

Congregationalism

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In 1607, a small group of English Separatists led by John Smyth and Thomas Helwys migrated to Holland to avoid religious persecution. Two years later, after studying the Scriptures, Smyth came to the startling conclusion that baptism should be administered to believers only. He then baptized himself, Thomas Helwys, and about forty other members of their congregation. This was the beginning of the first Baptist church.

By baptizing believers without permission from a government official or a bishop, Smyth's congregation joined the ranks of the "free churches." They were called "free" churches because they refused to conform to the doctrines and practices of any established church. Like other reformers, early Baptists felt they should be able to order their churches and develop their beliefs on the basis of Scripture alone.

The Meaning of Congregational Polity

Based on Scripture, Baptists concluded that authority for church governance should reside with the congregation. This type of church government is called congregational polity.

Most early Baptists were common people from the middle and lower classes. One church record in 1640 mentions a butcher, a blacksmith, a housewife, and a young minister who "covenanted together" to form a Baptist church. Edward Barber, an early Baptist leader, insisted that the Lord had raised him "a poore tradesman" to divulge the glorious truth concerning baptism.¹ These seventeenth-century Baptists, who were called "dissenters," were considered to be nonconformists because they did not look to bishop, council, or tradition for their authority. They looked to the New Testament.

Baptists teach that the local congregation should have the authority to choose and ordain its own ministers, to decide the basis for membership, and to discipline members. Congregationalism was widely practiced in the New Testament. Acts 13:1-3 depicts the church at Antioch commissioning Barnabas and Saul. Paul encouraged the church at Corinth to take care of its internal problems and to act decisively toward a resolution.

The choosing of the seven in Acts 6, the list of gifts for ministry in 1 Corinthians 12, and the qualifications for deacons and ministers in 1 Timothy 3 provide evidence that first-century church members made key decisions concerning ministry and order.² Early Baptists insisted on ordering their churches on their interpretation of the New Testament, a Reformation principle known as *sola scriptura*.

When Smyth and Helwys adopted believer's baptism, essentially two other models of polity were being practiced for church government. The first model, episcopal polity, was practiced by the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England. Advocates of this hierarchical system claimed that the authority for the life of the church began with Jesus and the apostles. Bishops preserved the teaching of the apostles, then passed the teaching on to younger bishops, who, in turn, passed the teaching on to the next generation.

This concept of church authority, called apostolic succession, emerged in the second century when the church needed to defend its teaching from various heresies. Early church writers argued that the church's teaching was valid because the apostles had been taught by Jesus himself and transferred that teaching to church leaders.

Paul's admonition to Timothy to "entrust" his teachings to reliable leaders (2 Tim. 2:2) provides biblical injunction for the maintenance of apostolic instruction. Thus, the bishops are the successors of the apostles, and as such, they preserve the teachings of the apostles and keep them pure for the church. In an episcopal system, local congregations are considered a part of the church only if they conform to the teachings of the bishops.

A second model of church government is representative government or presbyterian polity in which a local congregation elects presbyters or elders to govern its life. Each congregation then chooses representatives to serve on a synod that governs member churches. Although the congregations are not self-governing, they do have a voice in the composition of the governing body. Like the episcopal system, presbyterian polity draws on New Testament concepts of church elders. For example, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders to churches at Antioch and other places (Acts 14:23), and Titus mentioned the qualifications of an elder in Titus 1:5-9.

In contrast to presbyterian or episcopal polity, Baptists believe that members of the local congregation should govern themselves. Often, Baptists refer to this principle of local congregational control as church autonomy. Autonomy of the local church is simply the belief that churches should be self-governing. Baptist theologian Stanley Grenz pointed out that the titles of denominations tend to reflect their polity. "Whereas most groups speak of a national or international church (e.g., the Presbyterian Church), Baptists generally employ terms such as 'conference' or 'convention' of churches," said Grenz. "There is no Baptist Church, only Baptist churches."³

Theological Bases for Congregational Polity

George W. Truett, longtime pastor of First Baptist Church Dallas, Texas, delivered a sermon on the steps of the United States Capitol in 1920. This sermon has become a classic presentation of Baptist heritage, particularly concerning religious liberty. Truett insisted that all Baptist beliefs hinge on the Lordship of Christ. "That doctrine is for Baptists the dominant fact in all their Christian experience," argued Truett, "the nerve center of all their Christian life, the bedrock of all their church polity, the sheet anchor of all their hopes, the climax and crown of all their rejoicings."

