

PART IV – THE PRACTICES OF FREEWILL BAPTIST

The following is a description of the organizational practices generally followed in the Free Will Baptist denomination. It is recognized that there is considerably greater variety in actual practice than can be expressed in this section. It is not intended that the following description should require that every organization conform in every detail, so long as there is not variance from the basic principles which underlie these practices. Each organization, including the local churches and the various associations, will define its own practices by usage and/or by a formal constitution and by-laws.

Chapter I

The Local Church

Section I: Its Authority and Independence

1. The local congregation of believers is the only visible form of the "church" founded by the direct authority of Scripture. Free Will Baptists, therefore, recognize the local church as the sole source of authority possessed and exercised within the visible church.\
2. The local church is an independent and self-governing body, with full authority to transact its business, choose its pastor and officers, receive, discipline, and dismiss members, hold free title to all its properties, and conduct all its internal affairs.

Section II: Its Relationships

The local Free Will Baptist church bears two important relationships to other churches:

1. Christians within the local church are members of the universal and invisible church, known as the body of Christ.
2. Local churches voluntarily form associations which organize and cooperate as the Free Will Baptist denomination. (See Chapter III: Associations of Churches.)

Section III: Its Organization

1. The authority to organize a local church lies within the group of Christians who covenant together, as they believe themselves directed by the Spirit of God, to form a local church.
2. Whenever such a group of Christians wishes to be organized as a regular Free Will Baptist church in fellowship with the denomination, these steps are followed:
 1. The Quarterly Meeting or District Association is requested to send a committee to examine the group as to character, doctrine, and fellowship.
 2. If the examination proves satisfactory, the formal organization proceeds as follows:

1. The Bible is presented as the only rule of faith and practice.
 2. The Free Will Baptist Church Covenant is adopted.
 3. A prayer of consecration is offered.
 4. The hand of fellowship is given by the associational committee or its chairman.
3. Occasion often arises when a local church already organized, desires to unite with the denomination. A committee is requested from the Quarterly Meeting or Association for the purpose of examining the church as to its doctrine, character, reputation, fellowship, stability, and organization. The committee, if the examination is satisfactory, makes recommendation to the body which sent it; and the body votes whether to receive the church into fellowship. Great care should be exercised by associations in examining and receiving into fellowship local churches already organized, especially when those churches have been in fellowship with other associations of churches in either the Free Will Baptist denomination or other denominations.
 4. Many local churches find it helpful to adopt a constitution and by-laws; such a document serves as a guide to government and procedure within the congregation. Some Free Will Baptist churches also find it helpful to be legally incorporated.

Section IV: Its Officers

One of the primary duties of an organized local church is the election of officers from within its membership. All officers, including the pastor, are elected by majority vote of the congregation. Some of the most usual and important officers are listed below, although there are many others used in various churches.

1. The Pastor, who preaches the Word of God, ministers to the needs of the members, and exercises general leadership within the congregation. It is expected that he will unite with the local church if he is not a member when called. The church should not call a man who is not at least licensed to preach within the denomination. (See further Chapter II: The Minister.)
2. Deacons are ordained—usually by the local church—to minister to the congregation and exercise general spiritual leadership. They assist the pastor in administering the ordinances, and may have to conduct worship services in the pastor's absence. Regular practice insists that deacons be men who meet the qualifications outlined in 1 Timothy 3:8-13.
3. A clerk (secretary) and treasurer, offices which may be combined if desired. Duties include the keeping of careful records of all business and financial affairs of the local church.
4. Trustees, officers elected by many churches to receive and hold title to property owned by the local church, but which may be disposed of only by decision of the church.

Section V: Its Meetings

Meetings of the entire congregation of a local church are of two main types:

1. Worship services, which are times set aside by the local church according to the schedule it finds most satisfactory. Included, wherever possible, are services in the morning and evening on the first day of the week, and a mid-week service for prayer and Bible study. Although discouraged as a regular thing, any item of business may be carried on by the congregation at any regularly scheduled worship service.
2. Business meetings (conferences), which are held at regular times scheduled by the congregation.
 1. Meetings should be frequent enough to insure that the congregation's authority over its business affairs is not usurped by any person or board. Usually such meetings are held at least once each quarter.
 2. All members are obligated to be present, and have a right—regardless of age—to speak and vote, unless otherwise decided by the local church.
 3. All matters not specifically delegated to some officer or board by the congregation must be handled by the congregation.
 4. The decisive authority of the local church lies in the majority vote of those present and voting at any session where business is legally conducted.
 5. Special business meetings may be called for times other than regularly scheduled business or worship sessions, but only in the manner agreed upon by the majority of the congregation.
 6. The pastor generally acts as moderator for business meetings.

