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# Acacia Resources

The biblical witness singles out acacia wood for its uniqueness. The only wood mentioned in the building of the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle and the altar is acacia. Acacia wood is listed with other precious objects—gold, silver, fragrant incense, onyx stones—given to honor God.

The name *acacia* symbolically ties BCE's curriculum initiative to our biblical heritage. The acacia tree represents the wise value attached to the family, the diversity within families and the durability demanded for growing healthy Christians, whether they are singles, couples with children or senior adults.

**Today's acacia tree is known for its ...**



## **Value**

Some acacia trees have fragrant flowers used in making perfume. The seeds are edible. The bark is rich in tannin, a substance used in tanning, dyes, inks and pharmaceuticals. Furniture, cars, tools and gunstocks are made of the hard lumber from the acacia tree.

## **Diversity**

Some 1,200 species of acacia trees and shrubs exist throughout much of the world, including Africa, Australia and North America.

## **Durability**

The acacia species is tough enough to survive the semiarid regions of Africa where its roots sink deep to capture the rare water which runs quickly into the soil.

Acacia Resources will guide Christians and draw them godward, as the ark of acacia wood guided the people of Israel in their journey and represented the presence of God in their midst.

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## Preface

We Baptists have two clear paths before us as we stand at the trailhead of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

One path leads backward into a 19<sup>th</sup>-century cultural castle. If this path is taken, Southern Baptists will pull up the drawbridge and lock in those who hold a frightened worldview and a reactionary framework for social engagement.

The other path leads forward on a 21<sup>st</sup>-century pilgrimage. If this path is chosen, Southern Baptists will build bridges, forge new relationships and proactively engage the unfolding cultural, economic and technological challenges.

The pilgrim path is for those with adventurous spirits. It is the way for those with deep commitments to listen to and obey Jesus' call, "Follow me." It is the journey for those who sing "Wherever he leads I'll go."

Many of those looking at the pilgrims' way are anxious about the future. They hear the warnings of danger from those already on the castle walls. They empathize with dear friends who are too invested in the past to go forward. They worry about their traveling companions, the shortage of ready supplies for the journey and the lack of maps of the territory ahead.

In order to outfit Baptist pilgrims, the Baptist Center for Ethics has produced this undated curriculum related to the changes in the *Baptist Faith and Message* statement.

We hope these lessons will bring clarity and courage to those inclined to move forward. We trust this curriculum will spell out the perspective of those on the castle wall. We think this resource will encourage reluctant pilgrims that now is the time to choose the best of Baptist faith and practice.

When the Southern Baptist Convention revised its 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* statement in June 2000, it moved away from being a confessional body of faith toward a creedal one.

Revisions in the statement's original preface and statements by SBC officials clarify the intended objectives for the new statement of faith.

The revised preface dropped a paragraph that read: "Baptists are a people who profess a living faith. This faith is rooted and grounded in Jesus Christ who is 'the same yesterday, and today, and forever.' Therefore, the

sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists is Jesus Christ whose will is revealed in the Holy Scriptures."

Adopted on June 14, 2000, the revised statement also dropped the time-honored commitment related to confessions as "a consensus of . . . beliefs." It deleted the sentence that confessions "have never been regarded as complete, infallible statements of faith, nor as official creeds carrying mandatory authority."

During the SBC debate over the proposed statement, a seminary president said, "We expect those who will serve our agencies to believe this." He said the expectation that agency employees would affirm the new statement did not represent coercion.

Another SBC official said that the adoption of the new statement meant, "You don't have a right to believe whatever you want to believe, and still call yourself a Southern Baptist."

Such unmerited bravado contributed to the Baptist Center for Ethics' determination to help real Baptists think for themselves within the context of a community of faith about historic Baptist beliefs and practices.

From its founding BCE has sought to be proactive, providing congregational leaders and congregations with resources that address real issues from a biblical perspective with practical insight.

Our new online curriculum, *Real Baptists: Spotlighting Changes in the Baptist Faith and Message*, is our constructive, fast-track initiative to provide a resource for leaders and churches. Of course, we could not have produced this curriculum without the ready and sacrificial involvement of the lesson writers. They wrote thoughtfully and quickly.

These lessons do not address every change to the 1963 confession. For example, the curriculum does not address the watering down of the article related to honoring the Sabbath. But these lessons do examine many of the significant issues.

We urge curriculum teachers to obtain a document that compares the 1925, 1963 and 2000 versions of the *Baptist Faith and Message* statement. That document may be downloaded from [http://www.sbc.net/2000\\_report.html](http://www.sbc.net/2000_report.html).

We live in an exciting time to be Baptist. We are grateful for the best of our heritage and eager to be companions with Christ in our changing world.

*Robert M. Parham is executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics.*



# Meeting Jesus

Matthew 16:13-18

When I was a child, Jesus was a Superman, able to stop speeding bullets and leap tall buildings in a single bound. Feeling small and vulnerable, I needed to know he was there to protect me.

As a teen, my Jesus was more of a hip, older brother. I admired his long hair and sandals. I was grateful for his companionship.

As a young man full of sass and store-bought wisdom, I decided the Gospel portrait of Jesus was seriously overblown. My Jesus turned into an Eastern sage, a kind of first-century Dali Lama.

Still later, after getting educated in the school of hard knocks, I was steeled by an unseen Presence. I discovered the Gospels didn't stretch the facts about Jesus. Truth was, they couldn't tell the half.

Today, I see Jesus as the human face of the Eternal. Jesus is God dressed up in working clothes. Radiant with holy love and light, Jesus reveals the shape of the fully human life.

Which of those images of Jesus is the "right" one? Which is hopelessly flawed? And which is to be counted as the authorized version that shows I know the truth of who he is?

There are those within Southern Baptist life who say the essence of being a Christian is holding to right ideas about Jesus: he was born of a virgin, died a substitutionary death for the sins of the world and will return on a cloud to rescue the redeemed.

Strangely, Jesus himself never made any of these things a condition of discipleship. His summons was much more concrete, unsettling and revolutionary. It was and is a simple creed, consisting of two words only: "*Follow me.*"

## The Biblical Witness

**Matthew 16:13-18.** In the first three Gospels, the story of Jesus unfolds along similar lines. Jesus called a band of disciples to himself with the command, "Follow Me" (Mt 4:19; Mk 1:17; Lk 5:27).

They began a journey with Jesus, listening as he taught astounding truths

about God. They shuddered before his revolutionary ethic of facing evil armed with nothing but love (cf. the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7). They saw Jesus live the love he preached by reaching out to lepers, "loose women," tax collectors and other certifiable "sinners."

They saw him tangle with religious authorities eager to keep God in a well-defined box. They watched in wonderment as the holy love present within Jesus brought healing of body and spirit and sent the demons packing.

Eventually, Jesus took his inner circle of twelve disciples away for a retreat to a place called Caesarea Philippi. There he asked the polling question, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (Mt 16:13).

The answers Jesus heard did not excite him. The popular estimation of him as a great prophet was hardly news.

But then Jesus put an intensely personal question to his disciples: "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter, speaking the heart of the group, burst forth the confession, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

In Matthew, Jesus exclaimed, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven" (v. 17).

In Mark and Luke, Jesus received the confession with greater restraint (Mk 8:27-30; Lk 9:18-21). But like a quiet "I do" uttered before the altar, Peter's confession changed everything. Nothing would ever be the same again.

Apparently, something happened at Caesarea Philippi that changed the course of history, for Caesarea Philippi became the continental divide in the story of Jesus. After this, events flowed inexorably toward Jerusalem where Jesus would bring his challenge to the holy city or die trying.

What was it about Peter's confession that gave Jesus the confidence to turn toward Jerusalem? Was it that Peter finally understood Jesus, had him pegged and could recite an orthodox creed? No! Peter's understanding of Jesus, like our own, was still very much a work in process.

Just a few verses later, Jesus rebuked Peter for trying to turn him into a Messiah who would conquer through power rather than suffering love (Mt 16:21-23).

But while Peter's confession was incomplete and inadequate, it was sufficient. Why? Because in calling Jesus the Messiah, Peter confessed Jesus as the One due his loyalty and devotion. Such loyalty and devotion would propel Peter into a journey that would reveal much more clearly who Jesus was and is.

At its heart, Christianity is not a relationship to a program, ritual or creed. Christianity is a relationship to a real, yet mysterious Presence known as Jesus the Christ.

Despite every attempt to reduce Christianity to a grand theological system, the essence of the matter is not "What do you believe about the Bible?" or even "What do you believe about Jesus?"

The essence of discipleship is the simple yet staggering summons, "Follow me!" (Mt 16:24).

**Luke 4:16-19.** What does it mean to follow Jesus? What does that look like in the rough and tumble of real life?

In Luke 4:16-19, Jesus fired the opening salvo of his kingdom movement. In this riveting mission statement, he proclaimed God's heartfelt love for the forgotten people of every age: the poor, the captives, the broken, the oppressed.

To follow Jesus is to care about those he cared about and to extend ourselves on behalf of the "least of these, who are members of my family" (Mt 25:31-46).

Jesus promised we would meet him where we least expect: in the hungry who ache for food, in the outcast who need a friend and in the single mom, desperate to find decent, affordable housing for her children.

Anne Lamott is a recovering alcoholic who has written movingly of her journey with Jesus. In *Bird by Bird*, she offers a pointed observation: "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out God hates all the same people you do."

That's a pretty good test of whether we are on the road with Jesus. He is always pushing the envelope of the people we consider acceptable and worthy of our love.

Will Willimon has told the story of Le Chambon, France, a village occupied by the Nazis in World War II. Many inhabitants of this village risked their lives to hide Jews from the dreaded SS.

After the war, a researcher went to find out what made these people so different from their compatriots in the hour of trial. He found they were not people of superior intelligence, virtue or courage. No, the thing that made them people of conscience was their attendance at the village church. Week after week, they heard the messages of a Pastor Trochme, who spoke not only of faith's comforts, but also of its challenges.

One parishioner even faked a heart attack to keep the Nazis from discovering the Jews hiding in her home. Later, she said of Trochme: "Pastor always taught us that there comes a time in every life when a person is asked to do something for Jesus. When our time came, we knew what to do."

One day you'll be asked to do something for Jesus, and you'll know what to do.

It may be to knit scarves for AIDS victims, shivering from sickness and cold; one woman in our church has already knitted over 75.

It may be to raise a million dollars over the next 20 years and build a Habitat House each of those years; a man in our congregation with a wild glint in his eye has actually proposed such a thing!

Or maybe Jesus is calling you off the fast track to start loving your family more than your career; I've talked to three people in the last month who've turned down promotions for the good of the people they love most.

Yes, those moments come when the call is clear: to renounce the gods of this world and heed the call of the Galilean. And like his first disciples, we may not be altogether clear where we are going.

But this much is certain: we are going with *Jesus*. For the person we become in his presence is so much bolder and more beautiful than the person we are without him.

## Practicing Our Faith

Jesus' exclamation to Peter at Caesarea Philippi was pregnant with meaning. "Peter" means "rock" in Greek, the original language of the New Testament. To paraphrase, Jesus said, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! . . . You are a Rock (Peter), and on this Rock I will build my church" (Mt 16:17-18).

Imagine! Jesus entrusted his movement to men and women like Peter: brash, imperfect people, still very much in process. But Peter gave Jesus

the one thing needed to turn a flippant follower into a rock of devotion: his heart.

For by believing *in* Jesus—not just *about* him—Peter began a journey of transformation. Peter “believed” in Jesus in the truest meaning of the word, namely, “to give one’s heart to.”

There are those in Baptist life today who say that is not enough.

Instead of giving their heart to Jesus and following him in the journey of discipleship, they say we must subscribe to certain beliefs about Jesus, and not Jesus only, but also the Bible, the role of women in the church and a host of other issues.

Such is the appeal of fundamentalism: distill the truth of God into a formula, a creed, that is predictable and manageable. The lavish love of God, showered upon the world in Jesus Christ, cannot be trusted (Mt 23:1-39).

But thankfully, there are others—free believers, free Baptists—who will take the risk of following Jesus. And miracle of miracles, the more they follow in faithfulness and love, the more like Jesus they become.

Ephesians 2:10 speaks to the dynamic tension at the heart of the Christian life. Christians are “created. . .for good works,” deeds of liberation and love that mirror Jesus’ own. Such “good works” are not the price of admission to Jesus’ kingdom. Admission is by grace alone (Eph 2:8-9).

Yet caring about the people Jesus cared about—the lonely, the oppressed, the forgotten—is the inevitable result of knowing, loving and following him.

As a pastor, I am often asked, “When is a child old enough to become a Christian?” Always I answer, “When he or she has enough of a self to give it away, and knows enough of Jesus to give that self to him.”

All else that matters will be discovered in the struggles and joys of the journey.

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# Treasuring the Bible As A Record of God's Revelation

Galations 1:12

Let us begin with two important questions.

## First, what is revelation?

The word the writers of the New Testament used when they spoke of revelation was *apocalypsis*. The Bible is quite clear about what an *apocalypsis* is.

Imagine a young couple has a daughter named Frances who is in the fourth grade. Early in May they go to a Parents' Night at her school. When they arrive in her classroom they find twenty-four desks, each one covered with a colorful shawl. They see Frances standing beside her desk, and they go over to it. "Are you ready?" she asks them, and they say they are.