"From that germinal conception of the absolute Lordship of Christ," said Truett, "all our Baptist principles emerge. Just as yonder oak came from the acorn, so our many-branched Baptist life came from the cardinal principle of the absolute Lordship of Christ."

The Baptist understanding of the church is profoundly shaped by the principle of Lordship in Truett's estimation. "Christ is the head of the church," continued Truett. "All authority has been committed unto Him, in heaven and on earth, and He must be given the absolute pre-eminence in all things."⁴

Related to the principle of the Lordship of Christ are two significant New Testament concepts: soul competency and the priesthood of all believers. Soul competency is the idea that God has endowed individuals with the ability to decide matters of faith for themselves. The principle of believer's baptism assumes soul competency.

Baptist dissenters in England asserted that baptism "requires faith as an inseparable condition."⁵ It assumes that people can be convicted of their sin, can repent, and can respond to God freely in faith. Soul competency is not merely self-sufficiency; rather, it is a gift of God. Every individual has the freedom to hear God's call and to respond to that call in faith because God has provided the opportunity.

Not only do Baptists affirm that an individual's soul is competent to decide issues of faith, but they also affirm that people have free access to God through the sacrifice of Christ Jesus. Martin Luther described this

principle of free access to God as the priesthood of all believers.

Baptists readily adopted this Reformation principle because of its biblical foundation. The New Testament refers to all believers as priests (1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6, 5:10). When Jesus died on the cross, the veil of the temple was torn (Mark 15:38). The symbol of the division between people and priest was removed.

Because of Christ's death and resurrection, believers no longer needed a priest to speak to God on their behalf. Baptists are to be priests to one another, to intercede for one another (1 Tim. 2:1-2), and to offer sacrifices to God (Rom. 12:1).

Congregational polity grows from the two seeds of soul competency and the priesthood of all believers. Baptist congregations make decisions for themselves. They do not require a bishop, or a priest, or an external church organization because they, like all people who will claim it, have direct access to God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Members of the congregation are competent and responsible to govern themselves. Through the encouragement and leadership of the Holy Spirit, Baptists work together to govern the life and work of their churches.

Congregational Polity and Baptist Confessions of Faith

Baptists have explained their congregational polity in their confessions of faith since the 1600s. Early Baptists repeatedly insisted that local congregations had the power to choose their own pastors and deacons. They were reacting to government-sponsored churches that appointed church leaders without consulting local congregations. Early confessions often stated that churches had the power to settle disputes or discipline members on their own, rather than defer to external ecclesiastical courts. The main point was that Baptist churches felt they should be independent and free to make decisions for themselves.

John Smyth wrote a confession of faith in 1609 that spelled out congregational authority. Smyth stated "that the church of Christ has the power delegated to themselves of announcing the word, administering the

sacraments, appointing ministers, disclaiming them, and also excommunicating, but the last appeal is to the brethren or body of the church."⁶ Basically, the church is empowered to share the gospel, choose its own ministers, and conduct church discipline, without external interference.

Thomas Helwys penned a confession of faith in 1611. He explained "that the officers of every church or congregation are either elders (pastors), who by their office do especially feed the flock concerning their souls, or deacons, men and women, who by their office relieve the necessities of the poor and impotent brethren concerning their bodies."⁷ Furthermore, Helwys contended that these officers are to be chosen by "election and approbation of the church or congregation whereof they are members."⁸

The *Second London Confession* of 1677 affirmed the Lordship of Christ. It stated that "the Lord Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church, in whom by the appointment of the Father, all power for the calling, institution, order, or Government of the church is invested."⁹ In other words, Jesus himself called out believers to follow him in obedience and to walk together as the church.

The confession then reiterated that the church is empowered by Christ to carry out all of its tasks in the world. "To each of these Churches thus gathered, according to his mind, declared in his word, he hath given all that power and authority which is any way needful for their carrying on that order in worship, and discipline, which he had instituted."¹⁰

Again, these Baptists were working out their church polity in a time when the state churches wanted to impose strict limits on how congregations could worship, who could preach to them, and where they gathered. Baptists wanted to make clear that local congregations should be free from these controls.

By the 1900s, Southern Baptists were using the word "autonomy" to explain their commitment to local church freedom. The 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* defined the church as a "local body of baptized believers who are associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel, observing the two ordinances of Christ, committed to His teachings, exercis-

ing the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth.”

