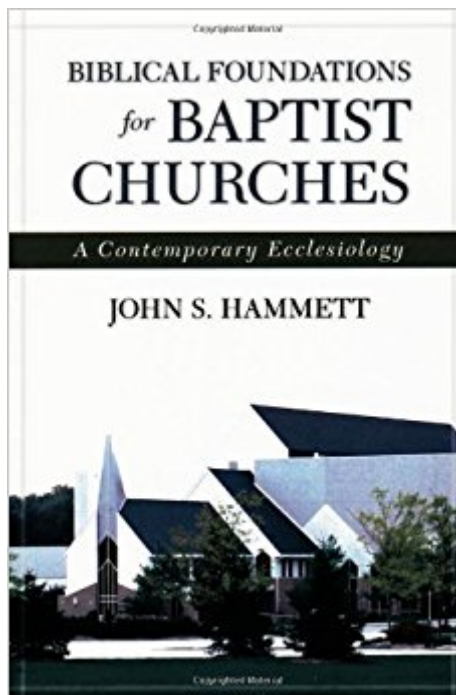




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Biblical Foundations For Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology



Synopsis

Most North American churches take a pragmatic approach to church life. We are concerned with being relevant to the culture and ultimately growing at a steady rate. While these issues are certainly legitimate, they also create a danger that our churches will be shaped more by these extrabiblical goals than by the biblical mandate of God. Utilizing the Scriptures, theology, and Baptist history, this comprehensive work addresses all aspects of the church—both theological and practical.

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Customer Reviews

Dr. Hammett is master of his subject and presents the material attractively. The book will be especially enjoyed by Baptists. Readers who are not Baptists will find it extremely enlightening. (Christian Observer 2006-08-01) --1

Utilizing the Scriptures, theology, and Baptist history, this comprehensive work addresses all aspects of the church—both theological and practical. Developments like seeker churches, mega-churches, and emerging churches have brought ecclesiology to the forefront of evangelical debate. But too often important questions are answered solely on the basis of pragmatism or cultural relevance. What does it really mean to be the church? In this practical book, former pastor and missionary John Hammett helps church leaders think through the foundational questions about the nature of the church. Blending biblical teaching and practical ministry experience, Hammett

presents a comprehensive ecclesiology from a historic Baptist perspective, examining crucial contemporary issues such as meaningful church membership, church discipline, elders in Baptist churches, different worship styles, and various models like seeker churches, mega-churches, and emerging churches. “A well-researched and clearly written vision for a fresh look at Baptist ecclesiology that is faithful to scripture and informed by the best thinking of yesteryear.”

•David S. Dockery President, Union University “One of the most comprehensive and thoughtful considerations of where we are today in understanding the local church. Avoiding both passing fads and frumpy conservatism, here we have a fresh and faithful ecclesiology.”

•Mark Dever Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church “Here is a thoughtful, thorough, and lively discussion of the theology of the doctrine of the church from one of our finest theologians. Even churchmen in denominations distinct from his own will find it rivetingly interesting and helpful.”

•Paige Patterson President, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

John S. Hammett (Ph.D., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) is professor of systematic theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Prior to becoming a professor, Hammett served as a pastor and missionary.

The American church has become and is continuously becoming more and more pragmatic. At times this is as innocent as a change in musical style, but in many cases, the church has become so similar to the world around her in doctrine and practice that she has blended into secular culture to the point of ironically lacking relevancy. There is tremendous confusion, doctrinal error, and egotistical self-centeredness that plague many churches in the world, particularly in the West. The “American dream” has permeated the church to the point that any resistance to pragmatic change is viewed as intolerant (and unwanted) dogmatic fervor. Churches want to be better, and better means bigger. These churches will stop at nothing to draw a big crowd. As a result, there is a lot of room for cultural and biblical compromise. Churches are not only in the world, but in yearning to reach the unchurched, they are increasingly becoming of the world or like the world. A primary reason for this is the relatively widespread ignorance of what the church is and what she is to be. John Hammett provides an answer to the many questions regarding the church and exegetically excavates firm ecclesial foundations from a Baptist perspective that Baptist churches and even churches from other denominations can sink their feet in to combat unbiblical pragmatism in the church today. Hammett, a professor of systematic theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, has served as both a pastor and a missionary. His experience as a professor has led him to see the lack of ecclesiastical theologies in our day. This coupled with his

