

CHURCH POLITY: A BAPTIST PERSPECTIVE

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The doctrine of the church has not historically been considered an integral part of systematic theology. Very few of the older classic systematic theologies treat the subject as a distinct theological topic. Thomas Aquinas, who is still considered the chief representative of Roman Catholic theology, did not treat the doctrine of the church in his massive *Summa Theologica*. The classic Reformed theology of Charles Hodge does not discuss the church as a distinct theological subject. The early Southern Baptist theologies of J. L. Dagg,¹ J. P. Boyce, and E. Y. Mullins contain no separate discussion of the church.² The absence of the church as a distinct theological topic in these and others caused Millard Erickson to remark in his *Christian Theology* that “at no point in the history of Christian thought has the doctrine of the church received the direct and complete attention which other doctrines have received.”³

Even though Erickson’s remarks may have been true at the point in history in which he wrote, things may be changing. Erickson himself devoted substantial space to the church.⁴ Herman Hoeksema, in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, includes ecclesiology as one of the six loci in his system of theology.⁵ James Leo Garrett included the church as one of his distinct theological topics, and observed that “today, Christian theologians almost universally agree that the doctrine of the church is a proper and essential subdivision of systematic theology.”⁶

The doctrine of the church has historically been of great importance to Baptists. It is, without doubt, the one doctrine which centers around what is known as “Baptist distinctives.” Unfortunately, it is a doctrine that has been the victim of much neglect in the average Baptist church and pulpit in recent years. Previously, doctrinal studies and doctrinal preaching centered in what Baptists believe about the church. The reason for this sad neglect is a matter of opinion. Nevertheless, I will venture to offer my opinion.

The doctrine of the church has always been a controversial and divisive issue among Christians. Baptists have historically resisted the ecumenical movement promoted by the World Council of Churches, but there is a growing acceptance of an evangelical ecumenism. There is a consuming desire for unity in what is called the body of Christ, and the doctrine of the church is often seen as a peripheral doctrine that need not divide that body. Consequently, matters dealing with the doctrine of the church are either ignored altogether or redefined so as not to offend other evangelical groups.

Nearly every issue that properly falls under the doctrine of the church is fraught with disagreement and controversy: the nature of the church, the ordinances, the polity, the officers, and even its primary function or mission. Once Baptists were nearly unanimous on these matters, with the possible exception of who should participate in the Lord’s Supper. While a broad agreement exists on most of these matters, diverse views are held on most every point of ecclesiology among Baptists today. A topic of much discussion among Southern Baptists today is the issue of church polity. What form of government is the biblical form?

Alternate Forms

The forms of church polity followed by various Christian denominations are related to their understanding of the nature of the church. There are essentially two views of what constitutes a church. Some scholars equate the church with a denomination, such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, the Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church. Others, such as Baptists, view a church as a local body, and thus do not speak of their denomination as a church. The Baptist denomination is a convention or association of individual churches. For example, Baptists do not call the Southern Baptist Convention the Southern Baptist Church. In Baptist theology there is no such thing as the Southern Baptist Church, only Southern Baptist churches, or a Southern Baptist church. Other associations of churches, such as the Churches of Christ, have a similar view.

Depending on their views of the church, there are essentially two broad systems of church polity: connectionalism and congregationalism. In connectionalism, the central authority of the church falls outside of the local congregation. Churches are accountable to the parent denomination. Local pastors are ordained by, assigned to or removed from local churches by the denomination or a representative. Church buildings and property are owned by the denomination and simply held in trust by the local congregation. Persons who view their denomination as the church typically practice some form of connectionalism (Catholic, Episcopal, Presbyterian, United Methodist, etc.).

In congregationalism the central authority of the church lies in the local congregation. The local church ordains, appoints, or dismisses its pastor. The local church is accountable to no ecclesiological body outside itself. All properties are owned by the local body. Individuals who perceive the visible church to be a local body of believers universally practice some form of congregationalism (Baptists, Churches of Christ, and most non-denominational churches).

Within these two general denominational systems there are three distinct forms of government employed with subdivisions in some of the forms.⁷

The Episcopal Form

Episcopal is a transliterated and anglicized form of the Greek, *episkopos*, which is the word for “bishop” in the New Testament. In the general sense the term means an “overseer,” someone who watches over others. It is so translated in Acts 20:28 (KJV, NAS, NIT). It became a technical term to refer to an official office in the churches and as such is usually translated “bishop” in the King James Version (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1; Tit. 1:7).

