

## Congregationalism—the Church Governs Itself<sup>1</sup>

There are a variety of ways to do church. One way is called the episcopal system. With that pattern, there is one person on the top who has ultimate authority. That person makes the decisions and speaks for the entire group. The RCC, for example, is episcopal in how they operate the church; authority extends from the top down. The head is often called the “primate” – first in rank or authority.

Another way of doing church is Presbyterian. In that system, the church selects representatives, and they oversee the operation of the church. A small group of elders administers all the business of the church. The only influence individual members have is to elect their representatives. Beyond that, individual members have little authority; the elders take care of everything. Authority is spread among a few leaders.

A third way of doing church is congregational. Under this format, the members of the church cooperate together to make the major decisions for the church. The church operates itself; the people make all the major decisions. Individual members under this system have considerable influence in the decision-making process of the church because members must cooperate to get anything done. Authority is spread throughout the whole congregation.

Which of these systems is most biblical? No doubt, supporters of each system claim that their way has solid biblical support. The RCs and the Anglicans would probably say that the episcopal system is most loyal to the biblical model (although most RCs and Anglicans don't see the Bible as their highest authority). Presbyterians, no doubt, would claim that their system is most biblical. Baptists, who are usually congregational in their orientation, would claim that the congregational system is the most faithful to the biblical model.

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<sup>1</sup> This message was sparked by an article by Kevin Bauder, Central Baptist Theological Seminary, cited by Charles Wood in *The Woodchuck's Den*, Nov 2009. It follows Bauder's arguments and thoughts.

Today, I'd like to consider what the Bible says about how a church is supposed to organize and operate itself. And in the process, I think we'll find that the congregational system is thoroughly biblical. Congregationalism has its own set of challenges, but it is a biblical system that serves the church well. We should understand the congregational system and operate the church by these principles.

## I. Definition of congregationalism

- A. Congregational church government is a way of operating a church in which the congregation itself—that is, the members of the church—make the major decisions for the church. The church operates by consensus/agreement of the members; everyone has to cooperate to get anything done. Every church member has some influence over the operation of the church.
- B. Instead of a single leader making all the decisions or a small group of representatives making all the decisions, the congregation itself makes most of the significant decisions for the church.

## II. Congregationalism in the Bible

A number of biblical principles uphold congregational church government.

- A. Believers have the capacity for spiritual wisdom. Since every believer has access to biblical wisdom, every believer—potentially—can help make good decisions for the church. I.e., it's not only the pastor and the deacons who are spiritually mature and wise.

1Co 2:16 ... *we have the mind of Christ.*

1 John 2:27 *the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, ...*

- 1. The HSp is the ultimate source of all spiritual wisdom. The Spirit provides us with illumination—the ability to understand the Scriptures.

1 Corinthians 2:12 *Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God.*

2. Rom 15:14 tells us that believers are able to “admonish one another.” That word “admonish” means “to warn, to counsel.” So it’s not only the pastor who has the wisdom to counsel and exhort; each member should have the wisdom to deal with problems or opportunities confronting the church.
3. The mark of a mature Christian is spiritual discernment.  
1 Corinthians 2:15 ... *he who is spiritual judges all things, ...*  
So that implies that believers—at least spiritually-minded believers, mature believers—are qualified to make spiritual decisions for the benefit of the congregation. The members should be able to come to reasonable decisions for the benefit of the whole body.
4. No doubt, some people in a typical church are *not* really qualified to provide wise counsel for decision making. They are not “spiritual.”
  - a) They are not biblically wise or mature. Maybe they are new believers or maybe not well taught. Perhaps they have neglected the means for attaining biblical wisdom/maturity. Some people have a selfish or even sinful agenda. These are not the kind of people you want making decisions for the church.
  - b) In some cases, mature, godly, spiritual believers must stand up against the bad ideas of the immature and unspiritual. Someone must oppose bad or unbiblical ideas if they come up.
  - c) Hopefully, the majority of the members of a church have a degree of godly, spiritual wisdom and are able to make good decisions. If the church is filled with spiritual, mature, faithful Christians, they should be able to cooperate together for the benefit of the church.

- d) Thus, the fact that believers have a degree of spiritual wisdom implies that we can make good decisions for the benefit of the church.
- B. The Bible shows us that congregations made two major types of decisions for themselves.
1. First, they selected their own leaders and held them accountable.
    - a) Acts 6:1-6 is the record of the church selecting the first deacons. They selected several men who were full of the HSp and able to solve various problems within the church. *The church* selected these men, and then the apostles confirmed that selection.  
  
