

Ecclesiastical Polity: Analysis of Congregational, Presbyterian, and Episcopal Forms of Church Government

Janvier Ndikubakuru
Email: ndijanvier76@gmail.com

Abstract

Church doctrine has been the subject of intense debate and division throughout Church history, particularly regarding Church governance. This article examines the traditional understanding of church governance based on the three forms of church that have been advanced from the New Testament. By exploring the Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational forms, the article underscores that the Congregationalism system is the most balanced system of church governance by providing its biblical support. The article analyses each model and provides biblical arguments for and objections to each model. The article concludes by showing that the congregationalist model is most supported Biblically.

Keywords: Church Government; Episcopal; Presbyterian; Congregational.

Introduction

The question of Church government and church organization has been an ongoing debate, sparking numerous separations from the Reformation to the present day. Christians believe the Bible has the final authority in what they are to believe and practice; therefore, knowing which system of church government is more balanced biblically is crucial. According to Leeman, the church government is important because it constitutes a church, guards the gospel, shapes Christian discipleship, and strengthens a church's witness.¹ Therefore, Studying church government becomes crucial as it equips believers with the knowledge and understanding necessary to reflect the gospel and enhances the community's church and credibility both within and outside the church.

In addition, the church doctrine has historically been a contentious issue, often resulting in divisions within the church². Among the many points of disagreement, the church

¹ Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman, eds., *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Interinstitutional Age* (Nashville, Tennessee: B & H Academic, 2015), p35.

² Akin et al., *Perspectives on Church Government*, p15.



government stands out as a significant source of division throughout church history. Denominations acknowledge that Christ is found and the head of the Church. ‘’ It is widely accepted that Jesus is the head of the Church (Col 1:8) and has entrusted His authority to be carried out through the church’s governing structures. However, how this church government is organized is often a topic of discussion and serves as a key distinction between various denominations.’’³

This article aims to research the complexities surrounding the various forms of church governance and their biblical foundations to determine the most balanced form of church governance. In addressing this question, this article argues in favor of the Congregational system as the most balanced form of church government; it has more biblical support and considers the priesthood of all believers.

Methodology

The methodology used in this article is library research. It engages with biblical texts, historical contexts, and theological arguments to contribute to the ongoing conversation about the nature and governance of the church.

The Definition of a Church

Grudem defines the church as a community of true believers of all time.⁴ This means the church is made only by those who place their Jesus. The church includes all believers from the Old Testament and New Testament. Berkoff notes that the church is comprised of partakers of Christ and all the blessings from his work on the cross.⁵ When speaking about the church government, we are not talking about this community of all true believers; we are referring to the visible church and local church.

The visible church is the community of believers as it is seen on earth.⁶ This expression encompasses individuals who publicly profess their faith in Christ and demonstrate its transformative power through their lives. As noted by Mbewe, the visible church comprises those who have experienced genuine conversion and have committed to living by the teachings of Christ, forming a familial bond within the community⁷. Although the visible church may include both genuine believers and nominal adherents, it is discernible to human perception and is a visible witness to the world.

³ <https://www.victorious.org/cbook/chur44-church-government> accessed 5 April 2025

⁴ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p743

⁵ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p556.

⁶ Ibid, p556

⁷ Mbewe and Lyons, *God’s Design for the Church*, p24



In the New Testament, the word “church” encompasses different groups of believers organized in small groups that meet in a house (Romans 16:5; Philemon 1:2) up to the universal church composed of all true believers (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18).⁸ The local church constitutes a specific congregation of believers who gather in a particular location to worship, fellowship, and serve together. When discussing church governance, the focus is typically on the governance structures and practices within both the visible and local expressions of the church, recognizing their distinct roles within the broader context of the body of Christ. Every well-ordered church has its own form of church government. A government is as necessary in the State as in the church.

The Church Governance

The term “government” inherently suggests the exercise of control and authority over the operations and actions of an organization or institution. In the context of the church, governance pertains to the authoritative body responsible for making decisions and overseeing its affairs. It refers to the person who has the final appeal in the matter of the life of the church. Throughout history, the forms of church government have been commonly categorized into three major systems: “Episcopalian,” “Presbyterian,” and “Congregationalist.” In the following section, I will make a critical analysis of each system to determine the most balanced church governance system.