Originally “bishop” was one of the terms used to refer to the pastoral office and emphasized the function of spiritual oversight over the members. Early in postbiblical Christian history, the term began to be associated with authority, first over a single city church. Gradually a structural change evolved in which smaller churches in the rural areas gathered around the city churches and formed a region under the authority of the bishop of the leading church in the area.⁸

In the episcopal form of church government, the final authority for church matters, both doctrine and practice, lies in the bishop. Persons who hold to this form claim that Christ gave the apostles authority over his church and the apostles passed this authority on to their successors, the bishops. Some forms of Episcopalian polity have a more developed chain of authority, with a level above the bishop holding the title of archbishop (Anglican, Episcopal, Roman Catholic). The most evident form is the Roman Catholic system in which absolute and final authority is

invested in one bishop—the bishop of Rome. In every form of episcopal polity a bishop has final authority over the local church.

The Presbyterian Form

Presbyterian gets its name from the Greek *presbuteros*, which is the word for “elder.” Churches which employ this method are governed by a hierarchy of councils consisting of members called “elders.” The lowest level of these councils is that which governs a single local church and is called the session or consistory. Most churches that follow this method see the elders who make up the session or consistory as consisting of two kinds: the teaching elder, usually the pastor, and the ruling or governing elders, usually lay representatives. Normally the teaching elder (pastor) presides over this council, but has no authority over it.

The local council of elders sends representatives to the next higher level council in a given geographical area, called the presbytery (Presbyterian) or classis (Reformed). In some Presbyterian structures these regional presbyteries send representatives to a national council called the General Assembly. While the Presbyterian governmental form starts with the local assembly,⁹ the higher level councils hold doctrinal and administrative authority over its member churches.

The Congregational Form

In congregationalism, the governance of a church lies in the local assembly itself. John S. Hammett has given an excellent summary of this polity model:

In this model, the congregation exercises the ultimate *human* authority in the church, under Christ’s *divine* authority. Christ exercises his headship through the members, as they all seek together to discern Christ’s will for the body. Since all the members are regenerate and thus indwelt by the Spirit, all are able to receive guidance from Christ. Thus, congregationalism involves democratic participation, with every member having an equal voice and vote. In such a system, leaders such as pastors or deacons may exercise significant influence and may be entrusted with a measure of authority for acting on behalf of the congregation on certain matters, but, in the final analysis, the highest human authority is vested in the congregation, not the leadership.¹⁰

The Historic Baptist View

Historically, congregational church polity has been a major distinguishing element in Baptist identity. The “Baptist distinctive” that defines us as Baptists centers largely in ecclesiological issues in general, and in church polity in particular. The congregational form of church government is so identified in nearly all Baptist confessions from the seventeenth century until modern times. The 1644/46 Baptist London Confession states: “Christ hath likewise given power to His Church to receive in, and cast out, any member that deserves it; and this power is given to every congregation, and not to one particular person, either member or officer, but in relation to the whole body, in reference to their faith and fellowship” (Article XLII).

The 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message*, one of the most recent confessions adopted by a Baptist body, states: “A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, ... Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ

through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord” (Article VI).

It may be said that congregationalism is the form of church polity expressed universally in Baptist literature. Hammett refers to a survey of Baptist literature on Baptist distinctives by Stan Norman in which he noted the prominence of “the advocacy of congregationalism as the New Testament form of church government.”¹¹ Beginning with the influential *Systematic Theology* of A. H. Strong at the beginning of the twentieth century, and even before, and continuing into the twenty first century with contemporary writers, scholars identify the Baptist view of church government as some form of congregationalism.

Strong’s view on church government was that which has been followed and advocated by Baptist leaders and writers in all the major Baptist bodies, not only in North America but throughout the world. On the one hand, Strong identified the government of the church as “an absolute monarchy,” since Christ is the head and the source of authority. On the other hand, as far as executing the will of Christ, the head, the church “is an absolute democracy in which the whole body of members is entrusted with the duty and responsibility of carrying out the laws of Christ as expressed in His word.”¹²

Congregationalism, as Baptists perceive and practice it, consists of two elements – autonomy and authority. Church autonomy simply means that a local church is self-governing and that no other ecclesiastical body has authority over it. Probably no aspect of church polity is more universally held by Baptists than this one. It is doubtful that one can find any other position expressed by a Baptist confession of faith or by any Baptist writer on the subject, ancient or contemporary. It is implied in the 1644 London Confession, the earliest Baptist confession, and explicitly stated in the 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message*.¹³

The second aspect of Baptist congregationalism is that of authority. In this area, there are some divergent practices among Baptists. Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman, editors of *Perspectives on Church Government*, include contributors on three distinct views on authority: single elder-led congregational model, democratic congregational model, and plural elder-led congregational model.¹⁴ However, in each of these models the ultimate human authority lies in the congregation.

