

Ordination Paper

Prepared for the American Baptist Churches of Michigan  
Commission on Ordination and Standing

Presented by Zachary Bartels  
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## *Biographical Information*

### **Christian Commitment, Growth, and Call to Ministry:**

Having been raised by two parents who are committed Christians, I have been immersed in the Word of God and the Truth of the Gospel for as long as I can remember. At a very early age, I expressed a desire to commit my life to Jesus Christ and my father led me in repenting of my sin and becoming a new creation. I would later doubt the authenticity of such an early conversion (five years old), but under the teaching of Rev. Ed Pikey came to realize that the childlike faith that accompanied my confession of Christ as Savior is exactly what the Gospel demands.

From an early age, I was very involved in my church. As I understand it, I was born on Thursday and in church (Essexville Baptist, ABC) the next Sunday. As soon as I was old enough, my parents enrolled me in children's ministries. I took great interest in the educational and faith-forming ministries in which I was involved. The "Kids of the Kingdom," Brigade Boys, and youth group were some of the most formative influences in my young life. Not only did such ministries expose me to the life-shaping content of God's Word, but they also kept me in constant contact with Christian role models, who served to teach me by their actions what life in the Kingdom of God is all about. In 1987, at my own prompting, I was baptized and became a member of Essexville Baptist Community Church.

As I entered my teen years, I was very involved with the church youth group. I read the Scriptures daily and, challenged by godly church leaders, tried to live my life as a true disciple of Jesus. Through involvement with Lake Louise Baptist Camp, I began to understand exactly how intimate a relationship I can have with God because of the blood of Jesus Christ. It was at Lake Louise as a fourteen-year-old that I first became aware of a call on my life. I was not sure exactly what kind of ministry I was called to (life as a pastor was the last thing on my mind), but God began to speak to me with His still small voice, telling me that He was going to use me.

When I was fifteen years old, God used a book called *Life on the Edge* to show me that He had indeed called me to pastoral ministry. My parents were far less surprised than I was to hear this news. Apparently, God's preparatory work in my life had been more obvious to them than it was to me. I quickly spread the word amongst my peers that I planned to be a pastor and the resulting expectations of saintly behavior further challenged me to live my life as a letter from Christ to the world. While my high school years were at times marked by a self-righteous and judgmental spirit, God still used me to lead several people to Christ and used them to help soften my heart.

During the summer between high school and college, I struggled with doubts about the Truth of God's Word. As so many young people raised in the church, I had to work through the process of making my parents' faith my own. The process involved much study, prayer, and soul-searching. Looking back, these months were very important in strengthening my faith and securing my identity as a disciple of Christ.

Since beginning my academic preparation for ministry, God has used many different people, events, and other means to break me down and build me back up in the image of His Son. He has used friends, pastors, and professors to give me an ever-expanding understanding of who He is. Most notably, He uses my wife Erin to this end on a very regular basis. Through her loving spirit and reverence for the Scriptures, God has made me more compassionate toward the lost and hurting and has opened my eyes to the vastness of the Kingdom and the diversity it contains.

### **Academic and Field Preparation:**

I enrolled in the pre-seminary program at Cornerstone University (then Cornerstone College) in 1996. As my transcripts reflect, the program is somewhat intense in its approach to Bible and theology, rivaling masters programs at some seminaries. Cornerstone requires that all students take part in ministries off-campus. In meeting those requirements, I had the pleasure of ministering to Native American youth through a ministry called “Unbounded,” reading with and tutoring inner-city children at J.O.Y. youth center, and serving the homeless of Grand Rapids at Mel Trotter Ministries.

After only one semester of college, my pastor at Essexville Baptist, Ed Pedley, gave me some opportunities to preach. Although these particular messages are far from “good” (and are, in fact, painful to listen to today), the experiences were invaluable in cultivating my gift of preaching. Such willingness by ministers to give up their pulpit and allow an untested young man to get some experience has marked my ministry development every step of the way. I count these opportunities as some of the greatest blessings I’ve received.