The Episcopal System

The Episcopal system is a system of church governance with a hierarchical structure that has several levels of clergy, and the main local authorities are called bishops. The Episcopalians believe that Christ is the head of the church, but he has put the government of the church directly and exclusively in the hands of bishops⁹. For much of the history of Christianity, the episcopal system was the only known form of church organization. It is still in use in many major Christian churches and denominations, such as the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the Anglican Church. Some Lutheran churches use this form of government, and assorted other smaller, less familiar churches also use this form of church government. The bishops believe to derive their authority from a personal and uninterrupted apostolic succession of the twelve apostles of Jesus. Bishops with such authority are said to represent the historic episcopate. Churches under the episcopal system are led by their bishops, who exercise authority in a territory called a diocese, conference, or

⁸ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p747.

⁹ Louis berkhofer, *systematic theology* p580



synod. Their responsibility is both sacramental and constitutional; in addition to celebrating ordinations, confirmations, and consecrations, the bishop oversees the clergy within a local jurisdiction and represents both secular structures and the church hierarchy.

Biblical Support in favor of the Episcopal System

While some theologians argue that the episcopal system lacks biblical support in the New Testament, its proponents defend it by asserting that the episcopal system continues the apostolate¹⁰. Churches that practice the Episcopal form of church government argue that they have a long Christian tradition. According to them, the system has had a successful history proven over time. They view the system as established in the providential guidance of God from the apostolic age through the early centuries of the Christian.¹¹ Episcopal structure developed over time and developed very organically with the hierarchical organization of bishops, priests, and deacons. According to the system's defenders, the Episcopal system's principles are evident in the New Testament. Jesus was an overseer of the church during his time on earth. After his ascension, he called the apostles to prepare them to become the overseers and the church's bishops. During his resurrection and ascension, He explained their future duties as bishops and conveyed special authority to them as apostle bishops to discharge duties implied.¹²

The churches with this type of government defend it by relying on certain texts of the New Testament, in particular Matthew 28:19–20 and John 20 21–21. In interpreting these scripture passages, the holders of the system view that Jesus is commissioning apostles by giving them the authority not only for preaching and teaching but also the authority to ordinate and inaugurate the office of deacons by laying hands on the people's chosen¹³. To illustrate this argument, they argue that Paul bestowed the apostolic authority of jurisdiction upon Timothy and Titus by ordaining them to the office of "jurisdiction" in addition to teaching (2 Tim 1:6).¹⁴ Episcopal Church structure and Episcopal polity are outlined multiple times in the New Testament, not only in the 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. , but the churches were very spread out. That is why Paul, an appointed apostle (1 Timothy 1:11), asked Timothy to appoint Bishops. The most biblical element in the Episcopal system is the fact that the bishops are appointed by other bishops whom other bishops from the apostles have

¹⁰ Akin et al., *Perspectives on Church Government*, p22.

¹¹ Ibid, p22.

¹² Culver, *Systematic Theology*, p923.

¹³ Ibid, p923.

¹⁴ Ibid, p923.



appointed. No self-appointment has helped to fight heresy in the early church. In this sense, the Episcopal system appoints a leader, a clear leader, and a well-defined path to follow humans need a leader to follow.

The Episcopal system holders further support their argument by referencing passages such as Acts 15:28 and Matthew 18:20, interpreted to justify the convening of church leadership meetings at local, national, and international synods/councils.

The Objections to the Episcopal System

While the Episcopal system was the only known form of church organization before the Reformation and is still practiced by many Christian churches because of its strengths in facilitating decision-making, the system presents some weaknesses:

First, The distinction between episkopos (“bishop”) and the presbyteros (“elder”). The New Testament uses the terms “bishop” and “elder” interchangeably and does not create a positional distinction¹⁵. As John MacArthur observes it, the major weakness of Episcopal is the distinction between the episkopos (“bishop”) and the presbyteros (“elder”) not found in the New Testament.¹⁶ The only difference between the “elder” and the “bishop” is that the Bible uses the word elders to speak about the character of the office while it uses the word bishop to speak about the function of the office¹⁷. Generally, the two words refer to the same person.

