

Understanding Congregational Government in the 21st Century

John Maxwell tells the story of how for more than 20 years, for no apparent reason, an attendant stood at the foot of the stairway leading to the House of Commons in England. Research was done as to the origins of the post and it was discovered the job had been held in the attendant's family for three generations. It apparently originated when the stairs were painted and the current attendant's grandfather was assigned the task of warning people not to step on the wet paint. The paint dried up, but the job continued.

In 1803 the British Civil Service posted a man to stand on the Cliffs of Dover with a telescope. He was instructed to ring a bell if he saw Napoleon and his army coming across the English Channel. That position was finally abolished in 1945 - 124 years after the death of Napoleon!

Within the British military there was a long standing tradition spanning several centuries of always assigning six men as gunners to each cannon or field gun. In recent years they could only find jobs for five men in a cannon gunner detail. Military historians researched their past and discovered the role of the sixth man was originally to hold the horse!

The Czar of Russia used to like walking across a particular field. One day in 1915 he noticed a sentry posted out in the middle of a field. The soldier was there every day. The Czar ordered an investigation into this soldier's role and where it all began. They discovered it dated back to the reign of the Empress Catherine II (aka Catherine the Great) who in 1776 had walked in this particular field and came across the first flower of Spring. She ordered a sentry be posted so as to stop someone stepping on the flower. Sentries were stationed on this spot from 1776 to 1915 but no one really knew why!

Traditions can be wonderfully enriching when we know what the mean and why we do them. But sometimes we are guilty of doing what we do without any real appreciation or understanding of the context behind their origins.

2009 is a significant year for the Baptist communion of Christians around the world. We celebrate the 400th anniversary of the founding of the first Baptist Church by a group of exiled British dissenters. They had fled persecution in England for the more religiously tolerant climate of Amsterdam and formed themselves into a Christian fellowship. The occasion of a 400th

anniversary is a good time to revisit what we stand for and why we do what we do.

The Baptist movement has a long and proud tradition. Today we're actually the largest Protestant communion in the world, numbering around 110 million people, and also one of the fastest growing. We have a definitive reputation and persona across the ecclesial spectrum. Not every aspect of Baptist ecclesiology or theology is entirely distinct from other branches of the Christian church, but we are renowned for believing and practicing certain things. The following seven characteristics are widely regarded as core values or a kind of genetic code for Baptist churches around the world who believe in:

1. *The Scriptures (particularly the New Testament) as the supreme authority for faith and practice*
2. *The priesthood of all believers*
3. *Freedom of conscience, soul liberty and the right of private interpretation*
4. *Congregational polity*
5. *The autonomy of the local church*
6. *Believers' baptism by immersion*
7. *Church membership for the regenerate*¹

There's a lot to be said about each of these characteristics of Baptist ecclesiology, but the particular focus of this paper is on congregational polity and how we organize ourselves. Baptists are not the only branch of the Christian church to practice congregational government, but it is probably fair to say that it is one of our major characteristics or reputations. Our system of polity marks us out as distinct from the other two primary systems of church government:

- **Episcopalianism** - where authority and power rests with the *episcopo* or bishop. There might be many voices and contributing arguments, but in the final analysis the ultimate authority over the church is vested in one person who is God's official representative or *vicar* (from the Latin *vicarious*) over the church, or collection of churches. (e.g. Roman Catholics and Anglicans, but also churches like Salvation Army and many Pentecostal.)
- **Presbyterianism** - where authority is vested in a group of *presbyters* or elders who collectively deliberate and discern the will of God on behalf of the church. (e.g. Presbyterian, Methodist and Reformed, but also churches like the Brethren.)

By way of a working definition:

“Congregational government is a form of church government in which the local church is autonomous and at which the major decisions affecting the church are made by the members. It’s a form of government which while demanding the separation of church and state stresses the priesthood of all believers and operates on the assumption that the Holy Spirit will guide the decision-making process to conclusions commensurate with the Will of God.” ²

Congregational government is based on the theological premise that every member of the church is a priest before God, with no need for an intermediary, and therefore able to discern his will and speak on his behalf. God doesn’t only speak through ordained leaders; all are free and competent to study the Scriptures and interpret their application – both for ourselves and for the church. It might be said that congregational polity is the synthesis of all the other elements in the Baptist genetic code. They all find expression or direct application in local church congregational government.

