

Congregationalism: Viable & biblical, speakers say

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By Samuel Smith

NEW ORLEANS (BP)--At a time when traditional Baptist church government, known as congregational polity, has fallen out of favor in some churches, a number of Southern Baptist thinkers met at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary to discuss the issue.

In varying ways, they said the traditional model remains viable -- and biblical.

"Congregationalism may not be attractive, efficient, well-understood, well-practiced, easy, universally believed in or loved or impervious to distortion," Mark Dever, pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., said in his address during the Feb. 5-7 gathering. "But, my friends, congregationalism is biblical."

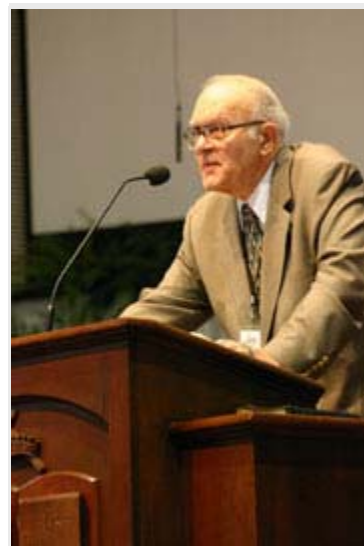
In a panel discussion, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary President Paige Patterson went even further in both his judgment of and support for congregational polity.

"Congregationalism is a terrible form of church government," the Texas seminary president said, "but it is light years ahead of whatever comes in second."

James Leo Garrett Jr., distinguished professor emeritus of theology at Southwestern Seminary, defined congregational polity as a form of church government in which "final human authority rests in the local or particular congregation when it gathers for decision-making. This means that decisions about membership, leadership, doctrine, worship, conduct, missions, finances, property, relationships and the like are to be made by the gathered congregation except when such decisions have been delegated to individual members or to groups of members."

Garrett presented a case for congregational polity drawn from his study of biblical scholarship on passages in Matthew, Acts and 1 and 2 Corinthians. Beyond the various Baptist conventions, 35 different Protestant denominational bodies in the United States practice some form of congregational polity, he noted. The intention of congregational polity, Garrett added, was for the congregation to govern itself under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and with the leadership of the Holy Spirit rather than under the authority of any ecclesiastical body.

Congregational polity, Dever noted, assumes that every church member is indeed a believer, a concept known as regenerate church membership. John Hammett, associate professor of systematic



James Leo Garrett, an emeritus professor at Southwestern Seminary, gave definition to the term "congregational polity" in addressing a New Orleans Seminary conference on the topic. *Photo courtesy of NOBTS*

theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in North Carolina, echoed Dever's emphasis on regenerate church membership. He illustrated that Baptists historically in the South practiced church discipline more often than any other denomination. Under that system, any member who acted outside the bounds of Christian behavior and refused to repent when confronted by the church could be removed from membership.

Church discipline all but came to a halt in the 20th century, Hammett said, as the teaching of "soul competence" by influential Baptist scholar E.Y. Mullins (1860-1928) replaced the historic Baptist doctrine of church competence, placing far more authority in the individual than the church.

Hammett noted, "It's hard to imagine that the pervasive presence of this individualistic doctrine of soul competence, in the absence of the idea church competence, did not play a significant role in prompting individual church members from asking questions like this, 'Who am I to call another person to be disciplined?' 'Who am I question someone entering the church,' rather than asking, 'What must we do as the church to assure this brother and protect the church?'"

Malcolm Yarnell, associate professor of systematic theology at Southwestern Seminary, said Mullins' idea of soul competence was a response to the dangers people faced in the early 20th century, including Nazism, communism and other kinds of dictatorship around the world.

"We were very concerned to protect people, and the way to do that was to protect the rights of the individual," Yarnell said. "Mullins took over current political ideology and current business terms and introduced them into Baptist thought and said, 'This is how Baptists have always believed.'"

Hammett outlined an historic view of church polity in which Christ gave the authority to rule to the church as a corporate body, who then entrusted much of that authority to the pastor. The pastor is then accountable to the church body. Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, addressed how pastors should exercise the authority granted to them by the local church.



Malcolm Yarnell of Southwestern Seminary recapped the influence of 20th-century Baptist thinker E.Y. Mullins in a shift from congregational to individual authority.

The biblical model for how a church should interact with a pastor, Land said, is identical to the instructions the Bible gives to husbands and wives.

"When the Bible talks to the husband, it says, 'Love your wife as Christ loved the church. Give yourself in service to your wife and always put your wife's needs above your own needs,'" Land said. "When the Bible talks to the wife it says, 'Put yourself under the authority of your own husband as unto the Lord.'"

In keeping with that model, Land said pastors should not abuse their authority and that church members should follow their pastors whenever possible.

"When a church calls a man to be their pastor, they are saying, 'We are exercising our autonomy under the Lordship of Christ, and we believe that you are God's man to be our under shepherd and to lead us and we are going to follow you. Even when we would prefer plan B, we are going to go with

plan A unless in conscience we cannot," Land said. "There is no such thing as a great, God-honoring church which is pastor-led and not deacon- and people-supported. ... There is also no such thing as a great God-honoring church which is deacon- and congregation-led."

Alvin Reid, professor of evangelism at Southeastern Seminary, noted that congregational polity must be employed with a sense of purpose if a church is to fulfill its mission to reach the lost.

"[Congregational] polity can lead to a form of individualism in which, just as it was at the end of the Book of Judges, everyone does what is right in his own eyes," Reid said. "Congregations which drift along led by a 'good old boy' system of a vocal few perpetuate a form of church life which most pleases them, sternly resists change and decreasingly concerns itself with pleasing God."

Reid said he believes congregational polity should be used to build consensus about the church's purpose rather than to preserve the status quo on non-eternal matters.

"Christianity at its heart is not a monument to be preserved, but a movement to be advanced," Reid said, asking, "Should the red carpet, robed choir and pipe organ of the 1950s and '60s stand ossified and unchanged for years to come?"

Rick Durst, vice president for academic affairs at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in California, said that in implementing congregational polity, Baptists would do well to develop a biblical understanding of conflict. In contrast to the modern assumption that conflict is the end of one's ministry, he said the nature of church life in the New Testament epistles and Acts reveals that Christians have always had to deal with differences of opinion. He went on to say that honest disagreements can and should lead to growth and the advancement of a church's mission.

"Could you learn to see conflict as a gift from God?" Durst asked.



Richard Land of the SBC Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission spoke of the balance between pastoral and congregational roles in addressing New Orleans Seminary's "Issues in Baptist Polity" conference. *Photo courtesy of NOBTS*