It may be noted that the term *led* is used rather than the word *rule*. Mark Dever, who led the Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington D.C. to adopt a plural elder led polity, stated in an address delivered at the Issues in Baptist Polity Conference, hosted by The Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in 2004:

The final judicatory authority resides not with a Pope or a Convention, not with a national Assembly or with a pastor, not with a regional association or a state convention, nor with some committee or board, whether paid or unpaid. Such responsibility for the discipline and doctrine of the congregation, under God, lies not with the deacons or the elders, but with the congregation as a whole.¹⁵

Dever went on to state concerning elder rule and church authority: “Ultimately, elders can only act by teaching and persuading the congregation. All of the duties elders have, all of our responsibilities and obligations have been given us by the congregation we serve.”¹⁶

Biblical Polity

There is little question that congregationalism is the historic Baptist perspective on church polity. The comment of Hammett that there has been “a long and virtual unanimous support for congregationalism among Baptists” can hardly be disputed.¹⁷ Still, is it biblical? Some scholars have contended that no prescribed form is set forth in the New Testament, and therefore, it is left up to contemporary churches to follow whatever form is best suited for them.¹⁸ John L. Dagg, sometimes identified as the first writing Southern Baptist theologian, admitted that “the Scriptures contain very little in the form of direct precept relating to the order and government of churches.”¹⁹ However, Dagg continued to demonstrate that “the apostles have taught us, by example, how to organize and govern churches,” that “we have no right to reject their instructions,” and that they “designed that their modes of procedure should be adopted and continued.”²⁰

An examination of the New Testament evidence reveals two very clear elements in the polity of the church. First, the churches of the New Testament were independent, self governing, churches. They were autonomous bodies. Evidence for this position is abundant. Local churches appointed their own representatives for various purposes (Acts 15:1ff; 2 Cor. 8:19, 23). Local churches determined their own customs (1 Cor. 11:12), and settled their own difficulties (1 Cor. 5:4, 5; 6:4). All the Pauline letters were written to individual local congregations, and not to a regional, national, or world body. Similarly, when Jesus wrote letters to the churches in Asia, recorded in the Book of Revelation, he wrote letters to specific churches, and not to *the* church in Asia. Some of these churches had errors to be corrected, and Jesus did not instruct an ecclesiological body other than the local churches to correct them.

The second feature of church polity exemplified in the New Testament is that each autonomous church was democratically ruled. This point is often questioned, even by some who see only autonomous churches in the New Testament. It is stated that there are no didactic or prescriptive passages dealing with how local churches were run, and that we are dependent on narrative or descriptive passages. Many scholars, such as Millard Erickson, conclude that even these descriptive passages reveal no unitary pattern, but have monarchical and Presbyterian elements as well as democratic elements.²¹

Admittedly, no didactic or prescriptive passages deal with how local churches are to be governed. However, the descriptive passages as well as other theological considerations support a pattern of democratically controlled churches in which every member had a voice in governing the congregation.

The biblical facts may be summarized as follows: (1) The letters to the churches of the New Testament were addressed to the members of the church, not just to the leaders. (2) Church discipline, the final decision for dismissing a member, is assigned to the whole body, not to a bishop or a group of elders (Mt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:9-13; 2 Cor. 2:6). This condition probably implies that the responsibility applied also to receiving members. (3) The whole body was responsible for choosing its leaders (Acts 1:15-26; 6:1-6; 13:2-3; 1 Cor. 16:3). (4) All members of a church are charged with the responsibility to evangelize and disciple the world (Mt. 28: 19-20). “Since then all are to be engaged in the work of the ministry, all should have a part in deciding the direction of the ministry.”²²

In addition to the above facts, two theological truths undergird a democratically controlled church. First and foremost is the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Because of Christ’s atonement the church no longer needs a human mediator to represent the believer before

God, as was the case in the Old Testament (1 Pet. 2:5; Heb. 10:19, 22). Now all believers are equals before God. All believers have received the gift of the Holy Spirit and are indwelt by Him. This indwelling of the Holy Spirit makes all believers capable of understanding God's word, and consequently qualified to participate in making decisions affecting a church and its ministries (1 Cor. 2:9-16).

