

CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH GOVERNANCE



Who governs your church? Who selects the pastoral leadership for your church? 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.

Polity includes the policies that guide matters such as governance, decision making, structure, and leadership. A major Baptist polity is that **no person or group outside of any 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 opportunity to take part in the governance of the church. **No individual is superior to another.**

Many non-Baptists, and even some Baptists, may think that this is a strange way for a church to function. Putting the governance of a church in the hands of persons who have no formal training or education in the operation of a church appears risky. Why would Baptists dare to function in this fashion? **The reason is that basic Baptist beliefs form the foundation for congregational governance.**

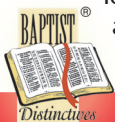
“Every form of polity other than democracy somewhere infringes upon the Lordship of Christ.”

E. Y. Mullins
The Axioms of Religion

What Are the Bases for Congregational Church Governance?

The Lordship of Christ. For Baptists, the ultimate authority for a church rests not in the members but in Jesus Christ, who is the head or Lord of the church (Ephesians 4:15; Philippians 2:11). In church governance all members have the responsibility to seek the mind of Christ in decisions related to the church and the right to vote in accord with their convictions on these matters, such as in church business meetings. This is often termed “Baptist democracy.”

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 been saved in the same way: by grace through faith in Christ (Ephesians 2:8-10). Therefore, no Baptist is over another. Thus, a church is to be governed by all of the people together under the Lordship of Christ.

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 and is responsible under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to seek 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 in the decisions 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 as Savior and Lord 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 of the church.

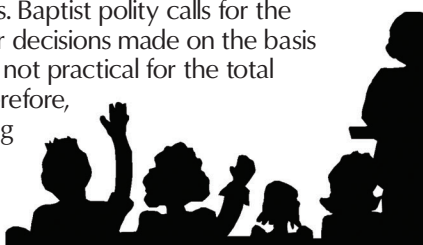
Questions and Issues

Who is in charge? 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. The Bible indicates that pastors have very important roles to play in a church (1 Timothy 3:1-7). However, their roles are not ones of dictatorial or CEO authority but rather ones of servant, spiritual leadership, "not lording it over those entrusted to you" (1 Peter 5:2-3 NIV).

Pastors and deacons are to be servants and not governors of the church. 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).

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.

In numbers of churches, the members delegate to committees and/or staff the responsibility for certain decisions, who then recommend major matters to the congregation for approval.



"So in Christ we who are
and each member believe

Romans 1

Some Factors Undermining Congregational Church Governance

Several factors contribute to failure to achieve the biblical ideal of congregational church governance. One may be church members who are not truly born again. Persons who lack the experience of salvation by grace through faith will not embody the qualities necessary for effective participation in congregational governance.

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 have not experienced Christian growth and discipleship in a meaningful way (1 Corinthians 3:1-23) may 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 governance functions of a church. Such lack of participation creates a vacuum, allowing those who are willing to participate to control the life of a church.

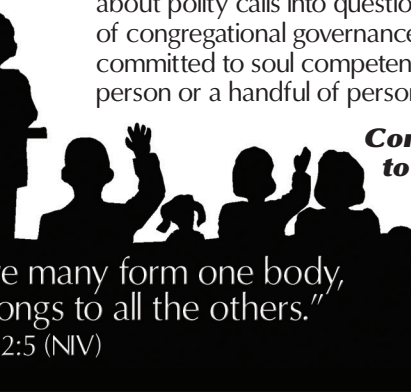
Efforts by a pastor, deacon body, or any group within the church to usurp governance by all the members obviously thwart congregational governance. A dictatorial spirit by a person or group undermines the role of members in decision making. The claim by one or more persons to have a better knowledge than anyone else of the will of Christ is counter to basic biblical beliefs which undergird congregational governance.

Lack of knowledge about Baptist beliefs and polity has left many persons with scant insight on the how and why of congregational governance. Thus the lack of true congregational governance may be due to the fact that many people simply do not understand how it functions.

Why Congregational Church Governance Is Important

The degree to which a church practices congregational governance says a great deal about the basic beliefs of that church. For example, to fail to follow what we believe the Bible teaches about polity calls into question commitment to the authority of the Bible. 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 basic doctrines.

Congregational governance contributes to 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



we many form one body,
ings to all the others."

2:5 (NIV)

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 4:1-16).

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.

Congregational governance also is important for society in general and not just for a church. Participation in such governance equips people for personal participation in a political democracy.

Ways to Strengthen Congregational Church Governance

Several ways have been suggested to strengthen congregational church governance: (1) Strive to maintain a church membership of regenerate and spiritually mature persons. (2) Place a major emphasis on evangelism and Christian growth. (3) Pray for the healthy participation of *all* members in governance. (4) Educate members about the importance of congregational church governance and its relationship to other basic Baptist beliefs. (5) Teach members how a Baptist church is to be organized and function.

Admittedly, churches, especially those with large memberships, may face special challenges in involving the entire membership in congregational governance. However, through including 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

In spite of difficulties, Baptists 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, see www.baptistdistinctives.org

The basic material in this leaflet originally appeared in a series of articles in the *Baptist Standard* in 2005. Wanting to share information about Baptist distinctives, Noble Hurley, shortly before his death in 2004, established the Jane and Noble Hurley Baptist Identity Fund to provide for publishing the series. He asked William M. Pinson, Jr. and Doris A. Tinker to prepare the articles. The financial assistance of The Prichard Family Foundation and Vester T. Hughes, Jr. enabled this series of nineteen leaflets to be produced based on the articles. Skyler G. Tinker designed and formatted the leaflets for publication. Each leaflet is for both individual and group study.

The topics in this series: (1) Baptists: Who? Where? What? Why? (2) What Makes a Baptist a Baptist? (3) The Lordship of Christ; (4) The Bible as Authority for Faith and Practice; (5) Soul Competency; (6) Salvation Only by Grace Through Faith; (7) The Priesthood of All Believers; (8) Believer's Baptism; (9) A Regenerate Church Membership; (10) Congregational Church Governance; (11) Church Autonomy; (12) Baptist Church Life: Organization, Worship, Officers, Ordinances; (13) Voluntary Cooperation; (14) Evangelism; (15) Missions; (16) Ministry; (17) Christian Education; (18) The Application of the Gospel; (19) Religious Freedom.

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