

Congregational Polity
Pastor Michael Wilburn
08.23.15

Tonight's topic is congregational polity. It fits into a broader discussion of re-establishing the office of deacon and the office of elder at Immanuel Baptist Church. Sunday, September 6, 2015 we will make a biblical case for elders and deacons followed by a congregational vote in the business meeting on September 27, 2015. Immanuel's elders already recommended the motion in early August. Members, I encourage you to set aside lesser responsibilities if at all possible to attend each of these nights. Higher attendance creates greater unity. This decision cannot be made without you. We need one another's participation, input, and prayer.

What does congregational polity mean? By congregational I am referring to church members and by polity I am referring to church governance. But no one likes the government, so we best use the word polity to preserve a good attitude and to protect against any misunderstanding that the church is a democracy.

If the church gives the authority to re-establish these offices, the pastors and elder will diligently work to define the roles, organize responsibilities, and adjust policy to include the role and work of deacons. This will take several months. The goal is to present a workable plan at the annual business meeting in January 2016.

We desire the church to be organized with the pattern Scripture provides. To simply state it in one sentence: "The outcome is a church ruled by Christ, governed by members, led by elders, and served by deacons."

One of my goals this evening is to present congregationalism as such a basic idea that you mutter under your breath "Well, of course!" because it naturally fits the biblical text and it historically fits the practice of Immanuel Baptist Church for the past 130 years.

Congregationalism does not mean that every decision requires a congregational vote. Designing bulletins, leasing a copy machine, picking Sunday school curriculum, or planning an outreach event are delegated decisions for church leaders not ultimate decisions for the church congregation.

Who has the authority in the church? The answer is not either-or. The answer is found in the pages of the New Testament. The church functions with layered authority. I want to address three layers tonight: the authority of Jesus Christ, the authority of elders, and the authority of the congregation.

First, the church submits to the authority of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the good Shepherd and the chief Shepherd (1 Pet 5:4). Jesus is the Door of the fold (Jn 10:9). He is the Savior of those who believe (1 Tim 4:10). He is the Redeemer of those enslaved to sin (Titus 2:14). Jesus is the King of the Kingdom yet to come (Mt 25:34). He is the Head of the church (Eph 4:15). The church belongs to him as his Bride (Rev 21:9). We are not surprised to hear Jesus say, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" in Matthew 16:18. So when we refer to the word "rule" in church authority, let us use it exclusively of Jesus Christ.

Second, the church must be led by the authority of elders. God created the church with a layer of authority entrusted to a plurality of leaders. For example, Hebrews 13:7, 17 says, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith." and "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account." I know some English translations substitute the word "ruler" for "leader" in these verses, but it is much better to receive elders who lead like shepherds rather than rule like kings. John Hammett acknowledges in *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches* that ruling refers to managing or directing. Elders exercise authority but it is surrogate authority from Christ and delegated authority from the congregation (142). We will dig deep into this on September 6, 2015.

Third, the church must be governed by the authority of the congregation. "Church" means an assembly. A local church is a gathered representation of the Body of Christ. God calls believers to membership in both. Romans 12:5 says, "So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another." Local churches are autonomous meaning they are to be self-governing. But this should not conflict with the authority of the elders.

An analogy will help us understand it. All automobiles have points of authority. The driver's whole body is involved in controlling the vehicle. Hands on the wheel. Right foot accessible to the gas and brake. Mobile phone turned off in the backseat. Eyes on the road. The whole body is involved. A congregation works like this as a unified body (1 Cor 12:12). Mark Dever writes in *The Church: The*

Gospel Made Visible, “The congregation more normally recognizes than creates, responds rather than initiates, confirms rather than proposes” (143). In a church the congregation exercises authority like the accelerator and the brake. Elders lead like hands on the steering wheel.

Church members have a job to do, and God gives leaders to prepare you for that work. Listen to Ephesians 4:11-16, “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.” Of the four groups (apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers) only shepherds and teachers continue as an office in the church. Why? Because it is the only office for which the New Testament gives qualifications (1 Tim 3, Titus 1). Deacons are not listed because teaching and equipping is not their role in the life of the church. Who does the work of the ministry? The work of the ministry is the work of the members equipped by teaching and shepherding elders.

Let me suggest to you from Scripture three ways the congregation exercises its authority.

Guard the Door

Church membership is a responsibility of the congregation, both adding members to the church as well as excluding members from the church. That is why the members vote to receive new members just as we have done tonight. Baptists believe in a regenerate, baptized church membership. We ask potential members, “Are you a Christian?” “Please share with us how and when that happened.” Baptism by immersion is required for membership, following the pattern in Acts 2:41 that those who received his word were baptized and added to the church. I believe this is what Jesus meant in Matthew 16:18. “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.” Then Jesus says of the church in Matthew 18:18, “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.” The “bind on earth-bound in heaven language” is the church’s authority to validate a Christian’s Gospel testimony, the basis upon which the church receives someone into membership.