experience as a pastor gives him both the credentials to write a theology of the church and the vision to see the practical need for a work like this. Summary Hammett presents a Baptist theology of the church in a very easy-to-understand way.. He does the difficult in producing a work that is deep in content, yet does not require a seminary degree to understand. He accomplishes this by organizing this book in an effectively progressive manner. The first of five sections in this book looks at what the church is. In these first three chapters, the nature, marks, and essence of the church are examined in detail. The first chapter outlines the use of *the church* in the Bible, as necessary biblical foundations are set. Biblical images of the church (*people of God, body of Christ, and temple of the Spirit*) are probed and interpreted through a highly Trinitarian lens (31-48). Hammett turns in chapter two to look at the marks of a church. Hammett writes that what separates a true church from a false church are the Reformed distinctives of the pure and true teaching of the Scriptures along with sound biblical practice of the sacraments (62-66). Hammett also sees the Nicene Creed as a traditional mark of a true church (51-59). This section concludes with five theological conclusions that show the church as being an assembly of God's people with a purpose (67-69), a primarily local assembly (70), a living and growing assembly (71), centered on the gospel (73-74), and an assembly that is empowered by the Holy Spirit (74). Hammett faithfully presents a biblical, historical, and theological understanding of what the church is. The second part of Hammett's book discusses who is in the church. Hammett explains the Baptist distinctive to ecclesiology of believer's baptism and regenerate church membership. Chapter five then moves to a polemic call for churches to return to biblical marks of the church. Here he shows where many Baptist churches went astray by abandoning the mark that the church is made up of believers as he offers advice for how regenerate church membership can be recovered and how baptism and church discipline can be reformed. Hammett then moves in part three to present the Baptist distinctives of church government and leadership. Hammett makes the case for congregational church government and shows that many contemporary churches need restructuring. Hammett argues that the biblical teaching on congregational church government and the biblical teaching on elders are to be viewed and interpreted separately. Indeed, Hammett shows that elders are to have a place of leadership in the church, but this does not necessarily mean that elders should rule the church (159). Hammett also defines and outlines the biblical role of deacons as the servants of the church. In part four, Hammett discusses the ministries of the church as well as going into further

detail on baptism and the Lord's Supper. Hammett shows the importance the local church's ministries of teaching, fellowship, worship, service, and evangelism. While many Baptists are guilty of belittling the sacraments, Hammett shows that such churches are wrong to do so and he writes on the meaning, qualifications, practice, and importance of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Many issues pertinent to Baptist church life are discussed in this highly practical section. Finally, Hammett discusses "where the church is going" in part five. He shows that the landscape of American churches is changing and going in all directions (299). Though this is true, Hammett expresses a vital and noble desire of his for churches to always focus on faithful biblical teaching. He then closes with a look at the church in other contexts by surveying the progress of the church around the world.

Critical Evaluation

Even just a quick read of this book reveals Hammett's faithful biblical exegesis to argue for Baptist ecclesiology. His valid and heavy biblical exegesis is central to his work as a whole, which makes it not only worthy of consideration for all Christians, but also is a testament to Hammett's scholarly integrity. His arguments are all biblically based. Hammett views this as necessary and inherent to the Baptist faith: "Since Baptists are people of the Book, a Baptist approach to the nature of the church begins with Scripture" (26). This is seen in the very first chapter. In his explanation of the Greek word *ekklesia*, Hammett argues for the definition of the term from both the Septuagint and the New Testament (26-28). Hammett is faithful in going as far as the Bible allows him to go without going any further. This approach is repeated throughout the book. As a Baptist, he faithfully presents Baptist ecclesiology and does not waver on any of its essential tenets. His arguments are not based, however, on denominational preference, but rather biblical truth. In none of his arguments is he unfair to opposing views, and his consistent exegesis makes his arguments attractive. In a book that focuses solely on one ecclesiastical position, biblical exegesis is necessary in order for the book to not be written off by many. Another strength of this book is its high readability. This book is a comprehensive biblical and Baptist theology of the church that is written in a way that is accessible to lay people. This is an incredible feat considering the length and rigor of the book. This strength indicates that this is a book that should be considered by all Christians from the doctoral student to the average layperson. Hammett is also fair to engage positions he disagrees with. Some authors are guilty of adequately representing their own position while neglecting the positions of others. Hammett is not in this camp. He is generous, for example to the opposing view with regard to deaconesses. He lists the arguments in support of deaconesses amidst his denial of it (199).

