

REVIEW

Of Elder Curtis Pugh's Article:

CAN A CHURCH MEMBER DISMISS HIMSELF?

by

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PART II

This is the second part of a review of Bro Curtis Pugh's article, *Can a Church Member Dismiss Himself*, which appeared in *The Berea Baptist Banner*, March 5, 2009. References will be to this paper.

One of the first things essential to discuss an opponent's position is that you know what his position is! Scripture refers to those who respond to something before he understands it in a rather critical light:

He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him. Prov 18:13.

Bro Pugh in this article says:

Lately some preachers and other persons have taken it upon themselves to promote a new doctrine called the Self-Constitution View. This view states that no authority from a previously existing Baptist Church is required for a new Church to be started. In taking up this position, they have either wittingly or unwittingly necessarily adopted the position that members of a Baptist Church can dismiss themselves and form themselves into a new Church. They must adopt this position because they claim that nothing more than baptism qualifies person to form themselves into a new Church. [Pugh. BBB.41].

First let me say that I have never advocated that members of a church should pull out of the church they are members of without letters. Nor do I know of any man on the DA side of this question who ever said any such thing. This is, I fear, a plain misrepresentation of our position, *wittingly or unwittingly!* [Pugh. BBB. 41].

Now if Bro Pugh had any reference from Scripture (there is not a single reference to any Scripture in his article!) or if any Baptist author explicitly stated EMDA, of course he would have put that in the first paragraph. But the scarcity of ammunition compels him to resort to brandishing straw—mere assertions!

He built up a house of sand unaware that the tide comes in regularly and obliterates such castles with waves of documented facts. Let me demonstrate what I mean.

First we note that he tries hard to suggest that we have espoused a position that produces anarchy in churches.

In order to maintain their view, they must say that Church members have the authority to dismiss themselves from the membership of their Church. They are forced to this position and this very thing proves them wrong in their new doctrine. [Pugh. p. 41].

But we have never taught any such thing!

If we ever taught this, Bro Pugh should have given the reference. Did he do so? Can he do so? I do not think he can. Whoever said such? There is no reference in the article, and I believe none can be found in the whole world. Truth was sacrificed for the support of a theory which has lately been wilting under the light of examination! This whole article is about as relevant to the subject of church constitution as a game of polo! Of course the choir will not object! This demonstrates the straits the EMDA brethren find themselves in!

Now as to church letters let me say that Bro Pugh has a rather idealistic view of church history. He seems to think everything was done in history exactly as it is done today. This is hardly the case. There were many times where things were not as orderly as we prefer them to be. For example, in the days of early America, the population was in a flux. Baptists were moving all over and when they left one church they were often given letters so that if they found a church in their new home they could enter it without having to wait months to obtain a letter by turn-around mail. Sometimes members did not obtain letters. They may have failed to do this for various reasons. Some churches disbanded. Some moved. Some died out. Some were scattered and the Indians burned the records. Some letters were lost. All kinds of things happened.

But when a group of baptized saints wanted to constitute a church with letters, or without them in some cases, they did so. There are records of such churches. Some of these churches are listed in *Landmarkism Under Fire*. Also there are occasions mentioned where preachers baptized those saved in meetings but they did not become a member of any church (cf. Acts 8:37; Hiscox. 54). These people were also included in constitutions. Even today we have members who unite on statement of faith. One man that I know was saved and baptized in a church in KY but that church building burned and the records burned with it. Later the church disbanded. Because of these things and the time involved, this man could not obtain a letter. Apparently Bro Pugh thinks that in such cases the membership of those involved evaporated and they can never be admitted into any church in this world because they have no letter!

The next thing that I mention is the basis of his whole article shows a considerable misunderstanding of Scripture concerning church letters. As a matter of fact there is not a single case of anything like a church letter, such as is now used for the transfer of membership, in the NT! There is no command for a Church letter in Scripture! Church letters which we now use are a mere custom. It has no Scripture mandate and anyone who holds it up as such does so without a *thus saith the Lord*.

For example.