Following this definition, the confession explained Baptist polity as Southern Baptists then understood it: “This church is an autonomous body, operating through democratic processes under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In such a congregation, members are equally responsible. Its Scriptural officers are pastors and deacons.”¹¹

Congregational Polity and Local Baptist Congregations

Congregational polity means that Baptist churches are independent. They are free to choose their own ministers, to determine their own standards for church membership, to organize their worship, to select their literature, to designate their offerings, and to decide their ministries in any manner they deem best.

Officers of a local congregation may include the ministers, church council, deacons, trustees, and possibly other individuals or groups. Baptist congregations make decisions concerning the election/calling and ordination of ministers and deacons for the work of the Christian ministry independent of outside authority. In other words, no association, convention, society, or individual makes these decisions for a local congregation.

For those officers requiring ordination, members of the congregation examine the candidates. Usually, this takes the form of a question-and-answer session some time before the formal ordination service. Then, during a worship service, members of the congregation are invited to lay hands on and pray for the individuals.

Ordination offers the congregation the opportunity to set apart and commission an individual for ministry and service. Baptists are not governed by a self-perpetuating board of elders. The deacon body is to be a servant body, not a board of directors. When deacons wield power over the church, they jeopardize the principle of congregational polity and scandalize the principles of soul competency and priesthood of all believers.

As independent bodies, Baptist churches choose their own ministers. The pastor of a Baptist congregation should preach, teach, admonish, counsel, and encourage the community of believers. However, the pastor’s leadership should in no way undermine the central place of the congregation in the governance of the church. Concepts of pastoral leadership and congregational polity should be kept in delicate balance.

Church historian Rosalie Beck observed that “some Baptists in the late twentieth century absorbed the corporate world’s view of leadership, and ministers declared themselves the chief executive officers, CEOs, of their churches. Baptists need to remind themselves that although the pastor is spiritual leader of the church, he/she still has only one vote and does not possess the power to alter the decisions of the congregation.”¹² When a pastor becomes a dictator or manipulates the democratic process, congregational polity is violated.

Independence also means that each Baptist church freely determines its own doctrine. No extra-church organization can impose doctrinal positions on a local congregation. The introduction to the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* affirms that “any group of Baptists, large or small, have [sic] the inherent right to draw up for themselves and publish to the world a confession of their faith whenever they may think it advisable to do so.” Furthermore, “The sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists is the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.”¹³

However, independence could be misunderstood if taken to mean a type of rugged, John Wayne individualism. It does not mean that Baptists are to be a law unto themselves. Baptist historian Walter Shurden maintains that “Baptists never meant that their churches were independent of God, of Christ, of the leadership of the Holy Spirit or of the counsel of other Christians and churches.”¹⁴

Baptists balance their independence with a strong interdependence. Baptist churches typically cooperate together for the work of missions and evangelism. They may choose to affiliate with local associations, state conventions, and national organizations. The 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* affirms that “Christ’s

people should, as occasion requires, organize such associations and conventions as may best secure cooperation for the great objects of the kingdom of God.”¹⁵

Yet, the free cooperation of Baptist churches does not violate the principle of local church autonomy because the actions of associations, conventions, and organizations are not binding on local churches. The *Baptist Faith and Message* insists, “Such organizations have no authority over one another or over the churches. They are voluntary and advisory bodies designed to elicit, combine, and direct the energies of our people in the most effective manner.”¹⁶

The Best Applications of Congregational Polity

Discipleship: Congregational polity hinges on the participation of the members: the laity. Because of the historic emphasis on the priesthood of all believers, Baptists have long emphasized the importance of church members reaching out to the world as priests, evangelists, missionaries, teachers, ministers, servants, and in all endeavors, to be Christ’s ambassadors. Therefore, it is crucial that Baptist churches pay careful attention to instructing new believers in the faith and to discipling their members so that they may come “to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph. 4:13, NRSV).

Education: Christian education is a corollary to discipleship. Discipleship is following Christ, whereas education is an element of that following which leads to our transformation. Some churches define education as only Bible study. Christian education, however, must encompass an understanding both of the biblical text and of how that text, lived out in the body of Christ, encounters the world. This involves a study of church history, theology, and church polity. To work at its best, congregational polity requires an articulate, engaged, theologically literate, spiritually committed membership.

