

J. R. GRAVES' LIFE-TIME POSITION ON CHURCH CONSTITUTION INVESTIGATED

By

J.C. Settlemoir

INTRODUCTION

A number of Sovereign Grace Landmark Baptist churches believe they are the direct descendants of those Landmark churches in the 1800s of which J.R. Graves was the most vociferous spokesman. It is affirmed by these present day churches (that is by their leading men) that Graves took the position that no Scriptural church could be formed without a mother church, which we call, *Essential Mother Daughter Authority* (EMDA). They also maintain that he opposed *Direct Authority* (DA). The question is posed that if these present day EMDA churches do not agree with Graves and the Landmark churches of his day, then how can they claim they are in agreement with Graves? If Graves taught EMDA then their position is in line with him and those churches of his day and they can walk together in agreement. But if Graves and those churches taught DA, then they will not company with him or those churches which agreed with him. (Am 3:3). We should be able to determine conclusively from Graves' works the position he held whether it was EMDA or DA. Either way this issue should be settled by honest investigation. Graves' position as the leading Landmark Baptist of his day should be ascertained and published. What was Graves' position?

GRAVES' POSITION 1855 – 1860

We will attempt to demonstrate from Graves' explicit statements that he held to DA during the period of 1855-1862. His first statement on this subject which we have seen is in *The Great Iron Wheel*. This is one of Graves' earliest books. The First edition was published in 1855. The last, the thirtieth edition, was published in 1860. The total number of volumes published before the cast iron plates were destroyed by the Union Army in 1862, was 50,000 volumes! [Cf. *The New Great Iron Wheel*, 10]. Graves' statement on church constitution in this book is:

Each particular Church is independent of every other body, civil or ecclesiastical, and receiving its authority directly from Christ, it is accountable to him alone. [Graves. *Great Iron Wheel*. 552, 1855].

Analysis of this statement indicates the subject of the statement is *church constitution*, not some other issue. Graves is not here speaking of *succession*, *continuity* nor is he considering *perpetuity*. These synonymous terms do not indicate whether one believes in EMDA or DA. Graves is speaking of how a church becomes a church or how it receives *church-hood*. He excludes *all other bodies* as a source of a church's beginning. He makes the reader understand just what kind of bodies he excludes from the process of becoming a church. He asserts that a

church does not obtain its *being* from any *civil* entity, that is, from any political institution. Now up to this point, EMDA men are in complete agreement with Graves. But when he goes further and says, *Each particular Church is independent of every...ecclesiastical body*, he expressly excludes any church as the source of church being, power, authority or existence and at this word they part company with him but not publicly! This means that in Graves' view no church depends upon another church for its being! This powerful statement of how a church obtains church status shakes the pillars of the EMDA temple and makes Graves a heretic in their eyes!

But Graves is not through. He goes further. He not only gives the negative which cuts off the EMDA branch in unequivocal terms but he positively affirms DA in these unmistakable words—*Each particular Church is independent of every other body... receiving its authority directly from Christ...*—which designates how a church is set up by DA. This authority, Graves insists, is received *directly* from Christ! Not *indirectly* through a mother church, as EMDA mistakenly claims! Of course, because DA is so despised, detested and repudiated by EMDA men, this is an unacceptable statement for them. The mere term *DA* causes them to stop their ears (Ac 22:22; Ze 7:11; Ac 7:57). So far as anyone knows, they have never seen this statement! For not one EMDA man has ever attempted to explain it! They pretend it does not exist. This is an ox goad to their position. But so long as we allow words to carry any meaning, there can be no question that Graves held emphatically and tenaciously to DA during this time period (1855-1860). This cannot be denied!

GRAVES' POSITION 1860-1875

Of course during the Civil War Graves did not publish anything. *The Baptist* was suspended due to the war and Graves himself was a refugee. But soon after the Civil War in 1867 Graves was able to re-establish *The Baptist* and he began publishing again.

For the purpose of establishing Graves' position in this time period we will look at what he published in the *Great Carrollton Debate* (Carrollton, Mo) which was held with Jacob Ditzler in 1875. The book was published in 1876. In that discussion Graves said:

Each particular Church is independent of every other body, civil or ecclesiastical, and receives its authority directly from Christ." [Graves. *Great Carrollton Debate*. 995-6, 1876].

