

# **HISTORY SPEAKS**

## **To Hard Questions Baptists Ask**

The year 2009 is the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Baptist tradition. To help celebrate this big year, the Baptist History and Heritage Society has created a new 24-article series, HISTORY SPEAKS.

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### **Baptist Churches and Leadership: Where Are We Headed?**

**Jerry L. Faught II**

A church or a denomination goes the way of its leadership. Historically, Baptist churches have been led by both pastors and laypersons without making much distinction between the two. Congregational polity undergirds this arrangement as a local church chooses its own pastor and then the pastor serves alongside the members of the congregation. Typically, the pastor has motivated, mobilized, and given direction to a church but not commanded its allegiance. The superlative Baptist pastor encourages or admonishes but does not dominate and dictate.

Ideally, the pastor and the layperson should work together in harmony for the cause of Christ. Although congregational polity arguably keeps the relationship between pastors and laypersons in tension, in recent years the tension between clergy and laity has intensified. One reason for the conflict has to do with the new models of leadership that surfaced in uncommon ways in Baptist life in the late twentieth century and still remain vital.

With the emergence of the mega-church in Baptist life, a type of pastoral leadership arose that could aptly be described as the executive minister model. This chief executive officer (CEO) uses the latest techniques in church growth and manages the operations of the church with the assistance of a professional staff and at times a board of elders, all of whom support the pastor's agenda. Then the pastor's status sometimes becomes that of a celebrity in a subservient congregation.

With the mega-church being held up as the standard of success, ministers at less "prestigious" congregations often try to imitate the executive minister model hoping someday to move from Second Street to Superdome. The executive's "how to" books, bearing such titles as "The Little Church That Could," lay scattered about on the desks of many pastors along with commentaries and word study helps. Pastors at Toadsuck #9 Baptist Church and Flippin Baptist Church frequently become frustrated when church members resist their autocratic style of leadership and when the surefire church growth principles prove to be unreliable in a bucolic context. Bitter conflict often erupts. Terminations or resignations abound.

While the executive minister model entices Baptists with its promise to revitalize a swooning denomination that may very well be beating its head against a post-denominational wall, embracing this model could prove to be an empty victory. Baptists stand to lose far more than they gain. The CEO model of pastoral leadership, buttressed by the Southern Baptist Convention's adoption of a 1988 resolution that defined the pastor as the ruler of the church,

dilutes the historic commitment of Baptists to the cherished concepts of the competency of the soul before God and the priesthood of all believers and their corollaries—namely, the treasured idea that all believers have equal standing in Christ’s church.<sup>1</sup> When the ministry becomes exclusively a professional affair, laypersons no longer minister alongside the pastor as partners. The layperson, who has traditionally played a leading role in Baptist churches, moves off stage and is relegated to the rank of spectator. Such is the case especially when a board of elders becomes the decision-making body for a congregation.

Theoretically, a board of elders consists of a small group of informed persons who make better decisions than a large uninformed congregation. The elder system avoids the messiness that is often associated with democratic polity. Customarily, however, Baptists have accepted the prospect of an unpleasant business meeting because they value the involvement of the entire congregation in decision making.

Are Baptists now willing to embrace a seemingly “neat and tidy” Presbyterian or Episcopal style of church government? Are rank-and-file Baptists ready to give up their privilege to vote on important issues that affect the future direction of the church? Do Baptists really want decisions made by one man or a small group of men who may or may not understand or even appreciate the desires of the congregation? Oh, yes, the Baptist version of the elder system, not to mention the ruling pastor model, is unequivocally patriarchal limiting the role of women in leadership positions. What kind of polity do you want? “Be careful what you wish for. History starts now.”<sup>2</sup>

*Jerry L. Faught II is the Dickinson Associate Professor of Religion, Oklahoma Baptist University, Shawnee, Oklahoma.*

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<sup>1</sup> Cecil E. Sherman, “An Overview of the Moderate Movement,” *The Struggle for the Soul of the SBC*, ed. Walter B. Shurden (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1993), 32. Sherman has a brief but informative discussion about the 1988 resolution and the role of the Baptist pastor.

<sup>2</sup> Five for Fighting, “World,” *Two Lights*, Aware/Columbia, 2006.