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A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH GOVERNMENT AND ITS RELATION TO AFRICAN (SOUTH AFRICAN) CONTEXT

1 INTRODUCTION

It is an undisputed fact that we Baptists around the world share the same identity through our basic principles and beliefs. Yet it is important to accept that these beliefs, though basically the same, have been influenced by different contexts. For instance, Baptist churches in South Africa under the old government believed in the Separation of State and Church, which they interpreted as no participation for Christians in politics. But the context in which this principle was developed affected the outcome. Take, for example, this definition: 'The principle of Separation of Church and State is that, in the providence of God, the two differ in their respective nature and functions. The church is not to be identified with the State nor is its faith or practices to be directed or controlled by the State. The State is responsible for administering justice, ensuring an orderly community, and promoting the welfare of its citizens. The church is responsible for preaching the Gospel and for demonstrating and making known God's will and the care for mankind'.⁶⁸ This definition suited the context of old South Africa where the church was encouraged by those in power not to participate in politics.

Most Baptist principles were inherited with their definitions from the West, through those who came to build the Baptist work in Africa. It is important for African Baptists to define for themselves what these principles mean in their contexts. In most cases the principles will have similar meanings but, if they are to own them and identify with them, Africans ought to look into these principles and try to discover what they mean in Africa today. In this paper I shall illustrate this by focusing on the principle of Congregational Church Government.

2 DEFINITION

Baptists, like few other denominations, follow the congregational church meeting type of church government. This principle is self-explanatory: it simply means the congregation makes decisions that govern the church. The decisions that the church makes involve every member in that church. This is democracy in the local church. Congregational church government is based upon belief in *the competency of the soul*. Baptists believe that it is a God-given liberty and competence for every member to make decisions on their own. As Baptists we are not credal people. Neither have we surrendered our liberty and competency to any person, even though such person might be particularly holy or superior.

The STATEMENT OF BAPTIST PRINCIPLES in the *South African Baptist Handbook* gives this definition: 'The principle of CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH GOVERNMENT, namely, that a constituted church meeting is under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the highest court of authority for the local church; and that each

individual member has inalienable right and responsibility to participate fully in the life and government of the church, including the appointment of its leaders'.⁶⁹ The principle is a deliberate and a drastic move away from other forms of church government, such as the Episcopalian and Presbyterian. This principle, like all other Baptist principles, is based upon scriptural verses, for example, Acts 6:1-6, the choosing of deacons. Seemingly this was one of the practices in the early church, to involve every member in decision-making. This practice affirms the freedom and the competency of the soul as a God-given right that we have in Christ.

Secondly, this principle affirms the belief in *the priesthood of all believers* which still emphasizes that all members in the congregation ought to participate freely in the business of the local church, that all members in the church are called to minister freely, and be responsible for their participation in their church. Congregational church government does not mean moving away from being under the authority and the lordship of Christ. Christ remains the Lord and the Head of the Church. Neither does it mean that individuals will pursue their individualized agendas because of this God-given right. This is not a freedom which leads to chaos, but it is freedom which is governed by the Holy Scriptures in the unity of God the Holy Spirit. Therefore, this principle means 'Christ himself animating his own body through his Spirit'.⁷⁰

The principle also emphasizes the following concepts:

- All people are created in the image of God. Thus, in this case, every church member has the capacity to make decisions. To say yes or no, even to the highest executive body in the church. That every person is responsible for their choices.
- God is able to reveal himself to every member of the church. God does not reveal himself only to a few individuals or to one person.
- God communicates with every member in the church. Therefore every member in the church has the capacity to receive messages from God. Thus no one can claim revelation which cannot be challenged. Messages from God are not reserved to special people.

These are some of the basics I find helpful in this principle. Yet some Baptist churches or denominations interpret congregational church government in a very exclusive way. They emphasize the principle but the practice is different. There are four ways which I find prevalent in Baptist churches in South Africa.

- 1 Congregational Church Government means only those in special committees in the church have prerogative in the affairs of the church. In some instances it would mean only the elders of the church. In some, it would be people with special recognition in the church - those with lots of money, good education, or good family background. In some cases the government of the church would involve those whose parents and grandparents have been in the church for some

time. These are the third and fourth generations in the same church.

- 2 Only adults have the right to speak during the church meetings and make decisions on behalf of everybody. Young people who have come to faith and are very active and mature are not involved. Sometimes marriage becomes the criteria for young adults to participate in the church business.
- 3 In most cases women are excluded in churches which practise congregational church government. Dr Louise Kretzschmar⁷¹ emphasized this exclusion as a great omission or negligence on the part of the Baptist Union of South Africa when they drafted their major document on principles in 1987, *Six Baptist Principles*. Congregational church government was part of this document. According to Dr Kretzschmar this was a redraft of this basic Baptist principle with no change at all: totally silent on issues of gender, especially the exclusion of women and the question of the context. These are current religious debates in the world and anyone who is serious in church cannot just overlook them.
- 4 In some churches congregational church government would mean every member in the church except the pastor and his/her family. When decisions are to be made, they are always being advised to keep a neutral position. Sometimes they are requested to excuse themselves from the meetings, even for issues where their input is needed.

Before I attempt to raise issues on the context and gender, I want to look at the concerns about this principle, concerns which seem to have particular impact on Africans, especially in South Africa.