Frances grasps two of the corners of the shawl that is spread over her desk and, with a flourish, lifts the shawl away. On her desk the parents see the results of Frances's work for the year: pictures she has painted, papers she has written and tests she has taken.

The New Testament writers would describe what Frances gave her parents as an *apocalypsis*. The word means an uncovering; Frances uncovered the desktop, thereby revealing the results of her schoolwork to her parents.

Now let us imagine Frances has become a young adult and has fallen in love with a fine young man named Charles. They are engaged to be married. Over many months they see each other daily, they have long talks together. And they share their lives with each other.

Frances tells Charles that, in spite of her outward cheerfulness, she has experienced pain in her life. She explains to him how important her Christian faith is to her. She tells him how much she wants to be a wife and a mother.

The writers of the Bible would describe what Frances gave Charles as an *apocalypsis*. It was a spiritual disclosure, though not a physical one. She revealed her innermost self to the man she loved.

In the New Testament an *apocalypsis* is an uncovering, a disclosure, a display, a bringing to light. The Bible says God on many occasions has

given an *apocalypsis*, a revelation, to people.

## The second question concerns the relationship between God's revelation and the Bible.

In the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* statement, the Southern Baptists meeting in Kansas City affirmed their conviction that, among other things, the Bible "is the record of God's revelation of Himself to man."

In the 2000 version of that document, the Southern Baptists meeting in Orlando replaced that phrase with a phrase asserting that the Bible "is God's revelation of Himself to man."

Which is it? Is the Bible the *record* of God's revelation of himself to us, or is the Bible God's *revelation* of himself to us?

In a sense the answer is both. The Bible is God's revelation to us; that is why we call it "The Word of God." The Bible is also a record of many revelations that God gave across the centuries. This becomes evident when we consider how the writers of the New Testament used the words "reveal" and "revelation."

## The Biblical Witness

The noun and verb forms of *apocalypsis* appear about 40 times in the New Testament, and their usages fall into three categories.

**First**, the writers of the New Testament spoke of revelatory visions that God occasionally gives to people. The most famous of these was given to the apostle John and is recorded in the Book of Revelation (Rev 1:1).

On a few occasions Paul spoke of his "visions and revelations" (2 Cor 12:1). He said he received the gospel "through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal 1:12), and he said his understanding of the mystery of the church "was made known to me by revelation" (Eph 3:3).

The New Testament is a record of these visions and revelations given to the apostles John and Paul.

**Second**, the writers of the New Testament spoke of revelations that have not been given yet but will be given in the future; these are eschatological, or end-time, revelations.

For example, Jesus spoke of a future time when the Son of Man will be revealed (Lk 17:30). Paul said we Christians "wait for the revealing of our

Lord Jesus Christ” and in the future Jesus will be “revealed from heaven with his mighty angels” (1 Cor 1:7).

Peter hoped his readers would receive praise “when Jesus Christ is revealed,” and he said Jesus would bring grace “when he is revealed” (1 Pet 1:7, 13). He said Christians would shout for joy when Jesus’ “glory is revealed” (1 Pet 4:13).

Paul said something similar in a very profound passage: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed in us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God” (Rom 8:18-19).

**Third**, a group of Scripture passages is the most important for our purposes; it contains passages that speak of a revelation that has already been given and that is not a vision. There are several of these, and most of them are about Jesus.

Jesus said he, and he alone, could reveal God to people (Mt 11:25-27). In fact, Jesus himself was a revelation of God; this truth is expressed in many ways in the New Testament. John said Jesus is the Word of God (Jn 1:1).

Paul said we cannot see God who is invisible, but Jesus is the visible image of God (Col 1:15).

The author of Hebrews said that “in these last days [God] has spoken to us by a Son” who is “the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being” (Heb 1:1-2).

The same idea appears in a very beautiful form in the story of Simeon. In the temple this elderly saint spoke of the infant Jesus as “a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel” (Lk 2:32).

These passages make it clear Jesus provided a revelation of God; that revelation is recorded in the New Testament.

An important turning point in Jesus’ ministry occurred at Caesarea Philippi when he asked his disciples who they thought he was and Peter replied, “You are the Messiah.” Jesus told him he was right and God had revealed this truth to Peter (Mt 16:16-17). That revelation is recorded in the New Testament.

For the sake of completeness let us notice briefly that, in addition to these references to Jesus as the revelation of God, Paul occasionally spoke of revelations being given to individual Christians.

For example, he urged the Christians at Philippi to try to agree. Paul said, if they couldn’t agree, God would reveal what they needed to know (Phil 3:15). He also said through the Spirit God has revealed things to Christians that people had never before known (1 Cor 2:10). He said sometimes during worship services God gives a revelation to an individual (1 Cor 14:30). He told the Ephesians he prayed that God would give them a spirit of revelation (Eph 1:17).

So Paul believed God is free to give revelations in any way God chooses. On one occasion Paul associated revelation with prophets and apostles in particular, when he said the mystery of the church—that the church includes Gentiles as well as Jews—“has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit” (Eph 3:5).

### **Practicing Our Faith**

We have seen that a revelation is a disclosure. God has repeatedly disclosed things to people, and the writers of the Bible recorded many of these revelations.

We have seen that Jesus gave a unique revelation of God because Jesus was the Word of God incarnate, the visible image of the invisible God. In his revelation, Jesus gave us information about God, and he also gave us a new, personal relationship with God.

What Jesus did is both like Frances’s disclosure of some objects to her parents and like her self-disclosure to Charles; in Jesus, God’s innermost self was revealed to us.

This is very important to us in America today. Often we hear America has become secular, but in an important sense that is untrue. The American people are the most religious people of any industrially developed nation in the world, with Ireland and Italy next and trailing far behind. For example, about 97 percent of Americans tell pollsters they believe in God.

Yet we know Americans do have doubts. What is the nature of their doubts? In many cases they seem to be about whether God has provided human beings with a meaningful, trustworthy disclosure of God’s innermost self.

The biblical teaching really helps us here; it says Jesus has revealed God to us. We know God, and we know about God by reading the New Testament records of Jesus’ revelation of God.

One way to appreciate the Christian revelation of God is to notice the

pattern of that revelation. The pattern includes at least five components.

**First**, God gives a self-revelation in historical acts; the most important of these is the sending of Jesus.

**Second**, God inspires prophets and apostles to interpret the acts; an example is Paul's assertion that Christ died "for our sins" (1 Cor 15:1-7).

**Third**, a community of faith grows together around God's revelatory acts as interpreted by these inspired people; that is what the early Christian churches did.

**Fourth**, the community creates written records of God's revelation; that is what the Bible is.

**Fifth**, the community proclaims the revelation that God has given; God has used the church's proclamation to bring us all into the community of faith.

When we consider Jesus, the apostles' interpretation of Jesus, the faith of the Christian church, the New Testament and the preaching of the gospel of Jesus, we are confident that in all these things God is revealed to us. We are also very grateful to God.

We embrace wholeheartedly the sentiment of Daniel who long ago wrote, "There is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries" (Dan 2:28).

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# Reading the Bible with Jesus' Help

Matthew 12:1-14

Baptist Christians have agreed with the traditional view of almost all Christian scholars that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, in both the Old and the New Testaments.

“All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,” wrote Paul (2 Tim 3:16).

This reference to inspired Scripture applied originally to what we now call the Old Testament. The New Testament had not been written when Lois and Eunice were teaching the Scriptures to Timothy (2 Tim 1:5).

But Christians have faithfully and rightly applied Paul's teaching about inspired Scripture to the New Testament as well.

When the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a revision of the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* in June 2000, it replaced one sentence with another.

It omitted: “The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ.”

It added: “All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.”

The new sentence is acceptable on its own merits, but it is not acceptable as a substitute.

The omitted sentence focuses on the concept of criterion. Criterion means “a rule or standard for making a judgment.” To say Jesus Christ is the criterion is to say he is the guiding principle, the standard, the benchmark by which the Scriptures are interpreted and understood.

Why is this truth left out of the new *Baptist Faith and Message*?

At the SBC meeting, revision committee members opposed the reinsertion of the original sentence and misrepresented the appeal for its support. Committee members implied that supporters of the earlier language were appealing for the right to attribute to Jesus any view or doctrine imaginable.

Plainly said, the new *Baptist Faith and Message* removed Jesus from the exalted place as the one who guides our interpretation of Scripture. To say Jesus is the criterion for interpretation of Scripture does not demean

Scripture. It is rather the strongest affirmation possible for the truth of the Bible.

But to remove Jesus forces the questions: Who or what takes his place? Does the confession of faith become the interpretive tool? Do the affirmations of denominational leaders become binding? Does the pastor become the criterion by which the Scriptures are to be interpreted? Do the linguistic and historical principles of biblical criticism become the criterion?

## The Biblical Witness

One of the most popular ideas influencing the understanding of Scripture in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century was the notion interpreters could see a “progressive revelation” at work in the Bible.

This view suggested God revealed himself in ways that could be understood by people in their specific time. But as people of faith grew more aware of God's nature and purpose, God revealed more to them about his being.

For example, the moral lessons of the first five books of the Old Testament were high and noble compared to those held by the surrounding nations.

The Old Testament prophets taught the people of Israel that deeds of moral integrity and spiritual dependence on God were more important than ritual sacrifices and acts of formal worship.

The prophet Micah asked:

“Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?  
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?  
He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic 6:7-8)

**Matthew 5:21-39.** Jesus set an even higher standard. He challenged his followers: “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; . . . But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment” (vv. 21-22).

He continued to teach: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (vv. 27-28).

He went on: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” (vv. 38-39).

The theory of progressive revelation offered some help in explaining this development in biblical thought, but the theory was flawed. It was shaped too much by the prevailing evolutionary idea that progress was inevitable. It suggested the human race was growing increasingly wiser and more moral.

The tragedies of World War I shook this naive notion. The atrocities of Hitler’s death camps in World War II utterly devastated the approach of progressive revelation.

**Matthew 12:1-14.** A more helpful guide than progressive revelation is to see Jesus as the criterion for interpreting the Bible.

For example, Jesus challenged the religious laws that developed around the command to keep the Sabbath day holy. The Sabbath had become legalistic burden rather than liberating rest.

Jesus described appropriate behavior on the Sabbath: “So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath” (v. 12). He said, “The sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath” (Mk 2:27).

Jesus did not do away with the Old Testament. It was the only Scripture he possessed, and its words were on his lips constantly. He had hidden the Word of God in his heart, and he quoted it when tempted and when teaching. But he did not hesitate to reinterpret Scripture!

When the Pharisees condemned Jesus for allowing his disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath, he pointed out that David had allowed his soldiers to enter the temple and eat the consecrated bread forbidden to them.

Jesus said, “I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath” (Mt 12:6-8).

Jesus is greater than the temple. He is Lord of the Sabbath. And he is Lord of Scripture.

Jesus the Christ is the key to understanding all Scripture. It does not progress beyond him. He is still the criterion for interpreting Scripture

when one begins to read the history of the church and the epistles to the churches that make up the latter part of the New Testament. The epistles of Paul, John and Peter all acknowledge the primacy, the authority and the lordship of Jesus (Eph 4:15; 1 Jn 1:1-4; 1 Pet 2:21-24).

## Practicing Our Faith

What difference does it make if Jesus is or is not the criterion by which the Bible is interpreted?

**One Difference.** Many people, including many Baptists, have a deep faith in human reason. These individuals often conclude, “The Bible says what it says. It means what it means. Don’t try to change the clear teaching of Scripture.”

But anyone who carefully reads the Bible notices the Bible is not “flat.” Compare the Gospel of John with Esther.

The Gospel of John discloses God’s redemptive action through Jesus Christ while Esther records a wonderful story of courage without mentioning God.

This is not to say we don’t need Esther in order to have a full understanding of what God wants us to know. Esther, too, is part of the Bible and inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Esther gives help and encouragement. But Esther does not teach us the way to God as meaningfully and redemptively as does John’s Gospel.

This illustrates the Bible is the best commentary on the Bible, as biblical scholars are often quick to point out and experienced people of faith readily testify.

**Another Difference.** If Jesus is accepted as the criterion for interpreting the Bible, some fear this will open the door to abuse. They fear others will say, “I believe the Jesus I know in my heart would think this about that” or “I believe the only essential truth in the Bible is the Gospels or, even better, the words in red.”

Such a fear distorts what is meant by Jesus being the criterion for interpretation. The only Jesus we know is the biblical Suffering Servant, Royal King, Messiah. It is not only what the Gospel writers tell us Jesus said but what they understood his life, death and resurrection to mean that is important to Christians.

**A Better Way.** The Holy Spirit’s work is crucial in this regard. The Holy Spirit has done two things and continues to do a third.

**First,** the Holy Spirit inspired the writers of Scripture to understand the

divine meaning of what they saw and heard. That is why describing the Bible as the *record* of God's revelation is better than saying the Bible is the *revelation* of God.

The exodus out of Egypt happened before there was the inspired record of that event called the Book of Exodus. Prophetic voices spoke in Israel before the scrolls of the Major and Minor Prophets were written. Jesus was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, died a sacrificial death and was raised up leaving an empty tomb, before the four Gospels were written.

The Holy Spirit inspired the apostolic writers so they could record God's intended word.

**Second**, the Holy Spirit worked in the gathering and collecting of the inspired first-century writings. The Holy Spirit guided human hearts and minds to include God's chosen witness that became part of the Bible.

**Third**, the Holy Spirit continues working in the hearts and minds of those who read the Bible, in order that the Bible, which is normative for Christians, can be understood and applied.

