

ISLAND ECCLESIOLOGY: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE INFLUENCE OF SOUTHERN BAPTIST MISSIONARIES UPON THE FORMATION OF CUBAN BAPTIST ECCLESIOLOGY

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Introduction

Baptist work began in Cuba in 1878 with the return of a Cuban exile Alberto Diaz. The Florida Baptist Convention’s Board of Mission was the first Southern Baptist entity to be involved with Cuban Baptists followed by the Home Mission Board and eventually the Foreign Mission Board. Throughout the 130 plus years circumstances and mission strategies have changed. Political upheaval, economic disaster, and spiritual awakening have swept across the island obligating Cuban Baptists and their North American partners to make significant adjustments.

The anomalous Cuban Church Planting Movement (CPM) occurred not among an unevangelized people group but in the midst of long-established Evangelical churches. However the rapid growth among Baptists left thousands without the opportunity to experience the ordinances. In general the new believers were not left without discipleship but many have grown to spiritual maturity in an environment where Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are not a regular part of church life.¹ How did this situation come to exist?

¹Kurt Urbanek compiled the statistics from both Cuban Baptist Conventions and demonstrated that between 1997 and 2008 of the over 300,000 professions of faith less than 14% were baptized. “An Analysis of the Ongoing

Unintended consequences and unexpected socio-political changes conspired to shape the ecclesiology of the Baptist Conventions of Cuba into a hybrid of something similar to an episcopal-congregationalism. Even though the autonomy of the local church is vigorously affirmed (Congregationalism), there is a centralized control (more like Episcopalianism or Presbyterianism) especially over ordination of pastors and the ordinances. When unprecedented growth began in the early 1990's the tight controls inhibited Cuban Baptist participation in the ongoing CPM.² The purpose of this investigation is to identify those influences (missionary, political, social, and spiritual) that have contributed to Cuban Baptist polity as well as to demonstrate the impact of Western Baptist Convention polity³ upon an ecclesiology seeking to adapt to an ongoing Church Planting Movement. There is also much to celebrate in that a number of the changes needed in 2002 have now been in progress for several years through the visionary leadership of Cuban Baptists and the ministry of IMB colleagues who have served as facilitators and encouragers. That being said there remains an urgent need for further changes. For that reason the final purpose of this investigation will be to indicate polity changes that would free Cuban Baptist churches to participate more fully in the ongoing CPM.

The Anomaly within the Anomalous Church Planting Movement

In December 2002 (about ten years after the CPM began) the writer participated in an Ecclesiology conference for Western Baptist Convention leaders, pastors, and seminary students. The objective of the conference was to evaluate current practices (traditions) in the light of

Church Planting Movement among Western and Eastern Cuban Baptist Conventions from 1990–2008” (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010), 158.

² The CPM that arose in the midst of the Eastern and Western Conventions caught both groups by surprise. “In the light of their historic--almost Episcopal--polity, the two Baptist conventions have struggled with the growth of the house church phenomenon.” Ibid.

³The writer's experience has been almost exclusively with the Western Baptist Convention. Also the majority of the written resources refers to or comes from the Western Convention.

Scripture and of changing circumstances. At that time key Cuban Baptist leaders, according to Kurt Urbanek, “were aware of the emerging CPM and were struggling with how to integrate it into the existing convention structures without killing one, the other, or even both.”⁴ The problems they faced were the products of the traditions (unintended consequences) established in an earlier epoch and galvanized by the shock (unexpected socio-political changes) of the difficult years⁵ immediately following the revolution.

The Convention’s extra-biblical requirements for training pastors (four years of residential seminary, two years of pastoral experience) and for starting churches (set number of members, land, buildings, and programs) were lengthy processes. It was not possible for the Convention to produce nearly enough pastors or churches to meet the needs of the rapid growth of the CPM. The Ecclesiology conference was one way to point out the need for change by pointing to the Scriptures.

Ecclesiology Conference

The three-day conference was held at the Convention’s camp in Yumurí. The conference included presentations and small group investigations followed by reporting and dialogue sessions on six topics related to ecclesiology (baptism, priesthood of believers, the Lord’s Supper, house churches, ordination and lay leaders). All of the participants (about 100) were divided into groups of eight for the small group investigations. The small groups were to discuss

⁴ Urbanek, “CPM Cuba,” 168.

⁵The difficult years began in 1961 when the government declared itself Marxist. Discrimination and persecution followed as the official government position became atheist. According to Rodolfo R. Juarez, this shift in direction resulted in a massive migration of Protestant pastors and Catholic priests. “Colonialism and the Church in Cuba: A Brief History Shows How Christ is Still Alive in Cuba,” *Christian Social Action*, January/February 2001, 7. The end of the difficult years was a gradual process. A significant indicator of progress occurred in 1992 when as Jeremy Weber records, “the ruling Communist Party changed the state constitution to refer to Cuba no longer as ‘atheist’ but only ‘secularist.’” in “The Communist Island’s Improbable Revival is 15 Years Old and Growing Stronger,” *Christianity Today*, July 2009, 24.

all six topics. But each group also was assigned one topic on which they were to report to the large group. The small groups reports were followed by a time of dialog, an open-microphone session.

The small group investigation procedure was simple. A starter-sheet was prepared for each topic containing pertinent Scripture passages. The group was asked to review the Scripture references and add other references that they deemed important to the conversation. After gathering and reviewing the related biblical material the group developed a description of the New Testament practice, a comparison with current Cuban Baptist practice and an evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of maintaining the current practice or adjusting current practices to align them more closely with New Testament principles.

