

Congregationalism

June 3, 2018

The purpose of this evening is to present to you what is meant by congregationalism. This is one of the topics of the ten weeks of gathering together to help you answer the one question: Should Meadow Creek Church adopt Elder Leadership?

The two books I used for references are 'Don't Fire Your Church Members' (The Case for Congregationalism) by Jonathan Leeman and 'Understanding the Congregations Authority' also by Jonathan Leeman.

The first week Craig spoke, he defined a number of terms, three of which I will review for you so that we understand what is meant by them when I use them.

Congregation - the members of a local church who serve as the final authority in disputes, doctrine, discipline and membership, while trusting and obeying its leaders.

Member – Christians identified with the local gathering or community of believers who regularly meet together for worship and mutual encouragement, who love one another and who are submitted to one another for the care of their souls.

Elder/Pastor – Christ-like men chosen by the congregation who give themselves to:

- praying and the preaching & teaching of God's Word.
- shepherding or caring for the members of the body by knowing, feeding, protecting and leading them.

- overseeing the life of the church.
- setting a good example by their lives.
- raising up faithful men to serve and lead the church.

Now we can move forward...

Congregationalism is a form of church government. Typically, we think of the topic of church government as pertaining to who possesses the final authority in a church to make decisions. There are 4 basic positions or common models of church government.

- 1) Elder rule advocates say final authority belongs to the elders of an independent church.
- 2) Presbyterian - give authority to gatherings of elders over several churches.
- 3) Episcopalian (Anglicans, Methodists, Roman Catholics, etc.) – give a bishop or Pope authority over several churches.
- 4) Congregational – say the Bible gives this final authority to the gathered congregation as led by the pastors/elders.

Now although the major differences in these 4 models is determined by where final earthly decision making resides, all 4 agree that Jesus and His Word possesses final ultimate authority. What divides these positions is who makes final decisions on matters like receiving members, church discipline, removing a disqualified pastor/elder, changing a statement of faith, approving a budget and so on. Also, in the congregational model it is not simply about decision making or as some think 'voting'. More broadly it is about work and *who possesses responsibility to do the work.*

Think about it this way....there are different exercise classes, one in which the trainer does the workout while the whole class watches, and another in which the trainer demonstrates the exercises and then tells everyone to do them. Which class will be healthier? Or think of two different construction crews - one where only the foreman works & everyone watches, and another where the foreman demonstrates or instructs and the whole crew works together. Which crew will build more houses?

So likewise, in congregationalism the church members maintain final say on decisions concerning what they believe and who they are as a church body, but the pastor/elders must lead the congregation through those very decisions. Congregationalism does not diminish the pastoral role, it just adds another office called "member". The church is its members which have far more to do than just vote since theirs is the work of representing Christ 24/7 and protecting the gospel in each other's lives every day. To do this, they need to know the gospel well enough to protect it. They also must know the members well enough to know they are living by the gospel. Members are authorized and accountable in human terms for making sure that churches are established, protected, strengthened, and preserved from one generation to the next.

Therefore, to accomplish this, there are two parts to congregationalism. The church member's part and the pastor/elder part.

The member part – They are to watch over the church, keeping it consecrated to God just like Adam was to "work" and "watch" over the garden and Israel's priests were to "work" and "watch" over the temple, as a holy place, as the dwelling place of God by maintaining and protecting. This is accomplished mainly by sharing the gospel, affirming

the gospel, admitting people into membership and protecting the church from heresy.

Pastor/elder part – to train members in doing their job according to Ephesians 4:11-:12 (*it was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service so that the body of Christ can be built up*). So the two work together – pastors train and members do the work of the ministry.

The question you may ask is: Is congregationalism biblical? Do we as members have both the authority and ability to do the job as church members?

First here are some references that show that the authority has been given to us. Matt 16:17-19 (*Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of Heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in Heaven.*)

--Here in order to build His church, Jesus gives Peter, who represents the apostles, the keys for binding and loosing. The keys give the authority.

Matt 18:15-20 (*If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be*

bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in Heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in Heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.) --Here Jesus gives the local church authority in a case of church discipline. Keep in mind that the 'you' in verse 18 is plural. It's like 'you all'.

1Cor 5:4-5 won't read - but Paul is not telling the leaders to remove the unrepentant adulterer from the church, he tells the church to assemble in Christ' name and do it.

Therefore, the gathered church possesses the keys of binding and loosing. This is rendering judgment of what is a right gospel confession and who is or isn't a true gospel confessor. They don't make the gospel what it is or make a person a Christian or not. The keys allow local churches to write and affirm statements of faith, which define the gospel. And they allow churches to add or remove names in their membership, which helps to define who the people of God are.

2Cor 2:5-7 (If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent – not to put it too severely. The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.) --Here Paul refers to a case of church discipline having been decided by a majority.

Gal 1:6-9 (I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you in to confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from Heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we

preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!) -- Here Paul treats the Galation churches as capable of removing even him – an apostle if he preaches a wrong gospel.

Now here is a scripture reference to show where we get the ability to do our job. 1Cor 2:10-16 (*...but God has revealed it to us by His Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?" But we have the mind of Christ.*)

The New Testament affirms that the Holy Spirit dwells in every believer to separate the true gospel from the false gospel, or the true knowledge of God from the false knowledge. This scripture referring to the natural man – unconverted who lacks supernatural life and wisdom verses the spiritual man who through illumination of the Word, the Holy Spirit provides believers the capacity to discern truth which the spiritually dead

are unable to comprehend. This does not mean we don't need teachers or that understanding does not require hard work.

This gives us as believers the authority and ability to be Christ's priest-king. A priest-king is one who rules on behalf of a greater king, God.

The priest-king mediates Gods rule and works to protect what is Holy.

A few other scriptures that show we have both the authority and the ability are: 1John 4:1-2 which talks about testing the spirits and 2Peter 3: 1-2 which talks about guarding from false teaching.

So the question many may have with congregationalism is: Who trains the congregation to do their job and are we putting the church decisions into the hands of members who some may be less mature Christians? Remember in Ephesians 4:11-12 (*Jesus gave some to be pastors and teachers for the training of the saints in the work of the ministry to build up the body of Christ.*) Therefore, the job of pastor/elder should be to teach, explain, shepherd and move their members toward maturity and the ability to make good decisions and therefore use their authority maturely. We also have the command to submit to authority in Hebrews 13: 17 (*obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be no advantage to you.*)

So in summary the differences between congregational and non-congregational churches are as follows:

Congregational

Non-Congregational

-trains & strengthens Christians by giving them a job 7 days a week.

-forces Christians to study the gospel so they can recognize counterfeits and then do the work of protecting the churches gospel witness.

-requires fellowship because it makes members responsible for one another.

-weakens Christians by taking away their job Mon – Sat. Thus the title of the book “Don’t fire your church members.

-tempts Christians to complacency and nominalism and weakens their defenses against false teaching by removing all but very few leaders.

-depletes fellowship in churches because it makes the oversight of souls entirely the work of pastors.

The benefits of congregationalism guards against nominalism, promotes Christian growth and equips believers for fulfilling the great commission.

And so, it is by pastor/elders praying and the preaching & teaching of God’s Word; shepherding or caring for the members of the body by knowing, feeding, protecting and leading them and by the members following the pastor/elders leading that the members best use their authority and ability given by God to make decisions and function as a church body in congregational churches.