

An Answer To *Church Authority: Is it Vertical or Horizontal?* By Steve Cornett. BBB Dec 5, 2011 P. 1.

By

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In examining and answering this article by Bro Cornett let me say that he exhibits a more charitable spirit in his article than most Essential Mother Daughter Authority (EMDA) brethren do when writing on this subject and this is commendable. For some reason most EMDA men have not manifested this kind of spirit and Bro Cornett's moderation is especially welcome.

Bro Cornett begins by quoting Mt 21:23-27. He then says the question of how churches were started was never an issue when he was in the Tri-State area of West Virginia, Kentucky and Ohio. I am not sure just what the time frame of this statement is but I assume he is speaking of 1970-80. But I do know for a fact, however, that during this time several leading men in this very area did not accept the idea of EMDA. We have the testimonies of Bro Brong, Bro Kazee and Bro C.D. Cole. See *Definitions of Doctrine* Vol. III, p. 7, 8. But remember, unity in error is error still.

Bro Cornett then asks how authority is transmitted to churches. He quotes Ex 25:9. Next he says:

I believe in our two texts we have the authority for doing all mission work and starting new Baptist churches...

A little further on he says:

Some questions to stimulate our minds are as follows. What does the word authority mean? Did Christ give all or some authority to anyone? If He did what authority did he give? To whom was this authority given? Is this authority binding in our day and what does it consist of?

Bro Cornett then admits that church authority was first vertical and quotes Mt 28:18 to prove it. He says he agrees with what "self constitution brothers believe," that is, that church authority comes down from Christ—but only *initially*. After discussing the use of authority in Scripture he then gets to the main point of his article, namely, that God's original vertical authority was for some reason transformed into horizontal authority and we have a record of that kind in Acts 13:1-4. He says:

The question before us is how is this church authority passed on? Does it come down directly from above or does it come down from above first and then is passed on from one church to another church? [225].

He then sets forth this proposition:

A. The Church at Antioch Delegating Horizontal Authority Acts 13:1-4.

I have some more questions for our readers. Was Saul (Paul) and Barnabas in the church? How did they get into the church....

If vertical authority only is true then these two men would not have needed to be in any church. They could have just went out on their own authority for they had baptism, did they not? In order to teach the self constituted theory of doing mission work you must deny the clear truth of Scripture that these two men were members in good standing in the Lord's church at Antioch....if vertical authority alone (self constitution of churches) is true then why were these men in the church at Antioch? Please answer this question, my Brothers!

Let me answer Bro Cornett's questions. First. Yes. These men were in the church at Antioch. They got into that church by uniting or joining it (Ac 5:13: 9:26). Why did they need to be in a church? Because our Lord has directed that where two or three meet together in His name, He Himself is present with them and they desire to meet with Christ! Believers always desire to be in fellowship with other believers in church capacity.

I cannot understand why he thinks that if the authority to constitute a church is direct, that these men would not need to be in a church. What does that have to do with it? If a man is a member of a church and it goes out of existence, what then? If there is a sufficient number of such non-members, they can gather together and constitute a new church. This happened numberless times in the early days of America. Or, if not, they will seek to unite with another church already in existence, all for the same reason.

Bro Cornett then raises the question of why these men, Paul and Barnabas, when they returned from their first missionary journey reported to the church? The answer is quite simple and it has nothing to do with church constitution or delegated authority. They were relating to their home church what success they had in preaching the gospel to the Gentiles. They did the same thing at the church in Jerusalem (they were not members there) and did so on at least two other occasions, Ac 15:12 & 21:18. Paul did the same thing at other churches. He did so when he wrote to the Romans (15:15-23); was he a member in one of the churches there? But how does Paul giving a report to his home church (Antioch), or other churches, establish this horizontal church authority or EMDA? I can think of no way. How many times has a missionary gone around the country giving a report of the work in his field of labor to numbers of churches where he had no membership? How many missionaries send out regular reports of their work? Why do they do this? Do such communications have anything whatsoever to do with EMDA? Not that I can see.

Bro Cornett then takes up Paul and Barnabas and asks:

How do I know that the church sent them out?

He means sent out by EMDA—for there is no question that the church was involved with these men—even though it did not formally send them out. He answers:

And thence sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they fulfilled. Notice the words in bold!

Gill comments on Ac 14:26:

...by the prophets: from this place they first set out on their travels; here they were separated by the order of the Holy Ghost to the work of the ministry, and by them they were sent forth, after they had in prayer commended them to God, and to his grace to assist them, and succeed them, as well as to fit them...

