

What does our Iowa Association of Regular Baptist Churches need more from us – loyalty or scrutiny?

What is meant by loyalty as it will be discussed in this article? One dictionary definition states that loyalty is *“faithful adherence to a sovereign, government, leader, cause, etc.”*<sup>1</sup> Should we be loyal to the Iowa Association of Regular Baptist Churches? I believe that any such organization needs such loyalty to exist. There needs to be commitment or an association cannot survive. Can such loyalty be wrong? It can be. Loyalty without scrutiny (challenge, discernment, review, accountability, or evaluation) is dangerous. Blind loyalty to an institution, a loyalty that affirms without evaluating or scrutinizing the decisions and directions of that organization, leads to certain disaster. The logical end of loyalty without scrutiny is a cultic slide into error and corruption. Loyalty is necessary, but that loyalty must be founded firmly on God’s Word, not on any manmade organization, no matter how dear it may be to us. Loyalty, yes, but loyalty to an institution must not be equated with loyalty to the Word of God and the God of the Word.

Consider this. Can one truly care about an organization without being concerned enough to evaluate its decisions and directions in an ongoing way? I would suggest that continuous scrutiny is not only good for our Association (and frankly for any individual, family, local church, etc.), but is essential for a healthy, growing existence. Who cares if we exist if we stray from the truth? What point is there to exist as an Association if we do not desire to do it with accuracy and with excellence? Our passion should be to do *God’s work God’s way for God’s glory*. Ongoing scrutiny helps us keep that focus.

The Bible contains concepts of both loyalty and scrutiny. We are to be “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:16). “In love” expresses loyalty, a commitment to one another. However, we also are to “speak the truth,” which means pointing out the way things actually are and not glossing over defects just because we might hurt someone’s feelings. Even as we are to be speaking the truth in love, we are to be open to the loving input of others, truth that we may not appreciate, but need. In reality, one can speak the truth without love, but one cannot ultimately love without speaking the truth. We are called on to love one another with the truth, which in turn properly builds up the body.

### Why Embrace Scrutiny?

1. **Because the Bible is our foundation.** Everything we do needs to be measured by the Word of God. Our basic question for any direction or decision should always begin with the question, “What does the Word of God say about this matter?” If we truly claim to be fundamentalists that believe that the Bible is the Word of God, are we not obligated to build our very philosophy of ministry and methodology of ministry upon the Word? Also, we need to continuously evaluate and reevaluate our actions and directions to make sure that we still are following the Word.
2. **Because we are commanded to do so.** Peter warns us to *“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.”* (1 Peter 5:8) In Acts 20, Paul warns the Ephesian elders with great emotion to *“take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”* (Acts 20:28) He goes on to explain why, and to warn them further: *“For I know this, that after my departure SAVAGE WOLVES WILL COME IN AMONG YOU, not sparing the flock. Also FROM AMONG YOURSELVES MEN WILL RISE UP, SPEAKING PERVERSE THINGS, TO DRAW AWAY THE DISCIPLES AFTER THEMSELVES. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.”* (Acts 20:29-31) Watching was that big of a deal to Paul! Further, we are **commanded** to *“test everything, and hold fast to that which is good”* (1 Thes 5:21), to *“examine yourselves [as to] whether you are in the faith”* (2 Cor 13:5a), and even **not** to *“... believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world”* (1 John 4:1). Scrutiny is an **obligation!** George Whitefield, focusing on one area of scrutiny, stated that “It is every minister’s **duty** to declare against the corruptions of that church to which they belong.” He understood the need for scrutiny!
3. **Because history shows us of our tendency to decline.** The GARBC exists because of decline. Our association came into existence because scrutiny was exercised (albeit too late to fix the Northern Baptist Convention, which itself was founded on shaky ground)! It is the nature of any institution to decline over time, unless vigilance marked with aggressive scrutiny is practiced, and ongoing course corrections are made.
4. **Because the sin nature exists in all men.** Scrutiny is required because sin exists. This reason in no way is intended to suggest that men who lead our associational organizations are motivated by sin, but rather highlights the susceptibility of everyone to our old nature, including our leaders.

<sup>1</sup> Modern Language Association (MLA): “loyalty.” *Dictionary.com Unabridged* (v 1.1). Random House, Inc. 09 May. 2007. <Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/loyalty>>.