A second theological basis for a congregational rule is the biblical truth of spiritual gifts. According to biblical teaching, every believer has been given some gift for ministry in the church. Three specific passages identify these gifts (1 Cor. 12:4-12, 28-29; Rom. 12:3-8; Eph. 4:7-12), and in each one it is stated that every believer has been given some gift to be used for the profit of the whole church (1 Cor. 12:7; Rom. 12:3; Eph. 4:7). Gerald Cowen draws the conclusion from this fact: "Since all have received gifts, then all bear responsibility in the ministry of the church," and then poses this question, "... should not all who exercise the gifts have a voice in the ministry?"²³ My answer is "definitely."²⁴

Challenges to Baptist Congregationalism

In his *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, Hammett has a brief section on "Challenges Facing Congregationalism," in which he discusses four specific challenges and throws out the ominous warning: "If genuine congregational government is to endure among Baptists, these challenges must be addressed."²⁵ Most Southern Baptist churches still advocate and practice some form of congregationalism, and even those who have departed from it practically probably give credence to it doctrinally. After all, it is the official doctrine of the Southern Baptist Convention. However, all four of Hammett's challenges are valid concerns and do need to be addressed. For this article I want to mention the two that I feel are the most threatening.

The Rise of Elder Rule

Without doubt, Southern Baptist pastors are seeing a resurgence of an emphasis on a plurality of elders. In many instances, they have led their churches to adopt some kind of elder system in their churches. Just how widespread this situation has become is difficult to determine. It is pervasive enough to get the attention of many diverse segments of Southern Baptist life – scholars, denominational leaders on various levels, and pastors in general. It has become something of an issue in Baptist life today. It has provoked a myriad of articles and blogs on the internet, and was a central subject in a conference on Baptist polity hosted by the New Orleans Baptist Seminary in 2004.

Many persons who argue for a plurality of elders in the local church claim that it is not inconsistent with congregationalism. They still hold that the ultimate authority lies in the whole body. If one understands that the New Testament use of *elder* is synonymous with pastor, a plurality of elders is very compatible with congregationalism. It is when elders are divided into two classes, ruling elders (usually laymen) and teaching elders (pastor) that congregationalism is forsaken. When such a division is made, it really establishes a third office in a church. In most cases, decision making is removed from the congregation and invested in the elder body. Business meetings or church conferences rarely are held, some as few as once a year, and some not at all. The congregation is simply asked to affirm decisions already made by the elders without discussion.

Rise of the Mega-churches

In my judgment, a greater threat to congregationalism than elder led polity is the growing trend toward megachurches, which, as one observer has noted, is a contemporary phenomenon unprecedented in Christian history.²⁶ Southern Baptist churches are included in this trend. In many instances these megachurches establish multiple locations (campuses). Meeting in several locations, it is impractical if not impossible to maintain any kind of congregational participation in the affairs of the church. About the only involvement in decision making of these churches is voting on the pastor who could lead like a CEO, and the church may be run thereafter like a corporation. The pastor may gather around him a group (sometimes the deacons, but not always) who may act like a board of directors. Practically, these churches with multiple campuses operate much like a combination of episcopal-presbyterian polity.

The disturbing thing about this phenomenon is that according to Hammett, writing more than ten years ago, 65 percent of Southern Baptists attend these larger churches.²⁷ This percentage may be larger now, and if the trend continues, the overwhelming majority of Southern Baptists will know little or nothing about congregationalism. Sadly, I am of the opinion that the great majority of Baptists are content to have it this way. As James Leo Garrett stated in the New Orleans conference: "Congregational polity is being rejected in some Southern Baptist churches because it is time-consuming and sometimes difficult."²⁸

On the other hand, some pastors and church leaders (elders) may prefer it this way because they simply do not trust the people. Added to this problem is the emphasis on pastoral authority associated with planting and growing churches. Pastoral authority was a theme often heard in Southern Baptist denominational meetings years before the elder issue arose. Usually the advocates of pastoral authority are pastors of large churches and boldly proclaim that it is the key to their success.