Given that Baptist Churches have been around for 400 years one might have thought our system of organizing ourselves might have been well settled. What is the point of discussing it now? In point of fact all around the world Baptist churches are asking questions about our historical system of polity and why we do what we do. There’s a kind of groaning or wrestling over whether congregational government as we have come to know it is the best fit in a post-modern 21st century. Is it still as relevant as it once used to be or is it a relic of the past that might have passed its used-by date? In the 21st century no longer do we simply accept the patterns and models that have been handed down to us from our forebears; we need to wrestle with them and understand their relevance for ourselves.

In opening up this subject I need to state unequivocally that I am thoroughly convinced about the efficacy of congregational polity for the 21st century church. I am committed to the principles of congregationalism. But I have also come to recognize that there can be a difference between **principles** and **practices**. The theological principles upon which congregational government first developed are defensible and arguably sound. The question many of us are asking is whether the practice of those principles over the years might need a little tweaking. It might even be that some of our common practices need to be reviewed in light of the Scriptures that we avow as our authority in faith and practice.

In this light, allow me to highlight seven common misunderstandings about congregational government as it has evolved (some might say: devolved) over the past 400 years:

1. Congregational Government is not necessarily a New Testament model

At least, no more so than any of the other models of church polity. This is an important point to highlight for Baptists who claim a high view of Scripture as our supreme authority. Congregational government is based on an extrapolation of biblical principles. We may be able to argue for it robustly from sound theology, however it is not possible to go to the New Testament and draw from it models of organization and decision-making that equate with how Baptist churches have done things over the past 400 years. That is not to suggest that our mode of church government is unscriptural or inappropriate. It simply tempers claims we might make about it.

Writing specifically about Baptist systems of church government, Derek Tidball points to the fact that scholars of other denominations (namely *episcopalian* and *presbyterian*) read the same pages of the New Testament with different eyes and see different things. Therefore we need to be cautious about claiming too much. While, we get occasional glimpses of organizational life in early churches we should be wary of building dogmatically on them.³ Every system of church government has its proof texts.

One of the texts often touted by Baptists as supposedly descriptive of congregational government is **Acts 15:28** in describing the conclusion reached at the end of the Jerusalem Council:

“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements . . .”

However, careful exegesis of the phrase *“it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us”* can render a range of interpretations. It could also be argued that the decision-making process at the Jerusalem Council was as much autocratic as it was democratic. We simply don’t have a clear description of the decision making process involved.

2. Congregational Government developed in a particular socio-political context

The question we therefore need to ask is whether or not the same context applies today. In

the same way that when we teach the Bible it is important to understand or exegete the cultural context in which it is written, so too is there a need to understand the context of our own church polity. What were the life situations and issues founding Baptists faced for which they formulated their systems of church life?

This is a larger subject than this paper has room for, suffice it to say that the religio-socio-political climate at the end of the 16th century, and beginning of the 17th, was very different to what we experience today. Freedom of religion and association was largely unheard of. The early Baptists were protestors against inherited church and social systems that were corrupt. Leon McBeth, one of the more notable Baptist historians, describes 16th century England as a “*cauldron bubbling with revolutionary changes in economics, politics, and religion.*”⁴ Our Baptist forebears were courageous dissenters and protestors against corrupt practices in state churches and the unhelpful interference in affairs of the church by kings and princes and civil authorities. The state churches were protected by monarchical systems, and questionable monarchical systems were in term legitimated by corrupt church leaders. This was one of the reasons why Baptists championed the idea of separation of church and state. But this wasn’t done without cost. Founding Baptists were persecuted and not a few died in prison for the models of church life they practiced.

There’s a lot more that needs to be said about this to do it justice. The point I’m making is that Baptist principles of organization and decision-making did not arise out of an historical vacuum. Sociology had a part to play. The flip-side of that coin might be the question of whether contemporary sociology also has a part to play in how we organize the church today.