It was acknowledged from the beginning that significant cultural and historical distance exists between the New Testament and Cuban Baptists in 2002, and that plausible reasons exist for the differences between current practices and those of the New Testament. But at the same time there was a need to recognize those differences and to evaluate them afresh in the light of the Scriptures and in the light of the differences between Cuba in 1968 and Cuba in 2002.

A pattern of responses emerged during the dialog sessions. Younger leaders would speak first enthusiastically endorsing the need for changes. The older leaders would close the dialog explaining why things needed to remain the same. One veteran of the difficult years did admit that changes would be necessary if a revival did come to Cuba. Ironically the revival had been going on for almost ten years when he made that statement.

Cuban Baptist ecclesiology in 2002 was a form of Congregationalism with a centralized Convention control. The Western Baptist Convention and in particular the Ministerial

Department maintained a level of control over ordination, placement, and removal of pastors that to one raised as a Southern Baptist appeared to compromise the autonomy of the local church.

Local Church Autonomy and Convention Control

Convention control can be illustrated through the work of the Conventions' Pastoral Committee. The committee assigns graduates to their first church. When the new pastor has demonstrated his effectiveness the church submits a request to the pastoral committee for his ordination. The convention also requires that the pastor remain in his assigned church for a determined time period before accepting a call from another church.⁶ Ordination of a pastor appears to be the provenance of the Convention.

Alberto Gonzalez describes several incidents that illustrate a significant degree of Convention control over the pastors. As the pastors imprisoned in 1965 began to be released in 1967 the newly elected Convention executive committee faced some difficult decisions. Some of the pastors were innocent of any wrongdoing but others had participated to their own profit in illegal money exchanges. Accordingly some pastors were allowed to return to the churches they served before prison, some pastors were not allowed to continue in ministry, and others were asked to move to another church in another part of Cuba.⁷ Gonzalez explains that this activity was a regular Convention practice. "The measure of requiring certain pastors to change churches was due to the desire to protect the work and the pastor by sending him to an area where he was

⁶ Jonathan Sharp, "A Qualitative Study of Selected Aspects of Ecclesiology within the Baptist Convention of Western Cuba" (PhD diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009), 113–114.

⁷ Alberto Gonzales Muñoz, *Y Vimos Su Gloria: Documento Histórico de la Convención Bautista de Cuba Occidental 1959-2006 (And We Saw His Glory: Historic Document of the Western Baptist Convention of Cuba 1959-2006)*. (La Habana, Cuba: Editorial Bautista, 2007), 78.

unknown.”⁸ What might sound strange to Southern Baptists in our zeal to protect the autonomy of the local church is a normal part of church and denominational polity for Cuban Baptists.

Several years later a crisis arose over differences of opinion about how to relate to the communist, atheist government. As other denominations were looking for ways to cooperate and participate in the humanitarian goals of their government,⁹ many Western Baptist Convention pastors wanted to avoid any appearance of being collaborators. In 1982 after a long process of discussion the ministerial department removed four pastors who refused to end their relationship with a Baptist-initiated volunteer cooperative.¹⁰ In both of these incidents some may have questioned the wisdom of the decisions, but no one questioned the Convention’s control over the pastors.

Unintended Consequences

Is it possible that this strange polity came from the ecclesiology of the missionaries sent by the Home Mission Board during their years of leading Cuban Baptist work (1886–1988)?¹¹

⁸ “La medida de obligar a algunos a cambiar de iglesias se debió al deseo de proteger la obra, y al propio pastor, enviándole a un lugar donde no fuera conocida.” Ibid., 80.

⁹ Raul Gomez states that Catholic relations with the Cuban government moved from confrontation and flight to re-encounter in 1968. Letters from the Second General Conference of Latin American bishops condemned the blockade of Cuba and called on Cuban Catholics to involve themselves in the work projects. *The Church and Socialism in Cuba*. (trans. Phillip Berryman; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988), 6. Alice Hageman and Phillip E. Wheaton report interviews with Cuban Protestant ministers working as volunteers in the sugar cane fields. When asked why they were working the response was, in order to identify with the people of Cuba who do not belong to the church and because they too (the pastors) were citizens of Cuba who needed to be involved in reaching Cuba’s national production goals. *Religion in Cuba Today: A New Church in a New Society*. (New York: Association Press, 1971), 48–49.

¹⁰ COEBAC Coordinacion Obrero Estudiantil Bautista de Cuba. “La COEBAC comenzó como un grupo informal de jóvenes bautistas, identificados con el proceso revolucionario.” Gonzales Muñoz, *Y Vimos Su Gloria*. 85, f.n. 45. COEBAC began as an informal group of Baptist young adults who identified themselves with the revolutionary process.” (This and all subsequent translations of citations in Spanish are the writer’s translations).

¹¹ The Western Baptist Convention worked closely with the Home Mission Board (HMB) from 1886 until 1965 when Herbert Caudill and David Fite were imprisoned. Unofficial ties with the HMB were maintained in the succeeding years until in 1988 when the Foreign Mission Board assumed responsibility for mission work in Cuba. The Baptist Press release announcing the decision stated that the transfer would be effective December 31,

Jonathan Sharp concludes from his interviews with Cuban pastors that Landmark influences¹² were brought to Cuba by Southern Baptist missionaries. “Many Cuban Baptist leaders of the past have been marked by tendencies toward Landmarkism and have sought to define Baptists as the church that, unlike other denominations, has remained true to the Bible.”¹³ Alberto Gonzalez upholds Sharp’s contention of Landmark influences. “Our preferred sources for theological thinking were, among others, the theologians B.H. Carroll, Mullins, Pendleton, and Domingo Fernandez.”¹⁴ Carroll and Mullins are not associated with Landmarkism but J. M. Pendleton, according to historian Leon McBeth, was an important figure in the Landmark movement in the middle of the nineteenth century.¹⁵

In an interview with Jonathan Sharp, an older Cuban Baptist pastor affirmed that Baptist churches are the only true churches and Baptist ministers rightly ordained are the only true gospel ministers. This statement sounds like an indication of Landmark influence, an influence that could have been brought to Cuba by Southern Baptist missionaries.¹⁶ However Landmarkism also emphasized the rejection of any and all ecclesiastical authority outside of the local church and the absolute autonomy of the local church. These aspects of Landmarkism

1988. Leisa Hammett-Goad, “Mission Work in Cuba Transferred to FMB,” *Baptist Press* (Atlanta, GA, October 8, 1987), 3–4.