This is sometimes accomplished in the personal experience of one who prayerfully studies the Scripture and is open to the Holy Spirit's guidance. It is also accomplished by the preaching or teaching of the Bible by those led by the Holy Spirit and whom God has called to the task of proclamation and instruction.

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian makes this point. Luke wrote:

"Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over to this chariot and join it.' So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?'" (Acts 8:29-31). Luke concluded, "Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this passage of Scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus" (v. 35).

To know the mind of God, Christians believe we need the Scriptures that faithfully and truthfully record what God has done in history.

We need the Holy Spirit to guide us as we prayerfully read Scripture. We profit greatly from Bible teachers and the community of faith as they share their understanding of Scripture with us.

We need Jesus' insight, wisdom, example and passion to help us properly understand the Bible as the Book that is above every other book.

Jesus is the heart and soul of the Bible's witness. It is unworthy of any follower of Jesus to fear acknowledging Jesus' rightful place as Lord of Scripture.

To see Jesus as the essential standard by which we interpret Scripture recognizes God's sovereignty. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . Without him nothing came into being" (Jn 1:1-3).

This Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we called him Jesus. Jesus is the Word. He is both the author of Scripture and the criterion by which we interpret Scripture.

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# Embracing Soul Competency

Ephesians 2:8-18

Six Washington insiders mingle aboard a yacht on an evening cruise down the Potomac River. It is an unlikely cast to be seen together: Jesse Helms, Strom Thurmond, Trent Lott, Bill Clinton, Al Gore and Richard Gephardt. Other than that they are white, male, inside-the-beltway politicians and Southern Baptists; what do they hold in common with each other, and with you and me?

This: Like you and me, each is free and responsible in his or her relationship with God.

The theological name given to this concept is soul competency. Soul—every human being. Competency—has the ability to decide about his or her relationship with God.

No human being, sacred document or special place stands between you and God. Your religion is a personal matter between you and your Creator. That's soul competency.

Baptists should never be so bold to suggest our forefathers and foremothers invented the idea, but early we adopted soul competency as our bedrock principle.

“The doctrine of the soul's competency in religion under God is the distinctive historical significance of the Baptists,” wrote E.Y. Mullins in 1908 in *The Axioms of Religion*.

His ideas shaped 20<sup>th</sup>-century Southern Baptists, perhaps more than any other Southern Baptist leader.

Strangely, his sharpest critics are within the Baptist family.

In 1997, the publishing house of the Southern Baptist Convention reprinted *The Axioms of Religion*. In an introduction to this volume, Albert Mohler Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote that Mullins' emphasis on soul competency “set the stage for doctrinal ambiguity and theological minimalism.” Mohler said Mullins placed personal experience above “revealed truth.”

In the end, Mohler attacked soul competency as “an acid dissolving religious authority, congregationalism, confessionalism and mutual theological accountability.”

With Mohler's opposition to soul competency, it came as no surprise that the committee, on which he served to revise *The Baptist Faith and Message*, would in its initial proposal in May 2000 eliminate any reference to soul competency.

Even before the Southern Baptist Convention met in June to approve the revisions, the committee received widespread criticism for dropping soul competency. At the SBC in Orlando, the committee volunteered a tepid reference to soul competency which the messengers approved.

The approval of a new *Baptist Faith and Message* is a defining moment for Southern Baptists. The issue is one of identity.

Do you belong to a majority group whose leaders hand down a proper interpretation of the Bible and seek to direct the practices of SBC churches and supporters? Or do you identify with a Baptist minority that believes every person has equal access to God with no human mediator, and therefore leaves you free and responsible in personal faith and church practices? Where you stand on soul competency largely will determine which path you take.

From what source does soul competency flow? What difference does soul competency make to you and me?

## The Biblical Witness

The competency of every human being in matters of faith is not a doctrine that was first conjured up by a Baptist named Mullins.

Its roots lie deep in the fertile soil of the Bible, which records God's interactions with our world and humankind. Specifically, the idea of soul competency is lodged in the Bible's understanding of the nature of God and the nature of humanity.

**Genesis 2:15-17.** The first biblical account that records an interaction between God and newly created human beings tells how God placed them in a perfect creation and showed them all that was necessary for them to live in perfect harmony with it.

God fully revealed to human beings all they needed to know to enjoy life and to relate properly to their Creator.

The God of the Bible is continually revealing everything you and I need to know to be rightly related to God, creation and other human beings. The Bible is the story of God's revelation to the world in general ways, such as

through nature. The Bible also records God's revelation in specific ways, such as dramatic events, personal encounters and the living Word, Jesus.

As God met with Adam, so God revealed to Moses in a burning bush that was not consumed. God revealed to Elijah in a gentle voice, to Mary during her adolescent pregnancy and to Saul in a blinding encounter on the Damascus road.

God often goes directly to men and women to reveal a trait of God's nature or a feature of God's plan for their lives. God does not leave us without the divine revelation necessary to choose God.

**Genesis 1:26-27, 31.** Soul competency not only stems from the nature of God as One who reveals but also from the nature of humanity as created in God's likeness.

In Genesis 1:26-27, God said every human being, male and female, is equally created in God's image. This lends to life a sacredness, a quality that deserves dignity, respect and worth.

If we are created in God's likeness, then we have the capacity for reason and emotion, the ability to exercise moral judgment, to discriminate between right and wrong, to sense what is holy, to surrender ourselves in worship and gratitude to our Creator. To be fully persons in God's own image, we possess the freedom to choose and be responsible for our choices, to say yes or no to God.

Precisely because we are created in God's image, there is a spiritual dimension to every person's life that is marked off from external compulsion, an area of freedom that God does not violate, and no other person or organization should.

Every person is competent in religion because God has revealed enough about God for us to choose or reject God, and to be responsible for our choice. No one can be responsible for a decision made under compulsion.

**Ephesians 2:8-18.** Critics of soul competency say emphasizing this core principle results in "every man's hat is his own church." They argue making faith a personal matter leads to an individualism that overlooks the role of Christ in salvation, eliminates the need for the Holy Spirit in personal discipleship and makes secondary the authority of the Bible.

Scripture answers each of these objections.

Paul described the role of Christ Jesus as Mediator between God and humankind. Soul competency never means an individual is sufficient to restore fellowship with God on his or her own merits. Salvation is God's unmerited gift (v. 8), granted to anyone who faithfully receives it. No ordinary human being, church leader, doctrinal statement or meritorious service stands between us and the God who offers us this gift.

There is, however, a divine-human Mediator whose sacrificial act has made our salvation possible (v. 13-16). It is through the crucified Lord Jesus that we have "access" to God (v. 18). Belief in soul competency never presupposes salvation is possible without the redemptive work of Jesus at the cross.

**John 16:12-13.** Neither does soul competency deny the role of God's Holy Spirit as the teacher and revealer of truth for believers and non-believers.

In the upper room just hours before Jesus was arrested, tried and crucified, he told his gathered disciples they did not have the capacity to understand all spiritual truth at that moment. He said as time passed and their experiences deepened, God's Spirit would reveal to them more of God's truths.

An emphasis on personal religious experience and a growing discipleship drives us to a heightened awareness of our need for God's Spirit to direct us to God's truths, not a lowered awareness.

**Psalms 119:97-105.** Finally, a recognition of the importance of soul competency does not dissolve automatically our dependence on the Bible as the primary source of authority in our lives.

The Psalmist grasped the value of God's written precepts for his faith. God's word provided him wisdom (v. 98), food for thought (v. 99), strength to resist evil (v. 101) and direction (v. 105). Clearly, the Psalmist felt free to go directly to God with praise for the help he received from God's written word.

Soul competency is not a ticket to be liberated from our need for moral and spiritual authority, nor from the many ways God continues to be revealed in our daily lives.

You and I can believe we are competent and responsible before God, while at the same time giving proper authority to Christ our Redeemer, the Holy Spirit our Guide and the Bible our Teacher.

## Practicing Our Faith

The doctrine of soul competency is vitally important to Baptist Christians, important enough to warrant the emotion and ink poured out over it during the summer of 2000.

E.Y. Mullins called it the “keystone” truth of Baptists. One of his contemporaries, the pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, George W. Truett called it Baptists’ “bedrock” belief.

Consider a third image. Soul competency is the hub of Baptist ideals. Almost every other Baptist principle or practice is a spoke off this hub. They are derived from the core principle of soul competency.

If you are free and responsible in your relationship with God, then I cannot and should not attempt to force on you my interpretation of the Bible. You are free, under the guidance of God’s Holy Spirit, to arrive at an interpretation of a biblical text. This is the priesthood of believers.

If you are free and responsible in your relationship with God, then no denomination can or should expect an enforced uniformity of thought or set of doctrines to which each of its members should subscribe. This means Baptists are a confessional, but not a creedal, people.

If you are free and responsible in your relationship with God, then your church membership should be based on your conscious decision to follow Jesus as your Savior and Lord and join that congregation. This is what Baptists refer to as a regenerate church membership.

If you are free and responsible in your relationship with God, then your baptism is a sign that you are a deliberate, willing follower of Jesus Christ. Most Baptists practice immersion as the mode of baptism for many compelling reasons. To be true to soul competency, however, the timing of our baptism as believers is more important than the mode. This is why Baptists practice believer’s baptism.

If you are free and responsible in your relationship with God, then inevitably you will prefer a nation where government and church exist in a relationship conducive to individuals following their conscience, not the government’s direction, in practices of faith. This happens where the government and church are both free. Because personal faith thrives best where it is free, Baptists work to keep church and state separate.

If you are free and responsible in your relationship with God, then you

want to worship and work in a congregation that is not limited or controlled in its practices and beliefs by a denominational body or ecclesiastical hierarchy. This is why Baptists value local church autonomy, and cooperate with other Christian groups in a voluntary connectionalism.

Baptists are a peculiar people, and our peculiarity comes from the hub on which everything in our faith turns—the principle that religion is a personal matter between every individual and his or her God.

You are a competent soul. Never give that away.

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# Practicing the Priesthood of Believers

1 Peter 2:5, 9

The recent crash of an Air France Concorde, in a suburb of Paris, a few miles from the Charles DeGaulle Airport, saddened everyone. The catastrophe, taking the lives of over 100 people, was the first ever in the 30-year history of the slender, supersonic craft with swept-back wings and a nose cone like a bird.

Early reports only compounded the tragedy when they indicated the airplane actually took off knowing one of its four engines was on fire! Investigators told the press that 56 seconds after being cleared for take-off, while still on the runway, the tower informed the plane its number 2 engine was on fire. An airport spokesman reported “the speed and distance of the plane was such that the pilot couldn’t do anything but take off.”

Human beings are surely capable of taking actions that may contain the seeds of their own destruction.

Southern Baptists, meeting in San Antonio in 1988, passed a resolution limiting the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer in favor of clergy power. The resolution said this cherished Baptist belief “can be used to justify the undermining of pastoral authority in the local church.”

It was like taking off in an airplane with the main engine on fire! It was inevitable that the notion of universal priesthood would experience a decline in prominence in the official pronouncements of this Baptist group.

Many were not surprised when, in early 2000, the proposed revision of the *Baptist Faith and Message* was presented, having been sanitized of the treasured and historic Baptist distinctive known as the priesthood of the believer.

A somewhat modified and weakened version of this phrase was inserted back into the Preamble of the revised *Baptist Faith and Message* statement only after widespread and vociferous objections from grass-roots Baptists of all types.

Baptists often take actions in their annual meetings that are driven by fiery ministerial rhetoric, the press of immediate denominational-political agendas and the perceived benefit of taking a public stand against some form of evil.

What does the priesthood of believers really mean for clergy and laity? Why does it matter that rank-and-file church members who struggle to have healthy families succeed at work and live faithfully? Are Baptist people destined for a crash if they continue the journey, having so damaged this essential of our faith? What are the positive impacts of a renewed commitment to it?

This doctrine is at the heart of what it means to be Baptist. It affects everything else we say we believe. It must be understood in close connection with its theological twin, the doctrine of soul competency. (Be sure to reread Michael Clingenpeel’s lesson on “Embracing Soul Competency.”)

In a nutshell, universal priesthood or the priesthood of all believers is a commitment to the notion that human beings, made in the image of God, may come to know God through Christ without the requirement of any human, priestly intermediary.

Consequently, every believer has equal right and responsibility to read, interpret and obey Scripture. Every believer, therefore, has an equal voice in congregational decision making and, gifted by God, every believer has equal value. Laypersons can and must minister as priests and should not be repressed in their individual service by clergy power.

## The Biblical Witness

Although this teaching is central to the biblical message, three texts will serve to illuminate it.

**Exodus 19:1-6.** In the wilderness of Sinai, God told Moses, “If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession” (v. 5).

Having delivered the people from Egypt, God wanted a personal relationship with them. God desired for them, as a nation, to serve him in dedication. Calling these people into a covenantal partnership, God promised to cherish them uniquely and to expect them to “be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (v. 6 NIV).

**1 Peter 2:5, 9.** What is wonderfully anticipated but only partially achieved by the nation of Israel finds complete fulfillment through the church of Jesus Christ.

Writing at least 30 years after his notable failure to stand up for Jesus during the trial and crucifixion, a more spiritually mature Peter did not

hesitate to apply the images and ideals of the Old Covenant to the New Covenant reality of Christ's church.