This is a concrete assertion of DA and was made fifteen years after the publishing of the last edition of *The Great Iron Wheel* in 1860. His words are almost verbatim of those in 1855. The idea is identical. This demonstrates, to a remarkable degree that Graves had not taken an inchoate posture on this subject in 1855 but rather DA was his settled position and he held it at least until the time of this debate, November 1875. DA, in these references, stands out like Mt Rushmore and those who do not see the physiognomy do not see it because they do not want to see it! (Jn 9:41). This is not only ignorance but it is a *willing* ignorance. Thus from 1855 to 1875 we have traced Graves' position on how a church is constituted and it was by DA and his position remained the same throughout those years, the words in 1875 being but an echo of those in 1855. Thus for twenty years we have certified Graves' position in his own words and that position was DA.

GRAVES' POSITION 1875-1884

Now we move forward another nine years to 1884. The next reference is found in *The New Great Iron Wheel* published in 1884. Graves wrote:

...each assembly was a complete Church, and being complete in itself, it was independent of all other like bodies in other localities, and being each independent it was divinely invested with all the powers and prerogatives of a Church of Christ. [Graves. *New Great Iron Wheel*. 125, 1884].

One sees instantly that this reference contains the very same idea in slightly different words as that in the previous statements. There is a studied and consistent DA declaration in Graves' expressions which cannot be misunderstood. He excludes *all other like bodies in other localities* as the source of church being or power. Then to make doubly sure his meaning was understood, he adds the phrase ***divinely invested***, and connects it with what it is that a group obtains by being so *invested*, which he says includes *all the powers and prerogatives of a Church of Christ!* This means that a group obtains everything it needs to be a church by divine investment! Graves is saying a church has nothing and can have nothing beside what Christ gives it! He is the source of *All the powers and prerogatives of a church of Christ!* *Divinely invested* is a powerful way to state DA and that according to Graves is all a group needs to become a church of Christ! In this statement he dares any man to attempt to twist his words (as some have done) into EMDA or to make a compromise with it! The two positions are mutually exclusive. They repudiate each other. Graves' DA position is so pronounced that were he living today, no EMDA church would allow him in their pulpit! And yet most of them claim Graves as a supporter of the EMDA position!

In the same book, a few pages later Graves quoted Tertullian with approval:

Three are sufficient to form a church although they be laymen. [Graves. *The New Great Iron Wheel*. P. 136].

Of course Tertullian was referring to Mt 18:20 and Graves agreed with this ancient writer that this passage refers to church constitution. We know this because on the preceding page Graves stated his understanding of this verse in these words:

Christ said, where two or three are gathered in my name [authority], there am I in the midst of them. Matt. 18:20. [Graves. *The New Great Iron Wheel*, p. 135. The word in brackets was added by Graves-JC].

So Graves taught that Mt 18:20 referred to church constitution and this authority to constitute was given by DA from Christ out of Heaven—not from a mother church! This means that Graves believed that any two or three saints in gospel order (that is, saved and baptized) could organize a Baptist church and when they did so, they were as much a church as any church on earth! No reasonable man can question what Graves meant! Once again in the same book Graves expresses his position on this subject:

That each particular church was invested by its prime founder with all the functions, rights, powers and prerogatives necessary to its self-preservation and perpetuation, and for the discharge of all the trusts he designed it to execute, until he should come again." [Graves. *NGIW*, p. 143].

Here Graves argues that a church is *invested by its prime founder* with everything essential for a church to come into being and to function as an independent church without any earthly help. That is, a group of saints become a church by receiving their commission from the **prime Founder**—the Lord Jesus Christ. This investment of power and authority are **direct** out of Heaven and not from any mother church whether in Jerusalem, Antioch or Kentucky! Of course this is DA full throttle! His position cannot be made into EMDA without gainsaying!

In the light of these pertinent and consistent references for DA in Graves own words, it is amazing that EMDA men can and do quote Graves as believing EMDA! (See Bro Mark Fenison’s book, *Great Commission Credentials*, pp. front cover, 90; 118, et. al.). But you will not read any explanation of these explicit statements by Graves for DA in this book—nor in any other EMDA writer. The question is not addressed in any of their papers. They do not even admit these specific references exist—much less have they attempted to explain them! Thus from 1875 to 1884 there can be no questions but that Graves taught DA!