Second, the replacement of the Apostle by the bishops: The argument that a group of bishops replaced the apostles is not seen in the New Testament, nor is the idea of physical transmission of the apostolic succession by the laying of hands of those who have been regularly ordained. The consecration of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13:3 refutes the theory. Paul and Barnabas were not consecrated by the apostles in Jerusalem but by members of the Church of Antioch, who laid hands on them and let them go¹⁸. As noted by Louis Berkhof, the apostles did not form a distinct and independent group of leaders, and they did not have a special role in ruling and administering the affairs of the churches. Their primary task was to bring the gospel to unreached places, to found churches, and to appoint elders and other people to lead these new churches.¹⁹ According to Grudem, while some may argue that developing an episcopal system with single bishops overseeing multiple churches was a

¹⁵ Jeramie Rinne, *building health churches, Church Elders*, how to shepherd God’s folk like Jesus p17

¹⁶ MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, p957.

¹⁷ <https://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/1992-05-31-Is-Congregational-Government-Biblical/> accessed 6 April 2024

¹⁸ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p809.

¹⁹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* p580



beneficial advancement in the early church, others might contend that it represented a departure from New Testament standards. This shift resulted from human dissatisfaction with the system of elected local elders established by the apostles, seemingly functioning well throughout the New Testament church from AD 30 to 100.²⁰ Today, the church does not need people with supreme authority like the apostles; the church has completed the revelation of the word of God.²¹

Third, the distinction of clergy and laity: The teaching of the New Testament strongly argues in favor of the priesthood of all believers. The episcopal system creates gaps between clergy and laity, a system that takes the ministry from the hands of the laity and puts it in the hands of a small group of people called “clergy”. This gap between clergy and laity took the Bible from the land of laity, finally leading to the protestant Reformation during the 16 century.²²

Presbyterian System

The Presbyterian is a government of elected elders by faithful members of the church²³. The elders form the body of elders, also called the council of elders or the presbyteral council. A certain number of churches in each region form the regional synod. All the churches of a country meet in a general synod. Some of the regional synod members are members of the national synod, which generally has authority over all the Presbyterian Churches in a country²⁴. However, the local church constitutes the basic unit of the federation, which, of course, is constituted by a mutual agreement to comply with synodal decisions if these do not contradict biblical teaching. It is important to note that The Presbyterian system is very similar to the Episcopal system. In the Episcopal system, a Bishop oversees several churches; in the Presbyterian system, it is a counsel of people who oversee several churches.

Biblical Support in Favor of the Presbyterian System

Supporters of the Presbyterian system assert that the word of God guides every detail of the system. However, they do not claim that its fundamental principles are directly derived from Scripture.²⁵ Churches that practice the Presbyterian system defend it by asserting that it is the only system found in both testaments. In the Old Testament, the Presbyterian appears for the

²⁰ Grudem systematic theology p 925

²¹ <https://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/1992-05-31-Is-Congregational-Government-Biblical/> accessed 6 April 2024

²² Ibid

²³ Culver, *Systematic Theology*, p923

²⁴ Grudem systematic theology p 927

²⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* p58



first time when Moses assembled the Elders in Egypt to communicate God’s message Exodus 4:29). The Old Testament is filled with examples of the system of elders. In his farewell message in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses addresses the elders. Josua similarly addresses the elders in his last days to faithfully serve the Lord, not turning to gods their fathers served in Egypt and the gods of Ammonites of the land they were dwelling (Joshua chapters 23-24). In the same way, the elders came as the people’s representatives to ask the king to Samuel; the elders, on behalf of the people, came to David in Hebron to invite him to take dominion (2 Sam 5:3)²⁶. Again, it was the elders who supported the work of rebuilding the temple after the return from captivity (Ezra 5:5, 9; 6:78, 14). These few examples illustrate that the Presbyterian system was the predominant form of governance in the Old Testament.

In the time of Jesus, the “Sanhedrin” designed on the model of the 70 elders of Moses was called the “presbyterion” or “college of elders” (Luke 22:66 and Acts 22:5) or the “gerousia” “Assembly of the elders” (Acts 5:21)²⁷. In the synagogues, the government of the community was in the hands of elders who bore responsibility for worship and life community and had the right to welcome members into the community and exclude them (John 9:22).

