

### **An Affirmation of Congregational Polity**

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I propose to define and to defend congregational polity as follows: it is that form of church government in which final human authority rests with the local or particular congregation when it gathers for decision-making. This means that decisions about membership, leadership, doctrine, worship, conduct, missions, finances, property, relationships, and the like are to be made by the gathered congregation except when such decisions have been delegated by the congregation to individual members or to groups of members.

The term “final human authority” suggests that the church is under divine authority, and this is most often described in terms of the lordship of Christ and the leadership of the Holy Spirit. The term “the local or particular congregation” is designed to identify a congregation in distinction from ecclesiastical judicatories or denominational bodies. The term “gathers for decision-making” implies that the whole congregation is responsible for such decision-making and that each member has a voice or vote in such. Consequently,

It is the intention under congregational polity that the congregation govern itself under the lordship of Jesus Christ (Christocracy) and with the leadership of the Holy Spirit (pneumatophoria) with no superior or governing ecclesiastical bodies (autonomy) and with every member having a voice in its affairs and its decisions (democracy).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>James Leo Garrett, Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, 2d ed. (BIBAL Press: North Richland Hills, TX, 2001), 2:644.

Congregational polity can be practiced according to different patterns. This is true both externally and internally. In terms of relations with other congregations, such congregations may practice either “*independent congregational polity*” or “*cooperative or interdependent congregational polity*.” According to the former, a congregation chooses “not to associate on sustained basis with other congregations or to affiliate with and support denominational or interdenominational bodies for missionary, educational, benevolent, or other purposes.” According to the latter, that is, the cooperative or the independent congregational polity, a congregation freely chooses “to associate with other congregations ‘of like faith and order,’” to use a historic term, “and to affiliate with and support denominational bodies for missionary, educational, benevolent, or other purposes.”<sup>2</sup>

In terms of the internal life of the congregation, congregational polity admits of different structures such as the pastor-deacon structure, the pastor-staff-deacon structure, the pastor-deacons-committee structure, and the pastor-deacons-committee-church council structure. In every case, however, the units within the structure are subject to the final authority of the congregation.

Having now defined what I intend to discuss, congregational polity, I would focus now on four areas: first, the New Testament, second, church history, third, theology, and, finally, practice.

The question needs to be asked, “In the New Testament are there passages which in some sense relate to or are suggestive of congregational polity?” There are those who seriously take the position that the New Testament, or the Bible as a whole, has really nothing to say on the subject of polity and that in discussions of polity we can virtually ignore the Scriptures. This

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 2:644-45.

question that I raise is designed to evoke an answer. Are there texts that speak enough on the subject of congregational governance that we can say they intentionally relate to this subject and have a direct, and not a merely inferential, relationship to this subject of governance? Let me answer by examining six passages which I believe to be in this category. Are there other texts that in a more secondary way may imply certain things about the life and governance of congregations that are not encompassed here? Yes. The study of these six texts appear in full form in *Perspectives on Church Government*, edited by Chad O. Brand and R. Stanton Norman.<sup>3</sup> There you will find all the details of the study of the English language commentaries on Matthew, Acts, and First and Second Corinthians. From that study I have found a high level of agreement among the commentators on the role of the congregation in relation to these six texts in the New Testament. These commentators range from Roman Catholic to Pentecostal. Time permits only a summary of the findings from that study.

### **The New Testament**

#### Matthew 18:15-20

As to the words “tell it to the church” in Matthew 18:17, although some commentators take them to refer to the Jewish synagogue, and others to the universal church, the majority of modern commentators—some thirty-four that I have examined written between the years 1879 and 1998—takes these words to refer to a local or a particular church, or a congregation of believers.

Matthew 18:15-17 prescribes that, when among Christians, offenses, be they moral or relational, cannot be resolved through interpersonal or small-group efforts, they are to be referred

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<sup>3</sup>Chad O. Brand and R. Stanton Norman, eds. *Perspectives on Church Government* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2004), 158-70.

to the particular congregation, the decision of which is to be final and to determine the continuance or non-continuance of the offender in the congregation. Therefore, we conclude that this text grants the authority of Jesus to such congregational decision-making and endorses such congregational governance.