Though he is fair in his argumentation, Hammett never wavers from his biblically based convictions. Finally, a strength to any book is for the author to accomplish the goal he or she sets to accomplish. Hammett writes in his introduction that he has written this book in order (1) *to show that the church is God's creation,* (2) *to show that the doctrine of the church is especially important to contemporary North Americans who are focused on being relevant and growing numerically,* (3) *to show that even in our postdenominational age, there is a need for a book on the doctrine of the church from a Baptist perspective that can be helpful to Baptists as well as non-Baptists* (11). He accomplishes each of these introductory goals through faithful biblical exegesis of numerous texts, by relying most heavily on Scripture for support for his argumentation, and by refuting many unbiblical movements prevalent in the church today with biblical truth, historical perspective, and theological consistency. While Hammett relies on church history, he also calls on contemporary churches to learn from the mistakes of the past. If there are any weaknesses, it could be that this book seems to be a hybrid between a classic systematic theology with sole focus on ecclesiology and a specific polemic. Most of the book discusses every aspect of Baptist ecclesiology, which makes the book read like a systematic theology. However, there are those chapters that are more focused on contemporary problems in the church. Chapter five for example discusses contemporary errors in many Baptist churches. Hammett takes his description and argument for regenerate church membership to a call for Baptists to return to this biblical truth and mark of the church. His use of statistics, though helpful to get a picture of current Baptist churches, is like a speed bump in this comprehensive and solid ecclesiology. Chapters five, nine, eleven, and twelve may have fit better together on their own. Their inclusion in this book does show practical relevancy of the importance of studying and teaching ecclesiology in the local church. These chapters also accomplish Hammett's second goal of showing contemporary North Americans the importance of the doctrine of the church. However, though the seeker-sensitive movements of Rick Warren and Bill Hybels as well as the lackadaisical effort of Baptist churches in the realm of church membership no doubt need to be addressed, these issues could have been addressed more thoroughly and more appropriately in a book of their own, rather than coupled with a focused biblical, exegetical, and systematic theology of the church from a Baptist perspective.

Conclusion In summary, John Hammett has truly gifted the church with a work that brings great understanding and clarity to an often debated, yet often misunderstood doctrine. As the world keeps pushing itself into the church at ever-increasing rates, Hammett's book is much-needed ammo that better prepares Christians to combat cultural influences with

biblical truth. This book calls the church to return to faithfulness to the Word of God. Whether one agrees with Hammett's Baptist perspective or not is not most pressing. However, what all Christians and all churches can gain from Hammett is not only his commitment to biblical exegesis, but his faithful commitment to centering all of church life and ministry on the glory of God in his Word. In the end, Hammett forces us to ask ourselves not "What can we do to attract more people in our churches?" but rather "What can we do to glorify God in our churches?" In an American church culture where every church is tempted to adapt the next big, cool, or relevant thing, while ignoring the Word, this book is a refreshing call back to the basics as it provides the necessary foundations for churches to see exactly who they are and what God has called them to.

The Greek word for "church" is *ekklesia*, which means "the assembly of the called-out citizens" and was used in both senses: local and universal. In Hebrew, it was *qahal* (those who have heard the call and are following it) or *edah* (the permanent community) (27). The church is God's organized, purposeful, primarily local, living, growing, gospel-oriented, and spirit-empowered assembly. The Baptist church character is based in the regenerate church membership. The church consists of "holy ones" (hagiol); the New Testament churches had only believers (83-84). Since Constantine converted his country in 312, however, the church has been mixed with unbelievers. In the Reformation, Anabaptists stood for a church of believers only and received horrible persecutions (90-91). Later, English Separatists and Baptists sought the purity of the church. In 1660, the Standard Confession was written. In the nineteenth century, Baptists started to find their own identities in "the necessity of believer's baptism by immersion, closed communion, church discipline, and the duties of church membership (97-108). Church governance begins with a congregation of regenerate members because the highest human authority is vested to the congregation. Congregationalism is supported by six verses such as Matt 18:15-20; Acts 6:3, 13:2-3, 15:22; 1Cor 5:2; and 2Cor 2:6 (146). A group of elders is selected by the congregation after careful examinations of their qualifications. Their responsibilities are "the ministry of the Word, overall leadership of the church, pastoral ministry, and setting an example (185). By the implication of First Timothy 3, the deacons' responsibilities are the support of "the material

needs, the care of the sick and poor, the temporal affair of the church in general (194), the distribution at the Lord's Table, and assistance to their pastors and elders. Church ministries are categorized into "teaching, fellowship, worship, service, and evangelism (220), which are related to the nature of the church and differentiate the church from parachurch groups (256). Hammett explains, "the ordinances involve commitment to a body of believers (in baptism) and renewal of that commitment (in the Lord's Supper) (262). Those are the central acts of worship (277). Secularization and postmodernism moved the United States from comparative stability to a parenthesis of instability, which brought new directions: the seeker church movement (303-317); the microchurch movement (318); the emerging church (327-329); and historic churches (332-333). Global church planting has been increased, and the Pentecostal/charismatic branch is popular among those churches and will increase globally (339). The SBC, NAMB, and IMB have been developing ecclesiological guidelines for church planters (347). Overall, this book is of sound theology and beneficial to all Christians. It provides vital information for Christians to understand about the church and also answers to those questions that everyone has wondered at least once in a life but that nobody had answers for.

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