

Church Governance Congregationalism and the Priesthood of All Believers

- based on "A theological Basis for Congregational Government"
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Historically, there have been four approaches to church government. Catholicism and the Church of England, along with a few other denominations, demonstrate the Episcopalian form of church government. Here there is a single head of the church, with the ultimate authority in the church flowing down to the congregations from that one individual (such as a bishop or pope).

With the Reformation came a second form of church government. Presbyterianism is a form of representative government; each church elects representatives to the presbytery, which controls the local congregation. Each presbytery elects representatives to a body (which varies by name depending on the denomination) that bears the authority over the local churches. The authority flows up from the churches but rests in a body outside the local congregation.

Baptists and some other evangelical denominations such as ours, have argued for and practiced a congregational form of church government. In this polity, the earthly authority of the church rests solely in the congregation. While the church may be a part of a fellowship or association of similar churches, there is no authoritative organization beyond the local church.

A final form of polity, if it can be called that, is no polity. Churches such as the Quakers argue that there should be no formal polity for a church but that the church and its members are dependent upon the moving of the Holy Spirit.

Dispensational Distinctiveness

The first theological foundation for congregationalism is the dispensational distinctiveness of the church.

In the Old Testament, there was routinely some form of hierarchical oversight of the sacrifices. Noah appears to have functioned in some form of patriarchal role (Gen. 8:20), and Job clearly functioned in that role as he sacrificed on behalf of his children (Job 1:5). Abraham was the overseer of the religious activity of the family. In Genesis 12 and 13 Abraham alone built an altar. In Genesis 18 Abraham functioned as the mediator between God and Sodom. Isaac and Jacob appear to have followed Abraham's example. Under the Mosaic Law the priesthood was developed to oversee the spirituality of the nation.

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Under Jesus Christ and the inauguration of the church age, however, one of the significant changes that took place was the elimination of the Old Testament priesthood and the new indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' teaching in the Gospel of John indicates that a significant change in the relationship between the believer and the Holy Spirit would take place with the ascension of Jesus Christ. In John 14:16, 17 Jesus declared that He would pray to the Father for "another Comforter," the "Spirit of truth" who "shall be in you." Again, in 14:25, 26 Jesus indicates that the Father's sending of the Spirit would be future. In John 15:26 Jesus indicates that He would send the Holy Spirit at some future time. In John 16:7 Jesus indicated that He must go away so that the Holy Spirit could come to the disciples. In Acts 1:5 Jesus stated, "Ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence." This indicates once again that the New Testament work of the Holy Spirit had not yet begun, but it was anticipated to begin just a few days after Christ's declaration. Acts 2:1–4 makes it clear that this specialized ministry began at Pentecost with the descent of the Holy Spirit.

The Priesthood of All Believers

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is what allows the New Testament saint to function in a way unlike any preceding dispensation. Abraham and Job served as the priests for their families. Under the Mosaic Law a single tribe was given the duties of the priesthood of the nation. In the Old Testament it appears it was imperative to have some form of mediator between God and man. In the church age, however, every believer is a priest (1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10) and Christ alone is the High Priest of the church (Heb. 2:17; 4:15; 7:26) and Mediator between God and men (Heb. 7:25; 1 Tim. 2:5). One of the themes of the book of Hebrews is the priesthood of the entire Christian commonwealth, with an emphasis on the New Testament believer entering into the very presence of God, an activity that only the High Priest could accomplish under the Law (Heb. 4:16).

The priesthood of the believer provides each church member with an equal right to direct access to God; it follows logically that these New Testament priests are entitled to equal privileges in the church. Equality before God makes men equal in their ecclesiastical standing. Unlike the Old Testament priesthood, there is no New Testament law of primogeniture; there are no favored sons who inherit thrones or the high priestly office. The government of the church is that of a spiritual brotherhood of equals.

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If church officers, in or out of the local church, carried the ultimate authority, then the priesthood of the believer would be impinged. The work of Christ makes such leaders unnecessary.⁵ Instead, the ultimate earthly authority is the congregation, following the truth of the Holy Spirit working through the Scriptures.