Section VI: Its Ordinances

The Gospel ordinances to be practiced in local Free Will Baptist churches are described in Chapter XVIII of the "Faith" section of the Treatise.

1. Baptism is administered by an ordained minister to the individual as soon as possible after his conversion.
2. Provision should be made for regular observance of the Lord's Supper and washing of the saints' feet by the congregation. Ministers and deacons administer these.

Section VII: Its Membership

1. An individual may be received into the fellowship of a local church by decision of the congregation according to its regularly prescribed method. This generally applies to either of two situations:
 1. Upon profession of faith in Christ, reception into full fellowship not being final until the convert is baptized by immersion.
 2. Upon receipt of a letter of good standing from any church recognized as Christian, with the qualification that the applicant must have been baptized by immersion and satisfied therewith.
2. In no case should an individual be received into membership if there remains any doubt as to the genuineness of his conversion and Christian character. Persons expelled from any sister churches, for example, should not be received into full

- membership without giving satisfaction to the church from which they have been expelled.
3. Reception into full fellowship should be made final, if possible, by the extending of the hand of fellowship, at least from the pastor and preferably from the congregation.
 4. Letters of commendation are granted, concerning members in good standing, to churches making such requests about members desiring to move their membership. The local church should not grant such a letter if there is doubt concerning the profession and character of the member.

Section VIII: Its Disciplinary Authority

The local church occasionally finds itself responsible to exercise its solemn right to discipline members. In such cases, the regular procedures of the local church are followed in keeping with the teachings of the Scripture.

1. Cases involving personal offense are to be handled according to Matthew 18:15-17.
2. In some cases, the church may have to effect a "break" in fellowship with a disorderly brother who is yet not an "enemy" (2 Thess. 3:6-15).
3. In other cases, the member is expected to submit to the discipline of the church. If the member does not choose to submit, the only course of action open to the church is to withdraw fellowship from the member.
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5. Withdrawal of fellowship from a member can take place only by majority vote of the congregation (see Section V) and should take place only after every effort is exercised in a humble Christian spirit to restore the member and give him adequate opportunity to be heard.
6. When a member, without providential reason, absents himself from the meetings of the church or refuses to support it for one year, it is considered a violation of the covenant and sufficient reason for dismissal.
7. A member (or minority group of members) dissatisfied with the action of the majority against him, may appeal to the association for a hearing among the sister churches. The nature of the association's powers in such a case is described in Chapter III: Associations of Churches.
8. The actual "trial" of a member, when necessary, should be carried on in the sole presence of the membership and involved parties.
 1. A written notice of the exact charges should be furnished to the accused at least a week in advance.
 2. The pastor, unless personally involved as a witness, should be impartial moderator of the meeting. He should read the charges, without comment.
 3. The pastor should call for volunteer witnesses who wish to sustain the charges by testimony, allowing the accused, in an orderly way, to question the witnesses.

4. The pastor should allow the accused to speak in his own behalf and ask for witnesses who wish to sustain his position.
5. When both sides are presented, the pastor asks whether there is a motion concerning some type of discipline for the accused. If there is, and it is seconded, the motion is discussed and voted upon.
9. The local church should always stand ready to forgive a genuinely repentant member and restore him to full fellowship in the congregation (2 Cor. 2:6, 7).

Chapter II

The Minister

Section I: His Ordination

1. The authority to ordain ministers has its source in the local church.
2. Free Will Baptist churches, in most areas, have traditionally delegated this authority to the associations in which they voluntarily unite themselves. This is done because the local churches desire the assistance of their sister churches and ministers.
3. Ordination procedure varies greatly from one district association to another, depending on the traditions of the various areas. In most cases, something like the following takes place:
 1. The candidate must usually be licensed for a period prior to ordination, often at least a year. In some areas, license is issued by the local church directly; in others, it is issued by the association upon the request of the local church.
 2. Before ordination, the candidate is examined by a committee of ministers appointed by the association for that purpose.
 3. This committee usually makes recommendation directly to the association, which body votes whether to ordain. Usually, a request for ordination must also be received from the local church of which the candidate is a member. (In some areas, the association's "ordination council" makes recommendation back to the local church, which then proceeds to ordain.)
 4. The ministers of the association usually administer the actual ordination ceremony when the association has voted approval.
 5. The actual ceremony generally includes the "presentation" of the Bible and a formal "charge." In many places, a sermon by a brother minister is preached. The service usually concludes with the "laying on of hands" and a prayer of consecration.
4. Ordination requirements also vary greatly within the Free Will Baptist denomination.
 1. Examinations generally include sufficient materials to determine a reasonable acquaintance with the Bible, Christian doctrine, and Free Will Baptist teachings.

