

**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CENTRAL MOTIF AND
STRATIFICATION FOR METHOD:
A CASE STUDY OF LANDMARK BAPTIST THEOLOGY
BY MIKE STALLARD**

While reading through Millard Erickson's volume *Christian Theology*, I was intrigued by the sections which covered the topics of *development of a central interpretive motif* and *stratification* (I: 77-79). In Erickson's list of steps in doing theology, he lists these as the final stages of a theologian's task. Erickson introduces the ideas in sketch form. I want to highlight the significance of these steps. The choosing of a central motif around which one will present his theology is, according to Erickson, a needful and important step in communicating Christianity to the current generation in which the theologian lives. It also determines how the next step of stratification will proceed.

Stratification is the determination of points of emphasis. It is the development of the outline of one's theology. I have become convinced that it is possible to have exactly the same content rearranged differently for emphasis on different areas of theology. The theological product in the rearrangement, although possessing many of the same constituent elements, has quite a different flavor from the original setup. Essentially a grid is established through which all the lower elements in the outline are viewed. The practical results of the difference is enormous not only for how one's theology is perceived, but also for practical everyday living of the Christian life which is the ultimate demonstration of one's actual theology.

In developing my argument I want to use my understanding of Landmarkism and its influence on the Baptist movement in America as the vehicle to present my case. As an independent Baptist for many years and now as a young pastor in the independent Baptist movement, I have found myself in a position which has forced me to analyze why certain traditions prevail and especially why pastors propagate

those traditions within the movement. I do not profess to own infallibility in the following analysis but do believe that I am headed in the right direction with my thinking.

The area of motif selection and stratification of theology will be shown to be the point at which a danger lurks for the theologian. It is the point at which the “balance” of the theologian is won or lost. There is some accuracy to the statement that “truth out of balance is heresy.” Perhaps another statement which rings true at this juncture is that “one’s greatest strength can become one’s greatest weakness if he is not careful.” This is indeed what I believe has happened to a large segment of the Baptist movement. An emphasis upon the doctrine of the church by Baptist peoples in church history has clarified the need for a biblical view of the local church. However, Landmarkism has taken this emphasis to such an extreme that the doctrine of the church is the essential point of the theological outline. Everything else is viewed through this narrow channel. As a consequence, some rather confining, and sometimes nasty, views of the doctrine of ecclesiastical separation have emerged. It is this trend which causes the movements thus infected to be more inwardly oriented than outwardly oriented. The resulting mentality can be destructive concerning the main tasks of the church in missions and evangelism, the points which many of these Baptist peoples ironically hold as their pride and joy. Central motif selection has been performed in error while stratification of theology has been constructed poorly with serious consequences.

All of this leads to the ultimate question of what area of theology one should center his theological thinking upon. Is there one right motif for all time? Is there one right way of stratification? I have certainly argued that there is a wrong way, as we shall see in more detail. It would have been nice if Erickson had elaborated a little more on this issue!

What is Landmarkism?

To begin this analysis it is necessary to trace Landmarkism historically and to give it definition. This teaching arose in the early 1800's and was popularized by J. R. Graves. His later work in 1880, entitled Old Landmarkism: What is it? clearly spells out the doctrinal convictions of the movement. The words from Proverbs 22:28, 23:10, "Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set," became the slogan through which the adherents were charged. The movement was (and still is) marked by the mentality of deep resentment and hatred aimed at the Roman Catholic Church. Its formulation during the first century of the American experiment with religious liberty (during which there was overwhelming Catholic immigration into this country) is no accident. These many forces combined in the minds of many Baptist people to produce an image of the church which was formed by reaction rather than exegesis of the Bible.

The doctrinal pillars of Landmarkism are three in number. First, Landmarkism is marked by the creation of a *false past*. There is a belief in Baptist successionism. Such a view has been made famous in Baptist circles by the little pamphlet Trail of Blood published by J. M. Carroll in 1931. J. M. Carroll was the brother of B. H. Carroll who was involved with the founding of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. Although the booklet possesses some positive points, it is primarily characterized by historical overstatement and faulty logic. The belief in successionism has been characterized in many ways. Some try to trace back through history to the time of Christ with a chain of Baptist pastor ordinations or baptisms. However, the primary successionist view as espoused by Carroll seems to be a succession of local churches down through history which can be labeled Baptist even though the name was not used throughout history in quite that way. Under this scheme of things, previous Baptist churches sent out missionaries under their authority who started other Baptist churches, etc. A modern example of how this is voiced is the flack which Jerry Falwell received from

G. B. Vick, the president of Baptist Bible College, Springfield, Mo., at the time Falwell started the Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, VA. Falwell did not start the church as one "sent out" from another church. That is, he did not have the authority to do such a thing. He was violating the chain of succession that must be kept in place (reported to me by a professor while I was at Liberty).