Without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit it is reasonable to assume that the Old Testament saints were in need of a priest and king. A nondispensational approach to ecclesiology would support an episcopalian polity. The Jewish king and priest would naturally carry over to the bishop and even pope, spiritual overseers of a less spiritual people. The nation of Israel was a mix of believing and unbelieving Jews. In the Reformed church, there is the continuing expectation of unsaved church members, who would be in need of some kind of ecclesiastical overlord. Congregationalist, however, arguing for a new indwelling presence of the Spirit and the accompanying empowering that attends this indwelling, understand that the New Testament saint has a greater independence from men and a greater dependence on God.

Regenerate Church Membership

A second theological foundation is the Congregational such as our church's requirement of a regenerate church membership. This requirement is predicated on the belief that all the members of a local church maintain a spiritual equality. This equality of all the members underlies the desire of a democratic ecclesiastical polity. "Hence, since the entire membership of the church is lifted into the plane of a divine freedom, and is subject only to Christ, it is endowed with autocracy; in its totality it elects and deposes its officers, determines all its methods of procedure, augments or diminishes its numbers by the exercise of its discipline. It projects no select guild or order of men above itself for its sovereign control, nor does it accept the imposition upon itself, from any source whatever, of such a sovereign guild."

The nondispensational approach to church membership expects a mix of saved and lost church members. This belief goes back to Augustine, who believed the church to be a "mixed body" (*corpus permixtum*) of saints and sinners. The holiness of the church is not that of its members, but that of Christ. His main illustration and proof was found in Matthew 13 in the parable of the wheat and the tares. In doing so, Augustine laid the theological foundation for the Catholic Church. Catholicism, following Augustine's teaching, came "to distinguish an invisible church within the one, holy, visible, catholic church, outside of which is neither possibility of salvation nor knowledge of the truth."

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The Reformers made little improvement in this area. Having saints and sinners in the same church was not a problem for Luther. He accepted, with some modification, the Catholic concept of the invisible church. Luther preferred the word *abscondita* (hidden) over the usual *invisibilis* (invisible). Only God can know precisely who are the members of the church, although the true believers (the *fideles*) can recognize what is the true church by the presence of its marks. It is only in later Lutheran theology that Calvin's distinction between the visible and invisible church was drawn. Calvin's ecclesiology made some improvements over Luther's, but the linkage of church and state and the distinction between a visible and invisible church maintained the problem of a church filled with the unregenerate. Calvin declared, "In this Church are included many hypocrites, who have nothing of Christ but the name and appearance; many persons ambitious, avaricious, envious, slanderous, and dissolute in their lives, who are tolerated for a time, either because they cannot be convicted by a legitimate process, or because discipline is not always maintained with sufficient vigour. As it is necessary, therefore, to believe that Church, which is invisible to us, and known to God alone, so this Church, which is visible to men, we are commanded to honour and maintain communion with it."

If the church consists of both saved and unsaved, then there is good reason not to give the vote to the congregation. Without the requirement of a regenerate church membership, the vote of the congregation could be worldly, selfish, and unspiritual. The need of a spiritual overlord would be as much a necessity in the New Testament church as it was under the patriarchs and Moses' Law.

Autonomy of the Local Church

The autonomy of the local church is predicated upon congregational government. The episcopal church system imposes an authority from outside the local congregation upon the local churches. The presbyterian form of church government still places an outside body over the local churches. These two forms of church government, especially the episcopalian form, are typical outgrowths of an attempt to maintain some form of continuity between Israel and the church.

Among the churches like the Baptists, however, the authority rests in the members of the local congregation, because these churches see no higher earthly authority than the congregation.

For Baptists there is no submission of a church to any authority beyond itself. Even when a member of an association or fellowship, each church maintains its autonomy. In such fellowships and associations, each individual church has a vote in the fellowship. In their practice, then, Biblically oriented fellowships of

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churches imitate the congregational government of the churches in that fellowship. Nothing outside the church has authority over the church.

Even the New Testament process of church discipline demonstrates the autonomy of the church and the priesthood of the believer. Under Moses, certain sins resulted in the execution of the sinner. Not so in the New Testament. The ultimate church discipline extends only to the exclusion of the person from the membership of the church. Nowhere did Jesus Christ or the disciples establish a court other than the local congregation. Apostles and pastors exerted their authority not as lords of the conscience but as brothers (1 Pet. 5:3).