2. Some associations require some type of ministerial educational preparation, or at least manifestation of a desire for self-improvement and study.
3. All areas recognize the necessity of a definite conviction on the part of the candidate that he is divinely "called" to the ministry.
4. Some areas have certain specific requirements about special items of conduct, such as, for example, whether a minister can use tobacco. All areas require consistent Christian conduct and character.
5. Many associations require that the candidate already be involved in some specific ministry, usually either as a pastor or evangelist.
5. A minister transferring from one association to another within the denomination generally undergoes the following:
 1. He is examined by the local association's ordaining committee, though usually not so closely as the new ordination candidate.
 2. He is required to present a letter of good standing from the association of which he was last a member. (Associations should exercise great care in granting such letters of standing; an unqualified letter should not be granted if there are any questions about the minister's reliability.) In general, no association should receive a minister into full ministerial standing who cannot secure a letter of good standing because he has been disfellowshipped or had his credentials revoked or who is in the process of being disciplined by another association. In no case should his credentials be ratified without consultation with the association which disciplined him.
 3. His ordination credentials may then be "ratified" by the association upon recommendation of the ordaining council.
6. A minister from another denomination wishing to unite with the Free Will Baptist denomination must first unite with a local Free Will Baptist church and will then be subject to procedure similar to that outlined above in E. He can expect to be examined closely.

Section II: His Discipline

1. As in the case of ordination, the authority to discipline a minister has its source in the authority of the local church. Again, however, this is delegated to the association along with the authority to ordain.
2. In most cases, any accusation against a minister that is offered concerning his conduct, character, profession, or doctrine (and which should be considered against his good standing), should be brought to the association by the local church. The only exception that should be made arises when an offense involves a fellow minister (as object or witness) in a situation unknown to the local church. In this case, charges should be preferred by three ministers jointly, with the local church fully apprised of the fact.
3. As with all other matters of church discipline, the minister accused should first be dealt with privately according to the principles outlined in Matthew 18:15-17.
4. If a formal "trial" becomes necessary, it should proceed in the same way as that described for members of a local church in Chapter I, Section VIII, except that

- here the moderator of the association presides (rather than the local pastor) and the delegates to the association hear the trial (rather than local members). All steps in part H of the Section just referred to should be followed.
5. The association's disciplinary action against the minister can deal solely with his ordination and fellowship in the association as a minister.
 1. If an intermediate and temporary act of discipline is needed, the minister may be retained on the roll of ministers but listed as not in full fellowship and denied the right to vote as a standing delegate.
 2. The final act of discipline, if labors are not fruitful in bringing satisfactory resolution of the problem, consists in the revoking of the minister's ordination and withdrawal of fellowship from him as a minister in good standing in the association.
 3. The association's discipline cannot deal with the minister's relationship to the local church, either as pastor or member. It can make recommendations concerning this to the local church, and the church's fellowship in the association might be endangered if those recommendations were not followed, but no force can be applied.
 6. The minister is expected to submit to the decision of the association and relinquish his "credentials" of ordination if they are called for. Civil action is not recommended, however, if he should refuse.\
 7. The minister who feels he has not been justly treated may, in union with at least one other sustaining minister, appeal to the next broader organization of which his district association is a member (such as the state association) for a hearing among the sister associations. The nature of the broader organization's powers in such a case is described in Chapter III: Associations of Churches.

Section III: His Relationships

The minister has unique relationships to many persons. As a divinely-called preacher, he is subject foremost to the Lord and His Word. This relationship qualifies all the others.

1. To his church. Most Free Will Baptist churches recognize their responsibility to support their pastors with such financial means as are available to them.
2. To the association. When the minister becomes pastor of a given local church, it is his responsibility to obtain good standing in the association of which that church is a member if he is not already in good standing therein.
3. To fellow-ministers. Many associations maintain "ministers' conferences," organized for the fellowship and cooperation of the ministers in the area of that association. These conferences should remain subservient to and responsible to the association.

Chapter III

Associations of Churches

Section I: Their Nature

Free Will Baptist churches, while independent, do not practice isolation. They form associations with one another in several levels of organization described in this chapter. It is to be remembered, however, that these associations are voluntary, both at the beginning and in their continuation. The local church remains at liberty to withdraw from the association it has voluntarily joined.