The second major tenet of Landmarkism is a *false present*. This one appears to me to be the most crucial of the three points. Landmarkers consistently deny the present reality of the Universal Church. The concept of a universal body is sometimes accepted but there is a refusal to see the word church (*ecclesia*) used in that sense. Usually both the terminology and the concept appear to be rejected. A universal church concept is only accepted when discussed in prospect. That is, at the rapture in the future there will be a universal *ecclesia*, but not until that day. Consequently, parachurch ministries are often looked at with suspicion and those who practice any fellowship not clearly delineated by specific local church ties are questioned as to their loyalty to the doctrine of the local church. For example, my own association with the interdenominational Dallas Seminary would prevent my full acceptance into the fellowships with which my own church are most closely aligned.

The final pillar of Landmarkism is a *false future*. There is a belief in the Baptist bride concept. This does not mean that only Baptists are going to heaven. It means that there are spiritual qualifications beyond salvation in Christ which are necessary to be part of the bride of Christ. These qualifications, consistent with the other marks of Landmarkism, are centered on the doctrine of the church. One is a member of the bride of Christ if he is a Christian *and* if he has correct ecclesiology demonstrated by being rightly related to a local New Testament Baptist church. This right relation is usually couched in terms of baptism and membership and not any spiritual character qualities and Christian labor within the church. The little chart below summarizes

the differences of interpretation of the key passages on this point concerning the marriage supper of the Lamb (see Rev. 19:9, Matt. 25:10, Luke 12:37):

Marriage supper	DTS view/ <i>Things to Come</i> p. 228	Landmark view
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Bride of Christ	New Testament age believers	New Testament age believers who have joined a Baptist church
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Wedding Guests	Old Testament and tribulation saints	Old Testament and tribulation saints as well as NT saints who have erroneous ecclesiology
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The Extent of Landmark Influence

The issue of Landmarkism has wide-range impact throughout most Baptist groups in the United States. The currently named American Baptist Association was formed in 1905 as a result of a split with the Southern Baptist Convention over the Landmark issue. Those who formed the ABA were committed Landmarkers. Also, independent Baptists who have formed various fellowships throughout this century, are dominated with much of the content and certainly the spirit of Landmarkism. Although all three tenets of the Landmark faith are not held by all ministers among the independent Baptists, it is difficult to find any who will say they believe in the present reality of the Universal Church. This is especially true among the three fellowships stemming from the ministry of J. Frank Norris, a strong fundamentalist in the 1930's-1950's who separated from the Southern Baptist Convention and started his own movement (the three groups are Baptist Bible Fellowship, World Baptist

Fellowship, and Independent Baptist Fellowship International). Even the Southern Baptist Convention has not been immune from the effects of a movement which originated within its own group. The question that must be asked is, "Has the emphasis (or perhaps, overemphasis) on ecclesiology had any serious side effects throughout the entire theological structure of Baptists with resulting practical ramifications in church life?"

The Significance of Landmark Theology

In all the major pillars of Landmarkism, we have seen that ecclesiology was the dominant area of discussion. Baptist succession seeks security in a firm foundation for the beginning of the Baptist movement with Jesus (or as some would say, John the Baptist). The denial of the Universal Church speaks directly to the nature of the church itself. The hope of the Baptist bride points to the necessity of right church relationships and elevates the place of the Baptist church in future prospect. This movement (and those it has affected) has chosen, consciously in its beginnings and perhaps unconsciously among its adherents today, the doctrine of the church, that is, the local church, to be the central motif of its theological presentation to the world. Then the stratification or outline formation of other points within ecclesiology and other areas of theology are viewed through this dominant concept. The ramifications are given in the following discussion.