Matthew 18:18, concerning binding and loosing—a bit different from 16:19—seems to refer to church discipline, and the great majority of recent commentators applies the binding and loosing to the whole congregation. Concerning Matthew 18:19-20, referring to agreement on earth and the presence of Christ, three interpretations are to be found among modern commentators. First, the passage refers in general to God’s granting of agreed upon petitionary or intercessory prayer. Second, the text refers to prayer, specifically in relation to church discipline. Third (and this is the trend of recent commentators on Matthew), it refers not to prayer, but to disciplinary decisions or negotiated settlements having heavenly approval. The second and third interpretations connect the promise of Jesus’ presence with church discipline.

#### Acts 6:3

As to Acts 6:3, the modern and even pre-modern commentators on Acts are almost unanimous in holding that the Seven were chosen by the entire congregation at Jerusalem.

#### Acts 13:2-3

The words, “they were worshipping,” in v. 2, are taken to be the congregation by most commentators, whereas the words, “they placed their hands on them,” in v. 3, have been taken by most commentators to refer to Symeon, Lucius, and Manaen. The laying on of hands has been interpreted variously, as consecration, as blessing, and, by the majority of interpreters, as

commissioning. The gathered, fasting, praying, and worshipping Antioch church is thoroughly involved in the commissioning and release of Barnabas and Saul.

#### Acts 15:22

In Acts 15 the account of the council or conference in Jerusalem, necessitated by the query from the Antioch church about the necessity of circumcising Gentile converts, the selection of Judas and Silas in v. 22 has been understood in three ways in the commentaries. First, as a selection by “the apostles and elders” from their own ranks. Second, as nomination by the apostles and elders and confirmation by the entire church. Third, the view held by the majority of commentators, as selection by the entire congregation, including the apostles and elders.

#### First Corinthians 5:2

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul shames the Corinthian congregation by saying that grief or mourning leading to church discipline in the case of incest should have been the congregational response rather than the arrogance of permissive inaction (v. 2). Frequently commentators have interpreted the excommunication called for as the action of the Corinthian congregation.

#### Second Corinthians 2: 6

This text refers to “the punishment already imposed by the majority” (NIV) on the offender as being “enough,” and hence he needs now to receive forgiveness, comfort, and love. Numerous, especially recent, exegetes have taken “majority” to imply a differing minority that desired either a more severe or less a less severe punishment, but other exegetes have rendered “majority” as “the many” or “the main body of the church.” In either case congregational polity is represented by the text.

### The History of Christianity

The story of the development of the monarchical episcopate, the various metropolitans and patriarchs of ancient Catholic Christianity, and the claims to and exercise of Roman primacy, with all of its implications, is an important story that cannot be retold in detail here. Nor can more than passing notice be given to the fact that Martin Luther issued in 1523 a short treatise<sup>4</sup> in which he advocated congregational polity, something that he himself did not consistently follow later. Nor can we probe deeply into the Anabaptists, for whom, although it may have been widely practiced among them, congregational polity was not a central or core belief.

Rather it is to English Separatism and English Independency that one must look for the matrix of the Baptist advocacy and practice of congregational polity. Henry Ainsworth, a Separatist, very clearly spelled out the essential features of congregational polity. The same was true of the Separatists' document *The True Confession* 1596 and also of John Robinson, who "stood", as Timothy George has said, "at the convergence of" Separatism and Independency.<sup>5</sup> The Pilgrim Fathers planted congregational polity in New England, and the *Savoy Declaration* 1658 aptly summarized the basic features of congregationalism.

That Baptists from their beginnings espoused congregational polity can be demonstrated both from their confessions of faith—the English being even more explicit at this point than the American, and by the writings of Baptist authors. For example, Francis Wayland,<sup>6</sup> Edward T.

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<sup>4</sup>*That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture.* Found in *Luther's Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 39, *Church and Ministry*, vol. 1, ed. Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 301-14.

<sup>5</sup>Timothy George, *John Robinson and the English Separatist Tradition*, National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion Dissertation Series, no. 1 (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1982), 159.

