

Why Church Matters
Congregationalism Matters: A Church of Priests (Hebrews 8)
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on October 4, 2015

Introduction

- ❖ We're starting a new sermon series today that'll lead up to our church's anniversary celebration on the Sunday before Thanksgiving. This year we're celebrating our fortieth year. Our church was planted back in 1975 and since then we've seen the work of God's grace in building us up and multiplying us through a handful of church plants. **As a church, we've got a lot to be thankful for as we look back, and at the same time we've got a lot to anticipate as we look forward.**
 - ▶ Your elders and pastors are currently working on a 5–10 year vision plan that we hope to unveil early next year, and a lot of it is going to relate to the very identity of our church, our ministry structure, our target groups, and our understanding of what it means to be a member of a church, particularly this one.
 - So what we hope to do in this series (which is happening concurrently in the Chinese services) is to lay out a foundation – certain theological principles pertaining to the church – that we'll build on in our upcoming vision plan. So we're calling this series, *Why Church Matters*.

- ❖ **I hope you already share the conviction that church does matter – that it's important to the Christian life to be actively connected and committed to a local church.** But the foundation, the reasoning, behind your implicit sense that church matters may not be the same as your neighbor sitting next to you. So together we want to study what God's word has to say about the church and its role in our discipleship to Christ. We're going to see why **church membership** matters, why practicing **church discipline** matters, why **elder leadership** matters, why **tithing** matters, and today we're going to talk about why **congregationalism** matters.
 - ▶ And you might be wondering, "*What in the world is congregationalism?*" Never heard of it. So why would it matter much if I've gone this long in my Christian life without even knowing what that means? Point taken. **But I'd argue that even if you've never heard the term before, you're actually more familiar with congregationalism than you realize, and I'm pretty sure once I explain it, you'd agree it matters.** What I want to do today is clarify this concept, help you see it in Scripture, and then draw out the implications if we truly believe in congregationalism as a church.
 - So I've divided this message into three parts: 1) Congregationalism defined – we'll define what we mean and don't mean. 2) Congregationalism taught – we'll see where the concept is taught in Scripture. 3) Congregationalism matters – we'll consider how it impacts other aspects of our life together as a church.

Congregationalism Defined

- ❖ So let's start by defining terms. **Congregationalism is essentially a form of church governance.** It's based on a particular way of interpreting and applying Scripture on how a church ought to be structured in terms of governing authority and leadership. Historically, there are four main approaches to church governance: *episcopal*, *presbyterian*, *congregational*, and *nongovernmental*.¹ Now I think the best way to explain congregationalism is to contrast it to these other approaches.

¹ See Benjamin L. Merkle's *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, pg. 26-30.

- ❖ Let me just quickly touch on that last one since it's not common. A **nongovernmental approach** is found among Quakers and some Brethren churches. Basically it's a complete minimization of any formal structure, so they usually don't have pastors or staff or a council or committees.
 - ▶ They theologically embrace the informal and unstructured. They'd ground it in their conviction over the priesthood of all believers (which we'll talk about later), but I think they go further than that and essentially teach an **eldership/leadership of all believers**. But when everyone's a leader, no one's really leading.

- ❖ So let's go back to the first approach, the **episcopal approach** to governance. This is practiced by Episcopalians, Anglicans, Methodists, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholics, and some Lutherans. The word *episcopal* come from the Greek *episkopos*, which can also be translated as overseer or bishop. Obviously there are differences between these denominations, but **the one commonality is they all believe that final authority over a church lies in the office of a bishop**. Someone who has governing authority over more than one local church. This is an authority they claim based on the belief that bishops are successors to the original apostles.
 - ▶ Methodists have the simplest structure where there is only one level of bishops over different groupings of churches. Anglicans and Episcopalians add a second level where you have archbishops over groupings of bishops. And of course there's the Catholic Church that vests final authority over the church in one particular bishop – the pope, bishop of Rome.
 - So when it comes to local church leadership, it's determine from above and not below. In other words, your pastor/rector/priest is appointed for you by the bishop. The same goes for issues over doctrine or discipline. The responsibility ultimately lies in the bishop and not the local congregation or even its own pastor/rector/priest.