3. Congregational Government is primarily about local church competence in discerning the will of God

There is a view that congregational government is about giving every member a say in decision-making processes. That is a distorted emphasis of the origins and intent of congregationalism. The more important issue early Baptists fought against was the unwelcome interference outside the locale of a local church in its local affairs. At a national level there was interference or control by the state, and within the Catholic and Anglican traditions there was interference by bishops who determined what local churches could and couldn’t do. The early

Baptist dissenters contended that each local expression of a church was competent to discern the will of God and to govern its own affairs. Closely allied with the concept of congregational government is the principle of local church autonomy. Behind local church autonomy is the understanding that within each congregation there are people gifted by the Holy Spirit and capable of interpreting the Scriptures and discerning God’s will. There isn’t the need for territorial bishops or government control over local church matters.

To be sure, this does imply that every member of the church is capable of contributing to the discernment process. But the weighting of the term “congregational government” is more to do with local church autonomy than on everyone having a say in decision-making. The locus of God’s operation in a particular community is best determined by God’s people within that locality, rather than by requiring referral or advice or permission from a supposed higher authority. In this sense local church congregational government raises questions as to whether Baptists can ever strictly be a denomination in the sense that other national churches use the term. We can be influenced and resourced by the Baptist Union, but there are distinct limitations on the degree of control or authority that the Baptist Union can impose beyond what is voluntarily requested by a self-governing local congregation.

4. Congregational Government does not mean democracy

To be sure, Baptist voices were among those who championed the socio-political concept of democracy. People of Baptist persuasion probably fought alongside the likes of Oliver Cromwell in the establishment of parliamentary democracy in England, and in emerging democracies across the Atlantic. It is also true that Baptist churches over the centuries have employed systems of voting to confirm their collective sense of the will of God in decision-making. But it is not correct to say that congregational government equals a democratic system. Alec Gilmore puts it succinctly:

*The Church is not, and must never be regarded as, a democracy, for the power is not in the hands of the demos but of the christos: it is a Christocracy. To grasp this delivers us from the worst kind of church meeting where the aim is not so much to discover the will of God as to gain a policy of one's own choosing by a majority vote.*⁵

In this sense the term “congregational government” might be an unhelpful misnomer. The emphasis is on collective discernment of the will of

God rather than upon expressing or lobbying for a particular outcome. Baptist church members' meetings have historically followed a Westminster parliamentary model of decision making with defined (i.e., Robert's) rules of debate, moving and seconding of motions, and systems of voting. However, two points are worth noting: Firstly, such a social system of decision-making is extra-biblical: there is no unequivocal evidence of democratic process in the New Testament. Secondly, it is doubtful that such systems of decision-making date back to the beginnings of Baptist churches. The earliest meetings of Baptist churches were not for the conducting of business as much as discipleship, accountability and discerning the will of God. There is ample freedom for contemporary Baptist churches to discover new ways of decision-making than simply the casting of votes.

5. Congregational Government does not imply the absence of leadership

There has been a view that congregationalism implies a *flat* organizational structure with no or little system of hierarchy. One of the theological foundations for this view is said to be the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, championed by Martin Luther. Luther recognized the competence of every believer to both hear from and represent God as a priest, without the need for an intermediary person to act on God's behalf. It is probably fair to assume, however, that Luther wouldn't have seen any connection between the priesthood of all believers and low or no systems of organizational leadership in the church.

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers does not mean or imply the **leadership of none**; nor does it mean the **leadership of all**. All might be priests but not all are leaders. The New Testament clearly describes a spiritual gift of leadership and in numerous places describes the qualifications of those who are appointed to leadership positions. Such people are to be recognized and honored by the church. Congregational government does not abrogate or diminish the need for good leadership in the church. What it does imply is that leaders are ultimately accountable to the congregation as a whole for their conduct and performance. They are not beyond the churches they lead, but they are still necessary and need to be allowed to exercise their leadership function.

In a similar vein, congregational government does not imply or mean **congregational leadership** or **congregational management**. Some have viewed

congregationalism as implying every decision a church makes should be subject to or deliberated on by every member at a duly constituted members meeting. That would be a denial of biblical teaching on differing spiritual gifts across the body of Christ, and upon the place of respect with which leaders are to be held. Congregational government does not mean an absence of leadership. Leaders are God's gift to a church and as well as holding them accountable we need to honour them and respect their work for the good of the church.