¹² According to H. Leon McBeth, Landmarkism taught that Baptists “were the only true churches and all others were merely human societies without valid ministers or ordinances,” *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Broadman Press, 1987), 447.

¹³ Sharp, “Cuban Ecclesiology,” 62.

¹⁴ “Las fuentes preferidas de nuestro pensamiento teológico eran los teólogos B.H. Carroll, Mullins, Pendleton y Domingo Fernández, entre otros.” Gonzales Muñoz, *Y Vimos Su Gloria*, 91.

¹⁵ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 440–450.

¹⁶ Landmark teachings did not go unchallenged among Southern Baptists. J. L. Dagg, an important nineteenth-century Baptist theologian, vigorously opposed the Landmark teachings. “But ‘the church’ which appears in the premises and reasonings of the Landmark is, at best, only a Baptist modification of the visible church catholic, the church that has given Pedobaptism and Popery to the world.” *Manual of Theology: Second Part, A Treatise on Church Order*, (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist, 1858). (Kindle Edition 4568). Seminary students like Moses McCall (HMB Superintendent in Cuba 1905–1947, graduate of Southern Seminary, 1902) would have been exposed to Baptist leaders who opposed Landmark teachings.

would be violently opposed to the Western Baptist Convention's "almost Episcopal polity".¹⁷ Landmark influence alone is not sufficient to explain the hybrid polity of Cuban Baptists.

Perhaps a better explanation for Southern Baptist influence in the development of a church polity that is so unlike its own can be found in the paternalistic model (not unusual for the time) employed by the mission.¹⁸ Kurt Urbanek describes the beginnings of Southern Baptist presence in Cuba as the "Americanization of Baptist work in Cuba."¹⁹ The North American missionaries arrived in 1898 and took control of the work that had been led by Cuban Baptists in the employment of the HMB since 1886. The impact of the change was sufficient for Cuban Baptist pioneer, Alberto Diaz, to withdraw from Baptist work.²⁰

From the beginning of the American presence, the missionaries made decisions about where to place Cuban pastors, where to purchase land and build chapels, etc.²¹ Newly arrived Moses McCall was made pastor of Calvary Baptist Church. McCall had to begin his pastorate speaking through an interpreter because superintendent Daniel was reluctant to give that responsibility to one of the Cuban pastors. In 1905 while still learning Spanish McCall added to his new responsibility as pastor the role of Superintendent of the HMB work in Cuba. The following year he "was elected president of the Western Baptist Convention during its second

¹⁷ According to McBeth, Landmark Southern Baptists attempted to eliminate any institution (e.g. the Foreign Mission Board and the Southern Baptist Convention) that might somehow overshadow the authority of the local church. McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*.

¹⁸ In 1898 there were very few advocates for indigenous missions. One notable exception was Methodist Bishop William Taylor. He published two books on the theme of indigenous missions *Pauline Methods of Missionary Work* in 1879, and *Ten Years of Self-Supporting Missions in India* in 1882. Roland Allen's better-known work, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours*, was not published until 1912. David Bundy, "The Legacy of William Taylor," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 18, no. 4 (October 1994): 172–176.

¹⁹ Urbanek, "CPM Cuba," 54.

²⁰ Eastern Baptist Convention leader Roy Acosta Garcia records that Diaz was replaced in 1904 by C.D. Daniel of the HMB. Diaz had conflicts with the HMB and eventually withdrew from Baptist work and returned to medical practice. *Historia y Teología de la Convención Bautista de Cuba Oriental 1898–1960, (History and Theology of the Eastern Baptist Convention of Cuba 1898–1960)*, vol. 1 (Santiago de Cuba: Privately Printed, 2000), 11. See also Urbanek, "CPM Cuba," 57, f.n. 93.

²¹ Harold Edward Greer, "History of Southern Baptist Mission Work in Cuba from its Beginnings in 1896." (Th.M. Thesis, University of Alabama, 1963), 199–200.

meeting in January, of 1906, and every year thereafter until his death in 1947.”²² A crowded agenda and heavy responsibilities were to characterize McCall’s many years in Cuba.

The phenomenal career of Moses McCall, Southern Baptist missionary in Cuba, spanned forty-two years from 1905 to 1947.

He held all of the major convention positions, including superintendent of the HMB, treasurer of the HMB, president of the Western Baptist Convention, pastor of the Calvary Baptist Church in Havana, president of the three Western Convention Boards (Cuban Missions, Education, and Publications), rector of the Western Baptist Convention Seminary, internal director of the seminary, professor in the seminary, preacher for the radio program *La Hora Bautista* (the Baptist Hour), director of the convention publication *La Voz Bautista* (The Baptist Voice), and president of the Baptist Men’s Society.²³

Forty years of running the convention machinery was not the best approach for developing Cuban Baptist denominational leaders. However those forty years do point toward an explanation for the Episcopal Congregational polity of Cuban Baptists. By making Cuban pastors employees of the mission, the superintendents modeled a highly centralized form of governing the churches, a model that was to produce unintended consequences.

