

# Church necessarily

ALLISON DISCUSSES NEW BOOK

*In what follows, “Towers” writer Craig Sanders talks with Gregg Allison, professor of Christian theology at Southern Seminary, about his new book, Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church (Crossway 2012). A review of the book appears on page 6.*

**CS: Of all the topics in systematic theology, what made you want to write on ecclesiology?**

**GA:** First, John Feinberg, the general editor of the series Foundations of Evangelical Theology, approached me and asked me to consider writing the ecclesiology volume for this series. I was Feinberg’s graduate assistant when I was doing my M.Div. and Ph.D. work at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and we’re also very good friends. So that request prompted me to think in that direction. Second, one of the distinctives of Baptist theology is its ecclesiology, so being part of Southern Seminary and its churches has re-emphasized for me the importance of this doctrine. I know there are a lot of good writers in other areas like the doctrine of God, but it seems like there’s been a lack of attention among evangelicals to ecclesiology other than in pragmatically oriented books. I thought this would be a really good project to present a biblical and theological ecclesiology.

**CS: How does 1 Peter 2:11 capture the vision of your book?**

**GA:** We’re sojourners and strangers – now I had to use the word sojourners since I’m part of Sojourn Community Church. As sojourners, we’re here during this earthly life as believers only for a short period of time; we have our roots here in this world and in the church. In another sense our citizenship is in heaven, so we’re sojourning and we’re living on mission for Jesus Christ. As strangers, we don’t fit in anywhere. We fit here as image bearers by Jesus Christ — being conformed to his image on mission — and yet we long for the ultimate reality which is an eternal destiny with Jesus Christ in the new heavens and new earth.

**CS: What do you hope your reminder that the church is a necessary reality accomplishes today?**

**GA:** When I emphasize the derivative necessity of the church, I am particularly targeting that mentality that we can hole up in our bedroom and get on virtual church or just meet in a bar with a few of our friends and talk about whatever we want. That’s not church. It’s not cultivating the reality that when we believe in Jesus Christ he baptizes us with the Holy Spirit and he incorporates us into his body the church. So out of necessity we Christians are members of the church and the body of Christ. That has to translate into participation and service in a local church. I’m deeply disturbed by the trend among millions of so-called Christians or evangelicals who say they love Jesus and they can’t stand his church. It would be like me going up to you and saying, “Craig, I dig you a lot. I want to hang out with you, I love you, but your wife, man, she is ugly.” [EDITOR’S NOTE:

Craig’s wife is stunningly beautiful]. It’s like a slap in the face.

**CS: What is your goal in promoting multi-site church models, which academic resources have largely ignored?**

**GA:** What I hope to achieve by this is to address the notion that there is no biblical basis for multi-site. It is a particular concern of mine since I’m part of Sojourn. The critics may not agree with my interpretation of some of the passages, but I want to move them away from saying there’s no biblical basis. Clearly, the church in Jerusalem was multi-site. It met together in the temple in Jerusalem and then it fanned out into the various homes where I envision that the apostles were preaching and teaching. There was great fellowship, giving sacrificially and worshiping the Lord together. I certainly respect those who would say we are just going to do our local church and maybe plant churches — that’s a wonderful idea — but I think on occasion, multi-site is called for and

it is a good strategy. And I’m using this term to define a strategy for expanding a church’s influence in a particular geographical area. At Sojourn’s four campuses, our vision of multi-site for city-reaching will one day be realized. The goal is to have a campus within ten minutes of every person in the Louisville area and that includes Southern Indiana.

**CS: How are you hoping to persuade Southern Baptist leaders to adopt a plurality of elders in a congregational system and the office of deaconesses while remaining Baptists?**

**GA:** The number one objection to a plurality of elders model among Southern Baptists is that it’s Presbyterian. My model is a plurality of elders who only function at a local church level, which is different from Presbyterianism. I think the second main objection from Southern Baptists to this model is, “We’ve not done it this way before.” But, at the beginning of Southern Baptist church life there was a very strong

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notion of a plurality of elders. This plural leadership is part of our legacy. Third, I want to calm fears: when I advocate a plurality of elders I'm not saying that there can't be a lead pastor who preaches most of the time and casts a vision. If we've got a capable lead pastor, my model certainly allows for this man to exercise all of his gifts in a leadership role. I also want to calm fears when I talk about deaconesses. In the traditional Southern Baptist model with a solo pastor and board of deacons, in reality the deacons function as pastors or elders. I do not advocate deaconesses in that model because that would actually make women elders. In my model Jesus Christ is the head of the church, and that's not a cavalier statement He is the one who leads the church. The highest human authority in the church is the plurality of elders. Under the elders are deacons, men and women servants who exercise ministries through the local church.

