

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

IN THE NICK OF TIME

Occasional Essays and Other Stuff for Christian Students Presented by the President of
Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs Christian leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

"...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine."

October 9, 2009

Fundamentalism: Whence? Where? Whither? Part 9

Digression One, Wrapping Up: Populism and Congregationalism

Kevin T. Bauder

This is a series of essays about the past, present, and future of fundamentalism. As an introduction to that topic, I have been exploring the intellectual and social influences that shaped the evangelicalism out of which fundamentalism emerged. So far, I have discussed three of those influences: Scottish Common Sense Realism, populism, and sentimentalism. Because questions have been raised about these influences, I have chosen to digress from the main topic (fundamentalism) in order to respond to some misperceptions.

One of those misperceptions is that a rejection of populism entails a rejection of congregational church order in favor of some form of elitism. This misperception stems largely from a misunderstanding of congregationalism itself. Some Christians, many of them Americans, have understood congregational polity as if it were pure democracy, driven by town-hall-style debates, caucuses, and votes. The result is that some have embraced the most populist forms of congregationalism, while others have rejected congregationalism in favor of some polity that they perceive as less rough-and-tumble. Both extremes are mistaken, and both can be corrected by noting what is and is not implied by New Testament congregationalism.

In the New Testament, every believer is the recipient of spiritual wisdom (1 Cor. 1:30). This wisdom qualifies every believer as a competent judge of spiritual matters. The Christian's wisdom is enhanced by the Holy Spirit as He teaches believers the moral implications of the Word of God (1 Cor. 2:12-13). Indeed, the wisdom of the ordinary believer surpasses the insight of the wisest unbeliever (1 Cor. 6:1-5). The mark of a spiritual person is discernment (1 Cor. 2:13-14).¹ Mature saints are capable of discerning good and bad (Heb. 5:14).

The question is whether every believer has received enough wisdom to participate in every aspect of the decision-making process of the church. This question is certainly answered by the pattern of the apostolic churches. An examination of the New Testament shows that these congregations made two major types of decisions for themselves. First, they selected their own servant-leaders and held them accountable (Acts 6:1-6; 11:2, 18, 22; 13:1-3; 14:25-27; 2 Cor. 8:16-21). Second, they admitted, disciplined, and readmitted members to the congregation (Rom. 14:1; 15:7-14; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Cor. 2:4-11).²

The decisions to select leaders and to discipline members are the two most important decisions that the local church can make. If a congregation is competent to make these decisions, then it is competent to make whatever choices might present themselves. Since the New Testament shows the entire congregation participating in the most important decisions, there is no area of decision-making that needs to be withheld from the church's membership.

Some may object that the New Testament also depicts these decisions being made for rather than by congregations. It is noted that Paul, Barnabas, and Titus ordained elders, and it is argued that this counts against congregationalism. Moreover, the "Jerusalem Council" is supposed to have delivered decrees that were binding upon Antioch and the gentile churches.

The ordination of elders by Paul, Barnabas, and Titus, however, does not contradict congregational polity. In Titus 1:5, the verb is *kathistemi*, and this verb elsewhere denotes installation after congregational selection (Acts 6:3). In Acts 14:23, the verb is *cheirotoneo*, which has the idea of raising the hand. Lange (a Lutheran), Barnes (a Presbyterian), and Alford (an Anglican) all understand this to mean either that Paul and Barnabas presided in the assemblies while the choice was made or that they ratified the choice of the congregations. Nowhere does the New Testament indicate that any individual has the right to claim the title of pastor, bishop, and elder except by an act of the congregation.³

What about the Jerusalem Council? Congregationalists have insisted that is not a council at all, but a meeting of the local church at Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem because teachers from that church were spreading false doctrine. Therefore, it was important that Jerusalem accomplish two things: first, that it clarify its own positions, and second, that it call its own members into account. Both of these things happened. The so-called "decrees" from Jerusalem are simply a report of the church's proceedings combined with the good counsel of one congregation to others.

Admittedly, the Bible does not reveal church order with the same clarity as it shows the way of salvation, and I concede that the above considerations do not constitute a full defense of congregational polity. My purpose has been simply to indicate the main reasons for preferring it as a pattern of church order. I believe that the New Testament displays a pattern of congregationally-governed churches.

If that is so, then why hesitate to speak of democratic churches? The answer is that democracy is, at the end of the day, a polity of force. In a true democracy, fifty percent of the people plus one can impose their will upon fifty percent minus one. That being the case, the spirit of democracy is for each party to seek sufficient numbers to enforce its will upon the minority. Democracy lends itself to partisan politics, fostering the worst sort of manipulation, demagoguery, and even character assassination. If one person can manage to stampede fifty one percent, then he has a majority and he can rule—even at the expense of trampling the minority.

Nothing could be more foreign to the spirit of the New Testament. Democracies count votes, but a church that determines its policies by bare majorities is in sad shape indeed. We can go through the

New Testament with a microscope and never discover a church that is governed by the naked voting strength of a majority of its members.

