

## Congregationalism---How Will it End?

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With recent actions in North America and Europe disregarding the twice-voted General Conference stand on Women's Ordination, a pattern of congregationalism is becoming established. The question now prominent is "how far into congregationalism shall we go?"

In order to understand congregationalism, we should see it in the larger context of the four general types of church government.

1. **Episcopal**---the form of church government by bishops, usually with three orders of ministers, as bishops, priests, and deacons.
2. **Papal**---the form of church government in which the supreme authority is vested in the Pope. From him the church is governed by cardinals, archbishops, bishops, and priests. The local church or individual member has no authority in church administration.
3. **Independent**---the form of church polity that makes the local church congregation supreme and final within its own domain. This is usually referred to as congregationalism.
4. **Representative**---the form of church government which recognizes that authority in the church rests in the church membership, with executive responsibility delegated to representative bodies and officers for the governing of the church. This form of church government recognizes also the equality of

the ordination of the entire ministry. The representative form of church government is that which prevails in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.<sup>1</sup>

Our current *Church Manual* makes the following statement regarding the Seventh-day Adventist system of church government:

The Seventh-day Adventist form of governance is representative, which recognizes that authority rests in the membership and is expressed through duly elected representatives at each level of organization, with executive responsibility delegated to representative bodies and officers for the governing of the Church at each separate level. This form of governance recognizes also that ordination to the ministry is recognized by the Church worldwide.<sup>2</sup>

Congregationalism is very different than the type of church government that we have had for a century and a half. Congregationalism is defined by Webster's *New World Dictionary* thus: "a form of church organization in which each local congregation is self-governing."<sup>3</sup>

Another description is found at GotQuestions.org:

Congregationalism speaks of a form of church government. "Episcopal" church government is rule by bishops, "presbyterian" church government is rule by elders, and "congregational" church government is rule by the congregation. Episcopal government usually includes a hierarchy over the local church, and presbyterian government sometimes does as well. Congregational government nearly always avoids such hierarchy, maintaining that the local church is answerable directly to God, not some man or organization. Congregational government is found in many Baptist and non-denominational churches.<sup>4</sup>

The congregational form of church government allows for an infinite variety of congregational beliefs and practices. This is why there are so many different kinds of congregational churches in our world today. There is a lack of genuine unity among them all!

On the other hand, the representative form of church government secures unity in beliefs and practices. It allows for study and discussion, but when the vote is taken by the General Conference in its world session, the members and leaders are ethically bound to uphold that decision. This is essential not only for the world church to maintain unity, but also for a local congregation to maintain unity as well.

Congregations have been “split” because some members were not willing to uphold the decision of the church in business session. This same principle applies to the world church.

Multiple conferences and unions have moved forward ordaining women to leadership pastoral positions in direct opposition to two votes of the General Conference in world business sessions (1990 and 1995). They are acting as if there is no authority in the representative form of governance of the world church. They have opened the door to the congregational form of church government and walked through it boldly.

### **How far into congregationalism shall we go?**

But how far into congregationalism shall we go? What if a local church should decide to withhold a portion of, or even its entire tithe, or to hire their own pastor or associate pastor? The only control over what these pastors teach and practice is in the hands of the local congregation. This is pure congregationalism! You say that would never happen. But it is happening more and more in the Adventist Church. Members seem not to care what the conference says; they seem to think they are answerable to God apart from the church that is God's.

These churches are only following the lead of divisions, unions and conferences that are following the congregational form of government in regard to women's ordination. The 2010 *Church Manual* clearly identifies our representative form of organization, reminding us that “This form of governance recognizes also that

ordination to the ministry is recognized by the Church Worldwide.”<sup>5</sup> However, ordination of women to the ministry is *not* recognized by the Church worldwide. Such “ordinations” are recognized only by a very few local conferences, unions and divisions (and perhaps in the end, for only a span of months). Therefore a form of leadership is established that is fundamentally different from the world Church. These divisions, unions and conferences are saying that they are answerable to God alone---not to the General Conference. This quite simply is congregationalism.

What will be the end result of this trend into congregationalism? The result will be a church that has splintered into many different fragments all looking out for their own special agenda---self-focused instead of world-mission focused. Satan will have effectively destroyed God’s efforts to proclaim the Three Angels Messages to the world.

Could it be that these leaders are blind to the implications of what they are doing? Or worse, that they see clearly what they are doing and therefore are pursuing it with gusto? We pray that it is that they are only blind, because there is hope for those who are blind.

This hope is found in the message of Jesus to our Laodicean Church! It is time we take another look at the counsel we have been given by God through His servant:

Never allow anyone’s ideas to unsettle your faith in regard to the order and harmony which should exist in the church. . . . The God of heaven is a God of order, and He requires all His followers to have rules and regulations, and to preserve order.<sup>6</sup>

An army would be demoralized if it did not learn to obey the orders of the captain. Each soldier must act in concert. Union is strength; without union, efforts are meaningless. Whatever excellent qualities soldiers may possess, they cannot be safe, trustworthy soldiers if they claim a right to act independently of their comrades. This independent action cannot be maintained in the service of Christ. . . .

