

Common Mistakes in Congregational Church Government **By: Dr. J. Alan Branch**

I am committed to congregational ecclesiology and I believe Baptist / congregational ecclesiology is the form of church government most consistent with the New Testament. However, while many Baptist churches claim to have a Biblical model of church government, the reality is they simply have a model they have practiced for a long time and have “baptized” in Christian terminology. What many churches identify as a New Testament model is in fact a dysfunctional imitation of the real thing. I contend that there is a real difference between legitimate congregational ecclesiology and what I call the “crass congregationalism” many churches practice. I’ve included a list of some common problems in churches that practice congregational ecclesiology.

I. Ecclesiology More influenced by American Civics than the New Testament

Nancy Ammerman is a sociologist who teaches at Boston University and she has written extensively about Southern Baptist Convention. Though Ammerman attempts to be objective in much of her work, it is obvious that she is displeased with many changes that have taken place in the SBC. Much of her research is devoted to the differences between self-identified conservatives and moderates within the denomination. In her analysis, Ammerman says the two theological camps have different approaches towards ecclesiology. She says, “Fundamentalist pastors expected to make decisions on their own or in consultation with a small inner circle of deacons. *Town-meeting democracy* in the congregation was not their style.”¹ Ammerman is painting with broad strokes here and the differences in ecclesiology between the two groups are not as hard and fast as she leads one to believe. However, she has described how many Baptists view ecclesiology: *Town-meeting democracy*. I do not deny that many Baptists view church government this way. However, I contend that this type of town-meeting democracy is *not* what the New Testament advocates.

I contend the concept of town-meeting democracy reflects a congregational polity more influenced by the **United States Constitution**

¹Nancy Ammerman, *Baptist Battles* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 89. Emphasis added.

than by the New Testament. This leads directly to the second error many congregational churches make.

II. Ecclesiology More Influenced by Business Models than the New Testament

Conservative Baptist churches often fail rightly to examine with theological rigor new trends or fads in evangelism. For example, many Baptist churches are moving to a “multi-site” model because “it works,” meaning multi-site churches can claim a larger membership. However, Baptist churches embracing the multi-site model have often failed to consider the long term implications of this model for local church autonomy. For example, White and Yeats ask an important question left un-asked in the rush to multi-site: “Since the main campus holds the deed to all properties held in most multi-campus structures, what determines the viability of each location?”² In many ways, the concept of “multi-site” has startling similarities to the way various businesses establish franchises. Essentially, multi-site has the potential to become a problem directly opposite to hyper-congregationalism: In some multi-site models congregational church government disappears altogether.

III. Elevation of Parliamentary Procedure and Church Constitutions Above the Bible

I pastored a small Baptist church for almost eight years. The church constitution stated the church must have eight deacons. Around my two year juncture, we reached a point when three deacons rotated off the deacon fellowship leaving room for three new deacons to rotate onto the deacon body. However, as we moved through our nomination process, it became evident that only two men were qualified and willing to serve. Some members of the congregation became greatly distressed and insisted that we must find one more person to serve because “the constitution says we must have eight deacons.” In response, I contended that 1 Timothy 3:8ff was our governing document at this point. If we only had two men who met those qualifications and who were willing to serve, we only had two new deacons *regardless of what the Constitution says*.

² Thomas White & John M. Yeats, *Franchising McChurch: Feeding our Obsession With Easy Christianity* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), 183.

Situations like the one I describe above are common in many churches. The Baptist Faith and Message States the Bible is “the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds and religious opinions should be tried.” This includes the constitution of a local church. Constitutions are helpful and needed documentation. The supply agreed upon ground-rules for everyone involved in a local church. However, when there is a conflict between what a church constitution mandates and what the Bible requires, the Bible must win every time.

IV. Business Meetings Held too frequently.

I am convinced that most churches can function effectively by having quarterly business meetings, but two business meetings a year could be sufficient. Multiple business meetings distract energy from Great Commission work and substitute bureaucratic activity for real service. A healthy question for churches with monthly business meetings to ask is this: “Is it an efficient use of our time to have a business meeting just because it is a certain day of the month?” I have often speculated that as soon as Satan was finished tempting Adam and Eve, his next step was to whisper in their ears, “Have a *monthly* business meeting!”

Thom Rainer, President of Lifeway, offers an excellent summary of why monthly business meetings are a bad idea and they need to go away. For many years, I’ve said the same things Rainer says in this list:

1. The meeting often attracts the most negative members in the church. It becomes their place for griping and criticizing. When my youngest daughter was sixteen, she attended a business meeting at a church where I served as interim. She commented, “I think these monthly meetings give uninformed people an opportunity to give their two-cents worth of input.” If a sixteen-year-old girl can see this weakness, certainly mature leaders of a local church can end the practice.

