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SOME OBSERVATIONS ON BAPTIST INDIVIDUALISM AND THE NEED FOR A COOPERATIVE FELLOWSHIP

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One of the outstanding principles and doctrines of Baptists through the centuries has been what we call "individual soul liberty." By this phrase is meant the right so far as any human intervention is concerned, of every soul to approach God and interpret God for him- or herself. It is understood, of course, that the phrase does not mean that the soul is sovereign above all other souls.

If an individual makes a mistake in the exercise of his soul's sovereignty in his approach to or interpretation of God, then he must settle with God on that score; but no other human, or combination of humans, anywhere on the face of the earth can coerce him to approach any other way or to interpret God in any other fashion than he chooses for himself.

We need to pause just here and point out the fact that this phrase, "individual soul liberty," has been much overlooked in recent days. When some of us in the Baptist convention, who still believed the old-fashioned doctrines, raised our voices in protest against the encroachments of modernism and its devastating influence in the ranks of the people called Baptists, when we further insisted that these men and women who were holding modern views and had long since departed from all semblance of historic Baptist position should be honest enough to take their leave of the people called Baptists and go over to the Unitarians or someone else whose doctrines they had come to adopt, we were told our insistence was a violation of the Baptist doctrine and principle of individual soul liberty. We were told Baptists believe and teach that an individual can believe anything he wants to about God. True enough, but one would have to search forever to find any indication where Baptists have ever said a man could believe anything he wanted to about God and still be a Baptist.

A true Baptist will be the first to concede that any individual or group of individuals has a right, so far as any other human coercion is concerned, to believe anything it wants to. But certainly no true Baptist would insist that a man who has come to the place where he denies the deity of Jesus Christ and the inspiration of the Word of God, salvation through the shed blood of Christ, the bliss of Heaven and the woes of hell, the personality of the Holy Spirit, and all the other cardinal and fundamental doctrines that Baptists have held dear through the centuries should remain among the people called Baptists. The variety of denominations that occupy the religious stage is, in our judgment, a great convenience. Each one of these denominations is a denomination by

reason of the fact that it denominates itself from all others by reason of what it believes. The Baptist denomination concedes the right of all these other denominations to exist, so far as any human interference or coercion is concerned.

When, in the course of time, an individual finds himself in the Baptist denomination and also finds himself no longer believing the cardinal doctrines of that denomination, for that individual to remain there is a breach of ethics and an abandonment of common honesty. Let him pack up his belongings and move over to some other denomination on the religious stage that holds his views.

THE INDIVIDUAL NEEDS FELLOWSHIP

While it is true the individual has a right to approach God and interpret God for himself, it is equally true that each individual needs to have fellowship with all other individuals who have approached God and interpreted God in like manner as himself. Naturally, one could not have much fellowship with others who do not believe as he does about God and His Book, but certainly one ought to have blessed fellowship with all those who do believe as he does.

God has been pleased to meet this need of the individual in the matter of providing him with a place for fellowship by the establishment of His church. Baptists believe that the local church is made up of a group of sovereign souls, all of them having voluntarily come to the same belief and interpretation of God and His Book.

We hold that, for his own spiritual welfare, every Christian ought to be identified in the fellowship of some church. Let him find the church or denomination that most nearly approximates his own views and get into that church or denomination for fellowship and service. If he should find after a few months or even a few years in such a church or denomination that there is still another church or another denomination that more nearly approximates his views, then he should at once make arrangements to transfer his membership thereto.

Since the local assembly is made up of a collection of individual souls, each one of them sovereign in his relationship to God, it necessarily follows that the church would, therefore, occupy the same position; namely, absolutely sovereign in its relationship to God. If no other individual in the world has a right to dictate to the sovereign individual his relationship to God, then it logically follows that no other individual or group of individuals formed into associations, conventions, or boards can dictate to the local church its relationship to God. It is an inescapable bit of logic that an assembly of believers made up of sovereign, individual souls constitutes, in the aggregate and in the sum total, a church that is sovereign also.

BUT THE CHURCH NEEDS FELLOWSHIP

If it is true that each individual Christian needs to have fellowship with other Christians who believe as he believes, and this fellowship is a vital and necessary contribution to his spiritual welfare and development, then it logically follows that a local church made up of these

individuals needs to have fellowship with other churches made up of the same kind of individuals believing the same thing.

Scattered across the northern territory of the United States, in particular, there are literally hundreds of Baptist churches that at one time had fellowship with the American Baptist Churches, state conventions, and local Baptist associations, but because of conviction, and for Christ and conscience sake, that fellowship has ceased in practice because it had already ceased in essence. Many of these churches have united themselves together in rather loosely formed fellowships covering limited geographical areas. Others have united themselves in such a Fellowship as the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches. Some of these churches are in fellowship with both the local and the general Fellowship.

