

A Modest Proposal

Have you noticed how hard it is to find a decent church to attend when you are on vacation? Have you discovered, as my members have, that a church may call itself independent Fundamental Baptist and yet be so far from what we understand those terms to mean that you can't even stay for the service. How can we even know where to visit? How will we know where to suggest our members visit when they are on vacation? How can we possibly make a recommendation to someone who moves from our area when there is so much confusion?



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I propose the following things:

To start, on a strictly voluntary basis, a reference group of godly pastors, to which pastors and churches could, without any coercion from the group, submit themselves for examination and review. These men could then determine the doctrinal position of the church, the fact that their music was appropriate, that they had basic principles of ecclesiastical separation and that their preaching was from the Word of God. Some kind of certification, seal of approval, or letter of recommendation could then be given. In this way, many of us would know that a certain basic standard had been met and that the term "independent, Fundamental Baptist" was being wisely and appropriately used.

To incorporate a common standard from the group of godly pastors. When the same words mean different things in different places, it confuses all of us. A foot is always 12 inches long, a mile is always 5,280 feet, a day is always 24 hours, an hour is always 60 minutes. Sunday is always the first day of the week (in America), December is always the last month of the year. Where would we be if everybody chose to assign different meanings to those terms?

To have that group be willing to take the heat and help set the approval of our churches. Of course, whoever does so will be subject to great attack and yet, could be doing a great favor for future generations. The Good House-keeping Seal of Approval is a logo which many have come to look for in merchandise or services. This Seal carries behind it the weight of objective observers who have examined the product and said that it meets certain basic requirements for safety, value, etc.

I hope by this point you are either thoroughly disgusted with me or laughing out loud. My "modest proposal" (borrowed from Jonathan Swift) amounts to nothing more than establishing a denominational hierarchy. It would require money and machinery and result in politics and manipulation. It would put men under the leadership of denominational overlords instead of the Lord.

What we would completely object to – correctly – in our churches, we are increasingly accepting in our colleges.

We do all I have suggested and worse when we become accredited. I would have more understanding for the actions of my brethren in seeking accreditation were the government requiring that they do so. I would still disapprove and think it to be very dangerous – but I would have more understanding. I would have more understanding of a Christian liberal arts college getting accredited than a Bible college. You see, those who seek accreditation usually say that the body who accredits them is "not telling them what to do, it is merely examining them to see whether they are doing a good job at what they say they are doing." Please tell me how a secular organization can know whether a Christian organization is fulfilling its ministry. If the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, what wisdom may I seek from the ungodly in how to do the work of God? Certainly, they can tell me how to build buildings, they can tell me how to hook up computers; they can advise me on a good phone system to buy. But what can they tell me about building lives and training young people to be soldiers in the army of Jesus Christ?

I presented a "modest proposal" for you to consider. Here, I have outlined a few reasons as to why I am against accreditation.

It is not Scriptural. The Bible says, "So then every one of us shall give an account of himself before God." Putting an intervening layer of bureaucracy between us and God makes it far too easy for us believe that because we have satisfied the accrediting organization, we have satisfied God. Not only that, but it makes it easy for the accrediting body to slip in requirements – seemingly innocuous at first – which may subtly but certainly steer us away from the will of God for our ministry.

It is not Baptist. A Baptist believes – or should believe – in the autonomy of the local church. Many of us have long taken issue with the General Association of Regular Baptists for their custom of approving Christian colleges. Who are we to approve or disapprove of one another? We can counsel, we can advise, we can recommend or fail to recommend; but to get a "stamp of approval" bespeaks a hierarchy that is contrary to the Scripture and to the word "Baptist."

It is not local church. Our church spent several years and \$250,000 in the early 1980's defending the right of our Christian school and others in our state to operate without coercion from the government. They wanted to certify our teachers, approve our curriculum, and oversee our educational process. We replied that the children at Bridgeport Baptist Academy did not belong to the government, they belonged to God. We further said that it was not the business of government to govern the ministry of a local church. We ultimately reached an accommodation with the state by which we report to a third party the number of students in each grade, the fact that we teach the basic subjects and the fact that we give a certain number of hours and days of instruction. Of course, this is information we would give to anyone. It requires no oversight, no change in what we were already doing, and gives the government no ability to expand in any way any control over our ministry. Why would we invite people to do far more in our colleges than we are willing to permit in our churches or our church schools?

It is almost invariably done with the wrong motives. In the article to which I earlier referred, the author explained that many financial benefits became available to the students because the institution was accredited. He remarked that this was an area where his tax dollars went for a good purpose. God help us if our ministries start lining up to feed at the government trough! Money never comes from the government without there ultimately being some control. It is my contention that those institutions which submit to accreditation have signed their own death warrant. They may exist with relatively little interference for many years but they are sitting on death row, waiting for the day of their execution.

Years ago, I preached at a church in Massachusetts. The pastor was a good man and there was a good spirit. The church operated a small ACE school. On the wall of their auditorium, I saw hanging a certificate of accreditation from the American Association of Christian Schools. The preacher was pleased that his school had been recognized by the AACCS and was using their approval as an advertising tool to his people and perhaps to people in the community. He had willingly attached significance to the approval of an outside body. I thought to myself as I looked at the certificate, "One day, the AACCS may suggest that to have full accreditation, a school should teach a foreign language, or perhaps have a certain amount of math required. When they do, this man would likely do what they suggested so that he could maintain the accreditation which had become important to him. Now, the suggestion would probably be valid. The action would probably strengthen his school. But the moment that preacher changes something in his school in order to keep his accreditation, he'll lose his autonomy. No longer is he acting under God. Now he is trying to keep the approval of man."