According to the holders of the Presbyterian system, the idea of having the Council of Elders or the regional synod is found in the New Testament. In the book of Acts chapter 15, when there was a question about the division of the church, the apostles and elders gathered in Jerusalem in what can be called the first General Assembly. The Apostles and elders from all over the church gathered in Jerusalem and discussed the matter. It was a doctrinal question and related to the fundamental doctrine of how a person is saved. Does he have to be circumcised and become a Jew to become a Christian? That was the matter. The elders and the apostles that were gathered in Jerusalem a ruling decision that was to be applied in all churches. They debated, studied the Scriptures, debated the question, and finally came to an understanding concerning the matter deeply troubling the church. In chapter 16:4, Paul and Timothy went through the cities and delivered them to observe the decisions of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. They delivered the decrees to keep, meaning churches were not autonomous. According to the proponents of the Presbyterian system, the book of Acts does not teach the local church’s autonomy. In the Presbyterian system, elders put their wisdom and gifts into the service of many churches under their authority, which helped the churches

²⁶ Hays, P. Geo, Presbyterians; *Popular Narrative of their Origin, Progress, Doctrines, and Achievements*, (New York: J. A. Hill, 1892), p25.

²⁷ Ibid., p25.



resolve many conflicts. The Presbyterian form promotes the unity of the body of Christ in that all the churches follow the common framework of worship and discipline. Churches that use the Presbyterian form also argue in favor of the system because the form is found in both testaments.

The Objections to the Presbyterian System

John MacArthur notes that the New Testament recognizes the office of eldership (1Thess.5:12; 13:17), but the extrabiblical hierarchical structures historically associated with this form of church government (e.g., local church sessions, regional presbyteries, larger synods, general assemblies) have neither New Testament precedent nor support.²⁸

Wayne Grudem identifies four main weaknesses of the Presbyterian system of governance²⁹: First, there is no biblical basis for elders having authority beyond their local church. Scripture does not support the idea that elders should exercise authority over multiple congregations. While the system proponents use Acts 15 to justify convening church leadership meetings at local, national, and international councils, Acts 15 cannot be applied in the context of church government. Louis Berkhof, himself a Presbyterian, notes that the Council of Jerusalem, composed of apostles and elders, does not serve as a proper example or model of a classis or synod in the modern sense of the word³⁰. According to Everett Ferguson, the passage of Acts should be considered the basis of advocating for church council but as the model of how a church can consult another.³¹ In Acts 15, the apostles and elders make universally binding decisions by the Holy Spirit. The meeting was voluntary, not mandatory, and was led by the apostles, not the representative of local churches, as is the case with the Presbyterian system.³² Acts 15 is to be considered apostolic, which means that the scenario was not to be repeated through the epochs; it should be considered like what happened on the day of Pentecost; it was not repeated over time. In conclusion, Acts 15 is a tough passage to build church policy upon, as noted by Jonathan Leem, because it records an event that happened one time in the history of redemption, such as the Pentecost event. It was a moment when the apostles, with the assistance of the elders in Jerusalem, clarified the gospel concerning the identity of God's people under the Old Covenant versus the New Covenant.

²⁸ MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, Page 769.

²⁹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Pages 812–813.

³⁰ Quoted from *don't fire your church members the case for congregationalism* by Jonathan Leeman p154

³¹ Everett Ferguson, 'The Congregational of the early church, p130

³² <https://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/1992-05-31-Is-Congregational-Government-Biblical/> accessed 6/ April 2024



Second, the system can lead to prolonged doctrinal disputes. These disagreements often drag on for years and are repeatedly escalated to the national synod, creating ongoing conflict within the church. Third, in practice, the church's governance tends to exclude the laity or regular members of local congregations. Decision-making and authority are concentrated in the hands of the clergy and elders, leaving lay members with limited influence. In this sense, the Presbyterian system does not fully support the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, as it involves a select group of individuals making decisions on behalf of the rest. Fourth, while it is theoretically possible for a Presbyterian system to maintain doctrinal purity and prevent individual churches from deviating, it often has the opposite effect. National leaders of Presbyterian denominations sometimes adopt false doctrines and then pressure local churches to conform to these heretical teachings.

Congregational System

James Leo Garrett defines the Congregational system as a form of church governance in which final human authority rests with the local or congregation when it gathers for decision-making.³³ According to this form of government, each local church is completely independent from the others. It means that local churches have authority in matters of discipline and doctrine. They have the freedom to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit in what they see in the word of God. The churches that practice the system argue that its independence helps them to rely on the clarity of Scripture more than other systems developed above. The holders of the system believe that God uses this system of governance to lead his people as a body to understand how the church should be recognized and what should be believed in terms of doctrine.

The power of government then resides in the members of the church and not in those who exercise an official ministry. This form makes the ministry entirely dependent on the gifted People. Officers are the only members of the local church chosen to teach and manage the church's activities. Their authority does not extend beyond what they hold as church members. When different churches need to collaborate occasionally, they do so through ecclesiastical councils and local or regional conferences to discuss shared issues.