5. **Because current events illustrate the need for scrutiny.** The broad evangelical world is being discredited by the scandal relating to Ted Haggard and the National Association of Evangelicals. The “Christian” world is burdened with a constant accusation of Catholic priests and their impropriety. Our own national and state association churches and affiliated ministries have seen many scandals and failures – indignities which could have been prevented with a healthy scrutiny and an established system of accountability.
6. **Because of the nature of an association.** If an association truly functions as an association, it requires large quantities of communication in both directions. Association implies ongoing relationship. It takes two-way communication by all to practice such a relationship in a realistic way, and to enable scrutiny in any form.
7. **Because there is always room for improvement.** Unless we have lulled ourselves to sleep with a false sense of perfection, all would easily agree that there is always more ground to cover. J.C. Ryle said, “Before Christ comes it is useless to expect to see the perfect church.” The same is true of an association of churches. This gives us a clear picture of what we can realistically expect from any association. It also gives impetus that we should never stop working to make our Association better, and to insure that it does not grow cold or corrupt.
8. **Because circumstances change.** Truth does not change; nor do the sinful hearts of men. However, the world in which we live changes politically and morally, and the resources and methods that are available to use change *constantly*. The moral assumptions we could make about people years ago are not assumptions that we can make today. What worked 20 years ago may not work now. We need to evaluate, to scrutinize, what we are doing, and how we are doing them, based upon these changes. Technology makes a huge difference as time goes on (who *doesn't* have a cell phone?). Many of these changes can strengthen us (especially in the area of communication). Scrutiny evaluates our focuses and our methods and incorporates or modifies to adjust to change.

### Suggestions to Enable Healthy Scrutiny

If scrutiny is essential, what might be some ways that our Association can help such scrutiny take place? Here are a few of my own suggestions to begin the list. Many of these overlap, but I believe them to be a good genesis of ideas that may serve as a catalyst for many others.

1. **Open up communication about Association direction and decisions.** Lay potential considerations out on the table, rather than communicating only end-product decisions and directions. Do not require blind support but enable intelligent participation through early and full communication. Let pastors and churches be part of the process, not just recipients of the final decision or direction. This is proactive accountability.
2. **Do not just send decisions – ask questions.** Find out what pastors and churches are thinking. Develop a process to what we think the needs of our churches and our Association are, as opposed to assuming these needs and concerns. The leaders of the Association should give us their thoughts, but then ask us what our thoughts are as well. The receiving of ideas does not require the leaders of our association to incorporate all such ideas – there is no way to use all the ideas that may be offered. It would suppose that the leaders would consider this input, and openly communicate to indicate that this has taken place.
3. **Provide a forum for questions to be answered.** Pastors and churches need a forum to be able to ask questions regarding decisions and directions of our Association. This builds upon the previous suggestion. We not only need an avenue to get our ideas and concerns heard, but also a means to get our questions answered.
4. **Incorporate those who cannot “meet.”** I do not know the situation of most of the pastors in the state. However, I am aware that many simply cannot afford the time to meet monthly in pastors’ fellowships or state meetings. Their lack of participation should not be assumed to be a lack of desire to participate. It may rather be an inability to meet, whether because of the demands of ministry, family, finances or employment. For example, there are probably a good number of pastors that work either full or part-time in our state. Attending fellowships during the day hours requires these pastors to use vacation time, of which they may have little, and which they need for other life demands (rest?). What can we do to work these men into fellowship at their level of ability to participate?
5. **Communicate too much, rather than not enough.** Monthly newsletters are nice and informative, but they do not fill the entire need of all the communication that is needed for a healthy association. Provide more “push” type communications (those that do not require the user to go to access a web site, for example). Send more letters about the problems and processes of the Association, not just end results. Send more e-mails (short, easy-to-read summaries with full text for further reading) to engage the pastors more. Maybe the State Representative and the Council of 10 could proactively visit pastors and interview them regarding their perspectives and needs to get to know the full Association and it’s needs more completely.
6. **Give credence for the possibility of dissent without assuming disloyalty.** Do not just classify dissenters as being disloyal. Maybe they really care, and see issues that really need to be addressed. As an association, all churches and pastors have the responsibility to speak up and challenge our direction, to exhort from their hearts, based upon their own understanding of the Word.

## The Benefits of Scrutiny

There are many key benefits to allowing and encouraging scrutiny:

1. **Safety.** If we truly are desirous of keeping keep our Association on the straight and narrow, scrutiny will only help us. Being open to challenge or change may or may not result in change, but it will result in a strong, purposeful Association with reasoned direction, and will cause us to fully affirm our decisions.
2. **Accuracy.** Closely related to safety is accuracy. Are we doing the right things? Are we doing things the right way? Scrutiny helps us to think things through Biblically.
3. **Accountability.** Should we not expect the ongoing proactive validation of integrity, rather than the assumption of it? Accountability involves being open, communicating the processes as well as the decisions, and clearly showing the responsible use of resources.
4. **Community.** If the entire group has a voice, the group is validated as part of the Association. When pastors and churches have an active say on what is going on, we will truly be functioning as an association of churches.
5. **Efficiency.** Soliciting input and being open to scrutiny provides the opportunity for better ideas to come to the surface, with the result of accomplishing more of what we seek to be done in more productive ways.
6. **Relevancy.** With scrutiny, we will better be able to meet the needs of local churches. We will minister on the basis of what pastors themselves discern they and the churches they shepherd require, rather than what is assumed by those who have not sought out that information.
7. **Synergy.** “Two heads are better than one” is true when it comes to developing ideas. Being willing to receive and solicit input, even if it “goes against the grain,” is simply leveraging the knowledge, experience, and perspectives of others. “Together we accomplish more” can be realized in greater ways than can be imagined.

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