

Congregational Church Government

by Rev. Les Dennis, BA., D.D.

The Baptist form of church government is called congregational church government, which is defined as government by the membership of the church.

Two Church Offices

Baptist churches have traditionally practiced a very simple form of congregational church government. Until late in the last century, most Baptist statements of faith listed two and only two biblical offices, that is, pastors (also called bishops, elders) and deacons. Some modern Bible versions translate the word for bishop as overseer.

Congregational Power

Many variations of congregational church government have arisen so that there is no longer general agreement as to what it is. True congregational church government as practiced in Scripture is when all human power rests in the hands of the congregation. The congregation may delegate some things to the deacons or to trustees or committees, but the real power remains with the congregation. For example: one church may elect a committee to serve as trustees for legal purposes, while other Baptist churches use the deacons as legal trustees. All officers or committees serve at the will of the congregation and must answer to the congregation.

Submission to the Lord

The ultimate authority in the church is the Lord. The ultimate human authority in the church is the congregation, which answers to the Lord for its decisions.

Leadership of the Pastor

The congregation should be open to the leadership of the pastor. The pastor is biblically assigned the duty of teaching, warning, protecting, pastoring, and overseeing the flock. If a pastor abuses his authority and begins "lording it over" (1 Peter 5:3) those whom God has called him to serve; or if the pastor suffers a moral failure, gets involved in criminal activities, or commits serious violations of Scripture, the congregation is responsible to step in and remove him as pastor.

This is a serious responsibility and should not be taken lightly, because the Lord will hold all of us responsible for how we vote in church business meetings especially on such an important issue as removing a pastor.

Fear of Man or Fear of God

When biblical principles of church government are altered and when churches try to organize the church around company-style business practices, additional problems are created. A church cannot function like a business any more than a business can function like a church.

For example, some churches have introduced performance reviews for the pastor. The reviews are usually conducted by a board that is given authority over the pastor. The pastor is only human and he may be tempted to lead from a position of fear of man rather than fear of God because of the performance review. The only other option would be for the pastor to resist the board and risk having relationship problems with them. A pastor who is doing a good job may get a bad review because so much of his ministry is not visible. It is hard for the board to evaluate such things as studytime, which may vary greatly from week to week, and counseling because of confidentiality requirements and the inability to evaluate long-term effectiveness. Ministry just does not fit the company business model, so business-like performance reviews do not work. The only plan that works well, especially in small churches, is for the pastor and church to have a relationship of trust. If there is no trust, the pastor's ministry is not likely to be effective if it happens at all.

Conclusion

Congregational church government can function very well or not function at all. Just as individuals can fail to follow the Lord, the congregation can fail to follow the Lord. The congregation will follow the Lord only as the individuals that make up the congregation seek His will for each vote taken in a business meeting. When the congregation is in control and each member yields that control to the Lord, the church functions well. If a church is dysfunctional, it is not the Lord who is in control.

To go from being a church that at one time gave serious consideration to giving control of the church over to an outside group to becoming a fully functional Baptist church again requires that control of the church be returned to the Lord.

The biblical way for God to be in control is for power to be in the hands of the congregation with the all of the members seeking the Lord's will for each church vote.

For the purposes of this article the congregation and membership are considered interchangeable.

© Les Dennis, 2013 -- Permission is given to copy this article, if it is copied in its entirety and distributed without charge.