There is, however, a host of churches that are remaining absolutely independent of any fellowship whatsoever. We honestly believe this to be a dangerous position.

DANGER OF NONFELLOWSHIP

First of all, we believe it to be dangerous for the same reason we believe it is dangerous for an individual soul to stay away from the fellowship and worship services of his church. As pastor we insist our people cannot be their best unless they are more or less regular in attendance at the services of divine worship, meeting with others and assembling themselves together with others in the fellowship and service of a church.

If this is true of single individuals, it is true of collective groups of individuals, called churches. Neither men nor churches can be their best living unto themselves.

In the second place, we believe it to be dangerous because the independent position of the nonfellowshipping church opens itself to all sorts of attacks. We are thinking just now of a church not so far removed from us where, during a pastorate extending over several years, a much beloved leader brought his people to the point where they saw the fallacy of continuing in fellowship with the Convention and its affiliates. Therefore, they ceased all active cooperation. They enjoyed a time of blessed "independence." Again and again, invitations were extended to this church to unite in the fellowship of other churches already out of the Convention, but they maintained their "independent" stand. Finally, their beloved and trusted pastor was called to another field. In less than twelve months from the time he left, another pastor had been called to the field, and he had led this church back into full and hearty fellowship and cooperation with the Convention out of which they had come a few years previous.

In spite of all that could be said about a church that could be switched suddenly not having a mind of its own, etc., we still believe that had this church been lined up in definite fellowship in worship and service with other Baptist churches already out of the Convention; had they been attending the glorious conferences conducted by the Fellowship group; and had the members of that church come to know something of the glorious visitations of God in the group that had ceased to fellowship with the Convention, they never in the world could have been inveigled into going back into the wilderness of conventionism. But they had never gotten a taste of the glories

of the Canaan land of such a Fellowship and, therefore, the onions, leeks, and garlic still appealed to them.

Our suggestion is that every church that is free from the Convention ought to make haste to line itself up in fellowship with the other churches that, like itself, have broken fellowship with the Convention. This fellowship ought not to be simply a matter of paper. It should be a practical thing. They should make every effort to get at least three, four, or five of their membership to attend some meeting of the Fellowship at least annually, if not more often.

In the third place, we believe this ultra “independent” position is dangerous because of its reactions upon pastor and church. Some time ago, a very beloved friend of mine, who over a period of more than fifteen years had maintained this “independent” attitude to which we are referring, wrote expressing his regret that he had maintained such a position, for two reasons. In his letter, he stated frankly his conviction that after his long ministry of more than fifteen years in his present pastorate, he felt that it would be in the will of God for him to move elsewhere. As he began to think of all the things involved in such a move, he suddenly discovered he had cut himself and his church off from the very resources upon which he hoped to draw in such a change of pastorates. He had not been in attendance at the annual or other meetings of the independent fellowships and, therefore, did not know where to turn to seek entrance to another pulpit that was free from Convention cooperation. On the other hand, should he resign and leave, his own church, because it had not fellowshipped with other churches and other brethren, would not know where to turn or look for a successor, with the result that they might turn in the wrong direction.

Surely with the total absence of controlling machinery and any possibility of there ever being any such machinery created in the present or future setup of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, we see no reason in the world why all churches independent of Convention cooperation should not find in this Fellowship a place of happy communion.

WITHDRAWAL PERFECTLY BAPTISTIC

While we are on this subject of Baptist individualism, we ought to point out another very obvious fact. We have fallen upon a day when the Convention leaders are trying to tell us, and even go so far as to try to tell us in courts of law, that a local Baptist church cannot exercise its own sovereign right to determine with whom it shall cooperate in fellowship and service. They say a Baptist church, by majority vote, cannot withdraw from cooperation in fellowship and service in the established Convention. That argument carried to its logical end would mean that an individual member of a local church could not withdraw fellowship from the local Baptist church and place it with another Baptist church. We insist that so long it is Baptist practice and custom for individuals to withdraw their fellowship from one Baptist church and take it to another, by the selfsame right, Baptist churches have a right to withdraw their fellowship from one group of Baptist churches and take it to another group of Baptist churches. When the hour arrives that this is not true, then all that was once known as Baptist doctrine and principle will have perished from the face of the earth forever.

AN URGENT INVITATION

The General Association of Regular Baptist Churches invites into its Fellowship independent, separated Baptist churches that, as yet, have found no desirable, cooperative fellowship, or have taken the position that affiliation with any group is undesirable.

The Association invites interested churches that are dedicated to definite separatist convictions to prayerfully consider fellowship in the GARBC. Further information can always be obtained by addressing the Association at its home office address:

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