Section II: Their Organizational Structure

There is considerable variety within the denomination as to the exact number and nature of associational organizations.

1. The plan which seems to work best calls for four levels of organization, which can be diagrammed thus:
 - Level 1 -- The Local Church
 - Level 2 -- The District Association
 - Level 3 -- The State Association
 - Level 4 -- The National Association
5. According to this plan, the local churches in a given district form the district association; several (two or more) district associations in a given state form a state association; and the several state associations form the national association. Each of the levels is said to be the broader or larger (not "higher") than the former.
6. In this plan, the district association usually bears a proper name that includes the word Association, although Conference is often used.
7. The district association, in this plan, is the body which deals directly with the local church and would be the first level of appeal from the local church. It is also the body to which the local church delegates its authority to ordain and discipline ministers (see Chapter II: The Minister).
8. In this plan, the district association may meet quarterly. Some district associations cover such larger geographical areas, however, that it is found preferable to subdivide voluntarily into smaller groups for three quarterly meetings between the annual meetings of the entire association each fourth quarter. In this case, these smaller quarterly meetings are mostly devoted to fellowship and inspiration. While the local churches are expected to report to these smaller quarterly meetings, their main annual reports are presented directly to the annual meeting of the association.
2. Another plan of structure followed in some areas calls for five levels of organization, which can be diagrammed thus:
 - Level 1 -- The Local Church
 - Level 2 -- The Quarterly Meeting
 - Level 3 -- The Yearly Meeting
 - Level 4 -- The State Association
 - Level 5 -- The National Association

6. This plan works much like the four-level plan outlined above, except for the fact that the quarterly meeting is given considerably greater status in the associational structure and stands between the local church and the yearly meeting (equivalent to the district association). Here, the churches form and report only to the quarterly meeting. Quarterly meetings form and make all reports to the yearly meeting. In other particulars the two plans are identical.
7. The organizational structure in many areas reflects a mixture of elements from both these plans, thus adding to the variety. In all plans, state and national associations meet annually, and most include representation from the local churches as well as from the smaller associations composing them.

Section III: Their Purposes

These associations of churches at the various levels are all organized for cooperation among the churches. These denominational meetings serve for mutual edification and inspiration. They also provide opportunity for the churches to accomplish cooperatively what they might not be able to do individually.

Section IV: Their Relationships

1. The district association (or quarterly meeting) and the local churches.
 1. The association has no authority to interfere in the internal affairs of the local church (see Chapter I, Section I-B).
 2. Once organized, the association of churches is constituted a body distinct from the local churches that compose it, and:
 1. can speak only for itself, not for the churches;
 2. can commit only itself to a course of action, not the churches;
 3. is composed at any session of the "delegates" sent from the churches and who can act and vote only as a part of the association itself without the ability to legally commit the churches they represent;
 4. can deal only with the local churches as members of the association, and not with the individual members of the local churches.
 3. The association's only "power" over the local church is limited to dealing with the church's rights as a member of the association:
 1. The association may set whatever requirements it wishes as conditions for the church's "Good standing" in the association although it has no power to force the church to meet those requirements.
 2. The association may, for example, refuse to seat delegates from a local church if there is a breach of fellowship being dealt with.

3. Ultimately, the most extreme power of the association is to withdraw fellowship from the local church as a member of the association.
4. An aggrieved minority within a local church may appeal to the association for a hearing among the sister churches, and reasonable appeals ought to be heard according to the association's regular procedures.
 1. The association may desire, or be requested by the aggrieved minority of the church, to send a committee to meet with the church and investigate the difficulties. In such case, the church is more proper to receive and meet with such a committee, although it is understood it cannot be forced to do so.
 2. If the association agrees with the aggrieved minority, it may exercise all suitable labors to persuade the majority to reconsider. But if persuasion fails, and the matter is serious enough, the association's only recourse is to withdraw fellowship.
5. When a church violates its covenant, or becomes corrupt in doctrine or practice, or discontinues reporting to the association, the association will have to deal with the church in a similar manner. But, again, if advisory and persuasive labors fail, the only recourse for the association is to withdraw fellowship from the church. If a "trial" of a church becomes necessary, procedures should be followed as nearly identical as possible with those outlined in Chapter I, Section VIII-H.
2. The broader associations, at each successive level, bear exactly the same relationships to the bodies composing them as that defined above between the district association (or quarterly meeting) and the local church.