One problem many churches face is a false distinction between “business” matters and “spiritual” matters, as though the governance of the church is somehow unconnected to the work of the kingdom of

God. In truth, the everyday matters of the church—from choosing deacons and pastors, to organizing the budget—are profoundly spiritual issues that will shape how well the church functions as the body of Christ.

Honest Dialogue: Many Baptists, especially younger ones, ask “Why can’t we all just get along?” They deplore dissension and conflict. Often, their solution is to imitate an ostrich. They want to hide their heads in the sand or run, looking for a place where peace and harmony reign; others just give up on the church altogether. I conclude that conflict presents an opportunity for change rather than an obstacle.

Jesus promised us we would see conflict and suffering. When we bring our individuality and struggles together in corporate life, there will be differences. In the heat of the moment, it may seem easier to sweep the conflict under the rug or abdicate the decision to a strong leader. It is not a spiritual high road to ignore the conflict or to let a minister decide. Both of these options deny the responsibilities that come with being a part of the body of Christ.

The key is not how to eliminate conflict, but how to deal with conflict in a healthy manner—in other words, how to disagree with grace. Congregational polity functions best in an atmosphere of open dialogue. Church members should practice talking together about important issues that affect their faith. Dialogue can be accomplished in any number of ways. Business meetings, newsletters, roundtable discussions, and other methods of communication are crucial in the life of a Baptist church.

One congregation introduces important theological issues with dramatic presentations and invites the members to dialogue openly about the concepts raised. Some congregations have “family discussions” or “table talks” where the church can study and discuss difficult issues. Unfortunately, church business meetings often become heated because these are the only avenues for open dialogue in the life of the faith family.

These discussions should not be free-for-alls, of course. Choosing a wise moderator is extremely important. Churches should adopt a code of conduct for their community discourse, emphasizing such virtues as kindness, gentleness, respect, compassion, and

thoughtfulness. The community should not tolerate sarcasm, slander, or cruelty when it meets together as the family of God. All things should be bathed in prayer. Being Christian does not mean that we cease thinking, talking, or even disagreeing. It means that we conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Congregational polity means we cannot abdicate our personal responsibility before God to be concerned about, or to participate in, the life of the church. We must apply our whole hearts and minds to the issues we face. We must move on from milk to meat. The church must follow the pattern of Israel who “wrestled with God.”

The freedom of the local church brings with it responsibility. We are the body of Christ. We are to show Christ to the world. The blessing and the curse of congregational polity is that the local church is only as powerful as the passion of its people, its vision only as far-reaching as the gaze of its members. Congregational freedom carries with it tremendous potential that balances on the radical notion that individual believers will be conformed to the image of Christ.



Notes & Questions for Discussion

1. Leon McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 34.
2. See also Stanley J. Grenz, *The Baptist Congregation: A Guide to Baptist Belief and Practice* (Valley Forge, Judson Press, 1985), 54.
3. Ibid.
4. George W. Truett, *Baptists and Religious Liberty*, pamphlet distributed at the 96th annual meeting of the Baptist General Convention of Texas in Waco, October 27-29, 1981 (Dallas: Dallas Offset, Inc., 1981), 3.
5. McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, 44.
6. John Smyth, *Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles*, in W.L. Lumpkin, ed., *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1974), 101.
7. Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam in Holland*, 1611, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 121-22.
8. Ibid., 122.
9. *Second London Confession*, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 287.
10. Ibid.
11. “Statements of Faith of the Southern Baptist Convention,” in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 396.
12. Rosalie Beck, “The Church is Free to Make Its Own Decisions Under the Lordship of Christ,” in *Defining Baptist Convictions: Guidelines for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Charles Deweese (Franklin, TN: Providence House Publishers, 1996), 135-36.
13. *Baptist Faith and Message*, 1963, in McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, 504.
14. Walter Shurden, “Church and Association: A Search for Boundaries,” in *Baptist History and Heritage*, 14 (July 1979): 35.

15. “Baptist Faith and Message, 1963,” in McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, 516.
16. Ibid.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why is baptism for believers only important to the Christian community?
2. What is the biblical basis for congregational polity?
3. What theological concepts support congregational polity?
4. How should congregational polity shape our church’s understanding of ordination and the role of the deacon body?
5. In a church governed by congregational polity, what is the relationship between church and pastor?
6. What steps could your church take to improve honest dialogue?
7. Are there practices in our church that violate the Baptist principle of congregationalism?

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