If church letters are mandated in Scripture, then why did Paul not just present his letter from Damascus, Antioch, or wherever, and thus facilitate his acceptance in the Church at Jerusalem? It is quite obvious that no such thing existed at that time, or Paul would have had one! (Acts 9:27; Hiscox. *ND*. 54). Only by Barnabas' recommending him was he received. There is no indication of a letter from any church being sent to the Jerusalem Church for Paul or any other church or member at any time in the NT! There is not one case in the NT of one church granting a letter to another church to transfer membership! Yet Bro Pugh builds an argument (?) on a mere custom!

In the time of the Waldenses and especially in the Dark Ages, men did not carry such documents as that would be evidence against them and would give information on those who sent them as well as those to whom they were sent. They did not have any credentials to present to a new Church when they arrived but used other means of identifying themselves.

Am I against church letters. Of course not. They are very useful but with this caveat: they are not **mandated by Scripture**. They are like business meetings: valuable but not demanded in the way they are usually conducted now. We must always distinguish incidentals from essentials. Recognition of this fact knocks the straw out of Bro Pugh's article.

But let us go somewhat further.

Does one have to have *authority* to leave a church? This seems to be the burden of Bro Pugh's paper. The question then is this: what is this authority? Just because someone wishes to leave the Church where he is a member and unite with another church, is that anarchy? Do not members of a Church have a right to leave one Church and unite with another? Did not Paul have this right? Is this not what he did? Did he ask the Church at Antioch if he could leave? Cannot a missionary join another Church (which is what most do when they determine to unite with another church) and let the new Church notify the first Church that this member has united with them on promise of a letter? Is this anarchy?

Is there any permission required to leave a Church?

This leaving of a church is not even mentioned in some cases! Some members who move membership do not give any notice, nor does the church know anything about it until they get the request for a letter in the mail! How many times has Bro Pugh known of a church which had a business meeting and voted that a member could leave and gave him a letter before he joined another Church? What permission is required beforehand? How is this given? But when a letter is received from another church then the first Church acts on that letter. And if the church refuses to grant the letter, what happens then? Well, the new church will receive this member on statement! This is done constantly among our churches and Bro Pugh will not question the fact! Is this anarchy?

Can any church deny a member the right to move his membership? Is a missionary locked into his sponsoring Church? Does he have freedom to move to another Church? Does not the freedom reside in him to go to another Church? If this is true of missionaries, then why not other members? How is this anarchic? Is it not true that where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty? (2 Cor. 3:17). This whole scenario imagined by Bro Pugh is nothing but an attempt to set DA in a bad light without any evidence for his proposition and exists only in his mind!

But suppose this granting of a letter is the authority—the authority which is essential for church constitution— and those who have letters then have EMDA. Now then, do not all of those who have proper letters have this authority which EMDA demands? Then why is it that our EMDA brethren recognize groups in history which had letters and nothing more, and who constituted, as true churches but refuse to recognize churches which constitute the same way today? For example. Our church when constituted had letters from other churches but a sister church refused to grant letters to members who united with us on promise of a letter— because we did not have EMDA! So in one case letters are the authority, according to Bro Pugh, but in practice letters are not authority! This is the kind of vacillation which plagues Bro Pugh's position! His wind socks do not indicate which way the wind is blowing on his field!

THREE MEN QUOTED BY BROTHER PUGH EXAMINED

Bro Pugh next refers to three men in his article by which he thought he might get some kind of support for EMDA. Once before in an interchange with Bro Pugh, he referred to quoting deceased men as *picking dead men's brains* when I had quoted some men from history! But now, he forgets and selects dead men and only dead men for support for EMDA! Circumstances compel him to go after any help he can find!

He does not quote these men as to what they believed about church constitution (which is strange for that is what he is really writing about). One can only wonder why did he not do so, as that is the real issue! Why refer to what they believed about church letters? He might as well have quoted them on what they believed about women preachers for that has as much to do with the subject as church letters! This appeal of Bro Pugh's to church letters or church unity to prove EMDA is about as useful as turn signals on a freight train!

If these men he quoted believed in EMDA then their ideas on church letters will fall in line with that belief. If they believed in DA, then their ideas on church letters will fall in line with that position. The real issue is whether they believed DA or not. So in response I will not treat these peripheral matters in any detail but rather go strait to the subject of church constitution.