Conclusion

A plurality of elders, biblically understood, and a strong pastoral leadership, biblically defined, do not necessarily undermine congregationalism. Both are definite threats, and in many cases have minimized congregational involvement in the affairs of Baptist churches. Considering the apathy of so many church members, their lack of interest and loyalty to any local church, the nondenominational mind set, and the consumer mentality of the average church goer, I am a bit pessimistic concerning the survival of congregational rule, a cardinal doctrine that has identified us as Baptists. My generation has experienced a conservative resurgence in the realm of biblical authority, and I was pessimistic that correction would happen, but it did. Now my prayer is that there will be a resurgence of congregationalism in Baptist life.

Before beginning my teaching ministry, the last church I served as pastor had a church council functioning when I was called to be the pastor. Nothing could be brought before the church unless first approved by the council. When I met with them the first time, I recommended to them that the first recommendation they should bring before the first business meeting I moderated is that the church council be dissolved. They were skeptical at first but agreed. The church accepted the recommendation and it was disbanded. I was there over four years and do not remember a single disorderly church business meeting. Personally, I prefer as much

involvement of the whole congregation as possible. It is the Baptist way, and I believe it is the New Testament way.

¹After his *A Manual of Theology* (1857), Dagg published a monograph on the church (*A Treatise on Church Order*, 1858), but did not include the subject in his systematic theology.

²Theologies from the northern Baptist theologians did include the church. See A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (a 3 volume work first published in 1886 with a final revision in 1907 devotes an entire section to ecclesiology); and Alvah Hovey, *Manual of Systematic Theology, and Christian Ethics* (first published in 1886, devotes a full chapter to “Christian Churches and Ordinances”)

³Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 1037.

⁴Erickson, 1035-1152.

⁵Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1968), 563-726.

⁶James Leo Garrett, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, Vol. 2: (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 457.

⁷The editors (Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman) of *Perspectives on Church Government: 5 Views* identify five specific views: single elder-led congregational model, democratic congregational model, Presbyterian model, plural elder-led congregational model, and the Episcopal model. I may be noted, however, that three of the five are classified as congregational models. So, in reality, three models are proposed.

⁸Garrett gives a brief summary of this development in his *Systematic Theology*, 2, 471.

⁹David L. Smith calls it “a representative democracy.” (David L. Smith, *All God’s People: A Theology of the Church* [Wheaton, Ill: Victor Books, 1996], 370).

¹⁰John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 143.

¹¹Hammett, 136. The survey is found in R. Stan Norman, *More than Just a Name: Preserving our Baptist Identity* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 119.

¹²Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology*. Three Volumes in One (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1907), 903

¹³The London Confession does not use the term *autonomous*, but it is implied in that the confession states that every congregation is “distinct” and “a compact and knit city in itself,” (Article XLVII). It also says each congregation has been given the authority by Christ “to receive” and “cast out” its members (Article XLII) and “to choose to themselves fitting persons into the office of Pastors, Teachers, Elders, Deacons” (Article XXXVI). The 1963 and 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message* explicitly uses the term *autonomous* (Article VI).

¹⁴Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman, eds., *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004).

¹⁵Mark Dever, “Baptists and Elders,” n.d, accessed July 23, 2016, http://www.silaspartners.com/cc/article/0,,PTID314526_CHID598016_CIID1744980,00.html.

¹⁶Ibid

¹⁷Hammett, 151.

¹⁸Eduard Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament*, trans. Frank Clarke (London, U.K.: SCM Press, 13; George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, Rev. Ed. (Grand Rapids:

Eerdmans, 1993), 579. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*. Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 1094-95.

¹⁹John L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology, Second Part 2: A Treatise on Church Order* (Harrisburg, Va.: Gano Books, 1982), 84.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹Erickson, 1094.

²²Gerald Cowen, "Congregationalism and Its Limits," *Theology for Ministry*, Vol. 1 (November, 2006), 13.

²³*Ibid.*, 14.

²⁴One may find a more detailed discussion of this biblical evidence in Cowen, 11-26, and Hammett, 146-151.

²⁵Hammett, 151.

²⁶John Vaughan, *Megachurches and America's Crises: How Churches Grow* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 41. Cited by Hammett, 152.

²⁷Hammett, 152.

²⁸"Elders in Baptist churches? Conference examines the idea," by Gary D. Myers, February 13, 2004, accessed July 27, 2016, <http://www.bpnews.net/17638/elders-in-baptist-churches-conference-examines-the-idea>.