In 1998, I joined Burton Baptist Church (ABC) in Grand Rapids. I was quickly offered the position of youth minister and gratefully accepted. For the next two years, I led weekly meetings, outreach events, service projects, and the like. While I discovered that youth ministry is not my gift, I also discovered that God can and does use even our most unworthy efforts for great things if we offer them with a servant’s heart. In 1998, I also began to serve as co-pastor for the “Younger Youth” session at Lake Louise (continued each summer through 2002).

In 1999, Burton Baptist licensed me to ministry, both to do youth work and to preach. Pastor Ed Pikey gave me many opportunities to preach during my undergraduate years. These were excellent ways for me to apply what I was learning in classes about homiletics, theology, and ministry. During the summer of 1999, I did a ministry internship at Burton Baptist. Among other things, I preached every other week, led the Wednesday night Bible study, conducted hospital and shut-in visitation, and planned special services.

I graduated from Cornerstone in 2000 with a BA in Religion and a minor in Biblical Studies. I was accepted at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary (then Grand Rapids Baptist Seminary) and began my M.Div. program in September. Also in September of 2000, I had the opportunity to serve as the speaker for the Jr. High Fall Retreat at Lake Louise Baptist Camp. Through the five sessions with the children, we saw many lives rededicated to Christ and several first-time confessions of faith.

In the summer of 2002, I completed a six credit field ministry, also at Burton Baptist Church, under the mentorship of Rev. Michael Gohn. In addition to the normal responsibilities (preaching, leading Bible studies, etc.), I worked with Pastor Gohn in developing a curriculum called “Evangelism Encounters Workshop,” which included multi-media elements. We led the church through the eight-week workshop during the summer.

Through my seminary career, I have continued to preach whenever the opportunity arose. I have preached more than one hundred expository sermons at several churches, including Essexville Baptist, Burton Baptist, Bethel Christian Reformed of Zeeland, First Baptist Church of Holly, Southpointe Bible Church in Wayland, and others. This experience has been very beneficial in helping improve my communication skills. I have won two awards for expository preaching (Strauss Expository Preaching Award and the Howard F. Sugden Award).

As the worship chairman at Burton Baptist, I am currently involved in worship planning and leading the praise band. I also substitute teach undergraduate theology classes at Cornerstone University.

## *General Doctrine*

### **The Doctrine of God:**

I believe in One Holy God who exists in Trinity. He is three persons—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in one essence. The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Father. Yet, God is not comprised of “parts” or lesser components.

I believe that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father—True God from True God—and that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. The three persons of the Holy Trinity have existed as such from eternity past, self-sufficient, unchanging, and unchangeable—One Perfect God.

I believe that God is eternal, immortal, all-powerful, all-knowing, and everywhere present. He is also perfectly good, just, loving, and wise.

### **The Person and Work of Jesus Christ:**

I believe that God the Father freely gave His one and only Son, Jesus Christ, as a propitiation for man’s sins, that He would be the one Mediator between God and man. He did this because He loves us and we were lost like sheep without a shepherd.

I believe that Jesus Christ is truly God Almighty, perfect and uncreated. Even though He is God Most High, He willingly emptied Himself of glory and took to himself a human body and soul, becoming in all ways like us, yet without sin. This was necessary because only another human could bear the punishment for the sins of humankind. His coming was foretold in the prophecies of the Old Testament. He is the culmination of the offices of prophet, priest, and king.

I believe that Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary—a physical body of her substance. He was not changed into a human; rather, He took to Himself full and undiminished humanity. While not giving up His divine attributes, He embraced the limits of humanity for the duration of His mission to redeem mankind. Christ is now fully God and fully Man, having two distinct natures that co-exist in mystery with no contradiction. These natures are inseparably joined in one person, without division, confusion, or separation.

I believe that while on earth, Jesus was approved by the Father and anointed with the Holy Spirit for ministry. He inaugurated His kingdom on earth and as the Suffering Servant, taught by word and example how we should live.

I believe that despite His sinless life, Jesus Christ was unjustly condemned to death by the secular and religious authorities. He endured ridicule, betrayal, abandonment, and torture. He was crucified on a cross, laying down His life for the forgiveness of our sins. In this, He accomplished salvation once for all.