First Bro Pugh gave reference to Cobb's *Baptist Church Manual*. He also indicated these men to whom he refers wrote a long time ago:

These are the words of respected Baptists who wrote long ago and without knowledge of the present departure from the truth. These quotes will prove that our position is the historic Landmark one, not those who oppose us on this matter. [BBB.45].

I do not know when Bro Cobb died, nor when he wrote his Baptist Church Manual, but he was certainly a contemporary of ours. I do not have this book quoted above but have made a copy of one section of it on the constitution of Churches. (Note: The edition I copied from was published in 1975 but I failed to take down the date it was written). I quote:

The Constitution of Establishment of Churches

We noted, under the topic, 'The Essential Qualities of a Church,' that the church, as an institution, is perpetuated. In order to sustain the perpetuity of the church new churches must, from time to time, come into existence. Different circumstances call for the organization or establishment of new churches.

Sometimes members of churches move into sections where there are no churches of the right kind. They should get together and constitute, or organize, a church of the true faith so that they can Scripturally carry on the work of the Lord in that community.

Sometimes missionaries go into hitherto un-worked fields and preach the gospel of Christ; souls are saved, and those saved people are brought together into a church. The usual procedure is as follows: In hitherto un-worked fields one of two methods usually prevails. (a) After someone has preached the gospel - usually a missionary - and enough people are saved to constitute a church, some church extends "an arm," that is, enough members to constitute a quorum, and receives the converts into the membership of the church. Those are then granted letters to organize a new church. (b) Missionaries may work in pairs, or even three or more in number. Counting their wives, they can constitute themselves into a church after receiving letters. They may then receive the new converts into the newly organized church. When they move on to other fields, they can be granted letters of dismissal.

It is sometimes the case that people moving from one section to another move into an area where there is no church. When a sufficient number have done so, they can request letters of dismissal from the churches where they formerly resided for the purpose of instituting a new church.

The usual custom of procedure in constituting a new church is to have a devotional service. A sermon is preached on some suitable subject. Those who intend to constitute the church vote to do so after someone has been asked to act as moderator and clerk, pro tem. They then adopt the church Covenant and an abstract of faith (Articles of faith). They are then an independent church ready for work.

A presbytery is not essential for the constitution of a church, though it is perfectly in order to have one.

Sometimes newly constituted churches hold what is called a Recognition Service. That is a service in which other churches are asked to take part and in which the new church is formally recognized by other churches as a true church of Christ. For several reasons, it is well to have such a service. It shows a proper spirit upon the part of those churches who recognize the newly formed church. It is an encouragement to the newly formed church to be recognized by older churches. [J. E. Cobb. Baptist church Manual. 1975, pages 45-48].

We note that when Bro Cobb describes expressly how to constitute a Church he says not one word about EMDA. If he had believed this doctrine, how could he have failed to mention it? I do not mean in a mere allusion, but directly and explicitly? It is true that the author mentions the *Church Arm* method of constituting churches and this could refer to EMDA but he also uses several terms not permissible in EMDA, such as: *Usual procedure; usual custom; sometimes.*

Notice also, he says a presbytery is not essential for constitution, which throws a chunk in Bro Pugh's gears, as he believes you must have an ordained man to constitute a church although he does not mention it in this article under review.

The statement that these men wrote before DA was taught is just astounding! Bro Cobb was for many years closely associated with Ben M. Bogard in the General Association and finally in the formation of the ABA in 1924. Bogard clearly states self constitution in *The Baptist Way Book*, [Bogard. *Baptist Way-Book*. The way to Start Churches, 68. 1908], and this book was the standard for the way ABA churches were constituted for decades!

Next, Bro Pugh gave a quote from Hiscox. Again, not a reference to what Hiscox said on constitution of churches and Hiscox has a section entitled *Churches Constituted* [Section X, 52] but on the irrelevant subject of church letters! Bro Pugh mistakes Hiscox's *The Baptist Directory* which was published in 1859 (and on up through at least 1911. Cf. Publishers Notes), with *The New Directory* which was published in 1894 and while entirely different from *The Directory* it was “in harmony with previous manuals” [Hiscox. *New Directory*. 8]. Bro Pugh's quote is from the *New Directory*, not *The Directory*. We will quote from both of these manuals on the subject of constitution and the source of authority. Hiscox gives his view of how a church is constituted specifically:

Resolved, That, guided as we believe by the Holy Spirit, and relying on the blessing of God, we do, here and now, by this act, constitute ourselves a Church of Jesus Christ.... and thatSuch an act makes such a company of disciples, *ipso facto*, a Church of Christ.... [Hiscox. *New Directory*. 54].

