

On Congregationalism

By Joel Kurz

“Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” Galatians 6:1-2

Are you dating the church? Pastor Joshua Harris begins his (very helpful) book, *Why Church Matters*, with this question. What happens when you “date” for too long without marriage in view? Well, we’ve seen it hundreds of times:

“Is she really what I want?”

“Is he going to be a good father?”

“Is she as pretty as other girls?”

“He just annoys me.”

“Why do I have to commit to just one?”

What happens when humans are in an endless dating scenarios? They become professional critics of the other person, and can become increasingly frustrated with him or her as they endlessly explore the question of commitment. Every couple must have a healthy dose of pre-marriage dating, time to explore whether or not this person will make a Godly husband or wife, but at some point, sooner or later, the couple needs to either leap into marriage and commit their lives or get out.

The point of this short paper is not a treatise against “dating-with-no-marriage-in-view.” As important as that is, the point of this paper is rather a plea for each member to understand their place within the visible church and why commitment matters. To use Harris’ term, “Dating the Church” with no “marriage” in view has devastating results.

This brings me to a second question: *why do you attend a church service on Sunday mornings?* As a matter of fact, why does anyone attend a church service on Sunday mornings? Is congregation merely a collection of warm bodies, filed in rows, quietly listening, afterward enjoying a cup of coffee and conversation, and then going home? Are we mere spectators? Is this nothing more than an opportunity to be encouraged or to make friends? Or is the congregation something more than all of this?

Let’s set this question aside for a moment and talk “church polity.” Our church polity is going to help you understand the value of commitment to a local congregation.

Congregationalism

The Garden Church is a “congregational” church. This doesn’t just mean that we like our congregation, though we do enjoy the people in this church. “Congregationalism,” an old term which refers to our polity, or the order of church government. We believe that the Bible not only tells us who to worship and how to worship, but also how this worshipping body ought to be ordered and structured. It would be

worth further study to look back into our Reformation history and read how the Protestant church established various forms of “church government” once the reformers broke away from the Roman Catholic Church (many at this point would add that, in reality, the “Roman Catholic Church” broke off from the true doctrines of the True Church). In any case, we don’t have room in this short paper to provide a complete history and overview of each form of church government but will provide you with a concise way to understand church government. Often, not always, the name of each “form of government” indicates the final earthly authority for discipline and doctrine. For example:

Episcopal: Authority is in the “Episkopos” (bishop)

Presbyterian: Authority is in the “Presbuteros” (elder), or better yet, a plurality of elders which oversee a number of churches.

Congregational: Authority is in the “Congregation.”

Allow me to briefly talk about the difference between leading and final earthly authority. The congregational form of government which we have adopted as a church (which, of course, we believe to most closely align with how we understand Scripture), is an Elder Led, Deacon Served, Congregationally Ruled Baptist Church.

Elder Led

A thorough defense of the Elder-led church deserves another paper but for the sake of clarity, in the Bible churches are shepherded, not by one pastor, but by a plurality of pastors/elders¹. The terms Pastor/Elder/Bishop are synonymous². This means that the three terms do not refer to three separate offices but rather three functions of one office.

It is clear in the pages of the New Testament that Elders are to be Godly men who meet the qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Elders are called to lead and feed congregations through servant leadership; the congregation is called to obey their leaders³. Much of the abuse within congregational churches come as a result of churches drifting into a strange type of congregationally-led government where pastors “obey” the congregation and “Business Meetings” turn into an all out brawl. No, congregations must choose elders whom they can trust and the congregation must let them lead and trust their leadership. If a congregation cannot trust an elder’s leadership, they must remove the man of his office.

Deacon Served

Deacons (literally “servants”) were the table waiters in the book of Acts. A complaint arose among the Hellenist Christians that their widows were being overlooked in the distribution of food. The Apostles⁴ declared that they must not forsake the ministry of the Word and ordered the church to elect deacons. The “deacon” was then established as a second office within the local church as deacons and deaconesses were called to serve the “non-Word” ministries of the church. In our church, deacons handle all essential, yet non-

¹ Acts 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; Titus 1:5; James 5:14

² 1 Peter 5:1-2

³ 1 Peter 5:1-4; Hebrews 13:17

⁴ Apostles, in some ways, were prototypes of the elders who would be leading the churches. The office of “Apostle” ceased while leading/feeding the church became the responsibility of Elders.

Word, ministries which would otherwise become a distraction for the elders. This includes setting up for worship services, finances, benevolence, and hospitality. Deacons must meet the qualifications set forth in 1 Timothy 3.

Congregationally Ruled

What we discover in Scripture is that the congregation does not simply make up the “attenders” of an event put on by elders and deacons, but serve as an integral part of the governing structure. While you may have thought quite a bit about Elders and Deacons, I wonder if you ever considered God’s role for the congregation in the local church’s governance.

