

## Executive Summary of the Ecclesiology Guidelines

### Introduction

The North American Mission Board and its partners assist Southern Baptist churches in fulfilling the Great Commission through the ministry of planting New Testament churches. To carry out this task, church planters and those that work with them must have and work with an ecclesiology that is both biblical and Baptist.

Church planting strategies and activities must be conducted in such a way that they are obedient and submitted to the New Testament for faith and practice as well as committed to Baptist ecclesiology as stated in the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*. The following guidelines and discussion will assist potential church planters and partners in knowing the type of churches the North American Mission Board affirms and will support its carrying out its church planting assignment.

The distinctive theological identity of Baptists is enmeshed in their doctrine of the church. Baptists have always been concerned that the church should reflect God's intentions as much as possible. The conviction that a church should rest upon the authority of the New Testament and not upon human tradition is what led those early Baptists to separate from other Christian denominations and to form their own churches. Baptist ecclesiology is the attempt of Baptists to reflect their obedience and submission to biblical authority.

Throughout their history, Baptist churches have enjoyed both uniformity and diversity in expression. With regard to uniformity, Baptist churches normally share the theological distinctives mentioned and discussed herein. Baptists have common theological convictions, and these common convictions are typically found in most Baptist churches. With regard to diversity, each Baptist church is as unique as the individuals who constitute its membership. Differing contexts and cultures have necessitated that Baptists adapt their methodologies and ministries in ways that best address the contextual concerns confronting them.

This is the genius of Baptist ecclesiology. The distinctive identity of Baptists is dynamic enough to engage any culture or contextual challenge in thoughtful and meaningful ways. At the same time, the distinctive identity of Baptists as expressed in their ecclesiology is stable enough to ensure that all Baptists share the common theological identity that makes them Baptist. In a paradoxical sense, all Baptist churches are alike, yet all Baptist churches are different.

### **Summary**

Based upon the previous discussion, a Baptist church is defined by the following traits:

- Committed to the authority of scripture for faith and practice while recognizing that all scripture is God-breathed
- Submitted to the Lordship of Jesus Christ
- Visible, local body that is independent and autonomous
- Composed of members who are regenerated by the Holy Spirit
- Members covenanted together voluntarily for worship of and service to God
- Observes the two ordinances of Christ
  - Baptism of believers by immersion as profession of faith in Christ as initiatory rite for membership
  - Lord's Supper regularly observed by members in good standing as commemoration of the sacrifice of Christ

- Practices congregational polity
  - Practices church discipline
  - Scriptural officers are men who serve as pastors and deacons
  - Invisible, universal body that includes all the redeemed of all the ages
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