This is DA expressly stated without EMDA anywhere in the picture! But does Hiscox say **How a Church is to receive its authority?** Yes, he does! He says:

This authority is derived directly from God; not from states, nor princes, nor people; not from its own officers, nor its members, nor from any other source of ecclesiastical or civil power or right . But Christ is head over all things to the church, and also as of right, the church is subject to Christ. [Hiscox. *The Baptist Church Directory*. 1859. p. 16].

This is a lightning bolt which illuminates the dark corners of EMDA! Let the reader ask himself, how could Hiscox have expressed DA any more emphatically? Carefully note: this statement strips Bro Pugh's contention that DA *is a new doctrine* of all validity! It reveals in a striking manner that DA is certainly as old as 1859! How could Bro Pugh in light of this statement of what Hiscox believed and published in 1859 and again in 1894 say he wrote before DA? This demonstrates that our EMDA brethren are long on claims, loud on assertions, insistent on assumptions but short—woefully short—on proof! Plainly put, their powder is wet! This also demonstrates that Bro Pugh has quoted a man to prove a position that the man emphatically repudiated!

But lest Bro Pugh should say *The Directory* is different, however, or that Hiscox changed his position, (which is the tack some EMDA men including Bro Pugh take when Baptist authorities are quoted against them) in the *New Directory*, I quote from that book also:

Its [the church's] chief authority is given by Christ *alone*. [Hiscox. *The New Directory for Baptist Churches*. p. 48].

No EMDA man can even form such words! **Authority by Christ! Authority by Christ alone!** Our EMDA brethren not only cannot say these words they cannot even *see* them when they are on the page they are reading! So when Bro Pugh read Hiscox, he did not read him as to what he said about how **a church receives its authority** but he read him to get some semblance of EMDA out of his book! Why is this? These *letter* references sound like Hiscox might just possibly support EMDA and this was enough for the choir who know better than to raise questions!

But Hiscox will not let this matter rest until he has literally blown Bro Pugh's contention out of the water! He again states emphatically where the authority for church constitution is found so that EMDA brethren cannot get it wrong even though they strive to do so! Is this authority in a mother church? Is proper authority gained from men or from Christ? What is the source of this authority? Hiscox asserts:

All rightful authority, therefore, is conferred by Christ, the king in Zion. He builds them: On this rock will I build my Church. He commissions them: Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. He is personally ever with them, superintending, and giving them success: Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Mt 16:18; 28:19, 20. What He does not give is not possessed. [Hiscox. *New Directory*. 49].

Does Bro Pugh agree with Hiscox? Do these quotes from Hiscox sound like EMDA or DA? Has Bro Pugh quoted Hiscox correctly or has he misrepresented him?

Bro Pugh maintains the authority to constitute a new church comes, and must come, only from a mother church. Hiscox denies this and says the *authority is given by Christ alone* and that it is *conferred by Christ!* Remember this is in section viii entitled *The Authority of Churches!* [Hiscox. *New Directory*. 48]. Hiscox also in this book has sections in chapter 2 on *Signs of A True Church* [31] *A Christian Church*, [20] *Marks of A True Church* [26] *The Nature of A Church* [44] *The Authority of Churches*, [48] and *Churches Constituted* [50], (which are banned reading for EMDA brethren apparently) so Bro Pugh does not quote from any of these sections! One can only be amazed at this tenacity to assert a writer believes what the writer is so careful to maintain he does not believe! How is it possible that anyone could overlook these statements? How could anyone reverse an author and claim he was teaching EMDA when he so clearly stated DA?

These quotes prove conclusively Bro Pugh either did not read Hiscox, or he read him carelessly. It seems Bro Pugh (and EMDA brethren in general) cannot see facts contrary to their system even when the author explicitly states them! Something causes these brethren to misread, to misunderstand and to misquote! They attempt to make Hiscox embrace what he opposed, and to oppose what he embraced? We will let Bro Pugh explain.