Despite the unique place in history and revelation reserved for the Hebrews, Peter, guided by the Holy Spirit, wrote to Gentile and Jewish readers alike.

As the new temple of God, he spoke to all Christians together: "You, also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (v. 5 NIV).

It must have been both scandalous and empowering to the early readers of Peter's inspired words to comprehend the "spiritual house" God wants to build could be constructed from such a flawed "stone" as one like Peter who had once denied Christ.

When Peter described believers as those who were responsible for "offering spiritual sacrifices," he used a phrase associated with the temple of old and encouraged all believers to accept boldly the roles and functions formerly held only by priests.

That these words were accepted as authoritative and inspired is silent testimony to the powerful reality that every believer, despite his or her mistakes, is fit to serve as a priest of God. Truly, the priesthood of believers has come to life through Jesus!

Relying directly on familiar Jewish imagery from Hosea 2:23, Peter emphasized the sense that the church was composed of that group whom God selected and called: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (1 Pet 2:9a NIV).

Here, the corporate dimension of church life is recognized and emphasized by the use of such aggregate terms as "people," "priesthood" and "nation."

For the first-century reader familiar with Jewish understandings, it would have been clear that the Christian notion of the church was the logical inheritor of the corporate identity of the Jewish people. It was also the practical expression of God's loving presence on the earth.

It would also have been crystal clear that the church of Jesus Christ as a whole was given the priestly assignment of proclamation. Notwithstanding the popular notion that proclaiming the good news is the assignment of the preacher alone, Peter, himself a preacher of no small talent, wrote that he expected all of God's people to proclaim. The very reason, he insisted, the

church has been called out is "in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into this marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9b NIV).

Paul's letters to Timothy underscore the individual believer's direct relationship to God.

Paul attempted to ground Timothy's practical ministry in an understanding of every believer's immediate access to God's presence, through the Holy Spirit. Paul proudly claimed Jesus was unique and uniquely available to any believer.

As certainly as Jehovah is one entity, with no possibility of dividing God against himself, even so, Jesus was the only intermediary needed between humankind and God's Spirit.

Paul wrote: "For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself, who gave himself a ransom for all" (1 Tim 2:5 NRSV).

## **Practicing Our Faith**

The fact that Baptists have always held firmly to the priesthood of believers has had significant practical implications for our ministry in the world.

If some now choose to diminish that doctrine and persist in calling themselves "Baptist," they will no longer be so in the classic sense.

But the dilution of this historic Baptist doctrine will do more than powerfully weaken the meaning of the name Baptist. It will also damage the effectiveness of Baptist ministry in local churches where this priesthood is absent.

In the absence of a strong commitment to this doctrine, only clergy come to be recognized as the visible symbols of God's presence in the world. Thus, this perversion of the Baptist witness will take on the shape of any other ministerially dominated denomination.

Wherever universal priesthood is suppressed, lay investment and inventiveness in ministry inevitably decline. The work of God comes to be done primarily by those who are perceived to have received a "higher" calling to some sort of clerical office. The gospel is stripped of its multi-hued and many-faceted lay diversity and appears in the world primarily through the uniform look of seminary-trained ministers.

When the universal priesthood is denied, proclamation of the gospel will come to be understood only as a verbal task performed by sermon makers from behind pulpits, as opposed to the vibrant, responsible and compassionate life of all laity in the workplace, seven days a week.

The slogan “Preach the gospel at all times! When necessary, use words!” will lose its potency and lay applicability. Baptists will be deprived of their right and responsibility to offer the priestly sacrifice of their highest worship to God, in or out of the sanctuary. The ministry workforce will eventually be reduced to the far smaller numbers of only those called into the profession of ministry, and lay persons will be stripped of their authentic biblical sense of calling.

The continued denial of the priesthood of believers, at its core, threatens to deprive Baptists of their most distinctive privilege and most precious responsibility, under the Lordship of Christ. They risk losing their soul liberty.

When the power of clergy or the state or any other institution so dominates the life of the church, to the exclusion of universal priesthood, the very right of access to God is at risk!

Reaction to such repression and clerical control birthed the Baptists in 17<sup>th</sup>-century England. Our Baptist forebears, motivated by a profound commitment to believer’s priesthood, resisted the forces that sought to deny their right to free, unhindered interpretation of the Bible and the responsible implementation of ministry on the part of laypersons. This belief has characterized the Baptist witness all over the world, ever since!

Must the distinctive and effective Baptist witness crash and burn, like an airplane that stubbornly takes off with its main engine on fire? Are we already too far down the runway of attempted revisionist and reconstructionist reworkings of Baptist essentials to turn back?

Surely, the recent challenges to authentic Baptist identity will be rebuffed by a serious, considered and prayerful response by traditional Baptists everywhere. Baptists must continue to be Baptists. Reclaiming their heritage, they must reassert their commitment to this distinctive belief, so that, until our Lord returns, there will always be Baptist priests in the (neighbor) hood!

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# Practicing Local Church Autonomy

Ephesians 2:19-22

If you have driven through the South, you have noticed a Baptist church about every two to three miles, if not every four or five blocks. They are everywhere.

Many of them have sprung up out of some controversy in the Baptist church down the road. It's one of the things we Baptists have had a tendency to do, because we could. No one in an office somewhere has to approve it, tell us if it's a good idea or encourage us to try and work things out with our sisters and brothers in the church we are leaving.

We can just start another church because Baptist churches are autonomous or self-ruling. They have no governing body that has to be asked or consulted. There is nothing wrong with faith groups that have a denominational hierarchy. In fact, there are many positive things denominational hierarchies contribute to their local congregations. It's just not the Baptist way.

Critics of the Baptist way have a point when they say Baptist churches are started for the wrong reasons. That is indeed true many times.

However, the most negative uses of the Baptist distinctive of local church autonomy do not negate the value of true autonomy in the Baptist tradition. The autonomy of the local congregation has not only been a distinctive of Baptists; it has been a cherished part of our beginnings and heritage.

Local church autonomy means each local congregation, under the sole authority of Jesus Christ, has the freedom to govern itself in a democratic way.

We Baptists like to say each local church is a democracy. What we really hope is that each church becomes a "Christocracy," a body of believers under the rule of Christ. There is no power other than Jesus the Christ who hands down to Baptist churches any ruling, edict or direction. Our orders come from the living Christ through the gift of the Holy Spirit most clearly revealed through the Holy Scriptures.

Local church autonomy means a particular congregation is called, gifted and freed by Christ to govern its own direction under God. That congregation is not controlled by others or by any outside forces. The local church is not a branch of a larger group. Under the Lordship of Jesus

Christ, the congregation itself seeks the mind of Christ and agrees by a democratic vote.

If we stopped here with this definition, one could reasonably conclude every Baptist church is totally independent. However, Baptist churches are also interdependent. Baptists have chosen to cooperate with other Baptist churches to accomplish things one congregation could not do by itself.

Baptist churches could decide to relate to no other church and not to rely on any other body than themselves to live out their calling within the local and larger community. But historically, Baptists have learned they can cooperate with other Baptists in other churches and accomplish far more of the Great Commission (Mt 28:19-20).

This whole concept of cooperation with other churches prompted the organization of associations, state conventions and national conventions. Baptists learned they could cooperate with each other and not relinquish any of their local autonomy. No one can take away or force a congregation to relinquish its autonomy.

However, local church autonomy can be lost or surrendered from within through passivity, sometimes without even being aware of what is happening. And there is a crisis among many Baptist churches for just this reason.

Cooperation became a wonderful vehicle for Baptist churches to be able to reach beyond their own boundaries. Baptists learned that through cooperation they could better train their clergy and lay leaders, publish literature for their Sunday Schools and send out missionaries to spread the gospel to areas they could not go themselves. Through the years, Baptists developed more and more institutions as the idea of cooperation grew.

By cooperating with others, Baptists built conference centers for continuing education, established and expanded regional seminaries, published literature for all areas of church life and expanded and enhanced mission endeavors. It was a beautiful and flourishing outgrowth of cooperation among local autonomous congregations.

It is important to remember any strength taken to an extreme or relied on without checks and balances can become a liability. Without being aware of it or meaning for it to happen, a Baptist congregation can rely on the established convention of cooperating Baptist churches. This convention provided a full range of services. Inadvertently these churches let go of some of their sense of responsibility, giving up their own autonomy as a local congregation.

After so many years of receiving help from conventions of churches, a church can begin to rely solely on those aids and look primarily to the convention for answers to local church issues.

While there is nothing wrong with turning to a convention for resources, a local church must not allow the convention to define its mission and purpose through those resources. To do this would be to relinquish its autonomy voluntarily.

A trusting relationship between a church and a convention does not absolve the church of its responsibility. The church must be the final authority under the Lordship of Jesus Christ to shape its own life and mission, call and train its own leadership, and ordain whom it perceives as gifted for ministry, male or female.

### **The Biblical Witness**

The biblical witness identifies local communities of faith. Paul wrote to “God’s beloved in Rome” (Rom 1:7). He also wrote to “the church of God that is in Corinth” (1 Cor 1:2) and to “the churches of Galatia” (Gal 1:2).

**Ephesians 2:19-22.** To affirm that a local church is autonomous is to say the church is responsible for the choices it makes. The church’s ultimate authority is Jesus, who is himself the cornerstone of the household of God.

When believers come together into a community of faith, they are a dwelling place for God. They are a holy habitation through the Spirit. God’s true habitation is the community of the redeemed.

What an honor and a privilege that is, but it carries with it the sobering realization that Jesus is the cornerstone (v. 20). Jesus is our authority—not the convenience of conventions or the resources they produce. It is Jesus and Jesus alone who is the cornerstone of our churches.

We must not turn to conventions to discern our mission as a church. We must turn only to Christ and through the Holy Spirit, Christ Jesus will guide our steps and make straight our pathways as we seek to discover and fulfill our God-given mission as a people of God.

**Ephesians 3:7-13.** Paul clearly was convinced the church was the vehicle for the wisdom of God (v. 9-10). He wrote, “through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might be made known” (v. 10).

That doesn’t mean everything a church does or declares is the wisdom of

God. It does mean God intends for the church to be a vehicle for such wisdom to be known.

What an awesome responsibility that is! It is a responsibility a local church must not pass off to someone else out of convenience. Daily a church must assume the daunting responsibility of listening for God’s voice, and discerning the specific mission that God is giving to that particular congregation.

**Ephesians 4:1-6.** Even while a church is discerning its specific mission, the spirit of cooperation with other Baptist congregations keeps that church connected to the larger family of God which seeks to minister to the world.

Paul wrote, “There is one body and one Spirit” (v. 4). He said the Christian faith had “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (vv. 5-6).

A healthy tension between the freedom and responsibility of local church autonomy and the spirit of cooperation with other congregations has long been a hallmark of Baptist life.

### **Practicing Our Faith**

One of the concerns in current Baptist life is some seem to think a local congregation must conform to a “majority” viewpoint in a convention in order to be considered a cooperating church.

This kind of pressure and coercion from conventions which have been trusted in the past can cause a church to forfeit its autonomy by yielding its decisions about internal affairs to a claimed “majority” viewpoint. When that happens, the Baptist distinctive of local church autonomy is lost.

The newly revised Baptist Faith and Message statement underscored church autonomy. It added a new phrase: “an autonomous local congregation.”

But the article on “The Church” made a controversial change. It said, “While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.”

While the SBC stated in this document each church is autonomous and each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord, it imposed a particular interpretation of one passage of scripture (1 Tim 2:8-14) regarding whom a church can call as its leader.

Of course, this is one way to interpret that passage. Churches and individual members may not realize other interpretations exist. They may not know this passage is only one of many texts on the subject of women in church ministry (Acts 2: 17-21; Gal 3:26-29).

If churches and individuals accept only one interpretation of the Bible and ignore other related passages of Scripture, they may abdicate the internal affairs of their local congregation to a larger ecclesiastical body.

Remember the importance of practicing local church autonomy. Remember its freedoms and its responsibilities.

To let go of that autonomy is to give up one of the cherished tenets of what it means to be a Baptist.

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# Ring the Bell of Religious Liberty

Galatians 5:1, 13-14

Baptists have always tolled the bell of religious liberty. We take seriously the freedom for which Jesus broke the yoke of slavery and set us free.

This is our heritage, our birthright, our battle cry and, we pray, our legacy.

From jail cells in England to stockades in Massachusetts Bay to whipping posts in Virginia, Baptists have suffered and paid the price for religious liberty. We do well to celebrate the Baptist heroes and retell their stories if our commitment to religious liberty is to remain passionate and vital.

After establishing the first Baptist church on English soil, Thomas Helwys authored a seminal treatise on religious liberty in 1612, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*. He sent a copy to King James I.

In a handwritten inscription, Helwys wrote that the king was a mortal man, not God, and had no power over the souls of his subjects. Helwys and his wife, Joan, were severely persecuted. He later died in Newgate Prison.

Called by some the “apostle of religious liberty,” Roger Williams came from England to Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1631. He preached “soul freedom”—the notion that faith could not be dictated by any government authority but must be nurtured freely and expressed directly to God.

Williams advocated a “hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world.” The theocrats in Massachusetts were so offended they expelled Williams from their colony. He trekked to what would become Rhode Island and began what he called the “Livlie Experiment” of religious liberty. There he founded the first Baptist church on North American soil.

An evangelist preaching in Virginia during the 1780s, John Leland advocated religious liberty and the separation of church and state. Leland played a pivotal role in convincing James Madison of the need for a specific guarantee protecting religious freedom.