It would seem that someone who ran everything for forty years might not be remembered with affection. However the opposite is true. One does not have to be among Baptists in Havana very long to encounter the deep love and appreciation that still exists for Moses McCall. Urbanek explains that even in the midst of paternalistic practices McCall invested in the development of Cuban Baptist leaders.²⁴ McCall continually insisted that the evangelization of Cuba would have to be done by Cubans. Thus the negatives were overshadowed by the positive

²² Urbanek, “CPM Cuba,” 65.

²³ Ibid., 66.

²⁴ “While in practice, McCall was in total control of the work in the West, he did mentor the majority of the Cuban leadership and taught sound principles of empowering leadership. McCall built the ministry in the Western Baptist Convention around the following three fundamental principles ... First, if Cuba was to be won to Christ, it would be won by Cubans. Second, if Cuba was to be won to Christ, the effort would be led by Cubans. Third, if Cuba was to be won to Christ, the effort should be financed by Cubans.” Ibid., 66–67.

influence of his tireless ministry. Alberto Gonzalez commented, “the figure of McCall was so bright that it could not be darkened by the paternalism that was manifested during his ministry in Cuba ... His attractive personality overshadowed his inevitable human defects and his extreme paternalism.”²⁵ Moses McCall is an example of how God works by means of and in spite of his sent-out ones. In spite of policies and practices that today would be unacceptable, the Lord worked by means of the life, faith, and perseverance of this amazing missionary.

Convention control reflected the missionary pattern of Superintendent control over the pastors. When the HMB superintendent was removed by the revolution, the Convention (through the pastoral committee of the ministerial department) stepped into the superintendent’s role. The pattern of a central controlling body to which the pastors were accountable was well established by the time the Castro revolution brought an end to Southern Baptist missionary presence in Cuba.

Interestingly the Cuban government also contributed to the centralization of the Baptist work. The department of religious affairs would only relate to the convention and not to individual churches.

Unexpected Socio-Political Changes

The unintentional consequences of the mission’s highly centralized model were aided by the unexpected socio-political changes brought about by the revolutionary government’s move toward atheistic communism. Baptists, like most Protestant groups, were optimistic in the early years of the Castro government. Alberto Gonzalez notes that a record number of baptisms were

²⁵ “No obstante, la figura de McCall tiene tanta luz propia, que no resulta opacada por el paternalismo que manifestó durante su ministerio en Cuba ... Su atractiva personalidad opacó sus inevitables defectos humanos y su extremo paternalismo.” Gonzales Muñoz, *Y Vimos Su Gloria*, 174.

reported in 1960. He describes relations with the new government as harmonious and records that Baptists held high hopes for participation in building a better future for all.²⁶

In 1961 hints of changes began to disturb the new optimism. Within a short time harmonious relations were replaced with what appeared to be hostile intentions. The government aligned with Russia and declared the nation to be Marxist communist. The government took over all private schools, including religious schools, and began an aggressive education campaign in favor of atheistic dialectical materialism. Despite all assertions to the contrary it appeared certain that the revolution was now out to destroy the churches.²⁷ Therefore defensive measures were necessary.

Many of the practices established during the difficult years were a necessary part of surviving in a climate of social rejection and of mutual suspicion (the church and the government).

However as Urbanek points out those same practices did not work well when the churches found themselves in a “climate of unprecedented growth.”²⁸ Like the believers praying for Peter’s release from prison in the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12–16), Cuban Baptists were not prepared for the answers to their prayers when they came knocking at their church doors.

The Impact of the Anomaly on Baptist Participation in the Ongoing CPM

²⁶ Ibid., 26–27.

²⁷ Ibid., 29.

²⁸ Urbanek, “CPM Cuba,” 70. Also David C. White describes the early years of the CPM. “A revival is underway in Cuba’s churches ... In many congregations attendance is three or four times what it was only two years ago ... the great majority are young people with little experience in the Christian church. The children of the revolution—those educated in a secular, atheistic environment, indoctrinated in Marxist thought all their lives—are coming to the Christian faith.” in “Religious Resurgence Swells Churches in Cuba,” *Christian Century*, May 1992, 477.

It appeared that the Ecclesiology Conference did not win converts among the older leaders. It was difficult for some of them even to acknowledge the fact that circumstances had changed.²⁹ It was even more difficult for them to accept the need for changes in the convention structure. However changes were essential. The polity of 2002 severely restricted access to the ordinances, failed to give recognition to the house churches, made no provisions for recognizing lay leaders, and held the potential to remove Cuban Baptists from participation in what God was doing all across their island.³⁰

The Problem of Ordination and Control of the Ordinances

Before the CPM began there were hardly enough ordained pastors for all of the needed services such as baptisms, Lord's Supper, weddings, or funerals; not to mention things like home visits, evangelization, and counseling. As explosive growth continued the number of ordained pastors became woefully inadequate for all the needs. Urbanek calculated in 2008 that there were on average almost seventeen "ecclesiological units" (churches, missions, house churches, and houses of prayer) per ordained pastor.³¹ It was impossible for one pastor to care for seventeen churches, even if some were smaller groups.³² Similarly it was impossible to prepare enough ordained pastors to keep up with the demand of rapid growth.

The process for becoming an ordained pastor included four years of formal training at a residential seminary followed by two years of demonstrating pastoral effectiveness in the church

²⁹ Churches had been growing rapidly for ten years. The government had officially changed its policies ending most of the discriminatory practices suffered by believers in the difficult years.