The Impact upon Bibliology

I believe a majority of Baptists in the world would agree with the statement, "I believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God." There is, of course, the intense debate now raging in the Southern Baptist Convention over what that means. However, among those that are Landmark Baptists (I've had no major associations with ABA churches, only independents), there seems to be a couple of areas in which the ideas

of the church are exalted in spite of obvious contradictions and lack of scriptural support.

The first area is the limited range of thinking allowed for interpretation. Interpretations of the Bible are elevated to inspiration in place of the words of the Bible themselves. Consequently, there is little toleration of anyone challenging any long cherished viewpoints within the movement.

Second, there is the zealous propagation of the idea that the King James Version of the Bible is the only inspired version in existence. Reliance upon original texts and textual criticism is usually ignored and movement of the Holy Spirit upon the translators of the KJV is assumed. This view is secondarily an issue in bibliology. It is primarily an issue of ecclesiology. It is the tradition of the church(es) which is being elevated. This is in harmony with the Landmark emphasis upon the church as the focal point for all thinking. Therefore, it is not surprising to see many churches which have been infected with Landmarkism verbally or practically demonstrate that they believe that preservation and inspiration merge together in the KJV.

The Impact upon Theology Proper

It is difficult to see any impact in this area of theology. Generally, there is an absence of teaching in this area in most Landmark churches. Perhaps the abstract nature of many of the discussions in this area (trinity, attributes of God) can be correlated to the absence of any room for abstract thought in the central motif that Landmarkism has chosen. The Universal Church has been denied largely because it has no concrete, visible form (Graves, Landmarkism, p. 32). The movement is tied to logic which in at least some areas permits thinking only about concrete ideas. This may be the reason it is rare to see a Landmark Baptist venture into this theological territory.

The Impact upon Christology

Within most churches impacted by Landmarkism, the fellowship of a Christian to Jesus Christ is governed primarily by his relationship to the local church of which he is a member. Consequently, the impression is given that the local church is all there is to Christianity. On the contrary, this is not the case although the local church does play a major role.

The Impact upon Pneumatology

Practically the same thing can be said here that was said for Christology. The spiritual life of a Christian is defined in terms of church relations resulting in a de-emphasis of this doctrine. Most of the preaching and theologizing that goes on about the Holy Spirit is a defense of church tradition against possible inroads made by Charismatics. There is little exposition of the Bible truths concerning the many roles the Holy Spirit plays in the life of a believer.

The Impact upon Anthropology and Hamartiology

It is true that most Landmark Baptists preach a strong message concerning the grace of God. Church plays no role in salvation apart from being the propagator of the gospel. However, once a man is saved, his sin is mostly couched in terms of his wrong relationships to the local church and its traditions. The result is an emphasis not on ministering the Bible to the needs of people, but on an effort to cause people to conform to the expected standards of outward behavior that have been accepted by most of the people in any given congregation.

The Impact upon Eschatology

The doctrine of the Baptist bride causes one to view his future in terms of his relationship to the local church. For example, a man who is rightly related to a Baptist church but is a poor father to his children can be in the bride of Christ while another man who is a wonderful Christian father but is an infant-baptized Presbyterian will fail to be marked in that number. A proper understanding and

practice of ecclesiology has higher ranking in God's reward system than a proper understanding and practice of Christian fatherhood. And this is in spite of the fact that the bride of Christ/marriage supper idea with all of its millennial ramifications does not seem to be marking off any particular group as getting any rewards above the others. For example, the bride is not being rewarded more than the guests. Each one has his proper reward in his own place in God's program.

The Impact upon Ecclesiology

Perhaps the biggest impact of all is on the other areas of ecclesiology itself. Landmarkism's centrality of the local church for all theology forces the following conclusions in the minds of many adherents:

1. There must be closed communion. Only those members in that particular local church can partake (note: my position is not open communion but what I call "close" communion).
2. There must be no alien immersion. It is difficult for many Baptist infected with Landmarkism to accept a baptism that is outside of the particular local church or churches very close to it in practice.
3. Parachurch ministries are generally illegitimate and have no authority to exist. All ministries must be governed by the authority of a local church. In practice few churches consistently apply this 100% of the time. But it certainly flavors attitudes toward non-local church ministries.
4. There can only be limited cooperation in ministry efforts, usually in the area of missions but rarely in the effort of local cooperation such as an area wide crusade.
5. Similarly, there must be a strict view of ecclesiastical separation. Separation includes more than just separation from liberal unbelievers but also from brothers in Christ who are of a different group and who may or may not have associated with liberal unbelievers (of course, there are varying degrees of

this). Since the church is the most important area of consideration, its ecclesiastical purity is paramount.

