

## **TALKING POINT #5**

### **BAPTIST DISTINCTIVES #3: CONGREGATIONAL GOVERNMENT**

#### **WHO'S IN CHARGE OF THE CHURCH?**

One of the most distinctive attributes of Baptist Churches is this idea of “Congregational Government.” It answers the question, “Who’s in charge of the Church?” Ultimately, the Head of the Church is Christ Himself, who bought the Church with His own blood (Acts 20:28). But, who has been empowered with authority over the Church here on Earth? Whereas in some Churches it may be a bishop or presbytery or even the pastor, in Baptist Churches we believe the ultimate earthly authority is the gathered Church – the membership.

#### **WE'RE ALL A PRODUCT OF OUR PAST**

As Baptists emerged out of the English Reformation in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, one of their key differentiating marks was their rejection of external authority over the Church. The Established Church of England had become entangled with the Government with the Crown becoming both head of State and Church. With a succession of bad kings, who had no regard for the best interests of the Church, the Dissenters pointed to Scripture (such as Mark 12:17) to show that Church and State should be separate. Given the complete entanglement of Church and State in the United Kingdom, the Dissenters came out from the Established Church.

Further, holding the principle of “Autonomy of the Local Church” (see Talking Point #2), these local Churches were left with an important question. Having rejected State interference in Church as unbiblical and asserting the autonomy of each local congregation from overarching authority of a bishop or presbytery, they had to ask, “So, who’s in charge here?”

Given the Baptists held the Biblical position of the Priesthood of All Believers (1 Peter 2:9 & 1 Timothy 2:5), no one person or group in the congregation could claim governing power. So, Baptists put forward the radical idea that the congregation is self-governing, in the sense that the final earthly authority of any congregation is the congregation itself – this was mind-blowing at the time!

That is not to say that the Baptists did not recognise the Biblical roles of leadership for pastors, elders and deacons. On the contrary, the Churches empowered their leaders to lead and govern the Church as instructed by Scripture (1 Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:1-3 to name a few). In so doing, the Baptist model gives a wonderful tension of empowerment and accountability that is essential in Church leadership.

#### **BUT IS IT BIBLICAL?**

One of the striking elements of Baptist theology is that we seek to measure all parts of Church life against the Bible, not tradition or fashion. So, in this case, despite the relative youth of the Baptist denomination as compared to other denominations, we must see if our radical ecclesiology (theology of the Church) is biblical.

Certainly, the Bible is clear that God gives leaders to each Church, who bear the responsibility under Christ to govern His Church faithfully. But, that doesn’t mean that they are the final authority in a Church.

When Jesus gave instructions in Matthew 18 regarding how to resolve personal issues and sin in the Church He gave a series of steps that should be taken. First, the two parties should try to work the issue out privately, and then some others may get involved. However, the final point of resolution, if all other steps have failed, is to take it to the whole Church – not just the leaders (Matthew 18:17). The leaders may give good guidance to the Church and may even be delegated by the Church to deal with the issue, but the authority to make a final and binding decision rests with the whole Church.

Again, when the Apostle Paul writes to the Church in Corinth about an immoral brother, his admonition is not just for the leaders in not dealing with this person but for the whole Church (1 Corinthians 5:4-5). The authority of discipline is with the whole Church.

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In Acts, when people are set aside for ministry as missionaries or Church deacons, it is the Church that does the selecting, commissioning and sending (Acts 6:3 & 13:1-3).

Finally, in Revelation, when Jesus addresses Churches to encourage, correct and direct them, it is to the whole Church that the prophecy is addressed, not just the leaders (Revelation 2-3).

So, in matters of personal disputes (where appropriate), Church discipline, appointing leaders and Church direction and health, the responsibility and authority ultimately rests with the Church.

#### **WHAT ABOUT LEADERSHIP?**

An obvious question, then, is, “How can we have government by the whole as well as leadership by a few?” Acknowledging both Scripture’s mandate to leaders to lead as well as the principle of Congregational Government, it would seem that we have an “either-or” situation and, indeed, this is how many Churches work this out in practice.

However, rather than seeing these two positions as opposites, we should see them as complementary. Leaders lead best when they are empowered by an informed congregation to whom they are also accountable. Congregations function best when they realise their responsibility before God not to abrogate responsibility for the Church to the leaders but to be informed and active in the Church’s ministry, decisions and life. This wonderful balance of leadership and followership is the genius of “Congregational Government.”

#### **SO HOW DO WE DO IT AT FOREST LAKE BAPTIST?**

At Forest Lake Baptist, the final earthly authority is our membership. This is enshrined in our Church Constitution and our Members take this role seriously and prayerfully. We also have a Ministry Council who leads the Church as a whole, with Ministry Leaders who lead particular ministries. As pastor, I am not closer to God than anybody else. However, God has appointed (through the collective voice of the Members) me to the role of pastoring the Church and the Ministry Council to lead with me. As a result, the responsibility has been given to us to be good and godly leaders. Conversely, by recognising God’s will for me to pastor and the Ministry Council to lead with me, the Church submits to the leadership, as required in Scripture. And yet, the leaders are still accountable to the Members and that is why the Membership has the power both to appoint and dismiss leaders. So, this balance of leadership, followership, accountability and submission is alive and well at Forest Lake Baptist Church and we seek to continue to grow in this under God.

#### **IMPLICATIONS**

There are five immediate implications for us coming out of this principle of Congregational Government:

1. Leaders recognise we are accountable to Christ through the Members for the Church’s good government;
2. Leaders must encourage the congregation to discern God’s will and be active limbs of the body;
3. Members should uphold the Church leaders in prayer and honour;
4. Members enjoy their responsibility to be prayerfully and actively involved in Church life and government;
5. Christians in our congregation should be Members to play their privileged part in Church government.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Congregational Government is both biblical and practically effective. It endorses leaders to lead while recognising every Christian has a role in discerning God’s will for His Church. Enjoy the privilege!

#### **FURTHER TALKING POINT TOPICS**

Next month, we’ll look at our fourth Baptist distinctive – Priesthood of All Believers.