- ❖ The **presbyterian approach** to governance is found among Presbyterians and Reformed denominations. The term *presbyterian* comes from *presbuteros*, which means elder. These are elder-governed churches. Now similar to the episcopal approach, there are various levels of authority over local congregations, but presbyterianism rejects the office of bishop. **So any authoritative body above a local church is comprised of elders from among the various churches in the area. Each congregation has its own elders there to represent them.**
 - ▶ So in this system, every local church has a session (team) of elders that governs them. Some are teaching elders (staff) and some ruling elders (lay). The congregation gets to choose their own elders, but in so doing they ceded authority to the elders on issues of doctrine and discipline. And elders themselves cede authority to the body over them, the local presbytery.

- ❖ And then we come to the **congregational approach** to church governance. This is practiced by Baptists, Congregationalists, independent Bible churches, and most Lutherans. I think the good majority of you here with a church background are more familiar with this approach. The key distinctive here is that the final authority in a church doesn't rest with a bishop from the outside, or even elders on the inside, but with the local assembly of believers. **The congregation itself is the final court of appeal when it comes to matters of doctrine and discipline, and by implication that would include the choosing of leaders and the receiving of new members.**

- ❖ **Self-governance is the key here.** Even if a congregational church is part of a denomination like the Southern Baptists, the individual churches are still autonomous. They might partner for missions, seminary training, church planting, disaster relief, etc., but it's always a voluntary cooperation. Such denominations or networks are a partnership of self-governing churches.
 - ▶ Now unlike the nongovernmental approach, congregationalism is not devoid of formal leadership. **These churches still appoint leaders to lead them.** In some cases, it's a single elder (senior pastor). Others may have a team of elders (staff/lay or staff only) or a team comprised of elders and deacons. **But regardless of who's given authority to lead, in congregationalism the ultimate authority to govern lies with the congregation.**

- ❖ Now I know some will point out that **congregationalism sounds a lot like a democracy.** Is that all this is? Is that why this form of governance is so popular among American churches because it's contextualized for lovers of freedom and democracy? No, congregationalism is *not* a democracy.
 - ▶ Yes, a congregational church shares similarities to a democracy in that we're not a monarchy (ruled by one), an oligarchy (ruled by a few), or an aristocracy (ruled by the fittest). So we're more like a democracy in that we're ruled *by the people*. And yes, like in a democracy the congregation's voice is typically expressed through a majority vote.
 - But I can't stress this enough: **Do not approach your role as a member and your vote in congregational decisions in the same way you approach your role as a citizen walking into a voting booth.**

- ❖ **In a simple democracy, you vote to express yourself, to express your will.** And when you choose leaders, you want them to represent you and the constituency and to make decisions that represent your will. That's what we expect in a democratic government.
 - ▶ **But in congregationalism, you, as a member, don't vote to see *your* will be done but God's.** In this sense, we're more like a monarchy in that Jesus is our King, and if we're given a vote, then we vote to make sure things are operating in the church according to our King's will as revealed in the King's Word.

- ❖ So if **a leader starts teaching things contrary to Scripture**, it's ultimately the congregation's job to rebuke or remove that leader. If **a fellow member starts living contrary to his profession of faith** in King Jesus, it's ultimately the congregation's job to discipline that member. If leaders present **a candidate or nominee that falls short of the biblical qualifications** for leadership or present **a budget that reflects priorities that run contrary to what Scripture prioritizes**, it's ultimately the congregation's job to reject the proposal and send it back for further deliberation.
 - ▶ Congregational authority, usually in the form of a vote, is about guarding the gospel and the church's gospel witness and mission. It's not about expressing yourself and your preferences.

- ❖ Here's another government analogy (so it's not perfect). **Think of congregational authority as not the authority to lead but the authority to veto bad leadership.** So like an executive's veto power, it should be used sparingly. If a church is healthy, it would rarely need to exercise this power because the relationship between congregation and leadership would be marked by mutual trust and respect.

- ❖ So yes there are similarities to a democratic system but congregationalism is not the same thing. But it's good to raise this point. I'll venture to say most of you prefer congregational governance. **You like that the congregation has final authority. There's something about it that just feels right.**
 - ▶ But why do you feel that way? Because of culture? Because you grew up in a democratic society? Some would argue that's the way it works. They'll say Scripture is silent on church governance, so just adapt it to the culture of your congregation. So if we're a Chinese church, then we should ask, "*What form of governance best fits the Chinese or Asian-American context?*" and then pick the governance structure that best suits the context.