Summary of Landmark Significance

Perhaps not all of the various doctrinal and practical ideas shown in the above analysis stem from the Landmark influence. In fact, the dynamics of theology involve many factors in the formulation of one's belief system. However, the fact that Landmarkism has chosen the local church as the central motif of its theological expression cannot be dismissed as unimportant. It is the coloring that is added to practically all statements of theology and preaching (the theologians of the movement are the pastors) even when other areas of theology are being addressed. Indeed, ecclesiology is the most influenced area of thinking but we have seen that Christology, Pneumatology, Eschatology, Bibliology and Anthropology are interpreted primarily as they relate to local churches. Theology proper is generally ignored. Abstract ideas are perhaps looked down upon in the context of a concrete concept of the church which is the only view allowed.

This impact is seen at the practical level. Church ministry is performed in a context of exclusivism. There is a lack of vital spiritual life in the congregations. Additions to the churches generally come through "church-hopping members" rather than through evangelism. Missionaries are judged more by whether or not they are of "our kind." Baptism and the Lord's Supper become measuring sticks of one's spiritual condition only as it relates to the church.

However, all is not lost. I do believe that a majority of Baptists are not Landmarkers even though virtually every Baptist has been affected in some way or another. There are among independent Baptists a growing number of ministers like myself who are rejecting the direction of the churches at this time. My hope is that the root problem will be seen. It is not essentially a practical problem. It is fundamentally a problem of theology. In particular, the movement of Landmark Baptist theology has chosen the wrong central interpretive motif to formulate its views. Treatment of the problem at the practical level will give only temporary solutions. The doctrine of the local church must be affirmed but it must not be the

motif around which the entire theological superstructure is built. Stratification must take place in which the more important areas of theology and belief have preeminence. After all, in the commonly listed fundamental of the faith which virtually all Landmarkers would sign up to, nothing is said about the doctrine of the church.

A Proposal

It is clear from the above comments that I believe the local church is the wrong central interpretive motif for constructing a systematic theology which can be communicated to the present generation. That does not mean that I believe the local church is not important. It is, in my opinion, of higher priority than Universal Church relationships. But that is a far cry from elevating it as the pinnacle of all of theology.

However, one must not simply curse the darkness. What is the correct interpretive motif to use in today's world? I would like to approach the answer from two perspectives. First, in the *derivative* sense, that is, in the *derivation* of one's theology, the fundamental nature of *Bibliology* seems to be the starting point. It is the speaking of God in special revelation through the Word that allows man to know with certainty how God has spoken through special revelation in other cases (for example, the first coming of Christ) and in natural revelation. If Bibliology is taken away, then all other areas of theology are open to debate. The nature of the Bible as the special revelation of God to man is the hub around which the other areas of theology depend.

The second perspective in selecting a central interpretive motif involves the *communicative* sense. That is, how does one present his theology to the generation in which he lives? Erickson is not far off when he chooses the *magnificence of God* as his central motif (I: 78). Somewhere within the realm of *Theology Proper* is the place of

origin for the central interpretive motif that will communicate the truth of God best to the present world. Moslems reject the gospel because they cannot understand the trinity. New-agers do not embrace a static God who cannot relate. Secular scientists cannot acknowledge the existence of a Creator whom they feel is not mirrored in the universe which they study. Across the board the main issue is the nature of God. The starting point then is to begin at the same place so that we are answering the questions people are asking before we proceed to questions that were the main concerns of olden times.

The classification I have shown between derivative and communicative senses is related in some measure to Tillich's distinction between ecstatic and formal reason in the method of theology (Erickson, *The Living God*, p. 66). One does not present something in the same way he derived it. For example, one can rearrange his resume to highlight certain points without altering the actual contents in any specific version. In the same way, theological derivation and communication, the incoming ecstatic reason and the outgoing formal logic, do not have to be in the same form. The doctrine of the local church (and ecclesiology as a whole) is not the correct starting place for either one. Instead, the theologian must receive his theology through the grid of bibliology and give it through the focal point of the nature of God. If that takes place, the world might be more willing to hear the message of the Gospel which Baptists, including Landmark Baptists, are so eager to spread.