3 CONCERNS

The first concern is that this principle can be misinterpreted and perverted, just like any other statement of belief. The question now is whether it is helpful to keep this principle or not. There are good things about congregational church government. It prevents the misuse of power by the church leaders. It embraces the participatory approach to the gospel. It propagates quality growth because of the liberty given to every member to have mature responsibility in decision-making. It affirms the freedom that we find in Christ.

But there are two major negative aspects. First, it can promote exploitation and oppression of the leadership. This has been expressed as a serious concern in South Africa. Churches have abused and ill-treated their pastors in the name of congregational church government. This can happen when the congregations can choose to disregard the position and the responsibilities placed upon the leadership.

Secondly, progress in churches can be retarded where the principle is misunderstood, especially where the visions from the leadership are always viewed as a threat to maximum participation and where churches fail to draw a line between their participation and that of their own leaders.

4 THE ISSUES OF GENDER

Although Baptists affirm the role of women in the church, often in practice women do not fully participate. The voice of women is not heard during church meetings. What I mean is that decisions taken at church meetings usually come from men. In my experience, women usually participate in voting for motions or decisions, but they are not involved in the actual debates. I think the reason is that in the back of our minds we still hold on to the belief that women should not talk during church meetings. Yet in many churches women are in the majority. Their participation in congregational matters does not match their numbers. In decision-making women form the minority voice.

How can we truly practise real congregational church government? Among the sensitive issues that can be highlighted is the choice of church officers. Why is it that usually men are chosen to be on the committees and not women or young people? Are such decisions influenced by the form of church government or by an androcentric perspective?

5 CONTEXTUALIZING

Is it possible to contextualize Baptist principles in general? If the answer is yes, then we need to find ways to contextualize congregational church government. First, we need to find out how the context has influenced the decisions around these principles. Maybe we can use that as a case study.

The understanding of participation in decision-making in an African context would differ from that of a European context. In an African context (South Africa) the people will always respect suggestions made by the leadership. This does not mean that people cannot differ from the leaders' views, but the voice of the leadership will always receive a hearing before considering another approach. Because kingship played a major role in the lives of African people, the deep sense of kingship, with all it implies, has been one of the strongest forces in traditional African life.

Where these rulers are found, they are not simply political heads, they are mystical and religious heads. The divine symbol of their people's health and welfare. The individuals as such may not have outstanding talents or abilities, but their office is linked between the human rule and spiritual government. They are therefore, divine or sacral rulers, the shadow or the reflection of God's rule in the universe. People regard them as God's earthly viceroys.⁷²

The definition of church leaders or pastors does not differ so much from that of community leaders, because after all they are community leaders. Congregational church government needs to be understood in a similar context. How can we engage congregational involvement without losing the prestigious position of the leaders? There is a saying, *Lefoko la kgosi le agelwa mosako* - the voice of the leader should be respected by the followers. Africans believe in leadership which speaks and gives

direction. Africans expect leaders to have a vision and to lead. This is not dictatorship but a way of affirming leaders. I want to make this clear: people are involved in processes which lead to decision-making, but they would always want to know the mind of the leadership. To them the position of rulers or leaders brings in God's guidance. That is not to say that other people are not guided by God, but that leaders were put in place through God's divine will. People would always want to identify with that blessing. In South Africa that kind of tradition was undermined by the white co-ordinators or superintendents of black churches.

Another concept in the African context is that the leadership exists because of the followers, *kgosi ke kgosi ka morafe*. Good guidance and advice from the followers enables the leaders to maintain quality. The African perspective respects the voice of the whole nation. In some ways this is the same as belief in the competency of the soul. In the case of church community, the communication and decision-making follow a certain pattern, through which the whole community complements and confirms the leadership. The leaders are not taken away out of the community. There is one unit. Decisions are made and owned by the whole community. No one is above anyone else, but everyone's position is respected.

As Africans with our various traditions we need to check whether it is possible to find a better way of contextualizing congregational church government in order to suit our situation. To remain congregational as Baptists, yet to maintain the ethos of our people in respecting leadership and the preservation of community life. The kinship that we have in Christ should not be spoiled by the cultures and traditions that have infiltrated our continent. Our sense of community is very deep. 'Almost all concepts concerned with human relationships can be understood and interpreted through the kinship system. This it is which largely governs the behaviour, thinking and whole life of the individuals in the society of which he or she is a member'.⁷³

In most instances the misinterpretation of this principle of congregational church government has diminished the value of kinship and community life because it has created a situation where leaders have no positions, where there is competition instead of complementing. It created a situation where leaders cannot be ordinary people in the community, because of having more opposition than support. Yet it is the duty of the church to find its identity in all circumstances and various contexts.

We are Baptists. We shall not revert to presbyterian or episcopalian forms of church government. Yet I should remain an African.

NOTES

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| 1 | J. Vink, 1994, p.112. | |
| 2 | Edition for 1988-89, p.178. | |
| 3 | H.H. Hobbs and E.Y. Mullins, <i>The Axioms of Religion</i> , Nashville, Tennessee, 1978, p.49. | |
| 4 | 'The privatization of the Christian faith amongst South African Baptists', PhD dissertation, | |
| | | University of Cape Town, 1992. |
| 5 | John S. Mbiti, <i>African Religions and Philosophy</i> , Library Congress, New Hampshire, USA, 1990, pp.177-8. | |
| 6 | <i>ibid.</i> , p.102. | |