



Current Thoughts

From Dwight's Corner

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No community, no church. Part II

. The church as community is the basis for congregationalism. While Baptists are not the only congregationalists, it is fundamental to who we are. Those who come from non-congregational backgrounds often do not understand us.

In affirming that the community the congregation is the fundamental and essential unit of the Church, we are rejecting the idea that where the bishop is, there is the church. This is a very old idea (one taught by the majority of denominations) that says that the presence of an ordained person is the defining characteristic of a church; that the church gathers around them in the same way that the disciples gathered around Christ.

Our counter is that, while ordained leadership has a special role in the church, Christ is not only in them (or any other single person). Rather, Christ is most fully manifest in the full congregation. We might say: Where the people of God are, there is the church.

In practical terms this is evident in the way pastors and churches are linked in Baptist life. The pastor is not assigned or sent to a church by a bishop, an administrator, or a committee. Rather, the entire congregation discerns the will of God (under the best circumstances) and affirms the person they believe God would have lead them. We know this process as call.

It is also evident in the use of Scripture and the transmission of the lessons of faith.

While the role of individual messengers and private insight are not to be denied, the truth of God makes itself known in community. Discerning (and applying) the truth is the work of the entire community of faith. As Bonhoeffer said fifty years ago: Truth happens in community.

That is a challenge to ministers who long to be intellectual tyrants or benevolent spiritual dictators. It is also a challenge to arrogant individuals who misuse the grace of soul competency to assert their right to interpretation, regardless of the consequences. It is also a challenge to churches that substitute parliamentary process for spiritual discernment or, even worse, abdicate any role in handling the truth.


While there is always more light to break forth from Go' s Word, and that light may first flicker in an individual, the community of faith is the searchlight that burns through the fog.

The Spirit of God is alive and active in the church. That Spirit is evidenced in the way

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the community handles spiritual matters with discernment. It is evidenced in the way that community deals pastorally with those who are deceived or are deceivers. It is evidenced in the way that community passes on the faith. It is evidenced in the way that community is convicted of its mistakes and missteps and responds to the grace of God. It is evidenced in the way that community lives out the truth.



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