<sup>6</sup>*Notes on the Principles and Practice of Baptist Churches* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman, and Co., 1857).

Hiscox,<sup>7</sup> John L. Dagg,<sup>8</sup> J. M. Pendleton,<sup>9</sup> E. C. Dargon,<sup>10</sup> William Roy McNutt,<sup>11</sup> Norman Maring and Winthrop Hudson,<sup>12</sup> Lee McCoy,<sup>13</sup> all of these have written specifically with regard to congregational polity. Within at least thirty-five different Protestant denominational bodies in the United States other than the Baptist conventions, it is said that congregational polity is being practiced.

### **Theology**

Turning now to theology proper, we should ask to what extent and how congregational polity is related to the doctrine of the church and to other Christian doctrines. First, when one examines representative Baptist definitions of a Christian church, including those by Hiscox,<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>*The Baptist Church Directory: A Guide to the Doctrines and Discipline, Officers, and Ordinances, Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches* (New York: Sheldon and Co., 1860), 56, 240.

<sup>8</sup>*A Treatise on Church Order* (Charleston, S. C.: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1858; rpt.: Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books 1982), 80-83, 263-74.

<sup>9</sup>*Church Manual*. Idem, *The Church: Its Polity and Ordinances* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1879).

<sup>10</sup>*Ecclesiology: A Study of the Churches* (Louisville: Charles T. Dearing, 1897), 34, 46, 107, 118-24.

<sup>11</sup>*Polity and Practice in Baptist Churches* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1935), 21-37.

<sup>12</sup>*A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1963).

<sup>13</sup>*Understanding Baptist Polity* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1964), 3-4, 6.

<sup>14</sup>*The Baptist Church Directory*, 13. Idem, *The Standard Manual for Baptist Churches* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1890), 10.

Pendleton,<sup>15</sup> J. R. Graves,<sup>16</sup> George McDaniel,<sup>17</sup> William R. McNutt,<sup>18</sup> H. E. Dana,<sup>19</sup> Everett C. Goodwin,<sup>20</sup> one finds that only a few of these brief definitions clearly allude to congregational polity, but others seem to imply or infer it. Although congregational polity among Baptists has developed diverse internal or structural patterns, to be Baptist has been to affirm and practice such polity.

Second, congregational polity is connected with the priesthood of all Christians, especially when such polity is understood as the congregational governance by all the believers-members. There may be a connection also between the denials of the priesthood of all Christians in favor of the clerical priesthood or pastoral authoritarianism and the denial of congregational polity by adopting another form of polity. If all believers are to exercise the “royal priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:9) through the offering of spiritual sacrifices, then why should not those same believers, who are priests, together participate in and be responsible for the basic decision-making of the congregation?

Third, belatedly in the latter half of the twentieth century Baptists began to give attention to spiritual gifts as contemporary reality. Even though they have not been united on the question as to whether the extraordinary gifts—tongues, interpretation of tongues, miracles, healing—ceased to be given at the end of the apostolic era or have continued to be given even to the

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<sup>15</sup>*Church Manual: Designed for the Use of Baptist Churches* (repr. Ed.: Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1878), 7.

<sup>16</sup>*Old Landmarkism: What Is It?* 2d ed. (Texarkana, AR-TX: Baptist Sunday School Committee, 1928; orig. publ. 1880), 29-34, 35, 53, 64, 80.

<sup>17</sup>*The People Called Baptists* (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention), 42.

<sup>18</sup>*Polity and Practice in Baptist Churches*, 26-27.

<sup>19</sup>*A Manual of Ecclesiology* (Kansas City, KS: Central Seminary Press), 138.

<sup>20</sup>*The New Hiscox Guide for Baptist Churches* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1995), 1.

present,<sup>21</sup> Baptists have nevertheless increasingly affirmed that to every Christian is given at least one spiritual gift and that he/she is obligated to exercise such for the common good. Should not those who exercise spiritual gifts participate in the decision-making of the congregation?