Congregationalism presents a picture of each local church governing its own affairs under the lordship of Christ and living out what it means to be the full manifestation of the one, true,

³³ Akin et al., *Perspectives on Church Government*, p27.



heavenly, eschatological church³⁴. In the congregational system, the final Court of Appeal in the local church's life is the congregation itself.

Biblical Support

The Bible clearly instructs about who has the final authority in the life of the church in the following areas:

First, in the matters of dispute between Believers: Matthew 18:15-17 is often cited as a strong support for congregational governance within the local church. In this passage, Jesus clearly knows who has the final authority. In this passage, Jesus addresses the process of reconciliation among believers. He outlines a step-by-step approach: first, one should privately show the fault to someone who has sinned. If this step fails, the following action is to involve one or two others as witnesses. If the person still refuses to listen, the final step is to bring the matter before the church. Jesus indicates that the church, the assembly of individual believers, holds the ultimate authority on such issues. This authority rests not with a bishop, pope, presbytery, assembly, synod, convention, or conference. Nor does it lie with a pastor, board of elders, board of deacons, or a church committee. The congregation of believers who collectively constitute the church has the final say.³⁵ Matthew 18:15-17 grants Jesus' authority to congregational decision-making and strongly endorses the concept of congregational governance³⁶.

Second, in the selection of the deacons: Another passage supporting congregational governance is Acts 6:2-5, where the early church faced division challenges due to the daily food distribution. The apostles entrusted the authority to address this issue to the congregation. The passage says that the twelve gathered all the disciples together and said: "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God to serve on the table. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of wisdom and the Spirit. We will turn this responsibility over to them and give our attention to prayer in the ministry of the Word. This proposal pleased the whole group."

To deny the fact that the apostles gathered the whole church, some Bible commentators argue that no place in cities could accommodate all the believers of the New

³⁴ "Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age: Dever, Mark, Leeman, Jonathan, Davis Ph.D., Andrew M., Hammett, John S., Haykin, Michael A. G., Merkle, Benjamin L, Schreiner, Thomas R., Wellum, Dr. Kirk, Wellum, Dr. Stephen J., White, Thomas, Wright, Shawn: p72.

³⁵ Dever and Platt, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, p178.

³⁶ Akin et al., *Perspectives on Church Government*, p44.



Testament in one place³⁷. However, the text says that the apostles gathered all the disciples in one place, as in Acts 2:46 and 5:12. Jonathan Leem notes that Acts 6 gives an example of a meeting of working church members in the context of a large number. In the context of Acts 6, the congregation held the final authority, even though the apostles took the lead in recommending a course of action to those with ultimate authority.³⁸ Mark Dever notes that the apostles handed over responsibility to the congregation, recognizing in the church assembly the same kind of ultimate authority under God that Jesus recognized in Matthew 18:15-17³⁹.

The New Testament also highlights the church's authority to excommunicate a false professor. In 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, the church tolerates the sin of a man whom Paul himself considers unrepentant (1 Corinthians 5:3). The man claims to be a believer, but Paul is no longer willing to affirm this claim. However, the responsibility still lies with the church to judge and take action.⁴⁰ He, therefore, urges the church in Corinth to discipline that member engaging in immoral conduct. Paul explicitly asks the entire congregation to participate in the disciplinary process, not just the leaders. It is clear from this passage that the responsibility belongs to the whole body, not merely a committee, indicating that the entire congregation must be involved in resolving such issues. The authority to excommunicate is in the hands of the congregation, which is why Paul is addressing the whole church. The entire church has the power to discipline the unrepentant sinner.

In discussing Paul's approach to addressing the issues within the Corinthian church, it is important to observe that "The intriguing aspect of this episode is that Paul has formed his own judgment and supports it wholeheartedly with the authority of his apostolic position, potentially even invoking the authority of Jesus Christ and the Spirit of God. However, he still approaches the Corinthian congregation as if they were a younger sibling needing guidance or correction. Ultimately, though, he insists that they must arrive at their own decision."⁴¹

Third, in the removing false teachers: In the epistle of Galatians 1 and 2, Paul addresses the church of Galatians as possessing an equal authority, at least in one respect. Galatians 1:6-9 affirms that the congregation has the authority to anathematize an apostle or

³⁷ Jonathan Leem, don't fire your church members, the case for congregationalism, p109

³⁸ Ibid, p109.