Gill means the three prophets mentioned by name are those who laid hands on the two whom the Holy Spirit had called for this work—not the church. Robertson emphasizes that this was not an ordination but a solemn consecration [WP. Ac 13:3]. This was a common thing among the Jews. ATR also says: “Luke again refers to the Holy Spirit as the source of their authority for this campaign rather than the church at Antioch.” [WP 13:4]. Why do EMDA men almost always see things in a text which are not there? Why do they take things which do not belong to a passage and put them into it?

If the Holy Spirit meant to teach by this passage, that an essential of church constitution is a horizontal investiture of church power, one church giving it to another, then I must confess I am among those who would never have even thought of such an idea from text or context. For suppose this is what the Holy Spirit meant to teach us—that is, how to constitute churches by EMDA—how could we know this? Read this passage a thousand times and you will be no closer to the answer! Take some things mentioned in the text as examples. *Fasting* is mentioned in this passage. Is this essential to constitute a church? Why not? Does the text teach that you must fast to constitute a church? Paul was a special *apostle* and he made much of this fact. So does this mean you have to have an apostle to constitute a church? There is a *laying on of hands*. Is it not as reasonable to say that no church can be constituted without the laying on of hands? *Prophets* are mentioned in this passage. Are they essential to constitute a church? The *Holy Spirit* specially called these men and announced their call for a specific work and said: “Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.” This was certainly **vertical authority—and long after that of Mt 28!** But note. He did not say: *I have appeared unto the Church at Antioch so that you can be a mother church and I authorize you to start other churches and this is the essential pattern of how churches must be constituted for all time.* Not a word of it! The idea is not in the text unless it is hidden there! These things are suggested to *stimulate our minds*. The text *contains nothing* of EMDA near or far. We know it is easy to read into a passage something which is not there as the disciples did in Jn 21:23—and this is what I believe Bro Cornett has done.

Is there anything in this passage that even mentions church authority? Is there anything in this passage that suggests church authority? I confess that if it is there I am unable to see it. Is this how the Holy Spirit gives a command?

A Baptist standard is that *positive laws require positive commands*. We have such commands for love, 1 Jn 3:23; Baptism, Mt 28:18-20, the Supper and so on. But when men make a law but have no positive command for it what are we to do? We have this example of those who said you must be circumcised to be saved. Was that true? What response did the apostles and elders give to that supposed law? They said, “We gave no such commandment!” [Ac 15:23]. That is, there is no such commandment! They never thought it! They never taught it! They never said it! They never wrote it! Nor had these Judaizers ever read this law in Scripture! But they thought they found a *pattern* for it and from that pattern they asserted that made it essential for salvation! They convinced themselves that *it had to be that way!* And consequently, they were bold enough to say *you could not be saved without circumcision*—which they asserted without a positive command! So our EMDA brethren do the same thing. They say *you cannot constitute a church without EMDA!* But where is this law stated in Scripture? We ask, *where is this law found?* Do not give us an allusion of it; do not give us a vague pattern; do not give us an implication; do not

tell us that it is *suggested* in this passage or some other—but give us the positive command for it! Give us one Scripture where EMDA is stated! When men unchurch, unbaptize, unordain, condemn and disfellowship with exclusion and epithet all who do not follow their tradition, we must ask them to give us a *thus saith the Lord*? But when we do we are treated to a rather contemptuous silence.

Bro Cornett then goes on to say:

The only way they [baptism and the supper—J C] can be passed on is the Biblical pattern for the constitution of churches, like kind begets like kind!

If Bro Cornett means that only a church can administer baptism and take the supper we agree and this is in agreement with the old Landmarkers like J.R. Graves. But whether this has anything to do with EMDA is an entirely different matter. There are several other ways that the ordinances and churches could be perpetuated without EMDA and thousands of Baptists in history thought so, because none of them, so far as anyone has found, ever embraced EMDA or even gave it a passing notice! And whatever Bro Cornett believes he has as to validity in church or ordinance, he has received it through these very churches, which if they were in existence today, he would not fellowship! Amazing! I might just here mention what Graves himself said on this subject:

A body of baptized Christians can organize themselves into a church at their pleasure, and no exterior body can organize them, much less can a presbytery organize a body superior to itself. [J. R. Graves. The Baptist. 1-17-1880, p. 486].