Fourth, the New Testament epistles—Paul, Peter, Hebrews—contain clear mandates for Christians to grow and increase toward maturity. Churches devoted to the spiritual growth of their members should indeed provide for them every available incentive for growth in the midst of a secular and sometimes hostile society. Part of the maturing process can be participation in the decision-making of the congregation. By serving on committees, workgroups, and ministry teams as well as by sharing in congregational meetings, in which all members are truly seeking the mind and will of Christ, believers can grow in faith and understanding and in love and fellowship. By such growth they also identify more fully with the message, the ministry, and the mission of the congregation itself.

Fifth, the Christian mandate for witnessing is expressed particularly in the high priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17, in the Great Commission in its various forms, and in 1 Peter 2.9. The pioneer among German Baptists, Johann Gerhard Oncken, declared again and again, “Every Baptist a missionary.”<sup>22</sup> During the latter twentieth century the training of church members for personal evangelism among Southern Baptists was increasingly practiced. Fisher H. Humphreys has asserted that the most important change for Southern Baptists toward the end of the twentieth century was “the sweeping introduction of short-term missions [defined as from a “few days to a

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<sup>21</sup>Some Baptists have agreed with Reformed and Dispensationalist theologians as to the post-apostolic cessation of the extraordinary gifts, while others have agreed with Pentecostal, Charismatic, and Charismatic Roman Catholic theologians that the extraordinary gifts are given in the modern era. See Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 2d ed., 2:221-26.

<sup>22</sup>“*Jeder Baptist ein Missionar*” and “*jedes Mitglied als Missionar*,” as reported in Günter Balders, *Theurer Bruder Oncken: Das Leben Johann Gerhard Onckens in Bildern und Dokumenten*, 2d ed. (Wuppertal and Kassel: Oncken Verlag, 1984), 92.

few years by volunteers”] into Baptist life.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, if more and more members of Baptist churches are witnessing in their communities, going likewise to places in North America, or going overseas for short-term mission tasks with fellow Christians and returning with new zeal for and commitment to global evangelization, is it tenable to hold that they should be deprived of meaningful participation in the decision-making of their congregations while a domineering pastor or power-hungry deacons or ruling elders or an oligarchical few preempt that decision-making?

Sixth, it is a mistaken notion to assume that congregational polity, when it is properly practiced, jeopardizes or cripples the legitimate roles of the ordained ministers serving the congregation. There is no either/or choice between congregational polity and the fruitful work of ordained ministry. The earliest Baptist documents affirmed both of these as essential to Baptist life.<sup>24</sup> According to Franklin M. Segler, “Pastoral authority is more an authority of influence than an authority of office.” It “grows out of the pastor’s character and spiritual development and is so recognized by the church.”<sup>25</sup> Longer tenure in a given pastorate can be a major factor in pastoral leadership. Furthermore, as the role of deacons has somewhat shifted from the “board of directors” model, responsible for the church’s temporalities, to the “servant ministry” model, the deaconship may have shifted from a violation of or deviation from congregational polity to a firm ally of congregational polity.

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<sup>23</sup>“The Most Important Change in Baptist Life,” *Baptists Today*, July 2001, 8.

<sup>24</sup>Note, for example, for Congregationalists, *A True Confession* (1596), arts. 17-23, and for Baptists, the *Second London Confession of Particular Baptists* (1677), art. 26, esp. parags. 3-11, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (1969 ed.), 87-89, 285-89.

<sup>25</sup>*A Theology of Church and Ministry* (Nashville: Broadman, 1960), 73.

Seventh, early English and American Baptists interpreted the exercise of corrective church discipline as an essential function of the congregation.<sup>26</sup> Censures included historically: rebuke, suspension, and excommunication. This practice lapsed late in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries. To the extent that it is practiced today, it should be the responsibility of the congregation, at least at the stage of excommunication. If members are both received into and excluded from a Baptist church by the church's decision, one may say that church membership in some sense is an extension of congregational governance.