Jesus’ teaching

“He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Matthew 16:15-20

In these verses, Jesus asks Peter about His own identity. Peter responds that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. “On this rock” Jesus says, “I will build my church (ekklesia).” On the rock, not of Peter the man, but of the truth contained in his confession. This means that the church is a literal gathering (ekklesia means assembly) and that this gathering is centered around the truth of Christ, the Gospel. Are you part of this “building?” One hundred and fifty years ago Charles Spurgeon said that a brick is worthless if it is not part of the house. A brick demonstrates that it is a genuine brick only when it is added into the structure. Christians are these bricks in the church which God is building. And while this church is indeed global and invisible, it is also local and visible, meaning Christians are people connected locally as “bricks” in visible churches.

Additionally, in Matthew 16, Jesus gives something to this assembly. He gives them the keys of the Kingdom. This is where the question of earthly authority comes in: what are these keys and to whom are they given? The keys of the Kingdom signify the earthly authority of “binding and loosing” which reflects the heavenly reality. The heavenly reality determines who is part of the true and invisible church while the earthly authority determines who is part of the visible church.

The Earthly Authority Regarding Church Discipline

The keys are handed, not to Peter the man, but to the church which will be built on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets. The keys contain the ability to “bind and loose.” What is this binding and loosing? We see our first example of it in Matthew two chapters later.

*¹⁵ “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you **bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.**”* Matthew 18:15-18 (emphasis added)

Binding and loosing determines who represents Jesus as the church on earth. Practically, this is the admittance of individuals into membership of the local church as well as disciplining members and excommunicating⁵ them from the local church. Who has this final authority to do so? Some would say that the keys are in the hands of the elders. We believe, from a careful understanding of Matthew 16 and 18, that these keys are given, not to the elders alone, but to the church, the assembly. Jesus said, “take it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church...” At the very core, congregationalism means that the members of the church themselves are ultimately responsible for disciplining members.

The book of Acts tracks the explosion of the church and, after Acts, a large majority of the remaining books of the New Testament are letters written to churches. In 1 Corinthians 5, we see another example of the congregation exercising their authority. In this case, there is a man who is having sexual relations with his father’s wife. Instead of mourning this sin, the church seems to be celebrating, possibly seeking to demonstrate how gracious they are toward sinners. In today’s church culture, if this were happening in our own church and a respected leader were writing to confront it, to whom do you think he would address the letter? Probably the Senior Pastor or maybe the Elders. What is interesting in 1 Corinthians is that this letter is addressed, not to the elders, but rather to the church members themselves. Paul reprimands the church members for tolerating such sin and quickly exhorts them to deal with it. How are they to deal with it? Paul is clear: “When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus...you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of his flesh so that his Spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” The congregation has the duty and authority to excommunicate this unrepentant brother and, essentially, let Satan be his Father as he so desires. The goal, of course, is not to destroy him but to discipline him so that he might be saved. Excommunication ultimately hopes that the unrepentant will experience the coldness of sin, fall on their knees, and return to the warmth of the Body. The members of the church in Corinth were called to be much more than simply a member of a community group. They were called to more than simply establishing accountability relationships with one another and occasionally exhorting and rebuking one another. The members of the church in Corinth were actually be responsible for the spiritual state of their fellow members and, when gathered as the assembly under the Lord Jesus, they had authority to remove from themselves individuals who no longer gave evidence of faith in Christ.

Throughout the New Testament, church members are called to “gently correct brothers and sisters in sin” (Galatians 6:1) and they are commanded “to not forsake this assembly, as some are in the habit of doing, but rather to encourage and strengthen one another in good works” (Hebrews 10).

In 1918, an old member of Charles Spurgeon’s Tabernacle wrote a letter to the members of the church nearly thirty years after Spurgeon’s death. The letter bemoaned the decline of the Tabernacle since the days of the great preacher. One of the primary reasons cited in the letter is not the loss of a great preacher, but rather the removal of church discipline from the hands of the congregation. Instead, the elders had instituted a “Court of Conciliation” to handle disciplinary cases. The old member writes, “The Church is the proper and constitutional Court, and no other exists either for members, or officers, or pastors.” To that I reply, Amen.

⁵ ex-communication, putting them out of the communion of the church. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church of old, this does not mean that the church has the power to remove them of eternal salvation. It simply means that this individual no longer gives evidence of regeneration and must be removed from membership and the Lord’s Supper.

