

Congregational Church Government: A Study Paper

What are the lines of authority within the body, and by what process are decisions made? There are three basic approaches to governing a church: congregational rule, board rule, and pastoral rule. Every church will find itself somewhere on a continuum between those options. If there is a trend among NWCBA churches it seems to be to move away from congregational rule toward a partial or full board rule. Is one form preferable to another?

A central issue in this discussion is the role of the New Testament narrative relating to church life. Is this content intended by the Holy Spirit to be descriptive or prescriptive? By that I am suggesting that we either view the operation of the New Testament church as a description of what worked then with latitude to develop whatever forms will work best now, or we see it as revealed structures and procedures which are mandated for every age of the church. If it is not prescriptive, then this whole discussion of Baptist distinctives is meaningless. I am not interested in adopting and requiring particular forms and functions just because that is what Baptists do. I am convinced those forms and functions reflect Baptist practice in the past because they are biblical.

Two lines of investigation might assist churches in drawing a conclusion. The first is to examine the decision-making process recounted in the book of Acts and in the Epistles. Several examples are available. The first is found in Acts 6:1-6:

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

Several things are clear here. There was a body of believers, and a spiritual, gifted core of leadership. There was

also a problem that had to be addressed and a decision that had to be made. What process was utilized? The leaders defined the problem in verse two, and proposed a solution in verses 3-4. The body accepted the recommendation in verse 5a and carried it out in verses 5b-6. Although there was invaluable input by the leadership that resulted in a recommended plan of action, the decision was made and implemented by the congregation. In Acts 13 the first missionaries are commissioned by the church. Verses one to three recount:

In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

Here one could debate whether the Holy Spirit is addressing the named leaders or the entire congregation, but there is good reason to conclude the latter. It was standard procedure for the Lord to work through the entire body, as was just seen in Acts 6, and as will become evident in Acts 15. It would be consistent for this to be accomplished through congregational action. As F. F. Bruce notes, "They were sent out by the whole church, and it was to the whole church that they made their report when they returned to Antioch (Comment on Acts 14:26f.)."

Acts 15 allows insight into the most crucial decision to come before the fledgling church to date. The stage is set in Acts 15:1-2:

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

Once again the church is faced with a clear issue that must be decided. The congregation in Jerusalem is asked to make a determination in the matter. Notice in 15:4-5 that the problem was addressed to the congregation as well as the leadership:

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."

It became clear that this question would not be quickly or easily resolved. The issues were too complex, and the emotions too deep. So the matter was referred to the leadership for study and interpretation in 15:6-8:

The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us.

In 15:12-14 the scene returns to the congregational meeting, with further testimony by Paul and Barnabas leading to a recommendation by the leadership, outlined in 15:19-21:

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself.

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..."It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

Finally this recommendation by the leadership was accepted and implemented by the entire congregation in verse 21. It is noteworthy that the letter was sent from the apostles and elders (verse 23) and not from the church. This may simply underscore the unique role the apostles had in the early church. This was, after all, an inter-church issue, not an issue facing this single congregation. Still, there continues a consistent pattern of carefully considered recommendations by leadership, which are adopted and implemented by the congregation.

One further illustration is found in I Corinthians 5:1-5:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit,

and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.

Verse 4 makes it clear that this was an action to be initiated by the body assembled. It was not a matter for the leadership, but for the congregation. There seems to be a clear pattern in the New Testament of congregational government. True, decisions were not made off the cuff. Major decisions followed careful and prayerful deliberations by leadership. But that preliminary process did not result in action. It resulted in recommended action, which the congregation then endorsed and implemented.

One final illustration is found in II Corinthians 8-9, dealing with the collection for the Jerusalem saints. Although Paul had given pretty directive instructions in I Corinthians 16:1 ("Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do." [NIV]), it is obvious he vests responsibility for this enterprise in the congregation:

I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. (NIV) 2 Corinthians 8:8-11

Further, the representative who was chosen to oversee the delivery of this offering was selected "by the churches" (II Corinthians 8:18-19).

In analyzing the decision-making process in these several instances there seems to be a consistent pattern: a recommendation is made by leadership to the whole body; the recommendation is approved and implemented by action of the body. There is a consistent pattern of congregational church government. Further, the above instances seem to provide parameters regarding the kinds of issues that require congregational action. These issues include the selection of leadership (Acts 6), missionary outreach (Acts 13, basic doctrine (Acts 15), membership issues (1 Corinthians 5, II Corinthians 2), and finances (11 Corinthians 8-9).

A second line of reasoning in pursuit of a biblical pattern of church government is the significant declaration of I Corinthians 3:16. In consternation Paul challenges the Corinthians, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's

temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?" It is important to understand that the pronoun "you" is plural in this context. This contrasts with the singular "you" in the very similar declaration of I Corinthians 6:19. Here the temple is the local congregation, as opposed to the individual believer in 6:19. Nowhere is the official Board said to be the "temple of the Holy Spirit." It is the congregation that comprises His base of operation. It is through the congregation that He will make decisions. To the congregation He has entrusted the responsibility of fulfilling the Great Commission. This is not to denigrate the important role given to scriptural leaders, and the considerable authority resident in that role. But the government of the church is committed to the congregation.

I look in vain for illustrations of "elder rule" in the New Testament. There are instances of "Apostle rule" where the Apostles exercised broad authority in the early stages of the development of the church. But it is my understanding that such authority passed from the scene with the passing of the Apostles, who are said to form "the foundation of the church" in Ephesians 2:20.

These are some thoughts on the issue of congregational church government. I hope they are helpful.

For the good of the Association, Dave Paine