³⁰ The report of the CPM Assessment team (research conducted during the first quarter of 2002) expressed concern over polity issues that could stifle or split the work with the result that the new converts would join other groups who were more open to the CPM. Urbanek, "CPM Cuba." 139.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Jeremy Weber quotes a leader from the Eastern Baptist convention, "We have two kinds of pastors: those who are burnt out and those who are burning out." in "Improbable Revival." 24.

assigned by the convention. The situation is complicated further by the fact that the ordained pastors maintained exclusive control over the ordinances. Only an ordained pastor could baptize or administer the Lord's Supper.³³ The lengthy process required for becoming an ordained pastor plus the exclusive control of the ordinances are largely responsible for the current situation where multitudes of newer believers do not experience the ordinances as a regular part of church life.

Is there a biblical foundation for restricting the administration of the ordinances to the ordained ministers? Baptist theologian H. E. Dana writing in 1944 articulated a position very different from Cuban Baptist polity. Concerning the question of who should administrate the ordinance of Baptism Dana stated, "There is no definite indication in the New Testament, either by command or example."³⁴ Dana's assertion leaves open the question of who can administer a valid New Testament baptism and raises another question by affirming the right of each autonomous church to decide who can administer baptism.³⁵

The second question, implicit in the first, is the question of to whom the ordinances have been entrusted. A contemporary writer on Ecclesiology, John Hammett, addresses this question. "There is no theological reason why someone must be ordained to administer the ordinances, but it does seem prudent and orderly. At the same time, we view the ordinances as entrusted to the church, not to the church's leaders. Therefore, the church can designate whomever it chooses to administer the ordinances whether the person is ordained or not."³⁶ Cuban Baptist churches have

³³ In addition the pastors wanted to personally disciple all of the new candidates for baptism. See Urbanek, "CPM Cuba," 108.

³⁴ H. E. Dana, *A Manual of Ecclesiology*, 2d ed., (Kansas City, Kans.: Central Seminary Press, 1944), 287.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 289.

³⁶ John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Kregel, 2005), 260–261. Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears also affirm that the Bible does not indicate who should administrate baptism and communion and then add, "It seems reasonable that the person who

not felt free to designate anyone to administer the ordinances because the ordinances have been exclusively the provenance of the ordained pastors. The end result of this arrangement is that the ordinances remain restricted to the ordained pastor's schedule and worse; they remain irrelevant to many new Christians.

Scripture is always the first and the foundational consideration for ecclesiological questions. But, as Dana acknowledges, tradition and expediency also have a place in the formulation of church polity.

The adoption of a scriptural basis for church polity does not necessarily exclude the use of either tradition or expediency in the formulation of policies for church life. They have their place, but should by all means be rightly related to the fundamental basis of scripture. To be rightly related these considerations are to be kept always subordinate to scriptural principles and never employed in violation of them.³⁷

Yesterday's expediency is today's tradition, the tradition that so often opposes today's expediency. Therefore an evaluation of tradition and expediency in the light of the Scriptures and of the changing circumstances is continually in order and was by the time of the conference in 2002 a decade overdue.

The Dilemma of the Casas Cultos and Casas de Oración³⁸

Early in the last decade of the Twentieth Century lay leaders began gathering groups in all sorts of informal settings. In several trips to the island between 2002 and 2004 this writer visited groups meeting in apartments, garages, on rooftops, and (outside of the city) under trees. There were not enough traditional churches for all those who were coming to faith. In addition public

was instrumental in bringing a person to Christ be the one who baptizes or assists in baptism. And, although any leader in the church could lead Communion ... we can understand why many churches relegate it to the role of elder ... Whoever administers must be godly and well prepared so the sacrament is done in a God-honoring way," *Vintage Church: Timeless Truths and Timely Methods* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2008), 130.

³⁷ Dana, *Manual of Ecclesiology*, 207–208.

³⁸ "Casas Cultos", Houses of Worship. "Casas de Oración", Houses of Prayer.

transportation was frequently not available. Therefore informal places for worship and discipleship called Casas Cultos began to multiply at a rapid rate.

These groups became a dilemma for the Baptist Conventions. As Urbanek describes, convention leaders found themselves “between the sword and the wall.”³⁹

Baptist leadership knew these new works were being started but had no mechanism, under their traditional denominational structure and polity, coupled with governmental restrictions, to recognize them as churches. When asked, they would say that the majority of these groups met the characteristics of New Testament churches, but they did not necessarily meet the conventions’ traditional expectations of owning land, a building, and having the necessary convention departments and an ordained pastor. The leadership of the conventions has struggled with these issues until the present day. How can all of these new churches be recognized without suffering the government’s wrath on one side, and destroying the conventions’ traditional structure on the other?⁴⁰

There was no room in the existing structure for what God was doing. Cuban Baptists are certainly not the first nor will they be the last to face that problem.⁴¹ Therefore the house churches went unreported (or under-reported) and unrecognized for what they were – healthy and growing New Testament churches, the churches that had the potential to gather the amazing harvest that God has continued to produce on the island.

Generally the Casas Cultos and the newer informal church model, Casas de Oración, are not permitted to celebrate the Lord’s Supper apart from the presence of a convention-ordained pastor. For that reason Manuel, one of the leaders interviewed by Jonathan Sharp, feels that the house churches are not considered nor do they consider themselves to be churches even though

³⁹ “Entre la espada y la pared,” the Spanish equivalent to the proverb “between a rock and a hard place.”

⁴⁰ Urbanek, “CPM Cuba,” 115.

