

BAPTIST Congregational Church Governance: A Challenge



Congregational governance under the lordship of Christ is a basic Baptist polity based on the Bible. However, many challenges exist today to this ideal.

Apparent Reasons for Weakened Congregational Governance

Observers of Baptist church life cite a number of factors that are testing congregational governance. **A corporate business model exists in some churches.** The pastor functions as a sort of CEO with the power to make major unilateral decisions regarding church finances, personnel, programs and sometimes even qualifications for membership. In some churches, a group, such as deacons or ruling elders, serve in a capacity similar to that of a board of directors in a business corporation.

Often the primary justification offered for such a top-down approach to church governance is that it is efficient. Decisions are made by one person or a few without the necessity to involve large numbers of persons in committee and business meetings. Of course, sound business principles ought to be welcome in a church. But expediency should not be the guide for the basic organization of a church.

The CEO and board of directors models may seem to be efficient, but they often lead to destructive conflict in a Baptist church. The majority of major church conflicts arise over the issue of leadership, and many of these erupt when a pastor endeavors to control. Often these conflicts result in the dismissal of the pastor. Church splits also occur over this issue. Of course, the fault is not always with any one person or group, but a basic cause is often the attempt to undermine congregational governance.

The challenge to congregational governance may come not from pastors, deacons, or elders claiming authority but from a few members of the church who gain great power. **Whenever a few persons gain control, congregational governance flounders.**

Some Basic Factors Undermining Congregational Church Governance

Observers of Baptist churches point to other factors that contribute to failure to achieve the biblical ideal of congregational church governance. **A basic factor may be numbers of church members who are immature in their Christian growth.** Effective congregational church governance depends on the congregation being comprised of persons who have not only been redeemed by Christ but who are also growing to healthy maturity in Christ. Persons who lack the experience of salvation by grace through faith will not embody the qualities necessary for effective participation in congregational governance, such as the biblical concept of the priesthood of believers and soul competency.

Similarly, persons who have not experienced Christian growth and discipleship in a meaningful way (1 Corinthians 3:1-14) may also **lack a servant attitude with a deep commitment to follow Jesus as Lord (Philippians 2:5-11).** The effective exercise of congregational church governance requires that persons desire to follow the will of Christ for the church and that they

seek insight and wisdom from other believer priests.

Apathy and indifference also undermine congregational governance by contributing to small attendance at business meetings and other church-governance functions. Such lack of participation creates a vacuum, allowing those who are willing to participate to control the life of a church.

Another basic factor in the lack of true congregational governance may be that many people simply do not understand how it functions. **Lack of education about Baptist beliefs and polity have left many persons with scant knowledge of the how and why of congregational governance.**

Why Congregational Governance Is Important

Another reason for the failure of persons to make the effort to see that congregational governance functions in a church is that they do not consider it of real importance. But congregational government is extremely important.

Congregational governance is important because **it says a great deal about the basic beliefs of a church.** For example, to fail to follow what we believe the Bible teaches about polity calls into question commitment to the authority of God's word. Lack of congregational governance may also demonstrate that a church is not committed to soul competency and the priesthood of believers; for one person or a handful of persons to govern a church undermines these basic doctrines.

Congregational governance is also important for the **development of Christian maturity in the members.** Failure to practice congregational governance can stifle the spiritual development of believer priests by taking away opportunities to exercise their soul competency and priesthood. Full participation by all members in the life of the church enables each to develop his or her God-given ministry qualities (Ephesians 4:1-15). Such development benefits not only the individual member but the church as a whole.

Thus, congregational governance is important because it can **contribute to the vitality of a church.** As persons feel a sense of ownership, they are likely to be more responsible members. Having a voice in church decisions often energizes persons to help carry out the decisions.

Congregational governance also is **important for society in general** and not just for the church. Participation in the democratic processes of such governance equips people for participation in our political democracy. In fact, our political democracy owes much to the Baptist concept of congregational governance.

Some historians have taught that congregational governance emerged at the time that western civilization was experiencing the move toward democracy in political life. Thus it has been asserted that Baptist democracy simply

“Let nothing be done through strife or vain glory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.”

Philippians 2:3

mirrors secular democracy and is not an essential ingredient of church life.

However, Baptist congregational governance is not based on secular democracy. It is based on the teachings of the Bible. In fact, political democracy owes much to the spiritual concepts of Baptists and others who championed freedom and individual rights and responsibilities on the basis of biblical truth. For example, a historian wrote in the 1800s that Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, attended business and other meetings of a Baptist church near his home, observed democracy in action and acknowledged the significance of Baptists in the development of American democracy.

“Although Baptists traditionally hold strongly to the concept of congregational church government, threats to its continued practice and effectiveness exist—both from outside and inside the Baptist family.”

Ebbie Smith
Beliefs Important to Baptists

Ways to Strengthen Congregational Church Governance

Since congregational church governance is essential to Baptist identity and is important for the well-being of churches, individual members and our society, **steps should be taken to strengthen congregational governance.**

Several ways have been suggested: Strive to maintain a church membership of regenerate and spiritually mature persons. Place a major emphasis on evangelism and Christian growth. Pray for the healthy participation of all members in governance. Educate members about the importance of congregational church governance and its relationship to other basic Baptist beliefs. Teach members how a Baptist church is to be organized and function; a new member's class should include this information. Include in the process of selection of pastor and deacons an emphasis on congregational church governance, the priesthood of believers and soul competency.

Admittedly, churches, especially those with large memberships, may face special challenges in involving the entire membership in congregational governance. However, through involving persons in groups and committees, delegating certain decisions to these groups, and holding business meetings at which all members can express themselves and vote, it is possible to maintain the basics of congregational governance.

Conclusion

Congregational church governance is closely related to other Baptist convictions based on the Bible. **Each Baptist can play a part not only in preserving but also in enhancing this cherished conviction.**

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

Church Governance: Congregational Participation

Church Governance: Diminished Participation