2. The negative church members have pushed the positive members out of the meetings. Healthy church members have no desire to be a part of a gripe and complain session. Most of them who do attend do so to protect the pastor and the staff.

3. The frequency of the meeting leads to micromanagement. There is typically not sufficient major business to discuss every month. So the void is filled with discussions and complaints of minutiae. One monthly church meeting lasted over an hour due to disagreements regarding the quality and cost of toilet tissue in the restrooms.

4. The monthly business meeting has become one of the most dreaded times for many pastors. These pastors certainly do not demonstrate excitement and anticipation in most cases. Church members typically will not follow unless leaders are enthused.

5. The Millennials abhor contentious meetings. The monthly meeting thus has become one of the ways to drive off many young adults. But it is not only millennials who abhor contentious meetings: No right-thinking Christian enjoys such things.

6. The meeting often allows a few naysayers to have inordinate power. Frankly, that's why many of them attend. A church member seeking power is a church member in need of repentance.

7. The monthly business meeting is simply not necessary. It is a waste of the precious resource of time. If there is a need for the church to tend to a major issue, special meetings can always be called.³

At the same time, I want to emphasize that churches should have business meetings. A modern trend is for some Baptist churches to take away all voting privileges from the congregation. This is a step too far and, quite frankly, a church that takes this step is no longer Baptist. A church with no business meetings is not a Baptist Church; a church with too many business meetings dies!

V. Failure to Empower leadership.

When I say that many Baptist churches fail to empower their leaders, I am referring to more than just the pastor or staff. When a church chooses

³ This list is slightly modified from Thom Rainier, "7 Reasons Why Monthly Church Business Meetings Are Dying," February 1, 2018, <http://www.lifeway.com/pastors/2018/02/01/7-reasons-monthly-church-business-meetings-dying/>.

members from within themselves to serve on committees / ministry teams,⁴ then that church should trust their own members in those areas of responsibility. It is not inconsistent with the New Testament or the Baptist Faith & Message for a congregation to choose leaders from within it and then empower them to make decisions in their realm of responsibility and then act upon those decisions. A major key to a smoothly functioning congregation is to assign tasks, delegate responsibility, allocate resources and then get out of the way! In many churches, initiative is penalized with criticism and attacks on the pastor. Healthy churches empower leadership to make decisions.

VI. Voting on minutia.

This follows closely on the heels of the previous criticism. A congregation functions in the healthiest manner by assigning responsibility, delegating authority, allocating resources, and the then getting out of the way! Churches should not vote on the color of the carpet, paint schemes, or light fixtures. These decisions should be made by committees assigned with these responsibilities.

VII. Situations where the most immature members of the congregation are allowed to influence key decisions.

I refer these situations as “The Tyranny of the Immature.” A great example of this is seen in III John where Diotrephes opposed the work of evangelism because of his passion to be in first place. Diotrephes’s desire to “be first” or “be preeminent” seems is in direct contrast with Colossians 1:18 where Paul emphatically states that only Christ should have the preeminence. As Danny Akin notes, “Diotrephes usurped for himself the position only our Lord should hold.”⁵ In a similar manner, many modern congregations are driven by “church bullies” who enjoy position and preeminence. Much like Diotrephes, church bullies are threatened by evangelism and oppose efforts to help the church grow. Why? Because if the church grows, Diotrephes won’t be in control anymore! Such churches sink to the lowest common denominator of maturity and are crippled by a flawed model of ecclesiology that invites people who are immature, backslidden or

⁴ I understand that many leaders today make a great distinction between ministry teams and committees, claiming that ministry teams are more spiritual. Personally, I think we are dealing with semantic differences. A well-functioning committee does ministry while a dysfunctional ministry team just meets!

⁵ Daniel L. Akin, *I, II, and III John* in *The New American Commentary*, vol. 38 (Nashville: Broadman, 2001), 246.

inactive to participate in key decisions. This is perhaps the most deadly mistake a church can make. It is not inconsistent with the New Testament for a local church to expect a certain level of faithfulness before individuals are allowed to vote in a conference.

Diotrephes and modern church-members like him use money as a tool of manipulation. 3 John 9 says Diotrephes refused to help missionary evangelists, with a strong indication he is blocking their financial support. The Apostle John says, “[Diotrephes] does not receive the brethren [the missionaries], and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church.” In 3 John 6, the Apostle John had urged that these very evangelists be sent “forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God,” a way of saying they should receive financial support. Immature Christians often find a way to use money as tool of manipulation in local churches. In a Baptist context, this often involves immature Christians (if they are in fact converted!) serving as deacons, treasurers, or members of a church’s finance committee. Financial control actually means *control of the pastor or control of the church*. Financial control in the church often dictates a church’s evangelistic effectiveness, determines what vision of the church’s future is accepted, and can be used as a tool of manipulation to bring to heel people who challenge the immaturity of the person controlling the money. The manner in which church finances are used in many ways controls the message a church puts forth in a community. Allowing immature, divisive, and ungodly people to have control over finances has been the death knell of many congregations.

