



CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH GOVERNANCE



Who governs your church? Who selects your pastoral leadership? Who decides how the tithes and offerings will be spent? Who determines what beliefs and practices will guide your church? Who owns your church's property? A church's polity or governance determines the answers to questions such as these.

What Is Congregational Church Governance?

Polity is how an organization, such as a church, functions—the policies that guide matters such as governance, decision making, structure and leadership. Baptists differ from most Christian denominations in matters of polity. The difference especially is evident in how congregations of Christians are governed.

One major difference between Baptists and many other denominations is **that no person or group outside** of a Baptist congregation is to have any authority over the church in regard to beliefs and religious practices. Furthermore, **all of the members within** the church fellowship are to have equal voice in the governance of the church.

Baptist church governance often is termed "democratic." In a sense it is. In a democracy, all of the people have equal voices in decision making. No individual or group of persons is in control. Such is to be the case in a Baptist church. One way that democratic governance is practiced is that each member of the church has the right to vote on matters at church business meetings.

To many non-Baptists, and even to some Baptists, this seems to be a strange way for a church to function. Putting the governance of a church in the hands of persons who have no special training, education or calling appears to be foolish. Why would Baptists dare to function in this fashion?

What Are the Bases for Congregational Governance?

For Baptists, beliefs are not only compatible with polity but are also foundational for polity. Therefore, basic Baptist beliefs relate to congregational governance.

The Lordship of Christ. Strictly speaking, Baptists do not believe in democratic church governance. "Democratic" is a political term that means "people rule." For Baptists, the ultimate authority for a church rests not in the people but in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the head or Lord of the church (Ephesians 4:15; Philippians 2:11). Perhaps an appropriate descriptive term for Baptist church governance would be "theodemocratic" meaning God's rule through all of the people.

The Authority of the Bible. Baptists believe that congregational governance best reflects the practices of those churches described in the New Testament. For example, the members of a church acting in concert, not any one person or group, made major decisions (Acts 6:1-6; 13:1-3; 15:22; 2 Corinthians 8:1-13).

Salvation Only by Grace through Faith.

Baptists believe that all persons who are redeemed have come by grace to saving faith in Christ, not by works, social status, or any other thing (Ephesians 2:8-10). The ground at the foot of the cross is level. Therefore, no Baptist is to lord it over another. Thus, a church is to be governed by all of the people together under the lordship of Christ.

"Every form of polity other than democracy somewhere infringes upon the lordship of Christ."

E. Y. Mullins
The Axioms of Religion

Soul Competency and the Priesthood of Believers.

Persons have a God-given competence to know and to follow God's will. Those who respond by faith to God's grace-gift of salvation become "believer priests" (1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 5:1-10). Each believer priest has direct access to God through the Scriptures and prayer and is free under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to determine God's will. Furthermore, each believer also is part of a "royal priesthood" in which Jesus Christ is the High Priest (Hebrews 7-10). This priesthood is a fellowship in which each believer priest is to seek God's direction as a cooperative part of that fellowship.

Regenerate Church Membership of Baptized Believers.

Baptists hold tenaciously to the Bible teaching that a church is to be made up only of those who have been saved by belief in Christ and who have experienced believer's immersion. A church, therefore, is a fellowship of baptized believers or, put another way, a community of believer priests. Church governance is not in the hands of one or of a few but of all the members.

Questions and Issues

The bases for congregational governance are biblical and are clearly related to core Baptist convictions. However, people sometimes have questions about such polity:

Who is in charge? In the business world; the president or the CEO of the organization is often thought of as being the one in charge. Thus, it is natural for many people to think in these terms regarding a church organization. However, based on the Bible and major Baptist doctrines, Baptists insist that only Christ is "in charge" of his church and that the members are to

seek and follow Christ's will for the church.

Isn't the pastor in authority over a church? The deacons?

The Bible indicates that pastors have very important roles to play in a church (1 Timothy 3:1-7). However, the roles are not ones of dictatorial authority but rather ones of servant, spiritual leadership "not lording it over those entrusted to you" (1 Peter 5:2-3, NIV). The Bible indicates that pastors have heavy responsibilities, and church members should respect their servant leader roles and relate to them in such a way that "their work will be a joy, not a burden" (Hebrews 13:17, NIV). The Bible also sets high standards for deacons (1 Timothy 3:8-13), but the deacons are to be servants and not governors of the church.

How should decisions be made? Being autonomous, Baptist churches vary in the specific ways that they make decisions. Baptist polity calls for the entire membership to be ultimately responsible for decisions made on the basis of Christ's will for the church. However, often it is not practical for the total membership to be involved in every decision. Therefore, churches follow a variety of procedures in carrying out the business of the church. Many churches formalize the procedures in a constitution and bylaws.

In numbers of churches, the congregation delegates to committees, to pastor and/or to staff the responsibility for certain decisions. These bring recommendations on major matters to the congregation for approval. Often recommendations from committees, pastor and/or staff are evaluated by the deacons before being brought to the membership in a business meeting.

Ideally, all members are encouraged to participate in business meetings. In many churches, business meetings are held following a worship service and take place periodically, such as quarterly. Special business meetings are held for major matters such as voting on a committee recommendation for a new pastor.

Isn't this pattern of governance inefficient?

It may be inefficient in some ways, but it is effective because it includes all of the members in the decisions about the life and ministry of the church. Because of such representation, the church is strengthened, people feel more a part of the church than they otherwise would. A church in the hands of the people has proven to be an effective means of carrying out the purposes of a church, such as evangelism, discipleship and ministry.

Conclusion

This approach to church governance is clearly idealistic and difficult to implement. The next article in this series explores some of these difficulties. Baptists believe that in spite of difficulties, they should strive for the goal of congregational governance because it **follows the example in the New Testament of church governance and is best in keeping with basic biblical doctrines that Baptists hold dear.**

For further information on congregational church governance, see www.baptistdistinctives.org.

"So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."

Romans 12:5 (NIV)