Congregationalism Taught

- ❖ But I think that's an unhealthy way to lead a church. It assumes Scripture's silence but that's not the case. Sure, the Bible is not as clear on church governance as it is on the gospel. **That's why you don't have to agree with congregationalism to be a Christian.** Just believe the gospel!
 - ▶ **But that's not to say the Bible is silent on this issue.** In the end, two Christians can walk away from the Bible with differing positions but at least they're trying to do justice to the relevant texts and let their theology drive their practice.
- ❖ In case you weren't aware, HCC is a congregationally-governed church. In my opinion, we're not exactly consistent in our practice. There's room for growth. But at the least we've landed somewhere. But I want to make sure we all know why. *Why are we congregationally-governed?*
 - ▶ Let me start by showing you a few texts that affirm congregationalism. **I think the Bible is clearest in teaching that the congregation is ultimately responsible for the doctrine and discipline of the church.** For guarding the purity of the its teaching and membership.
- ❖ Let's start with a passage about guarding doctrine. Consider **Galatians 1:6-9**. This is early on in Paul's ministry, so these are young churches, young believers, he's writing to. His letters, we know, were read before entire congregations (cf. Col. 4:16), so he's not just exhorting the elders but all the members to guard the gospel. Listen to what Paul writes in v8, "*But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.*"
 - ▶ Do apostles have authority? Do angels? Sure. But so does the congregation, and with their authority they are to judge even the teaching of apostles and angels to make sure it accords with the gospel. **So in matters of doctrine, in guarding the purity of a church's doctrine and its grasp of the gospel, the responsibility ultimately lies – not with a bishop, a team of pastors, or a board of elders/deacons – but with the congregation.**
- ❖ Now if the each local church is ultimately responsible for its own teaching, then **by implication it's ultimately responsible for choosing its own leaders.** When it comes to **choosing deacons** it's more clearly spelled out in Scripture.
 - ▶ In **Acts 6**, the first deacons are selected in the Jerusalem church. The apostles were there, so you'd think they could've just picked. But no, v2 says they summon the "*full number of the disciples*", and in v3 say to them, "*Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute*". So task of choosing deacons falls – not to the apostles, the leaders – but to the brothers, the full number of the disciples in the church.

- ❖ Now when it comes to **choosing elders** (or hiring pastors), admittedly the congregational approach is more of an implication to the Scripture's insistence that the congregation is responsible to ultimately guard the teaching of the church. If that's the case, then they should also be responsible to ultimately guard who gets to teach in the church, who gets to serve as an elder.
- ❖ **Let's consider some passages that affirm congregational authority over matters of discipline among fellow members.** First there's **1 Corinthians 5**. Here we have a messy situation in the church of Corinth. Read v1, "*It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife.*" Now that's likely a reference to his stepmother. We're dealing with incest.
 - ▶ There's a brother in the church persisting in sin and resisting repentance, and thus acting like an unbeliever. And apparently this is public knowledge and yet the church is doing nothing about it. **The purity of their gospel witness is at stake.** Even their pagan neighbors don't tolerate incest, so if Christ's church does, then what will their neighbors think of Christ?
- ❖ Paul says in v2 that this man needs to be "*removed from among you*". He needs to be treated as an unbeliever and not a church member. He needs to be excommunicated. [Rest assured we'll keep coming back to this concept in subsequent sermon in this series.]
 - ▶ The point I want to make here is that Paul is appealing not just to the leaders but to the whole assembly. In v4, he says, "*When you are assembled*" – when you congregate as the church – you've been given the power of our Lord Jesus to "*deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.*"
 - The congregation were the ones who accepted this brother into their number. They've been tolerating him. And now it's their responsibility to put him out for the sake of his own soul and for their gospel witness as a church.
- ❖ Here's one more related passage. In **2 Corinthians 2:6-7**, Paul is referring to a brother that had been previously excommunicated. The man is now repentant, so Paul says you should restore him back into fellowship. Let me read vv6-7, "*For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.*"
 - ▶ Notice a majority decision was previously made. At least a majority of the congregation believed this man needed to be removed. But now Paul is appealing to that same majority to turn to forgive and comfort the brother. They're to bring him back into membership.
 - **This is where I'd draw the implication that if the whole congregation is to be involved in putting members out and restoring them back in, then the whole congregation should be involved in receiving new members in the first place.**
- ❖ So those are just a few selected texts affirming the congregation's authority over doctrine and discipline, over the choosing of leaders and the receiving of new members. **But what I find most convincing is to see how congregationalism fits within the entire storyline of Scripture.** Let me explain. As you may know, the Bible is divided into two sections, the Old and New Testament. The Old Testament focuses on the people of God (Israel), whose relationship with God was based on a covenant he made with them at Sinai (cf. Ex. 20-24).