³⁹ Dever and Platt, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, p178.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p178.

⁴¹ David E. Garland, 1 Corinthians, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* p206.



an angel who proves unfaithful to the gospel. Like others examined above, the passage shows that the New Testament gives the church the final authority to handle false teachings. As noted by Jonathan Leem, Paul does not tell the church of Galatia to remove these false teachers pending the presbytery or the bishop's approval.⁴² It is clear from the Epistle of Galatians that the church has the power to vote, to discuss, or use whatever mechanism they have at its disposal to build consensus and remove its leaders.

In addition to Matthew 18:15-17, Acts 6:2-5, and 1 Corinthians 5:4-5, other New Testament passages support congregational governance. In Acts 1:21-26, the congregation is involved in choosing Judas's replacement. Acts 9:26-28 describes the church of Jerusalem's reception of Saul. In 1 Corinthians 16:3, the congregation selects people to accompany Paul to Jerusalem. Galatians 6:1 speaks about restoring a member who has fallen into sin. In 2 Thessalonians 3:6, Paul exhorts the congregation to "keep away" from idle or disruptive members. In Revelation 2:14-16 and 2:20-25, the churches at Pergamum and Thyatira are rebuked for tolerating false teachings, emphasizing the congregation's role in maintaining doctrinal purity.

Mark Dever affirms that every biblical discussion on church leadership assumes a congregational context, highlighting the congregation's ultimate authority under God⁴³. To conclude this section on biblical support for the congregational system, it can be said that the New Testament grants the church congregation the authority and responsibility to handle disputes between Christians and matters of doctrine and discipline. This demonstrates that the congregation ultimately has the final say in the life of the church.

The Objections to the Congregational System

John MacArthur criticizes the congregational system for emphasizing a democratic leadership style, where all congregation members, rather than just the elders, are involved in decision-making. He argues that in the context of American churches, where democratic ideals are prevalent in secular politics, congregational rule can undermine the elders' authority and responsibility to lead and shepherd the flock as outlined in the New Testament⁴⁴. The congregation system is accused of not favoring the leadership of the elders, while the New Testament strongly supports the leadership of the elders in local churches.

⁴² Dever and Platt, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, p178

⁴³ Ibid, p178

⁴⁴ MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, p952.



Louis Berkhof also critiques this system, suggesting that the idea of each church being independent fails to reflect the unity of the Church of Christ. He believes it has a fragmenting effect and permits various forms of arbitrary church governance, with no mechanism to overturn decisions made by local churches.⁴⁵

Additionally, critics argue that the congregational system often fails because many congregations have a significant number of immature members. Individuals who are not true believers lack the necessary qualities to participate effectively in congregational governance, which contradicts the biblical concept of the priesthood of all believers.

Summary of Findings

Following the discussion developed above, I conclude that congregational church governance is the most biblically supported and scriptural form of church governance. I hold this view for several reasons:

Congregational governance is the only form with extensive biblical backing. It aligns with the metaphor of the church as a body and upholds the priesthood of all believers. Additionally, it helps to recognize Jesus as the head of the church, not any single person or group. I agree with Mark Dever, who argues that congregationalism is the fundamental form of church governance. He states:

Every local church in Christendom, from Greek Orthodox to Pentecostal, from Roman Catholic to Baptist, from Episcopalian to Lutheran, from Presbyterian to Methodist, is congregational. They exist only as the people continue to participate in their activities. When the people vote whether at a congregational meeting or (where that's not allowed) with their funds or their feet, the leaders of the congregation must listen. They don't have to agree, but they must listen. The congregation will have their say.⁴⁶

Concerning the raised objections to congregational governance, I would say that these do not disqualify the system because of its strong biblical foundation. To argue that the congregational system undermines the elders' authority to lead and shepherd the flock misunderstands its nature. Congregationalism is not straightforward democracy; churches recognize human fallibility and the inerrancy of God's Word. Therefore, members work together collectively to understand God's Word⁴⁷. The role of elders is seen in the congregational system; it does not undermine the presence of the leadership, simply the elders have the authority to teach. The authority to teach is different from the authority to

⁴⁵ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p587.

⁴⁶ Dever and Platt, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, p178.