The Church of Christ is an independent body, consisting of one single local congregation, depending on the will of no other body on earth for her being or her ceasing to be. In one respect, like her crown head, she has power to lay down her life and power to take it up again. [Graves. The Baptist. April 8, 1880, page 668.].

Let me ask Bro Cornett to tell us what Graves said here? Whether Graves was right or wrong makes no matter for our discussion. What I am asking is, does Graves state DA or EMDA? Why is it that EMDA men never deal with these statements by Graves? Do his statements line up with Bro Cornett's position or with what we believe? Was Graves in agreement with Baptists in general on this subject? Did Graves and the men of his day constitute churches in Scriptural form or not?

As EMDA churches do not agree with Graves, will Bro Cornett tell us where his kind of churches—that is, EMDA believing churches—came from? He asserts that *like kind begets like kind*. Will he tell us how EMDA churches came to be? Are they Landmark Baptists? If so how is it that Graves believed one thing and they another? Are they the same *kind of churches*? The corollaries are instant and conclusive. My answers to Bro Cornett's questions have been instant, direct and to the point. Will he answer in kind? If not, why not?

Bro Cornett sets forth this proposition:

4. THE ERRORS OF SELF CONSTITUTION

A. WEAKENS THE GREAT COMMISSION GIVEN TO THE CHURCH

He then under C. he says:

WEAKENS CHURCH AUTHORITY IN DISCIPLINE

He quotes Mt 18:15-20 and says:

I cannot believe that any Baptist church or pastor would use these verses to teach the self constitution of churches when in fact the context clearly states it's the authority of an already existing church in Jerusalem which our Lord started during His ministry and is the mother of all other church are born (brought forth). Where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the very midst.

In reply let me thank Bro Cornett for bringing this passage up in this discussion. The context, as he intimates, is most important in ascertaining the meaning of this Scripture. The Lord discussed the subject of church discipline in vss 15-19. He had stated that whatever a church shall bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven, and whatsoever it shall loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven. This is a monumental statement! That what a church does (in truth and according to Scripture) on earth is bound in Heaven ought to make churches careful to follow Scripture in all their actions. But the writer goes on and says in vs 19:

Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven.

Here again we have a marvelous revelation and it is most crucial for us to understand its ramifications. Now the first thought the disciples must have had on hearing these things was to question, how can these things be? Our Lord answers and answers plainly:

For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

But Brother Cornett forgot a most essential point in the interpretation of Scripture: When you see a *therefore* or a *for*, in a text you need to see what it is *there for*! Christ is here telling them *why* these marvelous and wonderful things are true—**For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.** This informs us how this *power*, this *authority*, is conveyed. It is not by the mother church at Jerusalem birthing another church as Bro Cornett says. It is not by the blessing of a bishop, cardinal or presbytery. It is not by church letter or the vote of another church but it is because Christ meets together with them! This is Christ's authority and it is direct from Him! Cf. Re 1:13 His presence is there, Christ says, with any number as small as two or three who are gathered together in His name. Christ Himself lights the church lamp—for no one else can do it! Nor can anyone else snuff out a church lamp! Re 2:5. This is how the first church was constituted, Mt 5:1—and all others to the end of the age, Mt 18:18-20.

Now this interpretation of Mt 18:20 is no private interpretation as is the EMDA theory. A few references to Baptist authors will make it clear that this text (this is one of the great problems with EMDA—no one ever heard of it before our own time!) refers to church constitution and this is stated time and again. First I will give a quote which is 1800 years old! It is from Tertullian.

For the very Church itself is, properly and principally, the Spirit Himself, in whom is the Trinity of the One Divinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. (The Spirit) combines that Church which the Lord has made to consist in ‘three’ and thus, from that time forward, every number (of persons) who may have combined together into this faith is accounted ‘a Church,’ from the Author and Consecrator (of the Church). — [Tertullian, *On Modesty, Apostolic Fathers*, vol iv. p. 99-100].

That this was the common interpretation among Baptists the following will establish:

J. R. Graves said:

Wherever there are three or more baptized members of a regular Baptist church or churches covenanted together to hold and teach, and are governed by the New Testament, etc., there is a Church of Christ, even though there was not a presbytery of ministers in a thousand miles of them to organize them into a church. There is not the slightest need of a council of presbyters to organize a Baptist church. [Graves quoted by Jarrel. *Baptist Church Perpetuity*, p.1].

