

# *Congregational Government is from Satan*

*by James MacDonald.*

*NOTE: the tone of this post is intentionally aimed at influencing those who are engulfed in this system of church government that neither honors the Scriptures nor advances the gospel.*

That's right! It's actually the title to a book I have had percolating in my mind for a long time. After almost 30 years in ministry I have come irreversibly to this conclusion: congregational government is an invention and tool of the enemy of our souls to destroy the church of Jesus Christ. So there, I have said the strongest part of the message first; now some commentary.

## **1) Congregational Meetings Are Forums for Division:**

When church life is going well, the leaders of a church struggle to get a quorum for decision making. When things are going wrong, every carnal member lines up at a microphone to spew their venom and destroy the work of Christ in the church. I saw it growing up, and I have seen it since in churches that are fighting to survive and do something courageous for their future. Good people being held hostage by bad people, minorities hijacking the majority because a set of 'by-laws' get higher regard than the Scriptures. Satan does want to rip church unity to shreds like a devouring lion (1 Peter 5:8). He is accomplishing that again and again through a system of church government which elevates the fleshly and the worldly—often even those who no longer attend—to a status of influence equal to the most spiritually and biblically-minded in any congregation.

## **2) Voting Is Not Biblical**

The right to vote may be an American right given by the Constitution, but it is not a kingdom right given in the Word of God. It may be a tradition of some wonderful streams of church history, e.g. Baptist, but it is not biblical. There is not a shred of biblical evidence for a congregation voting on what its direction should be, but many church members believe it is their 'God-given right' to stand in judgement over the Pastors and Elders that are seeking to lead them. Even Mark Dever, a personal friend, champion for congregationalism, and credible scholar admits, "But the functioning of a purely congregational system is both unwieldy and lacking biblical support. Instead the establishment of a body of elders to serve in the day-to-day leadership in spiritual matters, serving at the pleasure of the congregation, enables us to maintain both the traditional distinctive of congregational life and the clearly biblical structure of elders."

## **3) Eldership Is Sometimes Unpopular**

Elders are responsible to "shepherd the flock" (1 Peter 5:2), which is often a very dirty job. Calling out sin, dealing with those who have fallen and seeking their restoration (Galatians 6:1-4), these responsibilities put Elders in positions where doing the right often means doing the unpopular. To then force the Elders to submit to a referendum on their actions is crushing to good men and destroys the work of God in a church. Rather, coming under a group of godly men will always be the best opportunity for a church to live in submission to God's Word and Spirit. In recent years we have seen many churches taken captive by a few vocal people who, like Alexander the coppersmith exposed by Paul in 2 Timothy 4:14, do "much harm." The Elders spend the majority of time trying to keep these blasphemous enemies of the gospel in line and often finish their term of leadership crushed by the weight of unrelenting criticism.

## **4) Congregationalism Crushes Pastors**

Statistics tell us that Pastors move every 2-3 years and that a pastor typically leaves a church because of 8 people. If you wonder how just eight people can so resist and refuse and ruin the calling of a gifted and trained messenger of the gospel then you have not spent much time in congregational settings. Just one elder's wife, or one women's ministry director, or one chairman of the building committee can consume a pastor and erode the support he needs to serve the church well. A lot of the men writing today in favor of

congregational government defend it as a tradition, and are so effective as leaders that they are able to suppress the inevitable uprising of carnality—but that is not so in the vast majority of small congregationally-stifled churches. I could retire now if I had banked a hundred dollars for every time a Pastor wept to me on the phone or in person about the crushing weight of a local ‘church boss’ who would not listen to Scripture or reason or God’s Holy Spirit. Many of the Pastors who have come into Harvest Bible Fellowship these past years have come seeking a new model of church government that frees them from the tyranny of the untrained and untrainable.

##### **5) Priesthood Not Eldership of All Believers**

A significant plank in the platform of biblical protestantism has been the priesthood of all believers. This is the idea that all of us as followers of Christ have equal standing before God and do not need a clerical intermediary in our relationship with the Lord. Sadly, though, this has led in many congregations to the Eldership of all believers—where each person, regardless of training, giftedness, fruitfulness, experience, etc., considers their thoughts about the future of a given congregation to be of equivalent value. Satan uses this expectation to create in people a demand to be heard, an insistence that their thoughts on the future of a church—no matter how quickly formed, or singularly held—receive validation equal that of a Pastor/Elder. When the vote takes place people are polarized, and factions sit back and wait for the plans they did not support with their vote to fail. (Sadly similar to the way most people view a president for whom they did not vote). It’s impossible to reconcile that process with:

**Hebrews 13:17 “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give an account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.”**

Down with congregational government. **Not the people who believe in it** or appreciate its history, **not the good or bad people who try to function well in a bad system**—down with the system itself. Let’s send congregational government back to hell where it came from. It’s unbiblical, unhealthy and too often a tool of Satan for the discouragement of good Pastors, godly Elders, and local churches everywhere.

You are welcome to engage in this discussion. Let’s stick to biblical defenses of congregationalism (which should be a short section) and anecdotal evidence of its effectiveness. I expect also to hear from Pastors who have suffered under its tyranny.