The Earthly Authority Regarding Doctrine

⁶ I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— ⁷ not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. ⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. ⁹ As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

Galatians 1:6-7

False teaching was being tolerated in the church in Galatia. The Gospel was being distorted and, again, Paul doesn't write to other elders but to the members of the church themselves: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you." Paul then exhorts these members to take the responsibility given to them and remove these teachers from their midst. Congregations, therefore, not only have authority over who is recognized as a member but also final responsibility to assure that sound doctrine is taught and that solid teachers are teaching.

Questions and Answers

Can congregations be wrong? Yes. No earthly authority will rule with perfection. As a matter of fact, Paul even gives a "heads up" that this will happen in one of the letters he write to a young pastor: "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions ... as for you...fulfill your ministry" (2 Timothy 4:2-3). Congregations are not inerrant and may make wrong decisions. As a matter of fact, Jonathan Edwards, the great preacher of the Great Awakening, was fired from his own congregation. History tells us that they made a wrong decision. Our solution, however, is not to reinvent God's design for the church but to train men and women in sound doctrine, equipping them to rule well, and bestowing the congregation with the weight of responsibility to which the Bible calls them.

How does being "baptist" play in to our understanding of Congregationalism?

Congregational churches believe that the visible church must be a regenerate church. There are many other reasons we practice "believers' baptism" rather than "infant baptism," (which deserves another position paper) but on this note we would never baptize, and therefore bring into membership, an individual who is too young to understand the Gospel and take up their role as a Biblical member of the local church. Children of members certainly enjoy covenantal blessings of being a child of a member and are subsequently part of the church family in that sense, however they are not members of the local church themselves in regards to the Biblical role of congregational authority.

If congregational authority is not authority to lead, then what is it? Congregational authority allows members to veto bad leadership. The congregation should elect Godly men to lead them yet if that man is preaching anything other than the Gospel, or even more broadly, if that man is leading the church in an unbiblical fashion, the congregation has the authority to protest and remove that man from his leadership role. The congregation therefore protects the discipline and doctrine of the church.

A Word of Caution: The Final earthly authority rests in your lap as a church member. Use that authority with care and caution, for Satan will tempt you to abuse the authority that God has given you.

Congregationalism at The Garden Church

How do we as a local church practice a congregational form of church government? Below are a few practical ways that we believe is most helpful in carrying out the principles of God's Word.

We have a constitution. Our constitution is a non-inspired document designed to help us remain faithful to the inspired text of God's Word. It serves as an accountability tool to help guide the church and to keep us from swerving into sin. The constitution outlines the role of elders and deacons, and the role of the congregation as well as our understanding of who should be a member, how decisions are made in members meetings, and how members can remove elders from leadership.

We have membership. How do we know who represents Jesus' body, the visible church? How do we determine who is responsible to take up this responsibility? Who are the elders called to watch over and who will they give an account for? Over which individuals are Christians commanded to maintain watchfulness? "Membership" is simply a word used to define who these brothers and sisters are. Marks of membership include a church covenant which outlines the Biblical responsibilities of all Christians as they relate to other. They also include baptism, the Lord's Supper, attendance, and love for one another.

We have members' meetings. These are meetings in which we have the opportunity to practice carrying out the duties of local church governance. Members meetings are led by elders who have been elected by the congregation. Elders are responsible to lead the way in matters of discipline and doctrine and will have often done a significant amount of work in preparing to lead the congregation at these meetings. The primary task of the congregation at these meetings is to carry out discipline and excommunication as well as voting to affirm new members. Additionally, members vote on elders and deacons at these meetings. Other issues are occasionally discussed which include budgeting, major purchases, and reports by various ministry teams.

Conclusion

While the local church is to be led by elders and served by deacons, the congregation is God's earthly authority in all matters of discipline and doctrine. At the end of the day, church polity is not just about systems and structures but is about the Gospel. The church is God's plan to bring the Gospel to the world and, when gathered, becomes a manifestation of God. Godly leaders, servants who act justly, and a responsible and active congregation comprise a church who makes much of Jesus. The goal of congregationalism, for us, is that Jesus would be glorified. With that, two final exhortations:

First, don't simply attend, participate. Dinner times in my house do not involve one parent making all of the food, setting the table, serving, cleaning the table, and doing the dishes. No, we all take part in the meal, each according to his or her own ability. Some help set the table, we serve one another, others help clean the table and do dishes. This is how a family dinner works. The church is a family who eats together. We don't always eat physical food (though our potlucks are a great reminder of this spiritual reality), but rather we feed on Christ. We each have a part in this meal.

Second, don't just participate, take responsibility for the Gospel witness of our church. Watch over the souls of your fellow members. Pick up a membership directory and commit to praying for regularly every single member. Encourage one another in good works. Correct one another with gentleness. And finally, whether in the pulpit, in a Sunday School class, or small group: Protect the Gospel!