The next man Bro Pugh quoted is Hubmaier. He quoted him thusly:

Where baptism in water does not exist, there is no Church, no brother, no sister, no fraternal discipline, exclusion or restoration... By receiving baptism the candidate testifies publicly that...he has submitted himself to his brothers and sisters...that is, to the Church." [Pugh. BBB. 45].

Of course! This is precisely what we how hold DA believe! Certainly Bro Pugh's reference proves nothing as far as EMDA is concerned.

But the questions Bro Pugh should have asked were: What did Hubmaier believe about church constitution? How did Hubmaier constitute churches? Did Hubmaier require mother church authority for church constitution? Would Hubmaier's church be recognized as a true church by Bro Pugh? As he did not ask these questions, we will.

Let me ask EMDA men who may read this article to answer now, before they see the answers to these questions, if they would recognize a church as sound in the faith which had no mother church authority to constitute? Would they recognize a church as Scriptural if no ordained man was present at the constitution? Would they recognize it if no single member had a church letter? Can a true church be formed under such circumstances? EMDA men respond in every case with an adamant negative! Now for the answers from the very book Bro Pugh quoted:

The principle of congregational rule was, therefore, set in motion in the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century. The first instance of an established church transferring its allegiance from its former faith to Anabaptism was at Waldshut. The event, as Littell indicates, furnishes the historian an illustration of the greatest importance:

Upon accepting faith baptism as a visible sign of restored Christian community, Hubmaier resigned as priest and immediately was re-elected as minister by the congregation. This was a most significant point in Anabaptist history, for it marked the beginning of the congregational principle of government. [Etsep. *Anabaptist Story*. 254. Etsep is here quoting Littell's *Anabaptist View*, 17].

Here we learn that Hubmaier (and the other Anabaptists did the same thing) constituted churches out of those who previously were Roman Catholic. Some had left Catholicism and associated with the Zwinglians. In 1525 Hubmaier and sixty others were baptized in Waldshut, severing his ties with Zwingli and the Reformation and moved into the *left wing* of the Reformation. Note that Hubmaier resigned as priest and was immediately re-elected as minister of the congregation. Consider carefully these facts:

Hubmaier was never ordained after his ordination as a Catholic priest! This means:

No ordained man was present unless it was Hubmaier, when the church at Waldshut was constituted!

No mother church was involved!

There were no church letters!

There was no church which granted Hubmaier or any of those at Waldshut authority!

Neither Hubmaier nor any of those in Waldshut who composed this church united first with another church to secure mother- church services!

Now most EMDA brethren would under no circumstances acknowledge a church constituted in this manner as a true church! They would require it to be reconstituted under the authority of a mother church. All the potential members would have to be baptized and unite with the mother church and then constitute. There would have to be a presbytery present to constitute them, on and on it goes. But the Waldshut Church had none of these according to the record!

Remember, under these circumstances, where not one EMDA brother would ever consider such a church as a true church, Bro Pugh is bold enough to claim an incidental statement by Hubmaier proved he and his church embraced EMDA and that it was operational in Waldshut and this proves DA was unknown! This is just another case of polishing the tombs of earlier men!

Yet it is a fact that Hubmaier believed in a *mother church*! Here is the reference:

Thus, the Anabaptist Hubmaier uses the same terminology to describe the local congregation as the reformer Zwingli used for the "*kilchhore*." Both men believed that the Church universal is the mother of the particular church, which can err. Both reformers logically emphasize the fact that church discipline is the task of the local church. In deriving the authority of local churches to bind and to remit sins on earth from the universal Church. [Bergsten, B. Hubmaier: Anabaptist Theologian and Martyr. 1978. p. 295.].

Hubmaier believed the local church got its authority from the universal mother church! I suspect that this quote by Bro Pugh from Hubmaier which was sweet in his mouth is now as bitter in in his stomach as that little book which John ate! Truth is the antacid needed! Tums will not help!

These facts indicate that Bro Pugh took a couple of loose sentences out of Hubmaier applied them to EMDA but overlooked plain statements about Hubmaier's method of church constitution which repudiates EMDA in an effort to gain a little clout for EMDA! The effort was a fizzle!

Astonishing!