I believe that on the third day, Jesus Christ rose from the dead. He vanquished the sin and death that entered humanity through Adam, thus becoming the new head of the human race. Having fulfilled the Law and the Prophets and having established Himself as the one true Mediator between God and man, He ascended into Heaven, where He sits at the Father’s right hand. He will return someday soon to judge the living and the dead and consummate His Kingdom with a new heaven and a new earth.

**The Holy Spirit:**

I believe that the Holy Spirit of God is the third person of the Trinity, of one substance with the Father and the Son. He speaks, comforts, reveals, and guides into all truth.

I believe that Christ promised His followers that the Holy Spirit, who had indwelt Him, would be poured out on believers from all nations to empower the Church. This promise was fulfilled at Pentecost.

I believe that by the presence and indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the Church worships, serves, and produces the fruit of the Spirit. The Spirit calls sinners to repentance, convicts believers of sin, imparts them with gifts for ministry and, with His still small voice, guides and directs us down the narrow path.

**The Authority of Scripture:**

I believe that the Holy Bible is the inerrant Word of God, written by godly men who were inspired by the Holy Spirit and kept from all error. It consists of the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. The testimony of the Church, the record of history, and the witness of the Holy Spirit confirm it.

I believe that the Bible is our perfect standard for preaching, teaching, and training in righteousness, to be studied by all Christians. While nature offers enough light so as to leave people without excuse, only the Holy Scriptures are sufficient to give knowledge unto salvation. Although the Bible contains many mysteries, all knowledge necessary for salvation is clearly put forward so that men and women can understand it through ordinary study.

**Creation, Humanity, and Sin:**

I believe that God Almighty, who is self-sufficient, did not need to create anything. Yet, to display His glory, love, and goodness, He created the heavens and the earth out of nothing, and it was very good.

I believe that the culmination of this Creation was humankind. God formed the first man, Adam, from the dust of the earth and breathed the breath of life into him. He formed the first woman, Eve, from Adam. Humans are unique among God's creatures in that we are made in the image of God. Every human possesses this image and, without it, would not be human.

I believe that because humans are made in the image of God, we have many God-like capacities. We are able to speak, reason, and feel emotions. We possess the capacity for art, music, and complex abstract thought. These capacities allow us to image God through relationships with Him, with each other, and with Creation.

I believe that, having created humans, God rested and left them to the creative task of developing culture. He gave humankind dominion over all of Creation, that they might continue to grow in perfection as they gained experience.

I believe that humans were expected and equipped to continue flawlessly bearing God's image forever. There was no flaw inherent in them that made a shattering of this situation necessary, nor did the freedom humans enjoyed make a moral failure inevitable. God created humans to be

free to please Him and fulfill His will, which was also their own. Adam and Eve were delighted to have the divinely appointed task of caring for Creation.

I believe that Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat from one particular tree, but gave into Satan's temptation, willingly perverting their own wills so that they no longer coincided with God's. As a result of this first sin, our relationships with God, each other, and the earth have become fractured and twisted. Adam and Eve were expelled from paradise and faced the reality of certain death.

I believe that all humans suffer the results of this first sin, which corrupted all of Creation. Because Adam, as the representative patriarch of mankind, chose to rebel against God, all of his natural descendants have inherited in themselves the guilt and sin nature that resulted from this rebellion. We humans tragically and consistently choose to glorify ourselves instead of our Creator. We lack the ability, and even the will, to restore ourselves to a right relationship with God.

I believe that, although God has decreed everything that has happened and everything that will happen from eternity past, He is not the inventor of evil, nor can He be charged with the sin of fallen humans. He decrees things in such a way that the blame rests solely on the wills of the sinful creatures.

#### **The Nature of Salvation:**

I believe that at the cross, Christ obtained forgiveness of sins and eternal life for all who will believe in Him, that He might reconcile us and present us as acceptable before God. All who put their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are in this way justified.

I believe that God imputes the righteousness of Christ to those who have faith by the Holy Spirit. In this way, our old self is crucified with Christ and we are resurrected with Him as new creatures. This faith is the work of the Spirit in their hearts, usually concurrent with the hearing of the Gospel and reading of the Word.