⁴⁷ Jonathan Leeman, *don't fire your church members, the case for congregationalism*, p100.



command, as noted by Jonathan Leem. “An elder has an authority of counsel or truth in matters of God’s word, just like a doctor possesses such authority in matters of medicine.”⁴⁸ Therefore, the pastors or the elders, according to their call to teach, have the authority to council. This means that they can instruct, warn, rebuke, or even command, and their instruction imposes some moral obligation.⁴⁹ In the New Testament, we do not know where elders make unilateral decisions, such as disciplining someone out of the church.⁵⁰ In the congregational system, the elders have the leading and training authority, but this authority does not make them a different group of Christians. As noted by Jonathan Leem, the difference between an elder and a member is based on maturity, not class.⁵¹ In the congregational system, there is collaboration and mutual submission between the congregation and its leadership. Critics claim that congregationalism undermines the unity of the Church of Christ due to its independent nature. However, churches with congregational governance often participate in voluntary associations that express this unity, involving all church members, not just elders or clergy, unlike in the Presbyterian system.⁵²

Regarding the concern that congregational churches might fall into heresies, Wayne Grudem notes that, historically, the national leadership of Presbyterian denominations has often adopted false doctrines, pressuring local churches to conform.⁵³

Conclusion

Each church governance system has biblical and historical support and some objections. The Episcopal system has been the dominant form of church government. However, it faces challenges to justify biblically the replacement of the Apostle by the bishops, the distinctions between bishops and elders, and clergy-laity separation. The Presbyterian system reflects collective elder leadership and historical precedent but struggles with biblical justification for extra-local authority and the exclusion of the laity of local congregations in decision-making and authority. The Congregational system prioritizes local church autonomy and congregational authority in decision-making, supported by numerous New Testament passages, but has the criticism of undermining elder leadership and church unity.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p139

⁴⁹ Jonathan Leeman, *understanding the congregation’s Authority*, Church basics, p45

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Ibid p49

⁵² Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p 812.

⁵³ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p 812



While I acknowledge the validity of each form of church governance, I believe that congregationalism is the most biblically balanced. This form of governance reflects the scriptural principles of the priesthood of all believers and the metaphor of the church as a body. It emphasizes Jesus as the head of the church. While I acknowledge the validity of other forms of church governance, I believe that congregationalism is the most biblically balanced. This form of governance reflects the scriptural principles of the priesthood of all believers and the metaphor of the church as a body. It emphasizes Jesus as the head of the church rather than placing authority in a single person or group.

Bibliography

- Akin, Daniel, Jr, James Leo Garrett, Robert L. Reymond, James R. White, and Paul F. M. Zahl. *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*. Edited by Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman. Nashville, Tenn: B&H Academic, 2004.
- Baptist Foundations: *Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*: Dever, Mark, Leeman, Jonathan, Davis Ph.D., Andrew M., Hammett, John S., Haykin, Michael A. G., Merkle, Benjamin L, Schreiner, Thomas R., Wellum, Dr. Kirk, Wellum, Dr. Stephen J., White, Thomas, Wright, Shawn
- Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. New edition. Grand Rapids, Mich: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1996.
- Culver, Robert Duncan. *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical*. Reprint edition. Fearn: Mentor, 2013.
- Dever Mark, and David Platt. *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. 3rd edition. Wheaton: Crossway, 2013.
- Dever Mark, and Jonathan Leeman, eds., *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Interinstitutional Age* (Nashville, Tennessee: B & H Academic, 2015)
- Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Zondervan Academic, 1994.
- Hays, P. Geo, *Presbyterians; Popular Narrative of their Origin, Progress, Doctrines, and Achievements*, (New York: J. A. Hill & Co. publishers, 1892),25-3
<https://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/1992-05-31-Is-Congregational-Government-Biblical/>
<https://www.victorious.org/cbook/chur44-church-government>
- Jeramie Rinne, *building health churches, Church Elders, how to shepherd God's folk like Jesus*, Crossway, 2014
- Jonathan Leeman *don't fire your church members, the case for congregationalism*, B&H academic 2016.
- Jonathan Leeman, *understanding the Congregation's Authority*, Church basics, Publishing Group, 2020
- MacArthur, John, and Richard Mayhue. *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth*. Illustrated edition. Crossway, 2017.



Mbewe, Conrad, and Glenn Lyons. *God's Design for the Church: A Guide for African Pastors and Ministry Leaders*. Illustrated edition. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2020.