Reynolds reinforces this idea:

The fundamental principles of Church discipline are laid down in Matt. 18:15-18. Here the Savior enjoins the course to be pursued towards an offending brother, and designates ‘*the Church*’ as the tribunal of ultimate appeal what, then, is the Church? The context affords a satisfactory reply. ‘Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I.’ This is the Church to which Christ alludes. It is gathered in his name, and blessed with his presence; and is, therefore, competent to decide a question involving the interests of his cause. The Scriptures recognize no higher authority. It is worthy of remark that in the organization of this ecclesiastical court for the trial of offences, the officers of the Church are not even mentioned. Their presence is not considered indispensable. ‘No officer is here. It is not the Church clerk, nor the parties that have neglected to summon him. The Church’s Head, the Lord Jesus Christ, has left him out. [Reynolds, J. L., *Church Polity*, 68].

I do not skimp but give more than needed. Crowell's *Manual* was a standard among Baptists and it held the field along with Hiscox' *Directory*:

When a company of believers thus united take the law of Christ for their rule of action, and faithfully execute it, they possess all the power, rights and authority, ever vested by him in any church on earth. This is evidently the import of the principle laid down in Matt. 18:20. after having revealed the law of discipline, and granted his disciples the power of binding and loosing, with the assurance that their acts, when they should be united to in the church capacity and obedient to his will should be ratified in heaven, and having thus explained to them the sacredness of the church power with which they were to be invested, he adds: ‘For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.’ ‘In my name,’ signifies, subject to his authority, and doing his will. This passage is often, and very properly mentioned in circles of Christians gathered for prayers, as a source of encouragement to unite supplication. But it extends further. It applies with full force only to a band of disciples pledged to each other and to the Savior to honor and obey his commands. With such a company thus united, he has promised to be, and where Jesus is with his disciples approvingly, there is full church power. Crowell. *Manual*, p. 66-67.

Here is another:

And wherever two or three baptized disciples abide, there they ought to ‘gather together in Christ’s name,’ and organize, and co-operate. They should take Christ as their only head, and lawgiver, and teacher, and they should bind themselves to be governed in all things by his word and to his way.... J.B. Moody. *Distinguishing Doctrines of Baptists*, P. 11.

Moody here alludes to Mt 18:20. Bro Troy Sheppard (who believes EMDA) says Mt 18:20 refers to church constitution [personal letter]. Is he a Baptist pastor? Was J. B. Moody a Baptist pastor? Was Crowell? What about Tertullian? Reynolds? Was J. R. Graves a Baptist pastor?

In The Baptist Examiner in 1940 Bro John R. Gilpin answered a question in the column “I would like to know.” He said:

What is the least number that can be organized into a church. He answered:

The Master started with four. Read Mt. 4:18-22. I think right there was the beginning of the first church the world ever saw. Possibly it would be all right to organize with even two. Read Mt. 18:30. [TBE. March 30, 1940. p. 2].

Was Bro Gilpin a Baptist pastor?

Bro Cornett said *he* could not understand how a *Baptist* pastor would apply this text to the constitution of a church suggesting, that in his opinion, such would be anomalous. But in the light of the above quotes it appears his appraisal is incorrect, Mk 8:21, at least as far as Baptists are concerned great numbers believed Mt 18:20 had to do with church constitution. Most of these references above (with many others were given in *LUF* and Bro Cornett had the book at hand), how could he miss this easily ascertained fact? Does he then really question what Baptists believed about this text, or was this just a ploy?

Now as far as the Jerusalem church being the mother church of all other churches, if Bro Cornett defines the term *mother church* as being *the first church* (and this is the proper definition of the term as used by Baptists—but EMDA men *never* define their terms!) we are in agreement. But if he contends that it was a mother church because it granted essential authority to all the churches which followed—that is “birthing” churches or giving ecclesiastical power, we must disagree. One will note that he offers no proof for his position but that his theory demands it! This is not any proof at all. We have the NT record of churches in Judea, Galilee, Samaria, Caesarea and Antioch which had no apparent connection with the Jerusalem church except the common faith, Ac 9:31; 11:26; 18:22. Multitudes of other churches were established all over the Roman Empire but not a single one was ever said to be essentially connected with the Jerusalem church.

But let me give one more quote which will make this idea clear. Graves says no church is dependent upon another church! This cancels out miles of EMDA assertions:

Each particular church, is a body of Christ complete in itself, and absolutely independent of all other religious organizations.