- ❖ **This covenant defined the people of God as a nation-state comprised of twelve tribes.** They were all Israelites, but as Scripture teaches “*not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel*” (Rom. 9:6) meaning the people of God in the OT was a spiritually-mixed bag of believers and nonbelievers. They were given God’s good Law, but their hearts were bad. So they couldn’t be left to themselves do whatever was right in their own eyes. They would destroy themselves.
 - ▶ **So God arranged for his people to be governed by special mediators who were uniquely filled with God’s Spirit.** They were called prophets (Moses), priests (Samuel), and kings, (David). The Spirit only fell upon these individuals and granted them authority to lead.

- ❖ But with the coming of Christ, with his death and resurrection, things have changed. That’s what the author of Hebrews is trying to get across. And in chapter 8, he quotes out of Jeremiah 31. That’s the chapter where the prophet anticipates a day when God will establish a **New Covenant** that will bring about new changes – **where the very nature and leadership structure of God’s people will even change and be made new.**

- ❖ Let me read you **Hebrews 8:6**, “*But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.*” And then in vv8-12 he quotes out of Jeremiah 31. **V8**, “*Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.*”
 - ▶ Skip to **v10**, “*For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ¹¹And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.*”

- ❖ This New Covenant has changed the very nature of God’s people. **It doesn’t just open up membership to new groups previously excluded. No, it radically changes every person within the covenant community as the Spirit of God is poured on them** (cf. Ezk. 36:27). By his Spirit, the Lord puts his laws into our minds, writes it onto our hearts, so that the knowledge of God is now available to all within the community, from the least to the greatest.
 - ▶ This is what Christianity is all about. **It’s about God making himself known to sinners.** Not to the self-righteous but to the humble, to the broken, to those who confess their sins and plead the death and resurrection of Christ as their only hope of ever knowing God. If that’s you, then you’ll find God to be merciful towards your iniquities, remembering your sins no more (Heb. 8:12). That’s the glory of the New Covenant that God makes with his people.

- ❖ Think about the change: Between the two covenants, the people of God transitioned from a nation-state, from a spiritually-mixed bag – to a body, an assembly of people, comprised only of Spirit-regenerated believers. **Where every member has a priestly responsibility to mediate the knowledge of God to the unbelieving world.** This is the priesthood of all believers.

- ❖ We're a kingdom of priests, a “*royal priesthood*” (1 Pet. 2:9). **So what we need is a new structure, a new leadership paradigm, that's compatible with our new nature.**
 - ▶ I'm convinced that congregationalism is the structure that's most compatible with these new realities. It takes into account that every member of a church is a priest by decentralizing authority from one uniquely Spirit-filled person (or just a few) and dispersing it among a whole congregation of Spirit-filled people. We're a church of priests.
- ❖ **But that doesn't mean we have no more need for recognized teachers and leaders.** It's just means that NT teachers and leaders no longer function like OT leaders who held a unique governing authority. Instead, they're fellow priests given the task to lead in concert with the congregation.
 - ▶ Remember, congregations are still commanded in Scripture to obey their leaders (Heb. 13:17) but they're also responsible to veto bad leadership, to make sure leadership is being carried out in faithfulness to the Head of the Church, Christ our Lord. The congregation is still the final earthly authority in all matters pertaining to the life of a local church.
 - Let me sum it up: **Congregationalism is the conviction that Scripture mandates for each individual local church to be congregationally-governed and elder-led.**