⁴¹ Historian Andrew F. Walls observed a similar situation in nineteenth century England where church structure was an impediment to what God was doing at that moment in history. The volunteer missionary societies that provided the powerful impetus for mission advance operated outside of the existing church structures. “The Church structures could only do what they had always done; a new concept needed a new instrument.” *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, 1st ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 243.

they perform all of the other functions of a New Testament church.⁴² Manuel believes that the house churches should be recognized as true New Testament churches. However he mentions the danger that once churches are officially recognized they tend to quickly become institutionalized.⁴³

Up until the 1990's Cuban Baptist churches had been planted through an institutionalized system that required property, a departmental structure, and a convention-ordained pastor.⁴⁴ The institutional focus can be observed from the beginnings of Baptist work. The purchase of the Jané Theater in 1888 (temple of Calvary Baptist Church) was seen as a necessity to give credibility to Baptist work.⁴⁵ The addition of extra-biblical requirements over time made it more and more difficult for missions to be constituted as churches. Alberto Gonzalez observed, "the Baptist churches of Cuba were accustomed to organize missions and work for years in them without recognizing them as autonomous churches."⁴⁶ For Gonzalez this mindset was inexplicable. Many of the convention's historic churches began as churches with a few believers meeting in a house. The requirement that a church have a temple in order to be a church was counter to both history and doctrine.⁴⁷

It was expedient (and not in conflict with Biblical principles) in the beginnings of Baptist work to purchase a theater in order to show that the new Baptist work had stability and would not quickly disappear. The expediency of obtaining property for new churches (or even for the

⁴² Sharp, "Cuban Ecclesiology," 88.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ "Baptists of both conventions came to require a convention-recognized church to have its own land, building, a convention recognized, ordained pastor, and an approved structure with a number of functioning departments. The majority of these traditional churches included an attached parsonage to house the pastor and his family." Urbanek, "CPM Cuba," 141.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 50.

⁴⁶ "Las iglesias bautistas cubanas estaban acostumbradas a organizar misiones y trabajar durante años en ellas, sin reconocerlas como iglesias autónomas." Gonzales Muñoz, *Y Vimos Su Gloria*, 141.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 142.

purpose of planting a church) became a firm tradition and eventually a mindset that would prove difficult to change as the new expediciencies cried out for new ways of planting churches.

How could the dilemma be resolved? Obviously the definition of church needed to undergo revision. A change in focus from structures to essence guided the work of Baptist leaders like Alberto Gonzalez. As president of the Western Baptist Convention during the first decade of 2000 he had the joyful task of attending numerous organization ceremonies for new churches. He insisted that the structural issues (owing property and having a certain number of members) were not relevant to the decision to constitute a new church.

From the moment in which a group of persons experience conversion they are believers, believers that God has called out, that need to grow and that need work in order to develop, but they are a church. To call them a mission or a house of worship or a house of prayer or a new group of believers is to diminish and not recognize their essential nature.⁴⁸

Would official recognition of the Casas Cultos provide all that is needed for those groups to be New Testament churches? If the Casas Cultos feel the freedom to select their own leaders and to designate who can administer the ordinances in addition to the proclamation, discipleship, service, fellowship, and worship that they have been doing all along, would they in fact be New Testament churches?

In 2005 the International Mission Board (IMB) drafted guidelines for what missionaries would teach and report as church.⁴⁹ The guidelines followed the definition of church in the 2000 edition of the Baptist Faith and Message. Those guidelines can be summarized in three areas: biblical functions, biblical ordinances, and biblical leadership. A New Testament church

⁴⁸ “Desde el momento en que un grupo de personas experimentan la conversión, son creyentes que Dios ‘ha llamado aparte’ y que necesitan de un crecimiento y un trabajo para su desarrollo; pero ya son una iglesia. Llamarles misión, casa culto o casa de oración a un nuevo grupo de creyentes es rebajar y desconocer la esencia de su naturaleza.” Ibid., 181.

⁴⁹ “International Mission Board, Definition of Church January 25, 2005,” *International Mission Board, News and Information*, January 25, 2005, <http://www.imb.org/main/news>.

performs the five functions of the church, observes the ordinances on a regular basis, and has leaders who are qualified according to Scripture. The Casas Cultos have been fulfilling biblical functions since their inception. The issue of biblical ordinances could be and is being resolved not by fragmentation of the Conventions but by the recognition and the support of more and more traditional churches and convention-ordained pastors. The final area, biblical leadership is always the most problematic in the context of Church Planting Movements.

The Difficulty of Biblical Leadership in a CPM

The IMB Guidelines state, “A church has identifiable leaders, who are scrutinized and set apart according to the qualifications set forth in Scripture. They recognize two Biblical offices of church leadership: pastors/elders/overseers and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor/elder/overseer is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.”⁵⁰ In the same way that the limited supply of convention-ordained pastors has impeded Baptist participation in the CPM, the limited availability of leaders who qualify as elders could be a further impediment to future growth.

As new believers are discipled and encouraged to share with others what the Lord has done in their lives a natural process of multiplication occurs. Many new groups form due to the ministry of recent converts, of teenagers, or of lay-missionaries (both men and women). Many of these leaders would not meet the biblical qualifications for the office of pastor/elder/overseer. How then can this healthy expression of the priesthood of believers (a basic characteristic of CPMs) be harmonized with the biblical requirements for leadership? The unacceptable solution to this problem is to institutionalize the movement and slow it down to the point that leader

⁵⁰ Ibid.

training can keep up with church growth. A better solution could be found in refocusing the role of pastor/elder/overseer from ordinance administrator to mentor of network shepherds.

