

John Dagg & The Church Universal: A Brief Exposition
by
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John Leadley Dagg (1794-1884) was born in Middleburg, VA February 14, 1794.¹ (compare however, Gardner who lists his birthday as February 13²). His parents were ‘nominal’ Christians who occasionally attended a Presbyterian church. Indeed religion was not really significant for the Dagg household. Neither was learning; for John’s formal education at an early age lacked much. John Dagg recounts his own conversion at age fifteen. It was then that his parents took a more active role in things of eternity.

Dagg served as pastor to several small churches in Virginia until 1824 when he was called to the Pulpit of the First Baptist Church, Richmond, VA, then the second largest Baptist Church in the United States³. Interestingly, Dagg did not take the call but chose instead to travel to Philadelphia and fill the pulpit at the Fifth Baptist Church. There he would labor for years before traveling to Alabama and finally to Georgia where he finished his ministry at a ripe old age of ninety before going on to meet his Lord.

One of the great accomplishments of Dagg was his role as the first writing theologian for Southern Baptists, or at the least, as Dever, says “the first Southern Baptist systematic theologian to be read widely by Southern Baptists”⁴. His Manual of Theology, first printed in 1857, and now reprinted by Gano Books, Harrisonburg, VA, 1982 stands as a monument of Baptist academic thinking in mid-nineteenth century southern expression. Embracing a traditional Calvinist grid in Soteriology, Dagg’s theology served as a seminarian textbook until James Boyce published his personal notes.

Dagg felt a second part was needed and approximately a year later, his influential Treatise on Church Order was published⁵. Some lesser known works on apologetics and ethics were also published.

For purposes of this paper, we shall limit ourselves to Dagg’s Treatise on Church Order, and more specifically, Chapter Three, entitled “The Church Universal.”

To grasp Dagg’s view of the Universal Church, it is necessary to engage two ideas significant to him and forms a needed framework to better understand his ecclesiology: Dagg’s a priori commitment to the Church Local and Dagg’s dialog with the Landmark movement among Baptists in the nineteenth century. We shall begin with Dagg’s understanding of the Church Local.

That Dagg embraced a robust, local Church ecclesiology is hardly beyond dispute. Dagg argued that turning to the New Testament meant finding the ‘ecclesia’ is “so employed that an assembly is manifestly denoted.”⁶ Indeed, it is clear from the New Testament that “the term in the singular number, denoted the separate local assemblies in those

districts or countries, and not the whole number of Christians inhabiting a kingdom or province.”⁷

Because Scripture teaches that they “ordained elders in every Church’ (Acts 14.23), this stands as further proof that the word denoted a particular or local assembly⁸.

Dagg did not stop with just a linguistic argument for the Local Church. Rather he argued for its existence from “membership”⁹, “organization”¹⁰, “independence”¹¹ and “ceremonial qualifications” most suitable of which was the rite of Baptism¹²

The conclusion one must draw is that, whatever Dagg meant by the Church Universal, it decisively did nothing to diminish his robust commitment to the local ecclesia. For Dagg, it would not be stretching to say the Local Church must be understood first in order to understand and/or embrace a wider, Universal ecclesia.

Secondly, once Dagg’s theological allegiance to the Local Church is understood, the historical context in which Dagg writes intersects precisely at his juncture. That is, at mid-nineteenth century, a swelling and, in Dagg’s view, misguided understanding of ecclesiology swept across Baptists in the south.

The Landmark movement led by the triumvirate—James Robinson Graves (1820-1893), James Madison Pendleton (1811-1891), Amos Cooper Dayton (1813-1865)—gained hordes of followers and threatened the very existence of historic Baptist ecclesiology. And, that Dagg took seriously the threat Landmarks presented is easily demonstrated by noting that exactly one half of the chapter on the Universal Church is a simple engagement with Landmarker, A.C. Dayton in his fiction, Theodosia Ernest. Theodosia Ernest, a novel about church culture in the nineteenth century, argued that all churches were wrong but the Baptists. Dagg engages one of the main characters of the novel, a ‘Mr. Courtney’, whose arguments, Dagg concedes, “are the best that I have met with” on the question of the Universal Church.¹³

While this is not a paper on Landmarkism, a few of its tenets should be expressed. Because of both the impact of Theodosia Ernest as well as its genre as fiction, A.C. Dayton has not without justice been called the “Poet’ of Landmarks¹⁴. And, if Dayton is Landmark’s Poet, then Pendleton is the ‘Prophet’¹⁵ and Graves is the ‘Preacher.’¹⁶

According to Landmark ecclesiology, historian Edward C. Briggs argues three radical thoughts developed.¹⁷ First, the Kingdom of God is visible and earthly. Secondly, the Kingdom is composed of churches, not of individuals. Thirdly, baptism is the door to the church and thus to the Kingdom. Given this Landmark triad, the inevitable conclusion Briggs supplies: “In light of this argument...there is no room for non-Baptists in either church or Kingdom. Moreover, it would follow that the Kingdom of God equals the aggregate of Baptist churches and also that these churches in their exclusive authority to baptize, the literal ‘keys to the kingdom.’”¹⁸

This historical context and the concomitant conclusion for which the Landmarks argued forms the necessary base on which Dagg's ecclesiology overlays. We now may proceed with Dagg's view of the Universal Church.