6. Congregational Government is not necessarily immutable

Principles of congregationalism can take different forms in different contexts. One size doesn't fit all. Congregational government is not an inerrant social system and at times simply doesn't work in the manner with which it has worked in the past. For instance, congregational government doesn't work the same way in large churches as it does in small churches. This has nothing to do with theology or philosophy of church as much as basic group dynamics and sociological principles. In fact it has been suggested that congregational polity is one of the reasons why most Baptist Churches have remained relatively small, until fairly recently. Thomas Helwys, one of the co-founders of the first Baptist Church wrote this as a kind of prescription on size for a Baptist Church in 1611:

... that the members of every Church or Congregation ought to know one another, that so they may perform all the duties of love one towards another both to soul and body (Matthew 18:15; 1 Thessalonians 5:14; 1 Corinthians 12:25). ... And therefore a Church ought not to consist of such a multitude as cannot have particular knowledge of another. ⁶

One wonders how Helwys would view some of the Baptist mega-churches today! The fact is the larger the church becomes the more complex the web of relationships and the more courage required to be able to speak in congregational meetings. Some argue, therefore, its better to keep churches small - that way everyone can participate. But that is missiologically inept. If a church is preaching the gospel and doing all it is supposed to do how do you stop it growing?

But the issue of the appropriateness of congregational government isn't only related to size. It is also questioned by cultural values and ethnicity of those who comprise a church. Congregational government works best amongst members who are well educated. There is a correlation between participatory democracy systems and middle class cultures. Baptists have

typically not done well in lower socio-economic communities. Some ethnicities are more honorific than middle-class Western culture, where you honor and respect your leaders and never speak publicly against them. How do you have robust debate and gathering of divergent views in contexts where people do not speak up for fear of disrespecting their leaders? Similarly younger generations are less inclined towards business meetings compared to those who are older. This may have less to do with youthful slackness and more to do with changing social systems in emerging Western culture.

Lyle Schaller also makes an interesting point about the different way people engage with group decision-making in small and large congregations. He calls it the difference of **participation** versus **performance**:

In the typical small congregation a high value is placed on participatory democracy. Every member has a right to be heard. A common goal is that every member will attend and participate in every congregational meeting. In many this is reflected in a constitution that requires a relatively large proportion of the members to be present in order for decisions to be valid . . . "Who made that decision?" is a frequently asked question. . . . By contrast, most of the constituents of the mega-church place a high value on the quality of the decisions. "Was that a good decision?" becomes the criterion, not who made it. . . . To put it very simply, the structure of a pure democracy in congregational governance and the high level of performance expected by constituents of the mega-church are incompatible.⁷

Schaller also suggests there is a vast difference between being **heard** and being **heeded**. He suggests that leaders of larger churches are well-advised to open up multiple channels for members to be heard on issues facing the church (e.g., visitation by pastors/leaders, suggestion box, occasional surveys, cottage meetings, non-decision-making forums, etc.) rather than making the only opportunity for dialogue a formal congregational meeting. Congregational polity is not only expressed in the making of final decisions. There are multiple other means by which church members are able to contribute to proposals and decisions in the process of their formulation, even if they are not involved in the final vote.

7. Congregational Government does not sanction unhealthy conflict

We've all attended Baptist members' meetings where there was metaphorical "blood on the floor." Sadly, congregational government has acquired a poor reputation in the eyes of both those who are members of Baptist churches, and those who look

at us from outside. We are supposed to speak to each other with love and respect. **James 3:9-10** puts it succinctly:

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.

Behavior and conduct at members' meetings is no less subject to the rule of Scripture than are matters of doctrine and theology. To be sure, there is a level playing field at a members' meeting and the technical opportunity for any matter to be raised must be present. However, the model for congregational government is not an unruly town meeting! Speech, conduct, attitude, and temperance within a members' meeting are to be as much in line with the teaching of the Bible as at any other time or circumstance. Much damage to relationships and leadership confidence has been done through the practice of embarrassing leaders in front of a meeting by asking questions that could have been asked, and answered, in private. The assumption seems to be that the most appropriate opportunity for raising questions or concerns over leadership performance is in a public forum in front of fellow members. As a result many church leaders approach members' meetings with a sense of fear and trepidation, anticipating what may be said or asked of them in public.