**CS: Why do you think it's important to introduce church discipline and emphasize it as you did during your time at Hinson Memorial Baptist Church in Portland, Ore.?**

**GA:** If we don't exercise church discipline we continue to nurture a church culture of compromise of moral indifference, individualism and hedonism. If we do introduce discipline, it is tough and I know that because I had to rehabilitate it, to practice it. At Hinson, we hadn't done it for decades. We had a situation in which an elderly woman had made contact with her old high school sweetheart. And she was going to abandon her husband and basically reestablish her relationship with her former sweetheart. Well, I had to approach her and talk to her about church discipline and she kind of wagged her finger at me: "We don't do that here at Hinson." And I said, "You're right, we don't, but we've been wrong, we've sinned. We have not carried out the biblical injunctions of establishing church discipline." She abandoned her husband, her family, her church, her friends for the sake of this man. When we announced the church discipline to the church there was some confusion but generally speaking there was agreement because it was an egregious sin. We love people strongly

enough that we will pursue them so they don't go off the deep end. There are a lot of things communicated but it's hard. It's time consuming. The energy and resources that honor this is huge. What encourages me at Sojourn is that we had a culture of church discipline from the very beginning and we have people right now in the church disciplinary process. I think that's a very healthy thing about our church.

**CS: We have the *Baptist Faith and Message* as a denomination, but are you suggesting that local and individual churches seem to be lacking strength in confession?**

**GA:** Yes. *Baptist Faith and Message* is a wonderful statement of our confession. In our Southern Baptist churches, if we would regularly read and even summarize it on a regular basis among our members, people would know what we believe and our members would know what is expected of them. It provides a way to prepare for church discipline, if people deny Jesus Christ, for example. It brings unity as it helps our people read the Bible with the proper theological framework. So it has a lot of benefits to this confessional element and I think the *BF&M* is a wonderful framework for what we believe.

**CS: What kind of legacy do you hope to leave with this work?**

**GA:** I would be very grateful if, over the course of a couple decades, we have healthier local churches; "healthier" defined in the ways that I do in this book: reflecting all the biblical resources and affirmations about the church rather than according to church growth principles or numbers. For instance, congregational churches that allow the pastors or elders to exercise their authority: teaching and preaching, leading, shepherding the flock and not being controlled by another board or by another church. Deacons and deaconesses flourishing in ministries of the church. A people constantly being nourished through the gospel, disciplined to be future leaders of the church. Churches that have reinstated or begun church discipline. Growing churches that are regularly reaching out to neighbors with a missional focus and not just having committees of evangelism and committees of missions. Every person see-

ing himself or herself as part of a missional church, whatever they do they're on mission for God through their local church. A church that has all the seven characteristics that I list. (1) It's doxological, it's oriented to the glory of God. (2) The church is logocentric, it's centered on the incarnate word, Jesus Christ, and the inspired Word of God, Scripture. (3) It is pneumodynamic, empowered, gifted, guided and directed by the Holy Spirit. (4) The church is covenantal, existing in this new covenant relationship with God and displaying strong covenantal relationships between its members. (5) It's confessional — each person is a regenerate member or has a personal confession of faith in Jesus Christ and on a regular basis the church confesses the faith. What we believe in the *BF&M* for example. (6) It's missional, we're called by God and sent out by God to be on mission, and that's not just an activity, it's an identity of the church. (7) And then the church is spatial-temporal, eschatological, it is a reality that exists now. It

has a building most likely and it's in a space and time reality and flourishing but it sees itself as a penultimate reality. It's always looking for that which is to come. It's here but not here, it's already but not yet.