Eighth, early Particular Baptist confessions of faith tended to equate the kingdom of God in its present sense with the church as "a company of visible Saints" or the true church, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Baptists tended to neglect the doctrine of the kingdom of God, and twentieth-century Baptists rediscovered the latter doctrine. Today's Baptists are often better able to grasp and conceive the global dimensions of the kingdom of God in relation to the fulfillment of the Great Commission than their forebearers were. They live in an age of instant communication and rapid transportation; many have experienced intercontinental travel. They are aware of the dangers that go with being Christians and Christian witnesses in the world today. Baptist lay persons must have a voice in the decision-making and mission-projecting of their congregations. The churches need the training of these lay people in their careers and their experiences in family and community life. Lay people need to participate in their churches. Anything less would be a tragic betrayal of the Baptist heritage at a crucial moment in Christian history.

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<sup>26</sup>"A Short Confession of Faith" (1610), art. 33; First London Confession of Particular Baptists (1644), art. 43; "The True Gospel-Faith" (1654), art. 21; Standard Confession of General Baptists (1660), art. 17; Second London Confession of Particular Baptists (1677), art. 26, parag. 12, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (1969 ed.), 110-11, 168, 194, 230, 288.

### Practice

Let us turn to the matter of practice. The contemporary crisis has already been alluded to in other papers. We have evidence today of serious erosion from or overt rejection of congregational polity in practice. At least three factors can be identified as contributing to such erosion or rejection.

First, most megachurches,<sup>27</sup> which have proliferated during the last quarter of a century, seem to have adopted a polity which is either an attenuation or a displacement of congregational polity. Lacking a thorough study of megachurch polity in general, we turn to a specific study of First Southern Baptist Church, Del City, Oklahoma, made by Wilson Hull Beardsley,<sup>28</sup> who offers generalizations about megachurches beyond the one being studied. Accordingly, the “megachurch is heavily pastor centered.” The selection and the termination of the employed church staff is “at the direction of the pastor and in consultation with the personnel committee.” The pastor is expected to speak first in most church meetings, the role of deacons is altered, and the pastor and staff become “less accountable to the congregation for the details and plans of the ministries.” Pastoral authority tends to grow with the length of a pastor’s tenure in a particular congregation, and members of megachurches tend to be “more willing to be observers than . . .

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<sup>27</sup>John N. Vaughan in *The World’s Twenty Largest Churches* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 16, 19, 27, 30, 32, 261, 263, 269, 270, seemingly coined the term “superchurch.” His next book he entitled *The Large Church: A Twentieth-Century Expression of the First-Century Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985). Later he authored *Megachurches and America’s Cities: How Churches Grow* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993); Vaughan attributed (34, 54) to C. Peter Wagner and Paul Heibert the coining of the term “metachurch” (“several tens of thousands” of members) in distinction from “megachurch” (“several thousands of members”).

<sup>28</sup>“The Pastor as Change Agent in the Growth of a Southern Baptist Mega Church Model” (D. Min. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1991). At the time of Beardsley’s study the church had 12, 979 resident members (p.1).

participants.” But Beardsley noted that the megachurch pastor “is not a dictatorial authority figure,” his authority being “that of leadership.”<sup>29</sup>

Writers on church growth and megachurches have given relatively little attention to the question of polity. One of the leading authorities, Southern Baptist John N. Vaughan, assumes that megachurches inevitably change in polity as they increase in membership.

As a church grows beyond being a single-cell organism and as organizational change occurs, an increasing shift in congregational polity evolves from congregational (people led), to presbyterial (deacon/staff led), to episcopal (staff/deacon led or staff led).

Without any particular textual or exegetical evidence Vaughan concludes: “This shift is seen in the Book of Acts and occurs in the dynamic of changing group size.”<sup>30</sup> Those who aspire to build megachurches seem to see congregational polity as an impediment.<sup>31</sup> Even Os Guinness’s searing critique of megachurches, based on the presupposition that “the empire of modernity is the great alternative to the kingdom of God,” and concluding that megachurches have compromised with and capitulated to modernity, includes no attention to polity.<sup>32</sup> No one seems to be asking just how a megachurch can practice of congregational polity.

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 200, 309, 278, 200, 310, 194, 267, 315, 100. James L. Sullivan, *Baptist Polity as I See It* (1983), 62, had warned: “Pastors who are dictatorial or autocratic, or churches that allow groups . . . to assume such roles, will someday pay a high price for this deviation from Baptist heritage.” C. E. Colton, *A 21<sup>st</sup> Century New Testament Church: Its Polity and Present-day Problems* (Dallas: n.p., 1999), 87-94, has recently written of “the trend toward” and “the danger of” “centralization” in Baptist church life. But megachurches in mainline denominations tended to be led by the full-time “staff and a half-dozen or fewer volunteer leaders,” according to Lyle E. Schaller, *The Seven-Day-a-Week Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 121.