VIII. Allowing Inactive Members to Vote In Conference

I’ve experienced situations when someone who hadn’t been to church in a long time showed up at a business meeting to oppose some new initiative. In many ways, this is the most easily corrected mistake in congregational church government. Most church constitutions already distinguish between inactive members. It is consistent with the New Testament to say, “If you are inactive, then you don’t get to vote.” Clearly established criteria for active versus inactive membership should be stated in the Constitution with appropriate exceptions for military service or extended illness. What one wants to avoid is a situation in which disgruntled members cease attending, giving, and supporting the work of a local church, but still show up at a business meeting to oppose some new initiative by the congregation.

IX. Failure to Rotate Committee Membership

If a church does not have term limits on committee membership, then difficult and combative people can become entrenched in positions of authority and stymie any attempts at change in order to reach more people for Christ.

X. Worship Wars

Many churches have had extended debates over the type of music used in service, with different sides claiming their particular taste is more Biblical than their opponents. The truth is that most of these debates, though dressed up in theological language, are really *aesthetic* debates about what forms of music different groups find pleasing. I grew up hearing Southern Gospel music and I have very fond memories of hearing my grandfather, Claude A. Branch, lead gospel music singing at Mount Pisgah Baptist in rural Clay County, AL. When I think of Southern Gospel, I have wonderful memories of sincere worship led by one of the finest Christian men I ever knew – my grandfather. Other people have grown up with different musical styles and tastes. As such, they much prefer the sound of Chris Tomlin or Trip Lee and find their music more aesthetically pleasing.

Let us all agree that there is a place for music in Godly worship. Non-Baptist Jonathan Edwards said:

And the duty of singing praises to God, seems to be appointed wholly to excite and express religious affections. No other reason can be assigned, why we should express ourselves to God in verse, rather than in prose, and do it with music, but only, that such is our nature and frame, that these things have a tendency to move our affections.⁶

All of us should approach musical debates with humility. Each of us should recognize tastes in the *sound* we find appealing can vary based on regional heritage, age, and socio-economic status. Why not learn to appreciate *each other's* heritage? As long as the music is doctrinally sound and lifts up Jesus, we should try to show grace to each other.

⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, Perry Miller, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 115.

XI. Conclusion

The Baptist Faith and Message comments on Baptist Polity and says, “Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes.” A significant amount of conflict in Baptist churches revolves around different opinions concerning the extent to which a church utilizes “democratic processes.” Churches can default into two polar opposites of congregational ecclesiology in an attempt to resolve the debate surrounding “democratic processes.” On one extreme is the Pastor/Ruler model in which the only real vote of the congregation is the call of the pastor, after which the pastor rules the church by fiat. On the other extreme, and I believe this is more common in Southern Baptist churches, is the hyper-congregational model in which all decisions require a vote of the congregation and the pastor’s role as “overseer” is completely overlooked. I contend that either extreme is in reality a dysfunctional imitation of New Testament ecclesiology.

In contrast to the hyper-congregational model of town meeting democracy practiced by many churches, I submit that the New Testament does not demand or endorse such a model. A more healthy form of congregational church government includes the following minimum requirements:

Here is a proposed list of things needing a church vote:

1. Who will be the leaders – pastor, major staff, Sunday School teachers, committee members and deacons. I want to interject here: Some small churches have a tradition of letting Sunday School classes choose their own teachers. This is a very bad idea, as this approach may allow doctrinally unsound teachers to circumvent the vetting process of the pastor, deacons, and nominating committee.
2. The annual church budget.
3. Changes in the Constitution or By-laws.
4. A major decision such as changing the name of the church or relocation.

5. Borrowing a substantial amount of money.
6. A Building program.
7. If someone is to be dismissed from church membership for disciplinary reasons, this should be a vote by the congregation. This does not mean that a public debate needs to be had on the issue. The pastor and deacons may simply present a case of discipline to the church and ask the church to affirm or reject the need for discipline by a ballot.⁷

This is congregational church government! The people in leadership are chosen by the church under a budget approved by the church with leadership of a pastor called by the church. I contend that this model provides a healthier environment that is more conducive to spiritual maturity.

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⁷ This list is adapted and modified from John Bisagno, *Inside Information: Resolving Controversies in Baptist Churches* (Bloomington, IN: Crossbooks, 2010), 52. Bisagno does not address #7: I have added that.