According to Dagg, the Universal Church is 'the whole company of those who are saved by Christ.'¹⁹ This great body of believers consists of those on earth and in Heaven.²⁰ That the Church is broader than the local ecclesia is easily demonstrated from the linguistic evidence in the New Testament. Ephesians 1.22 states that '[He is] the head over all things to the church.' It is 'unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end.' (Ephesians 3.21). Dagg then concludes for the reader to "attempt to interpret these and similar passages, on the supposition that the term church always denotes a body of Christians assembling at one place...and he will become fully convinced, that the interpretation is inadmissible."²¹

But whereas Landmarks argued that the Universal Church was made up of local Churches, Dagg would contend that such was definitively not the case. Rather the Universal Church membership was made up of individual members, not churches. He wrote: "We have before noticed, that the members of the universal church are individual Christians, and not local churches."²² Why? Two reasons are apparent.

First, local Churches were noted for their organizational structure. The Universal Church "has no external organization."²³ Second, membership in a local Church is subject to ceremonial prerequisites such as the rite of Baptism.²⁴ Again, Dagg notes: "The true universal church includes the whole company of those who are saved by Christ; and their spiritual organization is not dependent on outward ceremony."²⁵ Hence, the Universal Church cannot have such prerequisite.

Instead, the entrance to Universal Church is based upon regeneration, not baptism.²⁶ All those who are a part of the Universal Church are regenerate. The Local Church may possess 'false professors.'²⁷ But the Church Universal cannot. Dagg concludes: "Though unconverted persons are not entitled to membership according to the Law of Christ, they nevertheless obtain admittance into local churches through human fallibility. Membership in the church universal is determined by God Himself."²⁸

Dagg goes on in his treatise to note several characteristics of the Church Universal. Already discussed is absolute regenerate church membership and the lack of external organization. What else is essential for Dagg in his view of the Church Universal?

First, the Universal Church is visible. Dagg asserts that the members of the Universal Church "are known by their profession of Christ and their obedience to His commands."²⁹ This particular characteristic may be Dagg's greatest contribution to ecclesiology and strikes at the very heart of Landmark advocates.

Reformed ecclesiology was then and still now known for its classic distinction between the visible church on the one hand and the invisible church on the other. Dagg contends with "Writers on theology [who] have distinguished between the church visible and the

church invisible.”³⁰ The invisible church, Dagg asserts, is the creation of theologians, not of Christ. “The epithet ‘invisible’ applied to the true church of Christ, is not only incorrect, but it has led into mistake. Men have spoken of this church as a mere mental conception; and they have asked, whether Saul persecuted an invisible church. They seek a church that possessing more visibility than proceeds from Christian profession and a life of piety; and they find it, as they think, in some form of organization, which they deem necessary to constitute the church. Such an organized body they call the visible church.”³¹ It seems clear that Dagg here is suggesting the error that men have consequently embraced by thinking in categories of visible and invisible led to the natural conclusion of a Visible Church Catholic.

On one side of this ecclesiastical error, Roman Catholicism is definitely in view. Dagg explains: “The bishop of Rome and his adherents, claim to be the Catholic or universal church. They are united by external organization, for the organization itself points out the head, the subordinate officers, and the members of the body.”³² And, on the other side, Dagg clearly scopes out Landmark doctrine as an equally mistaken doctrine. Note carefully his words: “The opinion has been held, almost as a theological axiom, that Baptism is the door into the church. It is not the door into the spiritual universal church; for men enter this by regeneration, and are therefore members of it before they are fit subjects for baptism. It is not the door into the local church; for, though it is a prerequisite to membership, men may be baptized, and unconnected with any local church. But those who hold that there is a visible church catholic, commonly maintain that it receives and includes all the baptized... Since Baptists admit nothing to be valid baptism but immersion on profession of faith, those of them who hold the doctrine of a visible church catholic, make this church substantially identical with the Baptist denomination.”³³

Dagg’s way forward through the murky waters Reformed ecclesiology created with the artificial distinction of visible and invisible Church was to posit the visible church universal. Similarly, contra both Rome and Landmark—which correctly denied the invisible universal church but wrongly substituted the visibly organized universal church, Catholic and Protestant versions, respectively—Dagg posited the visible but unorganized universal church. In short, what Dagg did was argue that there is no such church as an invisible church, whether local or universal. Indeed, according to Dagg, “The religion of Christ was not designed for concealment. From its very nature, it cannot be hid... The disciples of Christ are bound to profess their attachment to him before the world... a church in this world to be invisible must consist, not of children of light, but of those whose light is darkness.”³⁴