Madison made good on his promise including these first sixteen words to the Bill of Rights: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

The first executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, J. M. Dawson,

was instrumental in convincing the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 to adopt the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

Article 18 of the Declaration said, “The right of freedom of thought, conscience and religion” was the aspirational goal for all people around the world.

We must teach our children and remind our adults of this grand heritage of freedom. If we fail, we shall lose something very precious, and eventually, we shall cease to be Baptists. Our understanding of religious liberty involves no less than the freedom to worship and practice our religion without undue governmental involvement.

## The Biblical Witness

The freedom we enjoy is biblically based. The Scriptures make clear God created human beings with free will. Religious liberty’s tap root runs deep into the creation accounts in Genesis. God’s decision to make human beings into his image implies the freedom on our part to say yes or no—to choose for or against a relationship with God (Gen 1:27).

**Galatians 5:1.** The New Testament rings the bell of freedom.

Paul wrote, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (v. 1).

The Judaizers were attempting to require Gentile converts to follow the Jewish law before they could become full-fledged Christians. Accordingly, Paul railed against attempts to deny freedom.

Nevertheless, Paul’s clarion call to the Galatians has inspired generations of Baptist Christians to fight for freedom from government-imposed limitations on the free exercise of religion.

If Paul issued the call to freedom, Luke provided an example of how to exercise that freedom in relation to the claims of the state.

**Acts 4:19-20.** Peter and John were arrested for preaching the gospel of Christ. They had been wildly successful; thousands had been converted. The Sanhedrin—a high court with civic and religious jurisdiction over the internal affairs of Palestine—was threatened by the success of Peter and John.

The Sanhedrin admonished them “not to speak or teach at all in the name

of Jesus” (v. 18). But the disciples repudiated civil authority because it sought to interfere with the proclamation of the gospel: “Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard” (vv. 19-20).

So the rights of conscience must take precedence over the demands of the governmental authority. It is important to point out, however, that the freedom we have by virtue of creation of God and the liberation of Christ is not unlimited. We are to avoid license as much as legalism.

**Galatians 5:13-14.** Paul wrote, “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love, become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (vv. 13-14).

Our freedom in Christ can never be separated from—and must always be limited by—the responsibility we have to one another.

Thus, freedom and responsibility must always be held in tension. They are two sides of the same coin.

TV commentator Bill Moyers aptly said our Baptist beliefs “do not make for lawless anarchy or the religion of Lone Rangers. Nor do they mean that we can float safely on the little raft of our own faith while the community flounders.”

He said, “They aim for a community with moral integrity, the wholeness that flows from mutual obligation. Our religion is an adventure in freedom within the bounds of accountability.”

Thus we must recognize a limitation on our freedom in the body politic when our exercise of religion violates the rights of fellow citizens. In interpreting the First Amendment’s protection for the free exercise of religion, we have traditionally understood that the state may limit our religious freedom when it has a compelling interest, such as protecting the health and safety of others.

## Practicing Our Faith

The *Baptist Faith and Message* incisively captures this Baptist understanding of religious liberty. God alone is Lord of the conscience. God has left the conscience free from the doctrines and commandments of human beings which are contrary to God’s word or not contained in it.

Thankfully, the Southern Baptist Convention, meeting in Orlando in June, 2000, did not change this article on religious liberty when it drastically amended others.

But some Southern Baptists today do not always practice what they preach. They neglect the application of religious liberty to church-state issues.

For example, in 1998 the SBC’s Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission supported the failed and flawed constitutional amendment that would have radically changed the way we understand the proper relationship between church and state.

The ERLC continues to press for vouchers and tuition tax credits. It approves of student-led prayer even in the context of official school sponsorship. The ERLC endorses prayer by judges and court personnel even in the presence of others summoned by state compulsion.

Strangely, however, the ERLC refused to endorse widely supported and reasonable guidelines explaining how the Bible can be taught in the public schools in a way that is both constitutional and sensitive to the unique claims of scripture.

Although the lofty principles enunciated in the *Baptist Faith and Message* statement remain unchanged, they are often observed as much in the breach as in the following.

Some Baptists, however, continue to embrace our tradition of religious freedom.

The Baptist Joint Committee’s singular mission is “to defend and extend God-given religious liberty for all, bringing a uniquely Baptist witness to the principle that religion must be freely exercised, neither advanced nor inhibited by government.”

The theological principle of soul freedom—a God-infused liberty of conscience—and its ethical expression of religious liberty are protected by the dual constitutional commitments of no establishment and free exercise.

These twin pillars of our constitutional architecture require government neither to help nor to hurt religion. Rather, government must be neutral toward religion, turning it loose to flourish or flounder on its own.

In other words, government must accommodate religion without advancing it, protect religion without promoting it, lift burdens on religion without extending religion a benefit.

- Historic Baptists support the right of students to pray voluntarily in huddles during a neutral moment of silence at football games, but oppose prayers delivered to a captive audience over a state-controlled microphone.
- We applaud tax exemption for religious and other non-profit organizations, but adamantly reject vouchers and other forms of governmental financial aid to support the teaching of religion.
- We recognize the right of religiously affiliated agencies to provide social services to the needy, but absolutely oppose the propriety of using government funds to finance such efforts.
- We do not object to government requiring churches to comply with reasonable building and safety codes, but reject attempts by zoning officials to micromanage church ministries or otherwise invade the autonomy of local churches. In short, government may—and sometimes must—get out of the way of religion, but it should never get behind it and push. The best thing government can do for religion is simply to leave it alone.

Eternal vigilance over the activities of government by all freedom-loving Baptists is the best way to honor our Baptist heritage of religious freedom and to pass it on as a legacy for generations to come.

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# Keeping Church and State Separate

Luke 20:20-26

On May 16, 1920, George W. Truett, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, speaking in Washington, D. C., said: “That utterance of Jesus, ‘Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s,’ is one of the most revolutionary and history-making utterances that ever fell from those lips divine. That utterance, once for all, marked the divorcement of church and state . . . Christ’s religion needs no prop of any kind from any worldly source.”

Truett based his position on his reading of Scripture and Baptist history. Most Baptists shared his perspective.

Beginning early in the 1960s, some Christians began to think separation of church and state might not be a good idea. They felt American society was becoming hostile toward Christianity.

Increasingly, they felt persecuted by government and looked for ways to respond. Organizations formed. For example, the Moral Majority, a right-wing Christian political group, was formed for the purpose of electing candidates to office and using the state to promote its vision of Christian values.

Another organization called Liberty Counsel offers educational and legal help to Christians in conflict with government. Liberty Counsel maintains its services are needed because “religion and moral values are under attack throughout the nation.”

At the most extreme end of the spectrum, a movement called Reconstructionism teaches Christianity and government should be merged and the Old Testament law should become the law of the land.

These groups, and others like them, reject or mute the idea of separation of church and state.

George W. Truett’s successor, W. A. Criswell, joined the rising chorus. During a television interview in 1984, Criswell said, “the separation of church and state is a figment of the imagination of some infidel.”

Should church and state be separate? That is, should the church refuse to rely on the state for support, and should the state be prohibited from interfering with freedom of religion? Either separation of church and state is biblical and a crucial component of the Baptist heritage, or it is not.

Who got it right? Truett or Criswell?

## The Biblical Witness

Baptists always wish to start with the Bible when trying to determine matters of faith and practice. Does the Bible offer guidance relative to separation of church and state?

**Luke 20:20-26.** This text recounts the encounter between Jesus and emissaries of the teachers of the law and the chief priests.

Hoping to trap Jesus into making a public statement the Roman authorities would find seditious, they asked him: “Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” (v. 22 NIV).

Jesus’ answer is well known: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” (v. 25 NIV).

What did Jesus mean? At the very least, he taught that God and state are not identical.

In addition, his words placed a heavy responsibility on his followers. They would have to discern the boundary between religion and the state. Later in history, Baptists exercising this responsibility developed the idea of separation of church and state.

**Luke 4:1-13.** The example of Jesus is also instructive. This text tells the story of the Lord’s wilderness temptation.

In verses 5-8, the devil offered to place the power of all the world’s nations at Jesus’ disposal if Jesus would worship him. The promise implicit in the temptation was clear. With the power of the state to back him, Jesus could enforce his religious vision on others, eliminate the necessity of his own suffering and death and shorten the time frame of the evangelization of the world.

Jesus turned down the offer. He refused to depend on worldly power to protect himself or further his cause.

**Romans 13:1-7.** Given the teaching and example of Jesus, how should Christians relate to the state?

Paul argued God had established the institution of government and given it authority to maintain order and the rule of law. In essence, Paul maintained Christians ought to practice good citizenship. They were to pay their taxes, to cooperate with the authorities and to obey the laws of the land.

Revelation 13:1-9. This passage deals with a different situation: what is a Christian to do when confronted with a government inherently evil and actively hostile to Christianity?

Should Christians organize to try and take control of such a government and turn it toward their ends?

John's answer may surprise us. He called upon Christians to endure patiently their suffering and to remain faithful to their Lord. John's prescription certainly seemed to accord well with the teaching and example of Jesus.

In summary, Jesus, Paul and John recognized the place and authority of the state. They taught that Christians are to be good citizens, pray for officials and pay their taxes. They are to practice discernment, distinguishing between dictates of conscience and the demands of the state, always being loyal to God.

If a government engages in persecution of the church, the appropriate Christian response is faithfulness to Christ, even to the point of martyrdom. Such faithful witness includes gathering to worship, sharing the gospel, ministering to human need and giving witness in the name of Christ. Such is the work of the church, and it is to be carried out without regard for the state's approval or opposition.

On the whole, the New Testament provides a more than adequate foundation for the idea of separation of church and state.

## Practicing Our Faith

What does our Baptist heritage say?

The witness of Baptist history is almost universal in its support for the separation of church and state. Only in recent decades have some Baptist Christians and their leaders challenged the consensus.

The first Baptists, and their successors, argued passionately for complete religious liberty. In language startling in their day, our forebears insisted the church had no right to interfere in any way with the relationship between God and an individual.

For example, Roger Williams insisted the state had power only in civil matters, not spiritual concerns. Because of this, the state was not to judge, govern or underwrite religion. It followed that the state may not presume to punish anyone on account of religious choice.

Williams maintained civility with regard to religious opinion was the best assurance of peace in a society. Finally, he asserted persuasion was the only God-sanctioned tool that Christians might use to present their case to others. The use of violence and laws was not permitted. In essence, his position found a home in the First Amendment.

Just as importantly, separation of church and state was enshrined in Baptists' confessions of faith, literature and popular preaching.

We have already noted George W. Truett's defense of the position.

The idea of the separation of church and state found its place in the 1925, 1963 and 2000 versions of the *Baptist Faith and Message*.

Article 13 states, "Church and state should be separate. . . . The church should not resort to the civil power to carry on its work. The gospel of Christ contemplates spiritual means alone for the pursuit of its ends."

The historical witness seems clear. Baptists have been vigorous advocates of the separation of church and state.

Does it really matter? Does commitment to this biblical and historical position make a difference in the daily life of a Baptist Christian?

Yes! Consider these points:

**First**, Baptists should resist all temptations to water down or eliminate separation of church and state. Such temptations may take subtle forms.

For example, some Christians argue government should support or at least accommodate the "majority religion." They tend to believe the United States is a Christian nation and, therefore, ought to promote or support the Christian heritage.

Genuine Baptists know better. They recall they were once a persecuted "minority religion," both in England and in America. They understand any infringement on the rights of religious or irreligious minorities violates religious liberty and threatens the liberty of all people.

For these reasons, and in spite of their concerns about a decline in public morality and civility, such Baptists view government support of religion with grave suspicion. Even with regard to emotionally charged issues such as government vouchers for private schools and prayer in the public schools, Baptists prefer to err on the side of maintaining the wall between church and state.

**Second**, Baptists committed to separation of church and state have recognized persuasion as the sole means of influencing others. The separation of church and state does not mean Christians refuse to participate in the life of their society.

In fact, following the teachings of Jesus often leads Christians to deep involvement in the issues and challenges facing the nation. We are not free to use the world's means, though, in our quest to share and live out the gospel of Christ.

Instead, the example and teachings of Jesus require that character, deeds, words and prayer be our tools. We have no right or authority from God to use power to impose our vision on others. On the other hand, we have a mandate to share and embody the gospel.

**Third**, if Baptists are to continue to guard the separation of church and state, they must cast aside all fears and rely only upon God.

When all is said and done, Christians resort to government power only when they fear God is not sufficient to care for his own and his work.

Certainly, Christians have reason to be afraid. Violence in schools and broader society, challenges to the family, the decline in sexual morality and the open hostility of some individuals and groups toward Christianity are sobering.

Confronted by such challenges, we are tempted to try and match power with power, specifically the power of the state.

There is a better way, a more faith-filled way, the Baptist way. We follow it because we believe it honors the intentions of Jesus, the teachings of Scripture and the Baptist heritage.

Staunch defense of separation of church and state plunges us into difficult situations. Why should this surprise us? When has it been easy to live in the world as a disciple of Jesus?

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# Influencing Culture

Matthew 5:13-16

I don't often get to visit churches other than my own—or hear sermons not in my husband's voice. But I recently spent a couple days with Florida friends and went with them to church on Sunday morning.

The preacher loosened up the congregation with a joke. The joke involved an American bungee jumper in Mexico, who took the plunge then bounced back up repeatedly, looking increasingly more injured with each spring to the top. Finally, he was grabbed and stopped and asked if the cord had been too long.