Looking to the Future: Three Reasons for Optimism and a Suggestion

Strong lay leadership has been in evidence throughout the history of Cuban Baptists and continues to be a reason for optimism. Another reason is the commitment to unity especially as is manifested in the respect given to the older leaders by the younger generation of leaders. And happily there are many indications that a positive shift is well under way among Cuban Baptist leaders.⁵¹ The positive shift and commitment to unity come together in Daniel Gonzalez's *Modelo Cubano*, a plan for combining the strengths of the historic churches with the strengths of the house church networks, holds great potential for Baptist involvement in the ongoing CPM. At the same time biblical leadership remains a concern that needs to be addressed both in the local churches and in theological education at all levels.

Church Planting Movements happen when believers put into practice their biblical role as priests. As 1 Peter 2:9 declares, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;" Dr. Tommy Lea explained that this priesthood means responsibilities to display the Lord's excellencies through testimony and life as well as the privilege of approaching God's throne in worship, praise, and intercession.⁵² Cuban

⁵¹ IMB missionaries have patiently walked alongside the leaders of the Eastern and Western Baptist Conventions and have had the joy of seeing many positive changes as a result. Alberto Gonzalez says of them, "these brothers with a tremendous respect served as consultants, encouragers, and catalyzers ... They were continually offering ideas and resources, but leaving every decision in the hands of Cuban leadership. "estos hermanos, con un respeto tremendo servían como consultores, animadores y catalizadores ... Siempre ofreciendo ideas y recursos, pero dejando toda decisión en manos de los directivos cubanos." Gonzales Muñoz, *Y Vimos Su Gloria*, 126.

⁵² Thomas D. Lea, "The Priesthood of All Christians According to the New Testament," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 30, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 15–21.

Baptists laypersons exercised their priestly responsibilities both before and during the CPM. As

Kurt Urbanek describes:

From the earliest years of Baptist work in Cuba, laymen have played an indispensable role in evangelism, church planting and local church leadership. This was never more clearly evident than during the imprisonment of the pastors and the sending of the seminary students and young leaders to UMAP.⁵³ As other denominations lost churches due to the early trials of the Revolution, Baptist laymen demonstrated through their service the long held Baptist belief in the priesthood of all believers. This strong lay base would prove invaluable in the coming CPM.⁵⁴

Perhaps it is another anomaly within the anomaly of Cuban Baptist ecclesiology that in the midst of a restrictive structure that placed the ordinances out of the reach of the churches, the believer-priests have felt the freedom and the responsibility to win, disciple, and group new believers. The Casas Cultos and Casas de Oración became the forms into which those groups could be organized, but sadly organized without the regular observance of the ordinances.

The historical roller coaster of intense opposition accompanied by little to no growth followed by the relaxing of restrictions and explosive growth should have created enough stress upon the Baptist conventions to split the fellowships many times over. During the Ecclesiology conference in 2002 the writer observed a profound commitment to the unity of the work. There were strong differences of opinion about the needed changes. Generally the differences fell along generational lines⁵⁵ with the veterans of the difficult years digging in their heels to keep things the same. But there was also a love and respect on the part of the younger leaders for those who

⁵³ UMAP stands for “Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción” Military Units for Assistant in Production. These were work camps that existed between 1965 and 1968. Their purpose was to re-educate certain classes of the socially maladjusted such as drug addicts and religious persons. Gonzales Muñoz, *Y Vimos Su Gloria*, 31, f.n. 25.

⁵⁴ Urbanek, “CPM Cuba, 109.”

⁵⁵ With some very notable exceptions, for example, Alberto Gonzalez was president of the Western Convention at the time of the conference. *Ibid.*, 168–169.

had paid the price during the difficult years. They recognized that changes were needed but not change at any price.

The fruit of this commitment to the unity of the work is evident in the *Modelo Cubano*, a plan for a cooperative mission effort between a traditional church and a network of house churches. The author of the plan, Daniel Gonzalez, rejects house church models that divide, models that insist on labeling the traditional churches as a mistake, an old wineskin that cannot contain the new wine.⁵⁶ Gonzalez's idea of teaming house church networks with traditional churches is producing significant results in the church where he pastors as well as in several other historic churches.

El Modelo Cubano

Daniel Gonzalez, pastor of a historic Baptist church in Havana,⁵⁷ has implemented a system that utilizes the strengths of both the historic church and a network of informal house churches in order to saturate the area around the location of their historic church with churches.⁵⁸

The Model is called the *Cuban Model of Kingdom Growth* because it responds to the particular needs of church planting (especially urban church planting) in Cuba. By law a church cannot be located within two kilometers of an existing church of the same denomination. Gonzalez estimates that in the densely populated sectors of the city two square kilometers would require dozens of churches in order to serve the population adequately. The law does not apply to

⁵⁶ Daniel Gonzalez Garcia, *Modelo Cubano de Reinocrecimiento: Una Iglesia Sistemica (A Cuban Model for Kingdom Growth: A Systemic Church)* (La Habana, Cuba: Western Baptist Convention Mission Board, 2008), 17.

⁵⁷ McCall Baptist Church. The memory of our amazing, much-loved, paternalistic predecessor, Moses McCall, is literally inscribed in stone in the walls of the Baptist temple located adjacent to the installations of the Baptist seminary in Havana. Historically known as Iglesia Bautista McCall the church has recently taken on the name of their sector of the city. The name change is the result of the church's efforts to apply the *Modelo Cubano* by identifying themselves with that area of the city where the temple is located (Iglesia de la Localidad).

⁵⁸ Gonzalez Garcia, *Modelo Cubano*, 14–15.

house churches since they are not formally constituted as churches. Thus the house churches can continue to multiply in various relational networks throughout the surrounding communities.⁵⁹ Through the house churches the communities can be permeated with the gospel to a far greater degree than would be possible if the traditional church was working alone.