Second, the Church Universal is unorganized and spiritually united. Argued above, the universal church while visible remains nonetheless without structure. It’s unity stands innately organic and spiritual in nature. Ceremonial rites have no place in the Church Universal. The Church Universal is peopled through rebirth not through baptism. No human structure can maintain it. Dagg suggests that “organization has respect to action, and is an arrangement and adaptation of parts fitting together to a common end”³⁵ where the unity of the church is “proved to be spiritual.”³⁶ This does not mean that churches of varying beliefs cannot possess a common spiritual bond but rather proves it. To the

question of whether pedobaptist ministers could share pulpits with Baptist pastors, Dagg answered a resounding ‘yes’ toward Landmark’s clear answer to the contrary. Dagg even conceded that he himself had often invited ministers of other denominations to preach in his pulpit and humorously added that the only one he ever had to correct was a Baptist!³⁷

Dagg would go on to state, however, that to fellowship with others at the table of the spirit did not necessitate him fellowshipping around the table of communion. Dagg was a close communionist: “And it may be the duty of Baptists, both by theory and practice, to teach their erring brethren the important distinction, too often overlooked, between spiritual service to God and that which is ceremonial.”³⁸

Conclusion

John Leadley Dagg stands as a great Southern Baptist and a formidable writing theologian. For him, writing theology was an act of worship. Albeit his well known flaws in advocating southern institutional slavery, Dagg still remains a light for Southern Baptists, especially in his unhesitating commitment to the “unerring” Word of God.³⁹ As such, Dagg attempted to gain his understanding thusly and this bears out in that Dagg rarely engages other theologies. Rather, he describes what he finds in God’s book.

As for ecclesiology, this may be the greater contribution of Dagg. For while Dagg’s systematic theology bore a common Calvinist Soteriology which he, without doubt, learned from his mentors at Princeton, not to mention John Gill, Dagg broke with his Reformed teachers on the nature of the Church. For Dagg, the ecclesia was both universal and local as well as visible. The primary difference between the local ecclesia and that of the universal ecclesia was visible organizational structure. The local church performed rites such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The local church exercised discipline and preached the gospel.

In addition, the local church, unlike the universal church, possessed a structure of officers called pastors and deacons who were the official administrators of all her ordinances including baptism, the Lord’s Supper and the preaching of the Gospel. Indeed, for Dagg, no one was qualified to do such except those set apart by ordination by the local ecclesia.

Through his balanced teaching on the visible local and universal ecclesia, Dagg avoided the errors of both Rome and Landmark, laying a solid foundation upon which later Southern Baptist could build a more profound ecclesiology.

End Notes

¹Dever, Mark 1990. John Leadley Dagg. In Baptist Theologians, ed. Timothy George and David S. Dockery, 165-187. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press

²Gardner, Robert G. 1968. John Leadley Dagg in Georgia in Baptist History and Heritage. 3 (1) (June): 43-50.

³Gardner, 44.

⁴Ibid, 165.

⁵Dagg, John L. 1982. Autobiography of Rev. John L. Dagg, D.D. Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books.

⁶Dagg, John L. 1982. Manual of Theology, Second Part: A Treatise on Church Order . Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books.

⁷Ibid, 76.

⁸Ibid, 77.

⁹Ibid, 79.

¹⁰Ibid,80.

¹¹Ibid,83.

¹²Ibid,95.

¹³Ibid,102

¹⁴Briggs, Edward C. 1975. Landmark Views of the Church in the Writings of J.M. Pendleton, A.C. Dayton and J.R. Graves in The Quarterly Review. 35 (3) (April-May-June): 47-57.

¹⁵Ibid, 48.

¹⁶Ibid, 54.

¹⁷Ibid, 56.

¹⁸Ibid, 57.

¹⁹Treatise, 100.

²⁰Ibid, 121.

²¹Ibid, 100.

²²Ibid, 121.

²³Ibid, 128.

²⁴Ibid, 95.

²⁵Ibid, 137.

²⁶Ibid, 135.

²⁷Ibid, 97-99.

²⁸Ibid, 143.

²⁹Ibid, 121.

³⁰Ibid, 122.

³¹Ibid, 124-125.

³²Ibid, 182.

³³Ibid, 135.

³⁴Ibid, 121-123.

³⁵Ibid, 128.

³⁶Ibid, 129.

³⁷Ibid, 297.

³⁸Ibid, 294.

³⁹Dagg, J.L, D.D. 1982. Manual of Theology. Harrisonburg: Gano Books