I believe that sinners are justified by grace through their faith alone, not by works. Yet, true faith will always be that which works itself out by love. The Holy Spirit calls us to repentance unto life and regular confession of our sins.

I believe that through the ordinances and spiritual disciplines, the believer continues to increase his or her faith and grow in righteousness. As we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us on the basis of Christ's perfect sacrifice, by which He became sin for us.

#### **Death and Eternal Life:**

I believe that when humans die, their bodies decay, but their souls remain conscious. Those who have been made righteous go to be with God in heaven while they await the resurrection of their bodies. Those who have remained in their sins go to a place of punishment to await the final judgment.

**Resurrection and Final Judgment:**

I believe that Jesus Christ will return to earth in glory. When He does, every eye will see Him. The dead in Christ will be resurrected, their souls reunited with their now-glorified bodies. Believers who are alive when Christ returns will be transformed in the blink of an eye.

I believe that all humans will give an account for their lives at the judgment seat of Christ. The wicked will be forever separated from God, banished to a place of everlasting torment. The righteous will forever reign with Christ on a new earth, where God Himself will dwell with us forever.

## *Understanding of the Church*

### **Definition of the Church:**

I believe that the Church universal consists of all people who have been justified freely by God's grace in Jesus Christ. The Church is the body of Christ, furthering His Kingdom on earth by the power of the Holy Spirit. Within the universal Church are many local congregations of believers who meet together for collective worship and mutual edification.

I believe that, following the model described in Holy Scripture, such local congregations should have overseers, deacons, and elders. They should celebrate the ordinances and exercise discipline. Of the many visible congregations, most contain some measure of doctrinal error and a number of unregenerate members. Yet, Christ will always have a Kingdom on earth until He comes again.

### **The Ordinances:**

I believe that Jesus Christ appointed two ordinances for His Church: baptism and the Lord's supper.

I believe that water baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, is an ordinance of the Church, to be received by believers as a picture of death with Christ, resurrection with Him, forgiveness of sins, and newness of life.

I believe that the Lord's supper or communion is also an ordinance of the Church, in which the believer consumes bread and wine in remembrance of Christ's body broken for us and His blood shed for us. Just as bread and drink nourish us physically, partaking of these mysteries in faith nourishes us spiritually. Before participating in the Lord's supper, believers should examine themselves and confess all sin, so as not to partake in an unworthy manner, becoming guilty of the body and blood of Christ and eating and drinking damnation unto themselves.

### **The Church's Ecumenical Relationships:**

I believe that, in keeping with Baptist principles, local church congregations should remain independent. No synod or diocese interprets Scripture for the local church, nor does it dictate practice. However, it is valuable for the local church to associate itself with other congregations of like faith for the purposes of unity, fellowship, cooperative mission, and mutual accountability.

I believe that it is also beneficial to extend cooperation, in a spirit of Christian unity, outside of one's own association or denomination. Recognizing the universal nature of the Body of Christ, we cooperate through worship and shared resources in missions with other churches and traditions that believe in a Triune God and acknowledge faith in Christ as the only way to salvation.

### **The Role of the Pastor:**

I believe that the distinction between clergy and laity is merely functional. Pastors are servants of Christ who are called to a position of leadership. Pastors should devote their lives to being servants and leaders of their flocks, while never neglecting themselves or their families. A pastor must be above reproach—an honorable, gentle, and godly person whose own household is in order.



I believe that pastors are responsible for guiding the spiritual growth of their people. They do this through teaching, preaching, prayer, administering the ordinances, and offering encouragement, support, and counsel. Pastors do not supply the vision for their churches, but lead their flocks in seeking God’s will for the congregation through study and prayer.

I believe that a code of ministerial ethics is vital for providing accountability among ministers. I have supplied a signed copy of the ABC Ministers Council Covenant and Code of Ethics to the commission chairman.

### **The Ministry of the Laity:**

I believe that ministry is not to be done exclusively by “professional ministers,” but by all Christians. The so-called “laity” (from *λαός*, meaning “people”) *are* the Body of Christ. All Christians are to be involved in the work of redemption. This includes building up the body of Christ, working for social justice, and bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a lost world.