The book of Corinthian gives us an example of church discipline when the congregation exercises its authority. 1 Corinthians 5:2 Paul follows Jesus teaching (Mt 18:15-20) telling the church to exclude a member from fellowship because of sexual sin. “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you” (1 Cor 5:1-2). Specifically, a man was involved in an adulterous relationship with his step mother. Apparently the Corinthian church obeyed Paul and excluded the man from membership. Paul seems to write of the excluded church member again in 2 Corinthians 2:6-9. “For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything.” Church discipline draws a sinner to repentance. Repentance should be met with forgiveness and restoration. Who is responsible for church discipline? Paul write in verse 6, “this punishment by the majority is enough.” Remember, 1 Corinthians was written to the entire congregation. Every member knew because every member was responsible to guard the door of the church.

Guard the Doctrine

As a congregation you also exercise the responsibility to ensure the elders are teaching sound doctrine. We are talking about the big doctrines. The doctrines by which we cease to be Christian if surrendered; doctrines like the inspiration, inerrancy, and sufficiency of Scripture, the Trinity, the virgin birth, the literal physical resurrection of Christ, and the Gospel of salvation. It is the congregation’s responsibility to guard the doctrine. Even the Apostle Paul does not elevate himself above the authority of the church. “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” (Gal 1:8). The church is to refuse the words of Paul himself if he strays from the Gospel. The congregation guards the doctrine by keeping a Gospel-centered focus and being uncompromisingly faithful to it, as Jude 1:3 commands, “Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about

our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”

Now, there are doctrinal differences on secondary issues for which Christians can disagree yet maintain unity in the church. We must grow in discernment as to what issues fall into what categories, and grow in desire to show grace to others who differ doctrinal issues.

Let me give you two suggestions: (1) Familiarize yourself with Immanuel’s doctrinal statement well enough to recall it and reference it in conversation with other members. Let the elders know where the doctrinal statement can express the Scriptures more clearly. Perhaps at points Immanuel can strengthen it in the future. (2) Faithfully listen to preaching and teaching at Immanuel Baptist Church. Your presence in services affirms true doctrine. When you are away for a Sunday watch or listen to previous sermons on Immanuel’s mobile application or website. Now, be gracious! I have no doubt my sermons will disappoint you on many points. No worries. I disagree with myself occasionally. But I intend to grow in knowledge of Christ in order to preach better sermons feeding you with the meat of the Word. I hope you will see my progress, preaching better sermons at 45 than I do at 35 and better sermons at 55 than I did at 45.

Guarding the doctrine is not just parsing every word preached. It also includes imitating the life of the elders as an example. Remember Hebrews 13:7, “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.” Sunday sermons are not the only place teaching happens. Let God’s Word reverberate in Sunday school classes, Soma Life groups, missions gatherings, prayer meetings, Bible studies, and wherever else Immanuel’s members gather.

2 Timothy 4:3 warns congregations who ignores the responsibility to guard the doctrine. “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.” The danger is becoming like the churches in Asia Minor (Rev. 2-3) who lost the Spirit-enabled Gospel witness.

Guard the Disputes

First are disputes among church members. Listen to Matthew 18:15-17, “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. 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. 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.” Never skip step one. Resolve conflicts one-on-one. If unsuccessful, include one or two other like an elder or someone close to the situation or someone the sinning brother respects and will listen too. If unsuccessful, the whole church is to be included. I know this pushes against the natural inclination to conceal conflict, but uncomfortable obedience is better than comfortable disobedience. If they refuse to listen to the congregation, the sinning member should be excluded.

Second are disputes with an elder. The congregation is not to receive accusations against an elder unless there are two or three witnesses according to 1 Timothy 5:19. Why? Because elders are leaders and teachers. They will receive the vast majority of criticism. Biblically faithful church polity does not mean personally faultless church leaders. If any, the closer you get the more you will see your leaders’ imperfections. But if the offense is disqualifying a rebuke should be made before the entire congregation (1 Tim 5:20). Why? Because the congregation guards disputes.

What about everything else?

Practical matters are all prudential matters. Church can vary in dozens of way in how they manage details, allocate budgets, fund missions, launch ministries, care for property, etc. There will always be a balance of delegated authority: leadership authority delegated to the elder, task responsibility delegated to deacons, financial authority delegated to those who oversee specific line items. All authority is rooted in the congregation. The congregation ruled by Jesus Christ.

It is the collective responsibility of Immanuel Baptist Church to guard the door, guard the doctrine, and guard the disputes. The goal is to be a church ruled by Christ, governed by members, led by elders, and served by deacons.