Members' meeting should be approached with an attitude of celebration and joy as the body comes together to discern the will of God. They are not patterned on the adversarial conduct of parliamentary process and party politics. The notion that appointed leaders are 'fair game' for curly questions from the floor of a meeting or that conflicting opinion ought to be played out in front of the whole church, runs counter to biblical principles of conflict resolution and respect. Some have argued philosophically for such a right to free speech and open questioning of leaders as a means of protecting the church from leadership abuse or corruption. However, the impact of such conduct, unfortunately, leads to diminished availability of leaders and servants in the future, and to fractured relationships within the church. Jesus was quite specific in prescribing a process for conflict resolution in Matthew 18. When a person feels aggrieved or concerned about an impropriety the process of confrontation begins in private, not in public. Public confrontation is possible but only after multiple attempts has been made to resolve a disputation privately.

Many Baptist meetings are ruled more by the tyranny of the articulate than by godly conduct. Sometimes the people with the courage and

capacity to hold forth in a large crowd are not necessarily the most spiritual and discerning; they simply know how to speak well in public. Paul Borden offers the following comment:

... we must get away from the notion in congregational life that everyone has an equal say. Everyone has equal standing before God in Jesus Christ. However, the right to speak and influence congregational life and behaviour should be granted in proportion to one's maturity as a disciple and ministry as a servant.⁸

Where unchristian behaviour at church member's meetings persists it is as much a cause for pastoral confrontation, and even church discipline, as in situations where a person is caught in immorality or some other sin. The church is a community of Christ-followers who are called to treat one another with love and respect, and when we come together the end goal is not politics or confrontation or lobbying or airing of grievances; it is to discern, and then to resolve to do, the will of God as best we discern it.

Conclusion:

In closing can I make one final plea for how we Baptist Christians understand our purpose in the broad spectrum of the household of faith. We have become known by reputation for a number of things. The name by which we are called was actually given to us by others because of our commitment to baptizing believers. We didn't choose it for ourselves; others gave it to us as a nickname and it stuck. Over the years we've acquired various other reputations surrounding our style of ecclesiology and systems of

government. These are not unimportant distinctives, and some of them we share with other branches of the Christian church.

Yet given our primary commitment to Christ and his mission in our world, as revealed to us in the Scriptures that authorize and authenticate our faith and practice, ought not our greatest reputation be for our commitment to the ongoing mission of Christ. We are first and foremost an evangelistic movement committed to helping unsaved people find saving faith through personal connection with Jesus Christ. Our polity and systems of organization are not unimportant, but they are nowhere near as important as our commitment to mission. Our polity serves this greater purpose, not the other way around. If the way we organize ourselves and do what we've always done is getting in the way of our primary mission purpose, for goodness sake change the way we do things! This is not just pragmatism. This is fundamental missiology. Jesus did not die on the cross in order to create an egalitarian democratic system of decision-making. He came that sinners might be saved and to declare the kingdom of God come to earth. That is our primary purpose; as the Father sent Jesus into the world, so he now sends us. May it be that we are most renowned in the future for how we proclaim the gospel; less about how we make internal church decisions.

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¹ Norman H. Maring and Winthrop S. Hudson, *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1963), 4.

² Don McLellan, *Leadership and Baptist Church Governance*, Graeme Chatfield, Ed. (Eastwood, NSW, Morling Press, 2005), 51.

³ Derek Tidball, *Leadership and Baptist Church Governance*, Graeme Chatfield, Ed. (Eastwood, NSW: Morling Press, 2005), 14.

⁴ H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1987), 22.

⁵ A. Gilmore. *The Pattern of the Church – A Baptist View*, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1963), 143

⁶ William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969) 121.

⁷ Lyle Schaller, *The Very Large Church: New Rules for Leaders*, (Nashville, TN, Abingdom Press 2000) 169-170.

⁸ Paul D. Borden, *Hit The Bullseye*, (Nashville, TN, Abingdom Press, 2003) 142.