This is so evident upon the face of the Scriptures I see not how to make it more manifest.

The proof given that the very word *Ekklesia* (as assembly) denotes a complete church, equally implies its independency, i.e., that it is dependent upon no other body for its existence or self-perpetuation, or the discharge of all the functions and trusts of a Church of Christ. [Graves. *New Great Iron Wheel*, 134].

Now let us ask: Is this EMDA or DA? Does Bro Cornett agree with Graves?

Bro Cornett then suggests that if some Campbellites met somewhere they could, under DA, be considered a church. Of course he is not serious but is only attempting to make our position seem absurd, but without success. When Christ said where two or three are gathered together, did He have no restrictions whatsoever? What did He mean?

He did not mean any two or three *pretended* believers. He did not mean if two or three heretics did so, that they could be a church. He was not referring to unbaptized, unsaved, or those who were disciples in name only. He was referring to those who were saved, baptized and thus legitimate disciples, who meet together with His authority—in His name—for the purpose of constituting a church! Nor did He mean that if two or three disciples chanced to meet on a street corner that they became a church unintentionally. His meaning is that when two or three disciples *purpose* to form a church, they can do so.

Is this not plain?

Then in the last paragraph of his article (p.226) Bro Cornett again says:

Beloved if you examine the majority of Baptist Confessions you will find that very few of them will agree to self constitution of churches.

One can only wonder why Bro Cornett did not examine these confessions to see what they said on this subject for himself. If any of them do set forth self DA this indicates that the EMDA position is not correct because they maintain that EMDA was the standard position of Baptists through the ages. But I will be much more specific and maintain that no single Baptist confession ever written specified EMDA! Let him produce one if he can!

But just a cursory examination of Baptist confessions would have caused Bro Cornett to have cut this last paragraph from his article. Take for example the famous Baptist Confession of 1644:

Chapter XXXIII.

That Christ hath here on earth a spiritual kingdom, which is the Church, which he hath purchased and redeemed to himself, as a peculiar inheritance: which Church, as it is visible to us, is a company of visible Saints, called & separated from the world, by the word and Spirit of God, to the visible profession of the faith of the Gospel, being baptized into that faith, and joined to the Lord, and each other, by mutual agreement, in the practical enjoyment of the Ordinances, commanded by Christ their head and King. 1

They go on to say in Chapter XXXVI :

That being thus joined, every Church has power given them from Christ for their better well being...

This means the authority for constitution is given **directly from Christ and not from another church**, mother church, father church, sister church, grandmother church or any other church relative but from Christ alone! [*LUF*. P. 97].

The London Confession is even more express saying the power and authority is vested in Christ Himself and that the Lord gives this power to a church when they covenant together—that is when they constitute. That they reject EMDA is made doubly clear by their appeal to Mt. 18:20

and the phrase “...and joined to the Lord, and each other, by mutual agreement,” (2 Co 8:5) which is self constitution stately so! [Cf. *LUF*. p. 101-3]. Question: Were the authors of this Confession Baptists?

We could go on but enough has been given for our purpose and the careful reader will see that Bro Cornett's defense of EMDA has been somewhat less than convincing. Let me close by asking some other questions of Bro Cornett:

Will you give us a positive commandment in the Bible for EMDA?

Will you give us the name of one man who ever applied the EMDA theory to Ac 13:1-4 before our own times?

Will you give us the name of one Baptist who ever applied the EMDA theory to Mt 28:18-20 before our own times?

Will you give us one explicit historical record of the doctrine of EMDA before our own times?

Will you give us the name of one Baptist church manual which specifically stated EMDA as an essential of church constitution?

Will you give us the name of one Baptist pastor who ever specifically taught the idea of EMDA before our own times?

Will you give us the name of one Baptist book which mentions the idea EMDA before our own times?

Will you give us the name of any church history which mentions the idea of EMDA as a Baptist doctrine?

Will you give us one Baptist Confession that mentions the idea of EMDA?

Will you tell us how you can contend for EMDA when it is not found in the Bible nor in Baptist history?

If EMDA is a new doctrine, then are you not teaching the tradition of men for the commandment of Christ? Mt 15:9.

Will you tell us how you can consistently oppose other traditions of men (such as infant baptism) when you hold EMDA without a positive law for it in the Word of God?

How can you write to instruct others concerning DA (for example on what Baptists believe about Mt 18:20 and on the position of our confessions on DA) if you (as you indicated in your article) do not know what they taught?