GRAVES’ POSITION 1884-1893

Now for this last period we need say but little. While some have suggested that Graves changed his position from DA to EMDA before his death in 1893, (Cf. *LUF* p. 168, Appendix I) the mere possibility of a theory without supporting evidence is worthless. *Quod gratis asseritur, gratis negatur*, i.e., “If no grounds have been given for an assertion, then there are no grounds needed to reject it.” To believe something without evidence is conjecture; to believe it against the evidence is purblindness. There is not the slightest evidence, in Graves’ books nor in his paper, that he made any such change. Because these men have no support for this theory, what they lack in evidence they make up with repetition.

We have found many statements by Graves in the TN Baptist in which he specifically set forth DA. For example:

A body of baptized Christians can organize themselves into a church at pleasure, and no exterior body can organize them, much less can a Presbytery organize a body superior to itself. Can I stream rise higher than its fountain? [Graves. TN Baptist, Sept. 3, 1885, p.8].

Note especially these phrases: *A body of baptized Christians can organize themselves into a church at pleasure... no exterior body can organize them...* One cannot imagine how any statement for DA could be more positive! Graves removes the right to organize a church from any exterior body—that is any church—and puts it in the hands of those who wish to form one. Of course, no man can question his meaning. DA was never expressed more forcefully!

The next reference we give was given by Jarrel in *Church Perpetuity*, p. 1. Some EMDA men questioned this reference suggesting it could not be trusted as Jarrel did not identify the source from which he took it. Jarrel says “Graves wrote,” but gave no information as to where it was

found. Jarrel published this book in 1894, the year after Graves died. Would Jarrel have published this statement by Graves if Graves had changed his position from DA to EMDA at any time after 1880? Of course not! This quote was taken from the TN Baptist *Querist*. These are Graves' words although slightly different from Jarrel's quote. Here is what Graves said in the TN Baptist:

Wherever three or more baptized members of a regular Baptist church or churches meet and covenant together to hold and teach and be governed by the New Testament, etc., there is a church of Christ, even though there was not a presbytery of ministers within a thousand miles of them. There is not the slightest need of a council or presbytery to organize a Baptist church. [Graves. *TN Baptist*, May 15, 1880, p. 759].

Jarrel's quote brings Graves' latter years into clear focus indicating that Graves held DA until the end of his life. Jarrel quotes him in 1894 just after his death as still holding the identical position he had held from the beginning of his career. As this statement is now verified to be that of Graves himself, another EMDA theory goes in the round file! EMDA men did not believe these words when Jarrel quoted them and they do not accept them now, even though we have proved they were taken from Graves' paper! They cannot be satisfied! This statement fixes DA as the stated position of Graves in the latter period of his life.

CONCLUSION

We have looked at Graves' position on church constitution during four specific periods of his life and in each case his position was DA. There was no variation. He did not waver. In his early days it was DA. In his middle years it was DA and in his prime it was DA just as it was in his declining years. There can be no question as to what Graves believed during his whole life. He was a pronounced proponent of DA. This has been documented by credible evidence.

When men attempt to enlist Graves under the EMDA banner (in their books, articles, sermons, or by their silence, etc.) as they do, and when it is proved beyond doubt that he held DA, can they be justified? Are they not responsible to speak the truth? (Ze 8:16). Is it not wrong to bend a man's statements to make them line up with a theory he did not believe? (Ex 20:16; Col 3:9). Is it not wrong to quote a man as supporting a position which he expressly denied? Is it not wrong to *pretend* a man held a position when it is known he held the contrary? Thus in the light of Graves' own statements on this subject, we must ask, is there an intentional effort to mislead people on what Graves believed on this subject? When churches hail Graves as a champion for EMDA and claim they are in the same line of churches he was, the facts given above indicate a major error on their part.

The cumulative effect of these statements given in Graves' own words on the specific subject of how a church is constituted* speaks like the trumpet of Sinai and with increasing volume. There can be no question where Graves stood. He held DA and this was his wanted position

throughout his life. What should honest men and churches do with these facts? Comments welcome.

* If the reader desires more information on Graves' position he may order: *Direct Authority, Biblical & Historical*, for \$7.50 postage included. Order address is: 839 W. US Highway 136, Lizton, IN 46147.