Section V: Their Organization

1. A group of local churches may voluntarily form an association of churches (quarterly meeting or district association, depending on the structure followed in the area, as outlined in Section II) when they feel it helpful to their common cause.
 1. If they wish to be in fellowship with the denomination at the time of their organization, they should request the broader association in which they will desire membership (yearly meeting, if a quarterly meeting is being organized; state association, if a district association is being organized) to appoint a committee to assist them in setting the organization in order. This committee can assist in such things as the drafting of a proposed constitution and by-laws for the association before the organizational meeting takes place.
 2. The organizational meeting should be set for a date acceptable to all the churches and the assistance committee, and should include at least these items of procedure:
 1. Each church desiring fellowship in the association to be formed should have elected delegates to accompany the minister to the organizational meeting.

2. Each church should have written a letter stating its purpose to unite in forming the association and naming the delegates that will represent it.
 3. The meeting should begin with the chairman of the assistance committee presiding and reading the letters sent by the churches, followed by the recognition and listing of the delegates assembled.
 4. The assistance committee should examine the delegates as to the character and doctrine of their respective churches, and should examine the constitution and by-laws which are to be presented for adoption by the delegates. Any churches who have previously belonged to other associations should have letters of commendation from those associations.
 5. If the examination is satisfactory, the Bible is presented as the only perfect rule of faith and practice.
 6. The proposed constitution and by-laws are adopted.
 7. The Treatise of the Faith and Practices of Free Will Baptists is adopted.
 8. The assistance committee extends the right hand of fellowship to the delegates and leads in a prayer of consecration.
 9. Officers for the new association are elected (as provided in the constitution and by-laws) beginning with the moderator, who will preside over the remainder of the meeting.
 10. Delegates for the newly formed association are elected to attend the next meeting of and ask for membership in the broader association (from which the assistance committee was sent). [Note: Other advice concerning the formation of a new organization is given in Robert's Rule of Order (Revised).]
3. A group of churches organized into an association without assistance from some larger association in fellowship with the denomination may request membership in such a broader association at any time. The following steps should be included in this procedure.
 1. Delegates are elected to attend the association (yearly meeting or state association, as the case may be) and petition for membership.
 2. A letter requesting membership is sent by the delegates, including a statement that the Treatise of the Faith and Practices of Free Will Baptists has been adopted.
 3. The delegates are examined by the broader association, as are the constitution and by-laws of the association requesting membership. (If information is not complete, the examination may be continued over a specified period.)
 4. When the examination is completed and satisfactory, the delegates are seated and the association enrolled.
 5. Caution in receiving previously organized associations is urged. The examination should be thorough. It should be clearly determined that the churches of the association seeking membership have all been in good standing with any other

associations to which they have belonged, and that they have departed from those associations in peace.

4. Once an association of churches has been organized, new churches may be received into fellowship at will, according to the provisions of the constitution and by-laws of the association, and in keeping with the practice described in Chapter I, Section III-C.
2. A group of associations desiring to form a broader association (yearly meeting or state association, as the case may be), will follow procedure identical to that described above for churches forming an association.
3. The constitution and by-laws of the various associations at any level give detailed provisions for membership, officers, activities, meetings, and the like. These vary greatly from place to place, but should not be repugnant to the basic principles underlying the general practices outlined in these "Practices." The Constitution and By-Laws of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, Inc. are given in this booklet (Part V) and may serve as a model for any of the smaller associations.
4. When a church or association wishes to transfer membership to another association, it should obtain a letter of good standing.
5. A church or association which has been expelled by another association should not be received by another association without first giving satisfaction to the association from which it was expelled.

Section VI: Their Business

1. Associations of churches within the denomination have varied ways of conducting business, as provided in their respective constitutions and by-laws. In general the following items are basic:
 1. Letters are sent from each local church to each meeting of the association in which it retains membership. The letter reports, as requested by the association, information concerning the state and progress of the church. The letter also names the lay delegates who will officially represent the church.
 2. In all associations (and at any level within the denomination), ministers in good standing within the association are standing delegates.
 3. The business of the association is decided by majority vote of the standing and lay delegates present and voting at any given session, as provided in the constitution and by-laws of the association.
2. The broader associations (yearly meetings, district associations, state associations, and national association) follow the same principles of business as in the associations composed directly of local churches, except that reports and lay delegates come from the associations composing them rather than directly from the churches (as noted in Section II-C, provision is also made in most of the broader associations for direct lay representation from the local churches).