Congregationalism Matters

- ❖ Okay if we agree that's what the Bible mandates. If we agree that congregationalism best reflects these New Covenant realities, then it matters to biblical faithfulness. And if congregationalism matters, that impacts other aspects of our life together as a church. Consider with me.
- ❖ If congregationalism matters, then **1) learning sound doctrine matters.** It only makes sense. If you're responsible to ultimately guard the purity of your church's teaching and guard who gets to teach, then your own grasp of doctrine better be sound. **You should be equipped to discern good teaching and detect false teaching. Don't just leave it up to the professionals.**
 - ▶ The priesthood of all believers was a Reformational principle in the 16th-century. The Catholic Church insisted that you leave doctrine and guarding its purity to the professionals. To the clerical class. To bishops. To the papacy. **But the Reformers insisted that every Christian is a priest, with direct knowledge of God through his Word mediated by his Spirit.** That means it's up to every believer to study the Bible and develop sound doctrine.
 - If this sounds daunting to you and you don't know where to start, might I recommend one of my favorite books and one of the first I read on doctrine. It's J.I. Packer's *Knowing God*. How about you and a friend commit to reading it together?
- ❖ If congregationalism matters, then **2) joining membership matters.** If the final governing authority lies with the congregation, then it's important to know who actually makes up the congregation. *Is it just anyone who walks in off the street the day you happen to assemble to make a congregational decision?* Obviously not. This is one reason why membership matters.
 - ▶ **There's just no way you can exercise congregational authority without a clear delineation of who's a member of the congregation and who's not.** Obviously not just anyone who shows up is authorized to govern. That responsibility must be limited to a specific, recognizable body of people – the church members.

- ❖ *Are you a member of a church?* The only qualification to join is that you've personally trusted in Christ, you've publicly identified with Him through baptism, and you demonstrate evidence of regeneration. **If those things are true of you, but you've yet to join the church you attend, then you're doing that church a disservice and yourself one as well.** There's a God-given duty and authority that He wants you to exercise within your church for its good, for its joy, and for your own.
- ❖ If congregationalism matters, then **3) practicing church discipline matters.** If the congregation is not a spiritually-mixed bag but comprised of only regenerate believers, then it's important that we do our best to guard the purity of our membership.
 - ▶ If we find ourselves in a 1 Corinthians 5 situation, if any member's life or doctrine begins to compromise the gospel – **if the church can no longer, in good conscience, affirm that this person is a regenerate believer, then he/she ought to be removed from membership.** Not because we don't like the person but because the very nature of the church requires this. It's a new covenant community of regenerate believers.
- ❖ If congregationalism matters, then **4) the ordinances matter.** By ordinances, I'm referring to baptism and the Lord's Supper. The reason they matter is because they're the biblically-mandated means by which a church publicly affirms and declares someone to be a regenerate believer. But that congregational aspect of the ordinances is often lost on us. We usually treat them as private acts.
 - ▶ **But baptism is not just an opportunity for you to say something about yourself. It's an opportunity for a congregation to say something about you.** To say we see evidence of Spirit-regeneration in you, of true faith and repentance in you. That's why we baptize you.
- ❖ **Likewise the Lord's Supper is not a private affair between you and the Lord. It's a public event where the congregation reaffirms each other's identity in Christ.** So when that plate comes to you in a few minutes and you're invited to eat and drink the body and blood of Christ, let it sink in that an entire body of believers is publicly reaffirming you to be a Christian.
 - ▶ And if that plate has to pass you by, the entire congregation is saying something to you as well. We're saying, *"You're not a Christian. You're not a member of the body of Christ. Yet. You're not without hope. Just confess your sins and ask Jesus for mercy. And you'll have it."* You'll be born again of the Spirit, and once you make that reality publicly known through the waters of baptism, then next time that plate will stop at you and the congregation will get a chance to reaffirm your place in the body of Christ.
- ❖ Lastly if congregationalism matters, then **5) membership meetings matter.** I'm not surprised if you see membership meetings as an inconvenience or formality. But I hope after today you're beginning to see the high calling and great responsibility involved in exercising your congregational authority.
 - ▶ So members, we're meeting in two weeks to affirm the deacon nominees recommended by the Church Council. You'll have a chance to vote, to exercise that authority of yours. Remember, that vote is not about expressing yourself or your will. It's about making sure God's will is done. It's about guarding the gospel and our church's gospel witness. It's a job only fit for an entire congregation of regenerate believers.