The best glimpse that we get into the decision-making process of the New Testament churches is the meeting at Jerusalem in Acts 15. Clearly this was an important meeting with much at stake. What happened in the meeting? First, every concerned party—even the Pharisees—received an opportunity to air its concerns. Second, there was a clear order of precedence among those who spoke: not everyone gets the same hearing. Third, biblical teaching was offered through the office of elder. Fourth, the consent or consensus of the congregation was sought, but the solution was proposed by the church's leadership.

How does New Testament decision-making differ from bare democracy? Democracy is about counting votes, but New Testament decision-making is about weighing judgments. In New Testament decision-making, not all judgments weigh the same. Some people's judgments are given greater weight than others. The judgment of Paul and Barnabas was given weight because of their experience and their service for the Lord. The judgment of Peter was given weight, not only because of his apostolic office, but also because of his crucial role in opening the gospel to gentiles. The judgment of James was given weight because of his skill in handling the Scripture, because of his station as an elder, and (if extrabiblical tradition gives us any clue) because of his reputation for deep piety.

The challenge for any local congregation is to avoid the opposite perils of brouhaha majoritarianism and supercilious elitism. Democracy can be driven by the appetites of the incompetent. Elitism allows for domination by the abstractions of theorists. The answer to both is the same: to recognize the value of those factors that lend greater weight to judgments. Those factors are three in number: biblical skill, deep piety, and office. These three ought to coalesce in local church elders, making them the natural leaders of their congregations.

Congregationalism and pastoral leadership are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, congregationalism can only work if pastoral leadership is effective. Pastors have the responsibility of equipping and maturing the saints so that they can make the wisest possible decisions. Pastors have the duty to make sure that all biblical considerations have been entertained before any decision is made. Just as importantly, pastors have the responsibility to guard the flock against the internal disorder that inevitably results when democracy runs rampant. They do this by ensuring that everyone has access to all relevant information, that every perspective gets an orderly hearing, and that the unruly are rebuked and restrained.

Ultimately, the congregation will still have to make its own decisions. A vote may still be taken, though a church-wide vote is certainly not the only mechanism for implementing congregational polity. Such a vote, however, is not the mechanism for making the decision. It is merely the reflection of a decision that has already been made through careful instruction and consideration.

Before I became a professor, I spent a decade and a half in pastoral ministry. One thing I learned was that I never needed to be afraid of the decisions of the congregation. I taught and believed that there was greater wisdom in the entire body than in any one member, including me. Experience proved this to be true. When the Lord's people understand biblical principles, they are together capable of making wise choices on any matter that affects the assembly. To make wise decisions, however, the assembly needs biblical instruction, a godly example, full information, liberty and humility to hear all perspectives, and protection from demagogues and special interest groups. ✘

¹One of the classic disagreements among interpreters is whether the spiritual person of 1 Corinthians 2 is simply a believer (in contrast to the natural man), or either a yielded believer or a mature believer (in contrast to the carnal person in 1 Corinthians 3). While I take the view that the spiritual person is a mature person, the answer to this question does not greatly affect the present discussion. My overall argument is that all believers are qualified to make spiritual decisions, but that some believers are better qualified than others.

²1 Corinthians 5 is especially relevant to this conversation. Clearly, the apostle Paul regarded disciplinary authority under Christ to be ultimately invested in the congregation. The decision to disfellowship a church member can be made only by the assembled church. No biblical warrant exists for a bishop or some board expelling a member from the congregation on its own initiative. The only individual to have done so in the New Testament is Diotrephes, concerning whom the apostle has nothing good to say (3 John 9-10).

³Even some Baptist churches choose only a senior pastor, who then chooses other pastoral staff members. This polity is an intrusion upon the evidence of the New Testament. To be sure, a senior pastor may and ought to take the lead in selecting other pastoral staff members. Unless those individuals are chosen by the congregation, however, they should not be recognized as pastors.

This essay is by [Kevin T. Bauder](#), president of [Central Baptist Theological Seminary](#). Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses. New subscriptions to this electronic newsletter can be requested at inthenickoftime@centralseminary.edu.

Of Heaven.

Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667)

○ Beauteous God! uncircumscribed treasure
Of an eternal pleasure!
Thy throne is seated far
Above the highest star;
Where thou preparest a glorious place
Within the brightness of thy face,
For every spirit
To inherit,
That builds his hopes upon thy merit,
And loves thee with an holy charity.
What ravish'd heart, seraphic tongues, or eyes,
Clear as the morning rise,
Can speak, or think, or see
That bright eternity?
Where the great King's transparent throne,
Is of an entire jasper-stone.
There the eye
O' th' chrysolite,
And a sky

Of diamonds, rubies, chrysoprase,
And above all, thy holy face
Makes an eternal charity,
When thou dost bind thy jewels up—that day
Remember us, we pray;
That where the beryl lies
And the crystal 'bove the skies,
There thou may'st appoint us place,
Within the brightness of thy face;
And our soul
In the scroul
Of life and blissfulness enroul,
That We may praise thee to eternity.
Allelujah. ✠

Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis | [Contact Us](#) | www.centraseminary.edu
900 Forestview Ln N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 1-800-827-1043