*Acts 6:3 Therefore, brethren, **seek out from among you** seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, **whom we may appoint** over this business*  
  
That's an important pattern we see repeated in the NT.
    - b) In Acts 11:22, we find that the church determined to send Barnabas up to Antioch. The people of the church made that decision.
    - c) In Acts 13:1-3, we find that the church in Antioch selected several of its members, under the direction of the HSp, to send out as missionaries.
    - d) In Acts 14:25-27; we have the account of the missionaries returning to Antioch to give a report of all that God had done through them. They reported their activities to the church, not just to the apostles or to the elders.
    - e) In 2 Cor 8:16-21, the church of Macedonia sent Titus to Corinth to help with the collection of an offering Paul was arranging to help the poor saints at Jerusalem.
    - f) Even in those situations in which Paul or the other apostles selected leaders for various churches, the text seems to indicate that the local church had some involvement in making such decisions.

- (1) We know that Paul, Barnabas, and Titus ordained elders in various churches. But they seem to have done this with the approval of the church.
  - (2) In Acts 14:23, the language implies a congregational vote by the raising the hand.  
*Acts 14:23 So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord ...*  
The word “appoint/ordain” here (χειροτονέω) means “to vote by stretching out the hand.”
  - (3) In Titus 1:5, the language denotes installation after congregational selection. The church selected the individuals, and then the apostles commissioned them to do the job.  
*Titus 1:5 ... set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you*
  - (4) It seems likely that either Paul and Barnabas confirmed the choice of the congregations. So the church selected their leaders and the apostles confirmed/appointed those selections.
  - (5) We don’t have apostles overseeing the churches anymore. The church itself votes on various issues under the guidance of the leaders—that seems to be the pattern.
- g) In all these cases, the church cooperated to make decisions. It was not the apostles who imposed their will on everyone else. Instead, the church—the congregations, the people—made these decisions or took these actions. The apostles often provided leadership and guidance, but the church ultimately made the decisions.

The church itself selected their own leaders and held them accountable.

2. Second, they admitted, disciplined out, and readmitted members to the congregation. In other words, the church itself controlled who was recognized as a member and who was not.
  - a) Normally speaking, people are added to the church through their profession of faith in Christ followed by water baptism. Cf. Act 2:41-47.
  - b) In 1 Cor 5:1-13, Paul instructs the church regarding excommunicating a man who was guilty of gross immorality. The church should put such a man out of the membership. The church recognizes and controls who is a member and who is not.
  - c) 2 Cor 2:4-11 instructs the church to forgive and reinstate a person who had been disciplined out of the church.
  - d) Who controls the membership of the church? The members of the church under the guidance of the leaders.
3. Some of the most important issues that a church deals with include selecting leaders, holding them accountable, and disciplining members. The church itself—the members of the church—are responsible for these decisions. Pastors certainly help the church make those decisions. But ultimately, it's the assembly itself who decides what to do.
4. If a church can make *those* kinds of decisions—leadership, discipline, membership—then it can make any kind of decision. A typical church has the spiritual wisdom and maturity to make decisions for itself.
5. Practically speaking, the pastor usually makes many of the day-to-day, mundane decisions to keep the church operating. We don't vote as a church on what songs we'll be singing or who is going to collect the offering at the next service. It would be impossible to operate the church by taking a vote on every little decision. The pastor usually oversees the normal, day-to-day operation of the church and makes many mundane decisions for the benefit of the church.

6. But for the important decisions, those that affect the people and the mission of the church, the entire congregation works together to decide what to do.

**Trans:** The Bible provides a pattern for congregational church government. Biblical principles and examples support congregationalism.

### III. Congregationalism as reflected in the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15)

- A. Acts 15 gives the account of a meeting of the churches in Jerusalem. Representatives from several congregations met together to discuss whether Gentile converts would be expected to follow the OT law—i.e., the dietary regulations, feast days, rules for being clean or unclean, etc.
- B. What led to this meeting was the fact that certain Christians were saying that unless you are circumcised and keep the OT law, you could not be saved (Acts 15:1). So that led many to question whether converts were expected to convert to Judaism first. I.e., was Christianity just a sect of Judaism? Some were affirming it, some denying it.
- C. So the church met together and discussed the question. After some discussion and testimonies, the entire assembly determined that salvation has nothing to do with keeping the OT law or converting to Judaism. Gentile converts did not have to follow the regulations of the OT law. We are saved by faith without the works of the law.  
**BTW**, that's still what we believe today—salvation is by grace through faith without the works of the law; repentance and faith.
- D. The Jerusalem council did two main things:
  1. It discerned the proper theological position on this issue. They took all the facts into account and discussed various options.
  2. It held its members accountable for what they believed and taught. They found that it was wrong to teach that believers must be circumcised and keep the OT law. They held one another accountable for correct belief on this issue.