Seriously injured, he somehow managed to reply, “No. But what's a pinata?” Chuckles spread throughout the congregation. (I didn't want to be a stick-in-the-mud, but something about the south-of-the-border setting made me uncomfortable. I smiled weakly.)

As to opening with a joke, I give the preacher credit for at least using it to introduce a point, by asking the question, “Don't you sometimes feel like that as a Christian? Beaten up by the world, society, the culture?”

As the message unfolded, that theme of God's people (conservative evangelical Christians) being persecuted—put down, put upon, shut out—was repeatedly revisited, with examples of “our” values and beliefs being challenged, mocked and refused daily in legislatures, schools, the marketplace, the arts.

Overall, I found the sermon negative and unhelpful as it described the juxtaposition of Christians to American culture, developing an us-versus-them tone, a right-versus-wrong flavor that included uncomplimentary references to homosexuals, foreigners and immigrants.

Even so, I do allow the pastor had a potential point. If we were really living as devoted followers of Jesus, we probably would be outcasts from society.

Scanning that congregation, however, everyone looked mostly middle-class white American, the well-dressed pastor included. Judging from clothing, hair, jewelry, cars out in the lot, I didn't notice any great cultural difference on the surface between them and those who do not follow Jesus. Kind of like me. Perhaps like you. Along with many in that congregation, I suspect, I may choose to avoid certain entertainment or to curb my use of four-letter

words or to remain faithful to my spouse. But those choices hardly make me feel persecuted.

In addition to persecution, a basic premise underpinning that Independence Day sermon was that Christians founded this country on Christian principles. As a result, we have been a nation blessed of God, while other nations (what with their other religions or heathenism) have not been so blessed.

However, negative influences in our culture and unchristian leadership have been undermining the work of the founding fathers, he said. In the course of the message, the congregation was reminded of the sad saga of the introduction of evolution into American thought and of prayer's removal from the public schools. We were told separation of church and state had gone too far.

The pastor called the country back to God, presumably so we could continue to be blessed. How to do that? Get the right leaders. While we weren't explicitly admonished to vote for one political party, Jerry Falwell was praised for courageously telling Christians how to vote.

The formula is to elect a certain-type-of-Christian president, who will in turn appoint Christians to the Supreme Court. Under this leadership, morality and religious practice will be legislated. Post the Ten Commandments in public places. Pray at high school football games. “Reclaim” society for Christ—or at least for Christians. Change the culture by way of the church managing the state.

An alternative stance is to give up on the culture and segregate oneself from it. Christians can choose to retreat from society, attempting to create islands of holiness in a sea of sin.

That's what separatists have done, recognizing an irreconcilable gulf between the world and what they perceive to be God's way of living. On a smaller scale than total withdrawal from society, some fundamentalist Christians are promoting an exodus from the public school system, in favor of Christian schools and home schooling.

## The Biblical Witness

No matter how alien some of us Christians feel in our culture, we are no more foreign to it than Christians of New Testament days were to their Jewish-Greco-Roman world.

Two thousand years later, we can turn to Jesus' words and example and to writings from the first-century church for guidance.

**Matthew 5:13-16.** Early in his ministry, in what has come to be known as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus used two potent images to describe how his followers were to influence their world.

First, Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot" (v. 13).

Salt penetrates and preserves food. A dash of salt can change the flavor of an entire meal. The image of salt suggests a few Christians engaged in culture can influence the much larger society.

Second, Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (vv. 14-16).

Light illuminates darkness and cannot be hidden. Can the image be suggesting Christians should shine in the public square, showing others how righteousness works?

To what salt, to what light is Jesus referring? The references are to the savor and brightness of compassionate good works.

**2 Corinthians 5:18-20.** Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, providing another image for the Christian's role in the world.

He said, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (vv. 18-20).

Clearly we cannot be reconciling ambassadors by living entirely apart from the culture. But we likewise cannot accomplish this role merely by electing Christian leaders to public office or by passing "Christian" laws. That strategy, without personal action, bypasses our responsibility for good works.

Besides, the Bible is not a blueprint for government. While some biblical

admonitions seem simple and straightforward, the Bible does not address each of the many complex and multifaceted decisions that together comprise our government and its laws. Even if we thought it wise, it would not be possible to Christianize our government.

## Practicing Our Faith

As I consider what the Bible emphasizes, particularly New Testament instruction, it seems far too much time and energy is spent by Christians pitting *Us* against *Them*, attacking secular humanism, condemning postmodernism and claiming persecution. "How very, very bad *They* are. How mean *They* are to *Us*," some Christians say.

In fact, one of the reasons given for changing the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* statement was the threat of "postmodern culture." The chair of the revision committee said "pervasive secularism has infected our society." He said our cherished truths were being assaulted.

We don't so much need sermons like the one I heard railing against *Them* and their beliefs and values and practices, as we do sermons that encourage *Us* to live as God's people wherever, with whomever.

What is too often missing is instruction, ideas, even programs that will help me influence the culture for Christ, that will show me how to be salt and light, so I can experience and exhibit transforming grace, mercy and forgiveness.

Imagine if the church took the energy that goes into labeling people as orthodox or unorthodox, Christian or unchristian, right or wrong, and instead concentrated on acts of compassion and reconciliation. Now that would be counterculture!

I'm not suggesting we drop the standards of conduct God has provided through the Bible. In fact, there is a need for Christians to state clearly our moral positions, to take stands against violence and racism, to speak out in support of marriage and family, to advocate protection of the voiceless.

But let's worry more about our own sins—of commission and even more likely of omission, what we have left undone—than those of other individuals or of the secular culture in which we live.

It is far too easy to make much of, for instance, sexual misconduct, pointing the finger once again at *Them*, while completely avoiding the too-close-to-home subject of greed and insidious materialism, about which Jesus had much more to say. (If we Christians would shake off

materialism, what an impact we would make on our culture.)

Rather than reacting to or ignoring our concerns with and for the culture, we can pray and consider constructive responses.

Take an issue like crime that troubles all of us. We could work to elect legislators who support tougher laws and sentencing. We could head for the hills and live like hermits in an attempt to avoid crime's impact on us and our families. Or we could bother to learn that a high percentage of juvenile offenders are functionally illiterate, a problem about which individuals and churches can do something. Either in detention centers or preventively before that point, we could tutor young nonreaders, opening a new range of honest opportunity to some.

Instead of being afraid of those who look, sound and act differently from *Us*, we can reach out to *Them*, not solely for the purpose of saving their souls, but because Christ has filled our hearts with love for the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the sick, the poor.

Here are a few ideas for individuals or congregations:

- Tutor an underprivileged student.
- Be a Big Brother or Big Sister.
- Build a house with Habitat for Humanity.
- Volunteer in an AIDS clinic or ministry.
- Sponsor a refugee family.
- Teach English to an immigrant.
- Offer support groups for those with particular challenges, such as divorce.
- Make your church a welcoming place for all people, especially youth.

While we may be troubled about where our culture is and where it is headed, neither a theocracy nor Christian isolationism offers our world hope. If even a small fraction of us who claim to follow Christ—whether fundamentalists, conservatives, moderates, liberals—would take seriously the question “What Would Jesus Do?” and would devote ourselves to Christlike sacrifice and service of others, we would see positive results in our culture.

Even one of us engaging in compassionate good works will light the way to God and facilitate transformations on the micro-level, in our relatives, neighbors and co-workers. Even one of us living as an ambassador of Christ in the midst of a culture characterized by broken relationships will bring reconciliation between people and with God.

By the power of the Spirit working through us, as individuals and churches, may we get down from our pharisaical high horses, may we stop preaching about a godless culture and get busy. There's plenty to be done.

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# Doing Evangelism

Matthew 9:35-10:8

Evangelism is sharing the good news about Jesus Christ and inviting others to become Christians.

But how can evangelism be done without causing harm? How do we engage in evangelism without creating a negative reaction? What does the Bible teach about evangelism?

When the Southern Baptist Convention revised the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* statement in 2000, it changed the paragraphs on evangelism and missions.

The new statement made two changes. First, it added a sentence: “The Lord Jesus Christ has commanded the preaching of the gospel to all nations.” Second, it replaced the phrase “personal effort,” referring to winning the lost to Christ, with the phrase “verbal witness undergirded by a Christian lifestyle.”

So, what is the problem?

These changes suggest missions must be preaching the gospel and witnessing must be verbal.

Historically, Southern Baptist missionaries were more than preachers. We built hospitals and schools. We planted churches. We organized centers for reaching the homeless and those living in poverty. Men and women were missionaries.

In the new understanding, if women are not allowed to preach, must we assume that missionaries will be only men? Will evangelism be done primarily by men?

Another problem accompanying the changes in the *Baptist Faith and Message* statement is with some contemporary evangelistic efforts. Some evangelistic endeavors result from a crusade mentality on the part of the evangelistic group. Military terms and strategies evoke fear, misunderstanding and an impulse to “fight back.”

Years ago, we sang “Onward, Christian Soldiers.” In Vacation Bible School, we taught children to sing, “I may never march with the infantry, ride with the cavalry, shoot the artillery . . . I’m in the Lord’s Army.”

However, the current approach to “targeting” certain groups for evangelism has brought extreme criticism to Baptists.

Part of the negative reaction relates to the practice of degrading other faiths. For example, calling the Catholic Church a false church creates an adversarial attitude. Charging that the Catholic Church teaches a false gospel sounds arrogant and mean-spirited.

The emphases on “super churches” and “evangelism explosion” have also helped to create skepticism about evangelism. At times Christians have used deceptive tactics and manipulative means to express faith.

As I was sitting with a group of women from a Bible study group at lunch, I saw one of the women leave a witnessing tract, rather than a tip, at her plate. When another woman commented about her action, she said, “What is in this tract is much more valuable than money.”

Authentic evangelism means sharing the good news about Jesus Christ and inviting others to accept personally the Good News.

Or, as we used to learn in Lay Witness training, “Witnessing is sharing your faith in the power of the Holy Spirit and leaving the results to God.”

Peaceable evangelism learns about other faith groups, listens to those with different beliefs and respects diversity. It invests time with people through Bible study and prayer when appropriate. It helps people meet their needs.

## The Biblical Witness

**Matthew 9:35-10:1-8.** This passage clearly shows how Jesus taught his disciples to be evangelistic. As they traveled around the country, Jesus encouraged them to look at the people and to sense their needs. Jesus “saw the crowds” and “had compassion for them” (v. 36). Then he told his followers to “ask the Lord” (v. 38).

Jesus sent his disciples with clear instructions. They were to “proclaim the good news” (Mt 10:7). But they were also to heal the sick and to give freely of their services to the needy (vv. 8-9).

**Matthew 22:35-40.** Jesus said, “This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (vv. 38-39).

If we love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves, then we will be eager to share with them the Way to abundant life. If we don’t have good

relationships with our neighbors and friends, there is the tendency to develop evangelism strategies that are targeted toward strangers.

A friend has said, “It is time to quit arguing over who believes the Bible the most, and it is time to see who lives the Bible the most.”

**Luke 19:1-10.** Jesus taught his disciples through his own actions. Everyone knows the story of Zacchaeus, “the wee little man.” In his busyness, Jesus took note of this reviled, wealthy tax collector. He looked him in the eye, called him by name and invited him into relationship.

In the Over-the-Rhine section of my city there are many people in need. A little Baptist church ministers in the area, and other churches send help in various ways. As I served in the food line one day, I talked with one of the elderly women. She seemed very willing to talk. I asked her to help me know how other women in my church might help her.

She looked me in the eye and said, “Tell them to look at us. Just look at us. Exchange looks with us.”

Jesus could have passed under the tree without looking at Zacchaeus. He chose to look at him.

**Acts 1:8.** This passage defines where evangelism takes place—wherever the Christian is, there should be a personal effort to share the good news.

This text is similar to the Great Commission in Matthew 28. Most often we tend to use that passage to mean we are to “go into all the world to make disciples.” However, using the present imperative tense, Jesus is telling his followers that “as we go” and “wherever we go” we are to put forth our personal efforts to tell people about Christ and his saving power.

Our mission field, our place for evangelism, is wherever we go, every day that we go.

**James 2:14-17.** James tells us real faith is best seen by meeting real needs.

During the civil rights movement, while employed by Alabama WMU, I heard a preacher say to his congregation, as he tried to get them involved in meeting the needs in their community, “When a man’s hungry, he can’t do nuthin but starve.”

### **Practicing Our Faith**

My dentist is a fine, friendly Jew. Every six months when I go to his office,

he greets me with, “Well, who are the Baptists targeting today?”

Going into a large bookstore in New York City to look for a book on Southern Baptists, I found several listings in the computer. When I went to the desk to ask for help, I was greeted with, “Are you one of those?”

I have found people who don’t want to get close to me if they know I am a Baptist. I want to be able to say to them, “I’m not here to put you down; I am here to lift up Christ.”

That’s evangelism. And it’s happening in many places, in many ways today.

We have to admit while warfare metaphors and terminology are biblical in the spiritual sense, they have been misused in many evangelistic communications.

There seems to be a growing movement in some quarters to look for other words to reflect the desire to lead others to Christ, however.

Recently, a group of mission leaders and scholars issued a statement asking colleagues to use gentler metaphors. Military terms “have become increasingly counterproductive, sometimes even endangering the lives of local believers, and are being used by opponents of the church to indict and impede its work,” according to a statement from the Consultation on Mission Language and Metaphors, held at Fuller Seminary.