### **Evangelism, Social Justice, and Mission:**

I believe that the Church is built on the concept of “mission.” Before ascending to the right hand of the Father, Jesus commissioned His followers to make disciples of all nations. While God has called specific individuals to life as missionaries, all Christians are to be about mission. Reaching the world with the Gospel is the responsibility of each and every believer.

I believe that the mission of the Church extends beyond evangelism. The cultural mandate of Genesis 2 and the prophets’ demands for social justice charge the Church to be about the work of redemption—redeeming souls, redeeming culture, and redeeming creation. Christ came not only to secure forgiveness of sins, but to “preach good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for prisoners, recover sight for the blind, release the oppressed, and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” The mission of the church is to show God’s goodness to all mankind. We must not stop at mere proclamation. Sin has fractured shalom; as Christ’s church, we are His agents for restoring that shalom.

An excellent example of Christ’s church working for social justice is when the American Baptist Churches USA serves as “friend of the court” in cases where religious freedom is being denied to other religious groups, such as Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Church. Granted, the Unification Church embraces heretical views (e.g. rejecting the Trinity) and practices that do not honor God, and helping to defend their right to religious freedom does nothing directly to save their souls. Still, like Jesus, the Church’s mission is to defend the weak. Not only does such action defend the Baptist principle of soul liberty, it also causes the Christian Church to serve as salt and light to the world.

### **Baptist Distinctives:**

I believe that the Baptist distinctives—*sola scriptura*, autonomous local churches, the priesthood of all believers, and individual soul liberty—were present in the New Testament church and should be present in our congregations today.

I believe that God’s Word alone is our final authority for matters of faith and practice. While canons, creeds, and the writings of the Church Fathers are important documents and should be studied diligently, they do not speak to the Church authoritatively.

I believe that local congregations are self-governing under the rule of Christ. Strictly hierarchical structures insinuate a final authority other than God's Word. While denominational and associational fellowship may be withdrawn if a congregation embraces non-biblical doctrines or practices, no government above the local church dictates how a local congregation should be run.

I believe that all Christians have access to God on the basis of Christ's perfect sacrifice. There is no hierarchy, man, or institution that stands between God and a regenerate person. Each believer can boldly approach the throne of grace.

I believe that, while the civil government is charged by God to enforce second table commandments, it should never attempt to enforce first table commandments. Civil government should remain distinct from the Church and never infringe on the individual's right to decide matters of faith for him or herself. This idea of *individual soul liberty*, or religious freedom, was first lived out by Baptists in the "livelie experiment" of Rhode Island.

**Denominational Commitment:**

I am a member in good standing of an American Baptist Church and have been since 1987. While pursuing my bachelor's degree in religion, I looked closely at every denomination of Christianity, testing them against Scripture, open to the possibility that perhaps the Methodist or Lutheran tradition was a better reflection of the Church as described in Scripture. While the Baptists are by no means the only true Christian Church, my journey led me back to where I started—a committed Baptist.

Having attended two schools that were until recently affiliated with the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, I also have considered the possibility of seeking ordination within that association and ministry in one of their churches. Ultimately, my commitment to the ABC has been reaffirmed and strengthened by several important differences between the ABC and its major offshoots.

I greatly appreciate the ABC's emphasis on mission. The importance we give to fulfilling the Great Commission through evangelizing all nations, social action, educational ministries, and health ministries is exciting. Initiatives like New Life 2010 display a commitment to renew our congregations and help transform thousands of unbelievers into disciples of Jesus. Through America for Christ, World Mission Offering, and other efforts, we work to spread God's message and peace at home and abroad. From my study and experience, the ABC also takes our responsibility to care for creation far more seriously than most other Baptist groups.

The ABC's commitment to Christian unity is also an enormous credit to the denomination. While many Baptist groups use the autonomy of the local church as an excuse to build up walls around their congregations and associations, the ABC recognizes that, while local churches are independent, we are also part of something bigger—the universal Church. A willingness to work with other denominations and traditions in cooperative worship, mission, and ecumenical Christian dialogue reflects Christ's prayer that we "may be one."

Seeing what God is doing through American Baptist Churches in Michigan and across the world, I am honored to be considered for ministry within the ABC by this ordination commission..