<sup>30</sup>*Megachurches and America’s Cities*, 84. Vaughan, 85, deplors “personnel policies and practice that make staff members accountable to the committee rather than to the pastor” as a hindrance to church growth.

<sup>31</sup>Scott Camp, on assuming the pastorate of First Baptist Church, Mansfield, Texas, declared publicly: “You won’t find a church that’s shaping its city and that is rapidly becoming a powerful church where the pastor does not have absolute authority to hire and fire his own staff and build his own team.” Robert Cadwallader, “Metro Pastor to Take Over Mansfield Job,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 19 August 2002.

<sup>32</sup>*Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Church Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), esp. 17, 28, 55-60.

Second, some Baptist pastors have been influenced by non-Baptist advocates and practitioners of elder rule to adopt some form of rule by elders in their Baptist congregations. These elders are to be differentiated from preaching and teaching elders. John F. MacArthur, Jr., pastor of Grace Community Church, Panorama City, California, through his writings and seminars has had considerable influence, especially on younger Baptist pastors who are recent seminary graduates. MacArthur has deplored the church's failure to equip its members for ministry and thus the prevalence of "professional 'pulpitism,' financed by lay spectators,"<sup>33</sup> and does recognize that church discipline is a congregational function.<sup>34</sup> But the Grace Church, believing that Christ "rules through a plurality of godly men, or elders," has about fifty such elders, whose task is "to discern the mind of God prayerfully, thoughtfully, and patiently" on those issues on which "the Scripture is silent" and whose decisions must be "unanimous."<sup>35</sup> This pattern, although not placed in a complete Presbyterian system, has been called "semi-Presbyterianism."<sup>36</sup> Korean-American Baptist churches have special difficulty in attaining congregational polity because first-generation immigrants have had little experience with political democracy and because many members are ex-Presbyterians.<sup>37</sup>

Another influence toward elder rule in Southern Baptist churches has been the calling of pastors who have been trained at Dallas Theological Seminary. Although its Doctrinal Statement

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<sup>33</sup>*The Church the Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 122; *Body Dynamics* (Wheaton, IL: SP Publications, 1982), 94.

<sup>34</sup>*The Church the Body of Christ*, 182-83; *Body Dynamics*, 141.

<sup>35</sup>*The Anatomy of a Church*, ed. Steve Miller (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1984), 128.

<sup>36</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 725.

<sup>37</sup>Young Sik Noh, "Equipping Church Leadership to Implement Baptist Congregational Polity for Newhope Korean Baptist Church, Lake Forest, California" (D. Min. project, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997), esp. 1-2.

does not mention elders, Dallas Seminary's instruction seems to assume the presence of elders in churches to be served by its graduates, especially Bible churches. The current catalog, in describing the women's ministry track on the Th. M. degree, declares, "Dallas Seminary holds the position that Scripture limits to men the role of elder and senior pastor."<sup>38</sup> More than a century ago a Baptist ecclesiologist contended, "There is no scriptural warrant for" "a ruling eldership" "distinct from a preaching eldership."<sup>39</sup> The burden of proof still rests on its proponents.

Third, congregational polity has been rejected or subjected to critical review in Southern Baptist churches on the basis that it is cumbersome, time-consuming, trivia-dominated, and detracting from the church's central mission. It must be acknowledged that, even as in the political sphere democracy is not always the most efficient mode of government, for dictatorships and oligarchies can claim greater efficiency, so in the ecclesial sphere congregationalism is not always the most efficient mode of polity, if efficiency be measured in terms of the time for and the ease of decision-making. Sadly, all too often, the success of our congregational meetings has been measured by the degree of agreement with *Robert's Rules of Order* rather than by the extent to which the members have prayed together, have read Scripture together, and have sought together the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The appeal to allow a small group in the congregation to make the decisions for the congregation parallels the appeal to the citizen to give up voting and participatory democracy and to put governing into the hands of the experts. Moreover, decision-making as to the life, ministry, and mission of a church should not

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<sup>38</sup>*Dallas Theological Seminary 2002-2003 Catalog*, 160-61, 33. More than 35 percent of the students currently enrolled are listed as "Baptists," and almost 14 percent are listed as "Southern Baptists" (170).

