

Rationale for the 10 Principles of Baptist Bylaws

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Bylaw - from the middle English “byrlaw” which means the local law or custom. Bylaws for a Baptist congregation are their own local rules for making important decisions. They are a tool to create unity and fairness in the direction of the church. Good bylaws will guide the church at crisis moments and ensure the best outcomes possible. They also communicate what we really believe about the nature of the church.

Who is the Church?

Bylaws portray the true theology of what the church or its leaders believe about the church. Baptists have taught that every pastor and member are equally endowed with the Holy Spirit upon confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. They readily confess that Jesus is Head of the Church and that no person should usurp His authority by seeking to control the body through title or office. The church is a body with many parts and every part has equal value. For the body is not one member, but many. *1 Corinthians 12:14*

This theology of the church means that fellow brothers and sisters in Christ are given equal right to be heard in church matters. This is why congregationalism and democratic practices are the norm in Baptist churches. It reflects the theology of who is the church. It is not one member, one leader or even one faction. Baptist bylaws place high value on the body of believers sharing with each other and being responsible together for the direction of the church.

In contrast to the congregational model is the hierarchical model. All power is placed in the hands of a few people. It is very controlled. This model is seen in the Catholic Church. The church has two classes of believers, the laity and the clergy. The clergy have special revelation from God. The laity must rely upon the clergy to truly hear from God. The laity’s ministry is to follow the clergy. When the Pope speaks, there is no debate. This is the same theology in practice when we state that only the pastor should be heard on any church matter. This model has been historically rejected by Baptists. The role of every member of the body of Christ is to follow the Lord. Setting our eyes upon man for our direction is not biblical.

Spiritual Leadership in Baptist Churches

There are three New Testament words used to describe the work of the spiritual leaders of the church. The term elder in the New Testament is from the Greek word *presbuteros*. The Greek word for shepherd is *poimen* and the Greek word *episkopos* is translated as bishop.

“Therefore, I exhort the elders [*presbuteros*] among you, as your fellow elder [*presbuteros*] and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd [verb form of *poimen*] the flock of God among you, exercising oversight [*episkopos*] not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness”

(1 Pet. 5:1-2). *Peter does not describe this as three different offices in the church but three functions of godly church leadership.*

Baptists teach that there are two biblically recognized leadership roles which require a calling from God and the church body, and they are pastors and deacons. There are not separate New Testament roles for elders, as opposed to pastors. It is the same role, just a different way to describe it. A church may have multiple pastors/elders that help govern the affairs of the church, but all of them must meet the required biblical qualifications.

Who Has the Authority in the Baptist Church?

Jesus Christ has all authority in heaven and earth. He is the head of the church, His body. The Greek word for authority is *exousia*. It comes from a verb that means (1) to do something without hindrance, and/or (2) the right to do something or the right to be over something. When someone has authority, it means that they wield influence and lead others in the accomplishment of a purpose. The word *exousia* is never used in the New Testament to grant ruling authority of one person or office over any other believer in the church.

“The scriptural model for Church life is one of gifted people, anointed by the Spirit and recognized by the people, functioning as a gift to the whole body, teaching and equipping ALL in the body to do the work of ministry as described in Ephesians 4:11-13. This is far different than a few office holders doing the work of ministry and all the people doing what they are told by those in office. The biblical model of the church moves one from viewing the church as an organization or institution to seeing her as an organism or a body, properly called the Body of Christ.”¹

The New Testament and Democracy

The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 calls for Southern Baptist churches to use democratic processes to make their ministry decisions. Democracy is the highest form of social decision-making and brings the best long-term results. This is what our country is founded on (it is indigenous to our culture), and it is also biblical.

Democracy is practiced in the New Testament as the church selects its deacons in Acts 6. Acts 15 is an incredible meeting of opposing positions, with major ramifications for the church. This is a textbook case for how churches can make difficult - and at the same time, God honoring - decisions. The leaders don't duck the meeting for fear of creating division. They lead the meeting and listen to both points of view to seek God's will and create a unified direction. If the apostles had the authority to make and enforce the decisions by themselves, why have the meeting? When James gives his recommendation to the church, the Bible says it was met with approval by all of them. I have led large meetings, and the only way to know you have agreement is to ask for a response from the gathering.

Using democratic processes allows the church and its leadership to fully gage its own unity before making a significant ministry decision. *Democracy is not about having the votes to get what we want.* That is a secular understanding of it. In the church, it is a valuable tool to measure how unified the church is in its understanding of God's will in that moment. A church decision being considered, with substantial sincere opposition, may communicate to the church body that God is not ready for them to proceed.

¹ 'Authority in the Church' by Paul and Wade Burleson p. 24

The 10 Baptist Principles of Baptist Bylaws

1. Bylaws should have real protection to guard against and remove ungodly leaders and members. Bylaws that assume that wolves will never appear are unbiblical, as they reject the teachings of Christ as to this reality. They should state how the church will discipline, restore or remove church leaders and members in the cases of verifiable scriptural disobedience.
2. Bylaws should truthfully state who you are and who you are related to. It should state that the church is organized as a Southern Baptist church, so that new members understand the doctrinal position and affiliation of the church from the very beginning. If you don't want anyone to know that you are affiliated with Southern Baptists, then why are you really affiliating with them? This is an integrity question.
3. Bylaws should make membership real and meaningful. It should be very clear how to become a member of the church, which should include a public profession of faith in Christ, baptism by immersion as a believer and approval by the church body. (Accepting infant baptism as a valid form of baptism for church members or leaders is not permitted in churches wishing to be affiliated with Southern Baptists.) Church bylaws that grant no voting membership status to the body are not inherently Baptist and are in contradiction to the Baptist Faith and Message 2000.
4. Bylaws should undergird the truth that all leaders serve the church as a whole. They should state that the calling and removal of pastors/elders/deacons and other church offices such as treasurer, trustees, etc., will be ultimately reviewed and determined by the members of the church. Church leadership will often make recommendations for some of these officers to the body for their consideration. The local church leaders are to be accountable to the local church body for their ministry.
5. Bylaws should make openness and transparency the operating norm. They should allow the church members to have free access to church bylaws, articles of incorporation, church business meeting minutes, etc., as requested.
6. Bylaws should foster a spirit of teamwork and partnership among the whole church. They should allow the church to vote annually on a church budget and ministry plan that authorizes church to invest God's provision in the work of ministry. A ministry plan is the goals and proposed directions of the church in the upcoming year that are proposed by church leadership to the body for their review and determination.
7. Bylaws should make financial and ministry integrity open to regular review. The church members should be provided to them, at least on a quarterly basis, a financial report and update on their ministry plan progress. Church members will review and consider the reports for their final approval or amendment. The bylaws should clearly state when the church business meeting are held. For example the second Sunday of the first month in the quarter.
8. Bylaws need to have the ability to be flexible when needed. They should state how to have a special called congregational ministry meetings and who is allowed to call one. This should require proper notice to the church body that the meeting will be held and the agenda of the

meeting.

9. Bylaws should communicate that the church is always ready to hear sincere issues of the body. They should state clearly how members may scripturally bring concerns or agenda items to be heard by the church. It is wise to have church members submit these items in writing at least seven days in advance of the meeting to the appropriate person. This allows church leadership to have the needed information prepared for the meeting.
10. Bylaws should reveal a very high level of ethics being met by church leadership. The bylaws should not allow church officers or members to vote on any business items that they have a conflict of interest in. Bylaws should also include protection of church assets and properties to be used for future ministry work should the church not be able to continue in the future.