Meet “Hope, Precious Jewel.” She’s a new Christian in Chicago who was helped in a time of critical need. When I met her, she introduced herself as “Hope, Precious Jewel.” I don’t know her real name. I do know that she now has hope, and that in the sight of the Lord and her Christian friends she is a precious jewel.

Meet Sojourner, or Phyllis, an African young woman whose face was horribly misshapen by a maxillary tumor. The people who came to her village to tell the people about Jesus saw her illness, got her medical help and through their personal efforts led her into life in Christ.

Meet Sarah, a young professional woman who moved into a rebuilt home and decided she could do something to help her neighborhood. For others like herself, “up-and-outers” living in the area, she planned “friendship circles” to get acquainted. A vibrant, attractive Christian, she began to share her faith with these new neighbors. Before long she had interested them in helping in the mission center and in getting acquainted with their “down-and-out” neighbors.

*In The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West Again*, George Hunter writes about Celtic Christianity as a vibrant form of evangelism in the 21st century. He contrasts the “Roman Model,” which is “present the message, call for decision, welcome into fellowship” with the “Celtic Model,” which is “establish fellowship, engage in ministry and conversation, invite belief and commitment.”

Some years ago, I had a startling call to personal efforts in evangelism. Every day I parked my car in the same parking lot next to the building where I worked in downtown Birmingham. The same young man took my keys every day. I didn’t even know his name. One day, however, I noticed he looked extremely stressed. I asked if I could help.

He replied, “Oh, I wish you could. My wife is desperately ill. I don’t think she will live.”

I began to talk with him, and asked if I could pray with him. Then I asked if he knew the Lord. His answer shook me: “No, I don’t. And so many times I’ve wondered why nobody in that building ever asked me that.”

He allowed me, even asked me, to tell him how to become a Christian. To this day I regret the months of failing to get acquainted with him, to see him as a person, to see him as one of God’s needy children.

Saint Francis of Assisi is credited with saying, “Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.”

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# Opening the Doors to Women in Ministry

Galatians 3:27-28

“The office of pastor is limited to men,” said Paige Patterson, then president of the Southern Baptist Convention. “This is a statement from Southern Baptists that our positions and our perspectives are not going to be dictated by the culture. They’re going to be dictated by Scripture.”

This particular interpretation of Scripture was then applied to all Southern Baptists when a new phrase was added to the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message*.

The revised article on “The Church” reads, “While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.”

When we look around the world today, we see women in positions of leadership in business, politics, professions, education, entertainment and the military. As opportunities increase for women in the workplace, a natural question arises concerning the appropriate role for women as leaders in the church.

Should women have equal opportunities and responsibilities for ministry because that is the direction of our culture? What exactly does the New Testament tell us about women in ministry?

Patterson was right when he said “our positions and our perspectives” should be “dictated by Scripture.”

Let’s see what the Bible says about the subject.

## The Biblical Witness

An artist painting a picture will begin with the background. Broad strokes give color to the sky or a wall, only later to have the details of the foreground filled in. Our consideration of women in ministry will begin that way.

**Galatians 3:27-28.** Apostle Paul gave us a broad background principle. He wrote, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Paul was not specifically writing about holding an office in the church or

being ordained to ministry. Instead, he was giving an overarching principle of what it means to be a new creation in Christ.

There are no longer any distinctions that must divide us. We are all one in Christ.

This principle was a radical departure from the traditional beliefs of Judaism. An ancient Jewish prayer taught men to give thanks daily by saying, “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, who hast not made me a woman.” This followed two previous blessings in which the man thanked God because he had not “made me a Gentile or a slave.”

Contrast that three part blessing with Paul’s words! Do you see the difference?

The first-century Jewish historian, Josephus, summarized the popular understanding of his time: “The woman, says the Law, is in all things inferior to the man. Let her accordingly be submissive, not for her humiliation, but that she may be directed; for the authority has been given by God to the man.”

Even the primary symbol of the Jewish faith, circumcision, was by its very nature a rite performed on men. Jesus came to call all people into his kingdom. Circumcision was no longer the sign of faith; baptism now became a symbol that could include both genders as full partners in the family of our Lord.

After all, we are all “one in Christ Jesus,” meaning the divisions which had existed between Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, men and women were no longer important in the church.

The principle sounds great, doesn’t it? We can all be included in the kingdom of God without anyone being left out.

But is that how it turned out in real life? What role did women actually play in the beginning of the church? Were women leaders at all?

Given the limited role of women in the Jewish, Greek and Roman cultures of the day, it is astounding to consider what women did as leaders in the early churches. Rather than lagging behind the culture of their day, the first Christians were way ahead of the times in relation to the role of women.

**Other Texts.** The most pivotal events in all of history were the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Who was there? Women were last at the cross in courage (Mt 27:55-56) and the first at the tomb in love (Mk 16:1).

Women were together with the men in preparation for Pentecost (Acts 1:14) and received the same power of the Holy Spirit during the miracle of that event. A woman's home became the first house-church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12) and at Philippi women started a new congregation under the leadership of Lydia (Acts 16:13-15).

Still another example of a woman leading a church in her house was Nympha (Col 4:15). Priscilla and Aquila formed a dynamic ministry couple who helped Paul in Corinth and Ephesus. Priscilla was mentioned first (the place of prominence) on several occasions (Acts 18:18, 26; Rom 16:3), perhaps because of her more outstanding service and ministry.

Since we seem to be very interested in titles and offices these days as they relate to ministry positions, note the practice of titles for women was used in the New Testament.

Priscilla was called a fellow-worker by Paul as he used this term for her and her husband that he reserved for his closest companions (Rom 16:3). Philip had four unmarried daughters who were prophetesses or preachers, in Caesarea (Acts 21:9).

Phoebe was a "deacon" in the church at Cenchreae (Rom 16:1). Don't let your Bible translation fool you on this one! The same word in the Greek is translated "deacon," "servant" or "minister" depending on the context.

All of these examples of leadership are amazing when you consider in Judaism of that day women were segregated into the court of the women in the temple. They had to watch the proceedings of a synagogue from behind a screen.

The principle delivered by Paul in Galatians 3 was actually lived out in the life of the early church! Men and women were one in Christ.

So what happened?

Here the great irony exists. Patterson's comment expressed a strong fear among many Baptists today that culture will have too much influence on our thinking about the role of women in the church. He cautioned that our views should not be "dictated by culture."

Ironically, the passages in the New Testament which are frequently quoted to support the view that women should not be pastors of churches represent occasions when Paul, the writer, was most sensitive to the culture of his day.

Baptists disagree over the role of culture in this debate about women in ministry, but our concern is over what to do with the culture of the first century more than the culture of today.

Two examples will help us understand this irony.

The role of women in the church at Corinth was greatly influenced by the presence of the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, in that city. One thousand priestesses served the goddess as temple prostitutes. They went into the streets of the city at night to offer their bodies in the name of religion.

Given that cultural context, it is hardly surprising Paul warned against an aggressive expression of religion by females. Women covered their heads to distinguish them from the way the prostitutes dressed (1 Cor 11:5-16).

Does that mean women should wear veils today? While a few women might still wear hats in church to make a certain fashion statement, most Baptists understand the Bible is talking about first century culture and not a timeless instruction for living.

The real debate centers on how we interpret words like "women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says" (1 Cor 14:34).

Was that an instruction based on the culture of the day or a timeless commandment that applies to all cultures?

### **Practicing Our Faith**

Here is the root of the disagreement among Baptists. Remember Paul said more in Corinthians about women speaking in church.

He wrote, "but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled dishonors her head" (1 Cor 11:5). It was understood women would take leadership roles in worship by praying and preaching, but he wanted to encourage the church to ensure its practices did not send the wrong message to the culture of the day.

A similar passage about the role of women is found in 1 Timothy 2:9-15. Usually we hear the verses quoted, "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent" (vv. 11-12).

Left out of the quote is the larger context which includes a prohibition of

women braiding their hair and wearing gold, pearls or expensive clothes (v. 9) which precedes the famous quote about women speaking.

To their credit the Amish are consistent in their literal interpretation of this passage. Baptists are not! Many Baptists want to take part of the passage as a declaration of God's will for all time and leave the other part as simply a cultural expression of its day.

If these passages provide a universal rule for all time, then a consistent interpretation would require women to wear veils, to avoid wearing gold and pearls, and to remain silent in church.

So how do we separate a culturally-based instruction from a timeless commandment?

We look at all of the New Testament, not just a few select verses. As described earlier, there is significant evidence to show women did speak, preach, teach and lead in churches. The restrictions in some of Paul's letters were not even applied to all churches in New Testament times, much less for all time!

On the other hand, Paul's great passage on love in 1 Corinthians 13 is a timeless commandment because it is consistent with the entire message of love proclaimed by Jesus and carried throughout the New Testament.

The point of all of this is not "either/or" but "both/and." Our convictions are not based either on the Bible or on culture. They must be formed by Scripture with an understanding of the role that culture played in the writing of the Bible.

The apostle Paul painted the beautiful background principle for all Christians in Galatians 3:27-28. Throughout its history, the church has tried to fill in the details to go with this backdrop.

The battle for the New Testament churches centered on the issue of Jews and Greeks. Could Gentiles become followers of Christ without becoming Jewish?

Peter finally saw the light when the Holy Spirit fell on Cornelius and his household. Reflecting on this crucial event, Peter remarked, "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" (Acts 11:17).

Our own Baptist history has included the struggle over the distinctions of slave and free. Many Baptists in the South preached slavery was biblical

and should be supported. A terrible Civil War and the continuous work of God's Spirit has finally helped us understand all races can be one in Christ.

There is one more barrier to overcome.

We are now in the throes of trying to understand that in Christ there really is "no longer male or female."

This particular struggle will be no easier than staunch Jews being open to Romans as brothers and sisters, or to slave owners viewing blacks as equals.

However, we all move ahead in hope because the same Spirit who taught Peter he should not stand in the way of God's movement is the same Spirit Peter described at Pentecost.

"In the last days it will be, God declares,

That I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,

and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy." (Acts 2:17)

God's Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, opening up a whole new day of ministry by women in the New Testament and beyond.

Perhaps the storms of denominational controversy are really the wind of God's Spirit ready to teach us again that when God gives gifts to women for ministry, service, and leadership, who are we to hinder God?

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# Submitting Mutually

Ephesians 5:21-25

A prominent pastor—famously affiliated with the recent Southern Baptist Convention statement that wives should “graciously submit” to the “servant leadership” of their husbands—offered a practical commentary on his own marriage.

When he and his wife got married, they decided to base their marriage on their understanding of the Bible’s guidelines. So, they determined she would make all the “minor decisions,” and he would make all the “major decisions.” Now, well more than two decades later, he says he’s grateful to God, because “we haven’t made any major decisions yet!”

Ironically, the subtle nuances that shade the most intimate of relationships have been debated dramatically on one of the nation’s most visible religious platforms.

Marriage is the most private institution. It’s one woman and one man daily figuring out how to intertwine their lives harmoniously. If they’re Christians, they’re also discerning how Christ wants that to happen. For millions of people, marriage is the core relationship that shapes identity, purpose and wholeness.

But in the past couple years, the discussion of marriage has leapt from kitchens and bedrooms onto television screens and newspaper pages. Southern Baptists—who comprise the second-largest denomination in America—have debated marriage since 1998.

That’s when the Southern Baptist Convention added a paragraph on family to the Baptist Faith and Message that emphasized a hierarchical view of marriage, with the wife submissive to the husband, who is to serve the wife and the family.

This statement touched a nerve in society. Media trumpeted the Baptists’ feud over families. Maybe that’s because the media love a fight. More likely, however, people have cared so much about this statement because it hits where they live. Family provides the foundation of our lives.

Beyond that, the relationship between men and women, particularly husbands and wives, has been eternally mysterious, confounding, invigorating and downright personal.

The challenge of determining how a marriage works is not new. Scripture

records marital discord of ancient couples. Abraham and Sarah’s marriage endured the challenge presented to many modern marriages—relocation after relocation, as well as unfulfilled dreams. Isaac and Rebekah played favorites with their children, and their marriage suffered from deception. Don’t forget Jacob, who had two wives and two more handmaidens, a marital lair.

Unfortunately, women and men didn’t bury the challenges of marriage with the patriarchs and matriarchs. Visit virtually any bookstore, and you’ll view books that describe how to conduct your marriage. Some authors and lecturers have become rich and famous by dispensing marriage advice, much of it notoriously dubious.

A minister friend recalls the time when a church meeting was interrupted by the agonized rocking of a woman, obviously in deep pain. He learned she had a migraine headache. When he asked why she hadn’t taken pain reliever, the woman—who had attended a seminar by a noted Christian speaker—said her husband was at work and unavailable to authorize her to take the aspirin.

Ludicrous? Most people would think so. But this rocking headache reflects the extremes to which some Christians will go to follow what they believe is God’s will for their marriages.

So Baptists—and much of the rest of America—have debated the SBC’s marriage statement and its “submission” theme.

## The Biblical Witness

The discussion has turned on interpretations of Scripture. This is as it should be, for the Bible is our guide to all relationships, as well as all behaviors. The focus of this discussion has been the apostle Paul’s advice to married couples, found in Ephesians 5:21-25. This passage contains advice to the couple, to the wife and to the husband.

