

XI. TYPES OF GOVERNMENT – Part II

- I. CONGREGATIONALISM (Authority vested in an independent congregation)
- A. Each local church is regarded as a complete church, independent of every other.
 - B. As independent, each congregation, including its officers, is independent of all external authority or control, subject to no control whatsoever from any other body. The governing power rests exclusively with the members of the church.
 - C. Christ gives authority to the local church and the officers are merely the organs or functionaries of the local church, having no power than that which is delegated to them by the membership.
 - D. The membership possesses the right of regulating all the affairs of the congregation, as distinguished from the office-bearers.
 - E. The pastor is the one elder in the congregation, and the helpers of the elder and the servants of the people are the deacons. Both the elder and the deacons are elected by popular vote.
 - F. Congregational churches generally recognize a community or conference of churches who are of like mind. G. Congregational form of government is practiced by Baptist, Independents, Lutherans, Congregationalists, Churches of Christ, etc.
 - H. Local autonomy and congregational government are not synonymous. However, most groups who believe in local autonomy usually practice some form of congregational government.

I. SUPPORT FOR CONGREGATIONAL GOVERNMENT

1. Support For One Elder (Pastor) In A Local Church.

- a. In 1 Timothy 3:1, Paul mentions the office of elder (bishop) which is in the singular, and in 1 Timothy 3:8 mentions deacons in the plural.
REFUTATION. In 3:1, Paul is using the singular because he is referring to the office of elder (generically) not the number of elders. The number of elders is spelled out in other passages.
- b. There was one church in each city but the church met in various units in individual homes. Possibly each house church had one elder (singular) and together the church of the city had elders (plural).

REFUTATION. In some places like Iconium (Acts 14:1) multitudes believed and it might have been necessary for many elders to be in one house church. But in Lystra and Derbe, the response was not so great and there were not many converts. Yet, on their way back to visit these churches, Paul appointed elders in all these churches (Acts 14:23). Apparently even the cities which had only one home church had a plurality of elders. There are also other verses which teach a plurality of elders (1 Tim. 5:17).

- c. In Revelation 2-3, the Apostle John addresses the seven angels of the seven churches and always addresses them in the singular. The word "angel" could be translated "messenger," referring to one pastor for each church.
REFUTATION. In an elder form of government, there is one particularly gifted teacher who would be the pastor-teacher or teaching elder, but he is just one of several ruling elders.
- d. Practically, a flock of sheep only respond to one shepherd.

REFUTATION. That is true and they will respond primarily to the leadership of the teaching elder (pastor teacher) but the government is by a plurality of elders.

2. Support For Congregational Government

a. In Acts 6:1-8, is the first mention of deacon. The congregation at Jerusalem was to pick out seven men who could do the physical tasks of the ministry while the Apostles gave themselves to prayer and ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4). The deacons were chosen by the people, proving congregational government.

REFUTATION. The authority was resident in both the congregation and the Apostles, for the Apostles gave the congregation the authority and had final approval of candidates who were chosen (Acts 6:2,3,6). Also we cannot be positively sure that Acts 6 is the election of deacons for the word "deacon" never appears, although it is implied through various word root meanings.

b. In the matter of church discipline, it appears that the church was involved (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-5, 13; 2 Thes. 3:14) to some degree.

REFUTATION. We are not told a vote was taken but the congregation was somehow to discipline the wayward brother.

c. In Acts 1:15-26, Matthias was elected by the 120 disciples to replace Judas as one of the original Twelve Apostles. He was elected by drawing lots. Just how this was done, we do not know but it was certainly participation by a congregation.

REFUTATION. This whole passage is not clear.

3. PROBLEMS WITH CONGREGATIONAL VOTE

a. Congregational government can often end up in a power struggle between the congregation and the pastor.

b. A pastor in a congregational government often has to become dictatorial to get things done.

c. Congregational voting becomes nothing more than a popularity contest. There is probably never a vote taken where someone is not hurt emotionally if he loses.

d. Congregational vote may subtly divide a congregation.

e. Congregational government puts too much authority in people who are immature in the faith.

f. Congregational vote leads to many church splits.

g. Pure Congregationalism often has little respect for authority residing in leaders.

h. Congregationalism has no protection for a pastor. He has no place to appeal his case or get help.

II. PRESBYTERIANISM (Authority is in the Church as a whole through the agency of elected elders with the consent of the congregation)

A. Jesus Christ is the Head and King of the Church and He exercises His authority by means of the Word.

B. Authority is committed by Christ to the Church as a whole, that is to the ordinary members and the elders alike; but in addition, elders receive special authority to carry out their perspective duties in the Church.

C. The elders are voted on by the congregation, so there is rule with the consent and concurrence of the people.

D. The Session (plurality of elders in a local church) are representatives, not mere deputies or delegates of the people and are chosen by congregational vote.

E. Presbyterian government consists of a Session (local church level), Presbytery (elder representatives from a number of local churches in a given locality) and General Assembly (representation from each of the Presbyteries). Therefore, ecclesiastical authority is implemented through a series of graded courts.

F. Presbyterianism recognized a relative autonomy of the local church. The presbytery can exercise ecclesiastical authority over a local church if action is necessary.

G. In modern day Presbyterianism, there are two streams of thinking about church

authority. Prelatic Presbyterianism believes authority is vested in the highest court (General Assembly) and is delegated downward, making all decisions of the higher court binding on the church. Under this system, there is an aristocratic and hierarchical rule in matters concerning the local church like owning of property, internal affairs, election of officers, discipline, etc. Democratic Presbyterianism believes that authority is vested in the lower courts (Session), recognizing the importance of the local church. In terms of ecclesiastical authority, Democratic Presbyterianism sees the denomination to be hierarchical but in terms of civil powers it is democratic. NOTE: The difference between these two Presbyterian views is whether authority comes from the top down or from the bottom up. This may seem trite but it has huge implications.