In a similar fashion the historic church can help the house churches with their legal barriers. Informal assemblies often raise concerns with the government. Some would hesitate to open their homes for a house church because of the unwanted attention and possible sanctions. However as a part of the historic church located in their area, the house churches have legal status as members of a government recognized church.⁶⁰

Another advantage of the house churches is that they provide multiple points of contact with the community. McCall church has typically been a congregation of professionals (teachers, doctors, etc). However there are many other social groups in the same sector of Havana. Thus Gonzalez explains, “Not only do we seek to see autonomous churches planted but churches that will take the avenues through which the life of our communities circulate.”⁶¹ The house churches can penetrate many different social segments as each house church identifies itself with the location or socio-cultural niche of the new group.

Interestingly one of the responsibilities that Gonzalez assigns to the historic church is to protect the house churches from becoming institutionalized. Since the historic church is already institutionalized it can offer to the house churches all of the benefits that go with that status

⁵⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 16.

⁶¹ Ibid., 14. “No sólo buscamos iglesias autóctonas (aplatanadas) sino iglesias que tomen las avenidas socio-culturales por las que circula la vida de nuestras comunidades.”

without burdening the house churches with all of the legal requirements entailed by that status. Thus the house churches remain free to continue multiplying rapidly.⁶²

Perhaps the most significant advantage of this tandem approach to Kingdom growth (institutional church/house church network) is the potential to rapidly multiply leaders within a structure that provides for development and accountability. The institutional requirements for vocational ministry, according to Gonzalez, have been and continue to be a major obstacle to the development of leaders among evangelical churches in Cuba. Leaders working in house church networks that are linked to a government-recognized church have institutional protection.⁶³ Thus the only requirements they need to concern themselves with are the biblical requirements.

The Need for Overseers

Leaders working in house church networks need not only institutional protection, but also spiritual and ministerial protection. The ordained pastors could be the group to provide this needed protection. The functions of the pastor/elder/overseer, according to Benjamin Merkle, are leader, shepherd, equipper, and teacher.⁶⁴ One important aspect of leading, shepherding, and equipping is providing oversight. The work of overseers **Εvpiskopoi** is the work of supervisors.⁶⁵ A good supervisor is continuously developing those under his or her supervision. What is frequently missing in the CPM context (not just in Cuba) is a supervisory structure (some prefer to call it a mentoring chain) that provides the needed guidance, protection,

⁶² Ibid., 18.

⁶³ Ibid., 21–22.

⁶⁴ Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 2008), 89.

⁶⁵ ἐπίσκοπος translated overseer comes from the verb σκοπέω “pay attention to or watch out for” Phil 2:4 and Gal 6:1. The supervisory function (oversight) is implicit in the root as well as in the usage of the word in both nominal and verbal forms (see Acts 20:28 and 1 Pet 5:2).

correction, and instruction at the outermost reaches of the church planting movement, the place where a recent convert is sharing her faith and forming a group of new believers.⁶⁶

In order for these structures to exist there must be a change of priorities among those qualified to initiate them – the pastor/elder/overseers. Clearly the first change would be for the convention-ordained pastors to relinquish control over the ordinances, allowing the churches the freedom to designate others to join the pastors in performing those functions and thereby lifting a huge burden off the shoulders of the overworked pastors.⁶⁷ Correspondingly there must be a change in the way pastor/elder/overseers are trained. Effective supervision of house church leaders and how to shepherd house church networks are courses historically not found in the seminary curriculums of Havana or Santiago. Perhaps an even more significant change would be a change in the traditional marks of a successful pastor. Success measured by how many elders have been equipped and by how many house church networks are being served through their ministries would point pastoral priorities in a new direction.

Conclusions

The strongest reason for optimism concerning the future of the work among Cuban Baptists is the active involvement of the sovereign God of the universe, the Lord of History, who has visited a most unlikely island in a most extraordinary manner. Historian Justo Gonzalez writing in 1969, just ten years after the beginning of the Castro revolution and only four years after the imprisonment of the Baptist pastors and the Southern Baptist

⁶⁶ The natural result of obedience, especially the obedience of a new convert whose relational network is mostly lost family and friends, is evangelism and discipleship. The natural outcome of evangelism and discipleship is the formation of a group of disciples. The natural outcome of discipleship groups is the formation of new churches. What these new churches need is not a list of extra-biblical ecclesiological requirements but mentors to walk alongside their leaders and answer their questions without stepping into the middle of their church life and taking over or incorporating them into an existing church.

⁶⁷ A Pauline pastor/elder/overseer model 1 Cor. 1:14–17.

missionaries wrote, “What the final result of the present circumstances will be, we dare not guess. One can only trust that the Lord of history will once more turn the crooked human ways into a straight path to his ends.”⁶⁸ The Lord answered the author’s heart cry, and we can trust that he will continue to do the same in Cuba and beyond Cuba to the ends of the earth.

We can also trust that the Lord will continue to make our crooked human ways into straight paths to his ends. Just as he worked through missionaries like Moses McCall, in spite of his less than perfect missiology and by means his faith and faithfulness, the Lord continues to work by means of and in spite of his sent ones.

Unintended consequences and unexpected changes are a part of every mission effort. God did not give us omniscience and we cannot anticipate all the effects of lifestyle and ministry, or even the effects of something as mundane as administrative policy. Like our missionary predecessors in Cuba, we might model something that we never intended for them to incorporate into their church life. But on the other hand we also have the opportunity (as our predecessors did so effectively) to pass on a life of faith, a passion for Kingdom advance, a confidence in His revelation, and a trusting submissiveness to the Holy Spirit.

⁶⁸ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Development of Christianity in the Latin Caribbean* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1969), 98.

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