

CONGREGATION: THE MEMBERS OF THE BODY // Matt. 18:15-17; Acts 14:23, 30-31; 1 Cor. 5:1-7
From the sermon series, "Polity: Church Structures in Baptist Life"

Thesis: Dysfunctional polity disrupts ministry – making disciples and multiplying the church.

There are three primary structures for church governance. Episcopalianism (from the Greek episkopos, overseer or bishop) is structured around one man as archbishop who oversees many bishops who are in turn overseeing several churches. It is akin to Methodism and also similar to the current multi-site structure. Presbyterianism (from the Greek presbyteros, elder) is structured around a group (presbytery) of elders who rule and oversee the church. A synod of elders forms a regional body that exercises authority and can form and dissolve churches. Congregationalism is a system in which a local church autonomously governs itself. Under Christ, it is the final court of appeals for that local body. As such, it maintains a built-in system of checks and balances that can help it resist moving away from conservative orthodoxy.

I. Biblical material

There are a number of arguments for congregationalism. First, the Bible, both in text and prescription, points to congregational rule. For instance, the church handled matters of discipline (Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:1-7) and the church was autonomous and made decisions for itself (Acts 15:30-31). Additional support is found in the fact that Paul wrote many of his letters to specific churches: to the church at Corinth, the church at Thessalonica, the church at Colossae (Col. 4:16), and so on.

It is important to note that congregationalism does not mean that the church leads itself. It governs itself and is led by pastors and elders. But it is the congregation that gives its final approval.

Congregationalism makes a huge assumption—that the members are actually Christians. We call this regenerate covenant membership—the church is made up of born-again Christians who are committed to the church. Membership in the church matters because the church is the bride of Christ. The church is an embassy, an expression of the kingdom. The church is an authority, and it is the means of discipleship and ministry.

How do we promote regenerate membership? Through the ordinances. We don't hastily baptize, but instead walk candidates through a probation period; we practice close communion, open to baptized believers. How do we protect regenerate membership? Through church discipline—that is, the gospel applied to believers, which is always meant to be corrective and restorative.

II. Current reality

Since last fall, approximately 240 people attend Coats Baptist on a given Sunday (counting both services). Of these 80% are members. In terms of unique numbers, we have approximately 365 people attending at Coats Baptist at least once a month. Currently there are about 900 members on record, but only about 330 of those could be considered active. How did we get here? Hasty baptisms when there was no real conversion; a loose membership process with low expectations; spotty care and follow-up and lack of group-life; and no formal church discipline. To be a member of a local church (such as CBC) should mean something, yet in many churches it does not.

III. Remedial suggestions

There are two possible strategies to remedy the situation. The more difficult path would be to deal with delinquent members one by one—first, scrubbing the roll of those who are deceased, have moved, or changed churches, then going name by name to contact those who have not been in attendance for the last 12 to 18 months. The easy way: dissolve the entire membership roll, then invite whoever is willing to re-join with a commitment to covenant membership that would be renewed annually.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does a church's polity impact its ability to do ministry?
2. What are the implications of congregationalism compared to episcopalianism or presbyterianism?
3. How can our church best respond to our current reality?