<sup>39</sup>Henry G. Weston, *Constitution and Polity of the New Testament Church* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1895), 66.

be rigidly separated from the execution or living out of the church's life, ministry, and mission. Members who are involved in one should also be involved in the other, lest there be an unhealthy hiatus.

Now it remains only to ask whether there are indeed advantages to congregational polity. First, congregational polity is fair to the members of the congregation. Prior to Vatican Council II (1962-1965) it was commonly said that the Roman Catholic laity's relationship with the clergy was threefold: "pay, pray [for], and obey." Those who through their voluntary stewardship of material gifts, their life of prayer, and their deeds of ministering service sustain the work of the congregation should indeed have some role in the decision-making process of the congregation. Not all believers are equally gifted, not all believers are equal in insight, but each should have a voice or expression of will amid the gathered and covenanted community of faith.

Second, congregational polity can be exercised under various patterns or structures as suggested above and hence is not a case of monolithic singularity. In all of these patterns there should be a significant place for pastoral leadership. If indeed, as we often hear today, the pastor ought "to cast a vision" for the congregation, that vision must be shared and adopted by the congregation if its implementation is to be effective and lasting. Books on leadership by Baptist authors only rarely address the relationship between pastoral leadership and congregational polity.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, in all these patterns the sharing of the church's ministry is essential. Franklin Segler said a generation ago, "The ideal for pastor and layman is that they are co-workers in the

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<sup>40</sup>Robert D. Dale, *Pastoral Leadership: A Handbook of Resources for Effective Congregational Leadership* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), did treat the subject substantively.

church's ministry . . . , brethren together in life's higher calling, that of bringing the church and the world together in Christ."<sup>41</sup>

Third, congregational polity is more capable than other polities of developing loyalty to and support of the congregation. Lay people living under other polities often fret and complain about not being able to participate in decision-making, and lay people living under congregational polity may question it after being in the minority in a major congregational decision. But congregational polity can produce loyal and responsible churchmanship.<sup>42</sup> Participating in decision-making helps Christians to be able to say meaningfully, "*our* church."

Fourth, congregational polity is very likely to produce stronger, more mature Christians than other polities. It is difficult to explain the blossoming of the laity in Southern Baptist churches during the twentieth century—from Annie Armstrong to Brooks Hays to Marie Mathis to Owen Cooper to Jimmy Carter—apart from some attribution to congregational polity. If the twenty-first century is to see the global expansion of a vigorous Baptist laity, it is difficult to envision such without congregational polity.

Congregational polity as exercised is not a perfect polity—there is no perfect polity—even as the congregation's members are not perfect saints. More than forty years ago Segler lamented that "in actual practice churches of congregational polity do not always follow democratic principles" and hence congregational polity theoretically affirmed does not always eventuate in the practice of congregational polity.<sup>43</sup> The litany of abuses and misuses of congregational polity is long, but let us not omit or forget its positive values.

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<sup>41</sup>*A Theology of Church and Ministry*, 84.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 15-16, 21-22.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

Finally, congregational polity is not an end in itself but rather a means to other ends. Like other polities, it must be ultimately tested by its capacity and performance in discerning and fostering obedience to the will of the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for the church and for the kingdom of God. Such congregationalism—what James L. Sullivan has called “theodemocracy”<sup>44</sup>—should be a means toward the “growth and maturity of Christians unto Christlikeness, the proclamation of the gospel to all nations and peoples, and the coming of the kingdom of God ‘on earth as it is in heaven’” (Matt. 6:10c, RSV, TEV, NIV).<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>*Rope of Sand with Strength of Steel*, 40; *Baptist Polity as I See It*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998), 139-40.

<sup>45</sup>Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 2d ed., 2: 645.