- E. So following that example, we find that it's biblical for a church to meet together, discuss various options, and try to decide what is best. In that context, the leaders provide guidance, but the church itself comes to its own decisions.
- IV. Congregationalism in practice: How does a congregational church operate?
- A. The primary concept of congregationalism is that the members of the church operate the church themselves. It's not that pastor or a small group of elders who make all the decisions. Every member has a say in how the church functions.
- B. So the normal method by which a congregational church makes decisions is through voting. Church members vote on the major decisions facing a church. The church meets regularly, discusses options and ideas, and then votes on what to do. Under the guidance of the leaders, every voting-age member in good standing has input on what the church decides to do.
- C. However, congregationalism presents something of a risk in that the majority of the church might vote to do the wrong thing. In fact, this happens all the time in many churches. The majority in many churches vote to do the wrong thing.
- D. Thus, the church should avoid making decisions *purely* on the basis of majority vote. We don't want to subject the church to the whims of a bare majority. The majority of a church may in fact be wrong on some issues, especially if the majority is immature or unspiritual. We don't want a system where 50% plus one forces its will on the other 50% minus one.

Majority rule can, in some cases, lead to manipulation and power plays. Whoever can gain control of 50% plus one controls the church. If church decisions come down to 50% plus/minus one, you've got a divided church and probably lots of other problems.

**Quote Bauder:** If one person can manage to stampede fifty-one percent, then he has a majority and he can rule—even at the expense of trampling the minority. ... A church that determines its policies by bare majorities is in sad shape indeed.



- E. If a church is very immature and unspiritual, you can imagine what a bare majority of its members might vote to do.

Congregational church government works best in a spiritually mature, godly, and faithful congregation. An immature and unspiritual congregation likely needs a very strong leader at the top to make decisions for the church.

That's what usually happens when a church is just getting started. The church planter is somewhat of a dictator at that point—he decides everything for the church. Until the members of the church develop some spiritual maturity and discernment, it's not a good idea to turn everything over to the whims of the congregation.

Once the church gains some spiritual depth and maturity, it can then begin making its own decisions without quite as much guidance from the pastor.

With congregationalism, the health and vitality of the church is only as strong as the people of the church.

BTW, our church constitution demands a greater-than-majority vote in some cases. E.g., to call a pastor requires a 75% vote; to dismiss a pastor requires a 60% vote.

- F. Churches should follow the pattern reflected in the Acts 15 council. That passage provides some guiding principles for congregational church government.
1. First, every concerned party—even the Pharisees—received an opportunity to discuss its concerns. Members of the church should be able to openly discuss their issues and ideas. Typically, that's what we do at business meetings.
  2. Second, there was a clear order of precedence among those who spoke at that meeting: not everyone gets the same hearing. The apostles had the greatest influence, which would be proper for the early church.

In the local church, the pastor typically has the most influence—he is the shepherd of the flock, the president of the assembly, the overseer of the church. He should have greater influence than any other single member, but he's not a dictator.

3. Third, the leaders bring biblical teaching to bear on the subject. The church does not just kick around ideas until one of them becomes the consensus. We should be striving to find out what the Bible says on the issue, and then we apply those principles to the situation.
4. Fourth, the leaders propose a solution or a recommendation, and the members give their consent—or in some cases, withhold their consent. The leaders present an idea, and the church members decide by voting.
5. Whatever happens, the church itself makes the decision, hopefully with a unanimous vote, or at least a solid majority.

Congregationalism teaches that there is *greater* wisdom in the entire body than in any one member, including the pastor. When the Lord's people understand biblical principles, they are together capable of making wise choices on any matter that affects the assembly. To make wise decisions, however, the assembly needs biblical instruction, godly examples, full information, humility to hear all perspectives, and protection from those who would lead the church astray.

Congregationalism follows the pattern found in the NT. Other ways of operating a church may be more efficient, but congregational church order is both biblical and practical. Congregationalism calls for the participation and cooperation of every member of the church. This form of church order is an opportunity to extend fellowship, love, and cooperation. Operating the church this way should draw us together in a spirit of unity and teamwork.

As a congregational church, we must make sure that we are following biblical principles of church order and operation. And we especially encourage godly, spiritually mature people to participate in the decision-making process of the church.

We have the privilege of exercising congregational church order today as we hold our annual meeting.