**Ephesians 5:21.** Unfortunately, the SBC statement did not reference the first sentence of the passage: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (v. 21).

This reasoning follows the logic of some Bible translations, which place this sentence at the end of the previous paragraph, in which Paul addressed Christians’ conduct in the world.

However, other translations, including the New Revised Standard Version, place this sentence at the beginning of Paul’s very important discussion of

marriage. Many New Testament scholars, including Ralph Martin, support this interpretation. Martin notes Paul uses similar word forms to begin and end this section, a common practice of the day—called “inclusio”—to signal the beginning and ending of a line of reasoning.

This is important to more people than grammar teachers. “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” sets the tone for the entire discussion. It binds together what Paul goes on to say to both wives and husbands. It reinforces the notion that the governing principle of their behavior is mutual submission. Whatever else Paul says individually to wives and husbands, it all is wrapped up in the opening admonition to submit to one another. Let’s come back to this thought in a moment.

**Ephesians 5:22-24.** Paul next addressed wives. Twice, he urged wives to “be subject” to their husbands. But he set that advice in a larger context, comparing the relationship of the wife and her husband to the relationship between the church and Christ.

If we think carefully about the analogy, we see what he means. Consider what Christ did for the church—he sacrificed and died to sustain and protect it. Ever since, the church has responded to that sacrifice out of love and adoration, not out of humiliating, menial duty.

Consequently, “be subject” is not a bully demand to abject subservience. It is “an obligation in love,” Martin notes.

“Because the husband gives himself for the wife to protect her and care for her out of love and concern, the wife needs to respond to her husband with humility and respect,” explains pastor/author Brian Harbour.

**Ephesians 5:25.** Paul’s advice to wives anticipated his admonition to husbands, who were called upon to “love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”

This is radical advice in any age. It especially was radical in the first century, when divorce and prostitution were rampant in many contexts. It was radical in a day when wives often were treated as property, little different from beasts of burden.

In that context, Paul told husbands they should love their wives so much they would even sacrifice their lives for their mates. Paul’s words echo forcefully today, encouraging husbands to lavish extravagant, self-sacrificing love on their wives.

Unfortunately, many people who debate this passage insist on breaking it into parts. “OK, the husband should sacrifice for his wife, but she’s still got to ‘submit graciously’ to what he says,” the argument goes.

Tragically, that misses the whole point. Remember what sets the tone for the whole discussion: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.” This is mutual submission, mandated not by feelings but out of ultimate love for Christ.

This passage is best understood when, as novelist Madeline L’Engle describes, we “try to understand, not word by word, but in a flash.” Mutual submission encompasses the particular roles of both wife and husband, blending and melding them into the harmonious whole that is so desired and so elusive—and inseparable.

## Practicing Our Faith

Obviously, much is at stake as couples try to figure out how to make their marriages work. Statisticians report that at least half of new American marriages will end in divorce. That may provide fuel for writers of country music, but it’s a ton of heartache for everybody else.

For example, researchers Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Blankenhorn have documented the devastation divorce brings upon women, men and children.

Children who grow up in single-parent homes, usually raised by a mother, are much more likely to slip into poverty than children raised in two-parent homes.

If that weren’t bad enough, children raised in poverty are much more likely to underachieve educationally, ensuring poverty for themselves.

While affirming the valiant efforts of single mothers, their research shows girls raised in fatherless homes are much more likely to be promiscuous than girls raised in two-parent homes. Boys raised without fathers are much more likely to turn to violence and crime than boys raised with their fathers’ attention. And so, the breakup of marriages creates wakes of destruction for generations.

Short of ultimate consequences of marital discord, mutual submission provides a key for enabling marriages to become all God intended and all we want them to be. The concept of mutual submission helps us:

- Recuperate from sick stereotypes. Culture reinforces the image of a “real man” as a tough, independent guy who only communicates when he wants to, never yields and demands unreciprocated loyalty. Society often paints the picture of a “real woman” as either a militant feminist or a manipulative coquette. None of these people make good mates, and they’re paltry parents.

Mutual submission helps become encouraging, uplifting partners. It helps us treat our mates the way we want to be treated. It enables us to strengthen each other and our marriages.

- Make sound decisions. Human nature leads us to please ourselves. An authoritarian husband might decide to buy a bass boat when the kids need braces. A self-serving wife might buy a sound system when the car needs tires.

Mutual submission provides a platform for cooperatively making decisions. They can range from choosing where to go out to eat to deciding whether to take a job in another town. But when husband and wife willingly place their desires beneath the good of the family, they work together to reach the best decisions.

- Involve both mates in all aspects of family life. Conventional wisdom about woman’s work” and “man’s jobs” has built barriers in many marriages.

But when couples are willing to submit mutually, they seek ways to arrange their marriages and lifestyles to ease each other’s burdens and make life more enjoyable and fulfilling. It might mean the husband cleans house, washes clothes or cooks. It could mean the wife mows the lawn, gets the car serviced or keeps the books. These are little things that can become big things when neither wife nor husband will yield.

- Provide role models for our children. Kids learn every day. They watch mom and dad, and from an early age they begin to code their patterns of behavior according to what they see at home. So, mutually submissive, mutually supportive parents teach their children the beauty and joy and happiness of a loving and complete marriage.

Every day, I pray for the families of two boys I probably don’t even know. They are the young men my daughters one day will marry. I pray they are learning from mutually submissive, loving parents what being a spouse is all about. And I pray that my wife, Joanna, and I will live before our girls in a way that they see the best of Christian marriage. Because now that they are Christians themselves, I want nothing more for them than to live all their lives in the strength and nurture of mutually supportive families.

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# Leading Like Servants

Mark 10:35-45

An elderly woman approached me with tears streaming down her face. She told me a story about her church and its experience with a new pastor.

When he arrived, he announced to the congregation God had revealed to him a vision of what the church was to become. As he set out to implement this holy mandate, a series of events unfolded that produced heartache. Sunday school teachers, deacon candidates and committee members were required to pass pastoral inspection and pledge allegiance to his theological convictions.

An inner circle of handpicked men became the executive leadership team. They began to make decisions for the church. Financial transactions were covered by a maze of paper and doubletalk. Longtime members were excluded from appointed positions and replaced by newcomers who adhered to the new leader's philosophy. Worship changed dramatically. Denominational affiliations were rearranged. Links that had stood for decades were abandoned. Attendance fell in worship from over 700 to less than 400. Any dissension was quickly dismissed as coming from spiritually immature troublemakers.

The woman told me she and her husband were looking for another church home, after 56 years of membership, faithful attendance and support.

This pastor's leadership had bruised many, alienated some to any organized church and set back the work of the kingdom for years to come.

Is this what is meant by strong leadership in local churches? Do takeover tactics and harshly implemented visions fit Jesus' leadership model? Is the authority of the pastor to be found in the model often played out by nationally recognized pastors who boast they run a tight ship where dissension is not tolerated?

## The Biblical Witness

Jesus' life reveals an ambivalent relationship with those who are described as leaders. Run a computer search on the four Gospels on the words "leader" or "leaders." You will find nearly every reference is a negative one. Jesus respected leadership when it was administered by the principles of his kingdom. But he utterly rejected leaders who saw themselves as rulers over the masses and dedicated to their own personal agendas.

**Mark 10:35-45.** Jesus' most direct comments to his disciples about leadership are found in this passage (also see Mt 20:20-28 and Lk 22:24-30).

James and John grabbed for powerful seats of influence. They requested to sit next to Jesus, one on his right hand and the other on his left (v. 37). Their request touched off an angry response among the other disciples (v. 41).

Jesus used the high anxiety of the moment as an opportunity to lay out clearly for his followers how his kingdom was to deal with issues of leadership and authority.

Rejecting the conventional wisdom of the culture, he offered a surprising alternative. Jesus said, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them" (v. 42).

The phrase "lord it over" also appears in 1 Peter 5:3. Here Peter said, "Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock." Peter added, "And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another" (v. 5).

Jesus contrasted his approach with that of the tyrannical leadership style. He said, "But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (vv. 43-44).

The Greek word translated for "servant" here is the word from which we get our English word "deacon."

Jesus defied the standard practices of his day and declared leadership in his kingdom was not determined by position, power, title or assumed authority. He said, "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve" (v. 45).

That radical notion did not go down any easier with the disciples than it does with us.

**John 13:1-16.** On the night Jesus was betrayed, he again taught about leadership. In one final effort to convey his absolute commitment to servant leadership, he offered them a living picture of how he intended his church to be led.

He took off his outer robe. He began the humble task of foot washing (v. 5).

His closing words were directed to all who would be a leader among his people: "If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (vv. 14-15).

## Practicing Our Faith

Fast forward 2000 years. Ask, how does servant leadership function in a church culture that demands leaders be visionary, charismatic, dynamic and persuasive?

Are the two mutually exclusive?

Servant leadership is, at its very heart, focused on the needs of those being led rather than the needs of the leader. Though none of us is able to be so self-effacing as to meet this criterion completely, we can work to build our leadership on something other than ego gratification.

Authentic leadership grows out of self-awareness and self-definition.

Jesus himself modeled this when he spent 40 days in the wilderness defining himself and becoming clear about his own sense of call and place in God's kingdom. What he learned was what too many of today's so-called leaders have never sought to discover. Jesus found out who God was, who he was and what the difference was.

The little boy's prayer is instructive. "Dear God, please help my dad. He thinks he is you."

Philip II was the father of Alexander the Great and king of Macedonia in the 4th century B.C. Philip was always accompanied by two men whose duty it was to say to him each morning, "Philip, remember that you are but a man." Each evening they said, "Philip, have you remembered that you are but a man?"

Servant leaders begin with a humility that grows out of a keen sense of God's omnipotence, sovereignty and providence. Servant leaders understand all they are is a gift from God. They are to be used for God's glory and to advance his kingdom.

The whole leadership enterprise is profoundly changed when it is built on

this base of modesty and humility. No longer am I required to have every answer, to pass judgment on those who dissent, to assume the mantle of perfection or to always be in charge. This is God's doing, and God may have some things in store for the people he has not bothered to reveal to us. In humility, I must confess I see through a glass darkly, and it is in community that God's people often come to a sense of clarity.

Before retiring to bed, Teddy Roosevelt and his friend, the naturalist William Beebe, would go out and look at the skies, searching for a tiny patch of light near the constellation of Pegasus. "That is the Spiral Galaxy of Andromeda," they would chant. "It is as large as our Milky Way. It is one of a hundred billion suns, each larger than our sun." Then Roosevelt would turn to his companion and say, "Now I think we are small enough. Let's go to bed."

The church desperately needs pastoral leaders who understand that God is larger than our understanding of him and who have an appropriate sense of humility as a result.

In his work on leadership, popular management consultant Steven Covey suggests effective leaders function in four primary roles. These are pathfinding, aligning, empowering and modeling. Each of these roles can be seen in terms of servant leadership.

**Pathfinding** is an apt description for the Christian practice of discernment. To lead God's people is first of all a call for them to seek out, recognize and follow God's will. A discerning leader will serve his or her people best when they insist the path forward be found together. God's Spirit is alive and working in the lives of all his priests. Pathfinding is our way of calling forth the best wisdom of our collective understanding of God's intentions.

**Aligning** is the leader's way of providing a conscience for God's people. It constantly asks if the action about to be taken is congruent with our understanding of God's revealed truth in Jesus Christ.

Servant leaders maintain their connection not only with those being led, but also with God. Jesus warned it is tempting to "lord it over them" and to become a "tyrant over them."

"Aligning" is our call to humbly serve as a reminder of the bigger picture of God's kingdom and kingdom values.

When a car is out of alignment, the tires quickly show the signs of uneven wear. So too, when God's people are out of alignment with kingdom

values, excessive wear is clear on the lives of those in the community.

Like the woman and her husband mentioned earlier, the pain is visible and unrelenting.

**Empowering** is the act of giving power to those being led. Many current leadership strategies focus on collecting power and using that power to accomplish personal ends. Jesus spent his ministry seeking to empower his followers so that, upon his departure, the work of the kingdom would continue and even expand. Giving away power is a task only well-defined, well-aligned leaders are able to consider.

**Modeling** is the leader's way of living out the values and premises he or she has suggested others follow. Words ring hollow when a pastor preaches sacrifice and practices self-gratification. The call to forgive that is not modeled by a leader when members oppose him or her creates cynicism among those who follow. No more powerful witness can be offered than to live out the principles of humility and servanthood in the midst of a disbelieving and hostile world.

Jesus would have trouble recognizing the leadership model some practice today. Top-down, hierarchical leadership is a sell-out to worldly standards and ignores Jesus' call to lead with a servant's heart.

Clearly rejecting a leadership style that seeks to control people by tyranny, Jesus makes obvious his disdain for those who are interested in self-promotion and finishing first. Instead, he calls us to empty ourselves, finding our fulfillment in him rather than in positions or titles.

Canute was the Danish king of England who was surrounded by followers who lavished praise on him. Tiring of their extravagant praises of his greatness, power and invincibility, Canute ordered his chair to be set down on the seashore, where he commanded the waves not to roll in and get him wet. The incoming tide soon proved the futility of human commands, and from that time on Canute never wore his crown again, but hung it upon a statue of the crucified Christ.

Leaders who understand this are able to build upon a servant heart and provide God's people with the skills needed to follow him and become the people he intends us to be.

May God give us more leaders with a servant heart who will build up his church, its fellowship and its ministry.

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