Those who prefer to act alone are not good soldiers; they have some crookedness in their character that needs to be straightened. They may think

themselves conscientious, but they do not the works of Christ. They cannot render efficient service. Their work will be of a character to draw apart when Christ's prayer was that His disciples might be one as He was one with the Father.—Letter 62, 1886.<sup>7</sup>

There will be, among the remnant of these last days, as there were with ancient Israel, those who wish to move independently, who are not willing to submit to the teachings of the Spirit of God, and who will not listen to advice or counsel. Let such ever bear in mind that God has a church upon the earth, to which He has delegated power. Men will want to follow their own independent judgment, despising counsel and reproof; but just as surely as they do this they will depart from the faith, and disaster and ruin of souls will follow.--Letter 104, 1894.<sup>8</sup>

Some have advanced the thought that as we near the close of time, every child of God will act independently of any religious organization. But I have been instructed by the Lord that in this work there is no such thing as every man's being independent. The stars of heaven are all under law, each influencing the other to do the will of God, yielding their common obedience to the law that controls their action. And, in order that the Lord's work may advance healthfully and solidly, His people must draw together.

The spasmodic, fitful movements of some who claim to be Christians are well represented by the work of strong but untrained horses. When one pulls forward, another pulls back; at the voice of their master one plunges ahead, and the other stands immovable. If men will not move in concert in the great and grand work for this time, there will be confusion. It is not a good sign when men refuse to unite with their brethren, and prefer to act alone. Let laborers take into their confidence the brethren who are free to point out every departure from right principles. If men wear the yoke of Christ, they cannot pull apart; they will draw with Christ.<sup>9</sup>

I have often been instructed by the Lord that no man's judgment should be surrendered to the judgment of any other one man. Never should the mind of one man or the minds of a few men be regarded as sufficient in wisdom and power to control the work and to say what plans shall be followed. But when, in a General Conference, the judgment of the brethren assembled from all parts of the field is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be stubbornly maintained, but surrendered. Never should a laborer regard as a virtue the persistent maintenance of his position of independence, contrary to the decision of the general body.<sup>10</sup>

Will this Church be shaken apart and dissolve into multiple smaller units, like Baptists and other denominations? Or, will we defy the pattern of these splintered churches and press together in unity, love and truth?

We have reached the intersection of those two choices.

The Lord has graciously warned us:

I asked the meaning of the shaking I had seen, and was shown that it would be caused by the straight testimony called forth by the counsel of the True Witness to the Laodiceans. This will have its effect upon the heart of the receiver, and will lead him to exalt the standard and pour forth the straight truth. Some will not bear this straight testimony. They will rise up against it, and this will cause a shaking among God's people.<sup>11</sup>

The church may appear as about to fall, but it does not fall. It remains, while the sinners in Zion will be sifted out---the chaff separated from the precious wheat. This is a terrible ordeal, but nevertheless it must take place. None but those who have been overcoming by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony will be found with the loyal and true, without spot or stain of sin, without guile in their mouths. We must be divested of our self-righteousness and arrayed in the righteousness of Christ.<sup>12</sup>

We pray that this issue of Women's Ordination will not cause God's Church to "appear as about to fall"; however, it looks like we are speedily headed in that direction. We appeal to brothers and sisters in Christ. "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14).

Once one has taken a public stand, it is hard to back down, but the Bible appeal is for all of us to humble ourselves before God and each other, pray for each other, seek the approval of Jesus, and turn from our independent congregationalism. Perhaps we have not gone too far, and God will hear, forgive and heal!

- 1 Seventh-day Adventist *Church Manual*, Revised 2000, pp. 25, 26.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 29.
- 3 *Webster's New World Dictionary*, Second College Edition, 1980, pp. 299, 300.
- 4 <http://www.gotquestions.org/congregationalism.html#ixzz2gRHKuYSY>, accessed 2013-10-08.
- 5 Seventh-day Adventist *Church Manual*, Revised 2010, pp. 28, 29.
- 6 Ellen White, *Testimonies*, vol. 5, p. 274.
- 7 \_\_\_\_\_, *Christ Triumphant*, p. 354.
- 8 \_\_\_\_\_, *Selected Messages*, vol. 3, p. 23.
- 9 \_\_\_\_\_, *Gospel Workers*, pp. 487, 488.
- 10 \_\_\_\_\_, *Testimonies*, vol. 9, p. 260.
- 11 \_\_\_\_\_, *Testimonies*, vol. 1, pp. 181, 182.
- 12 \_\_\_\_\_, *Selected Messages*, vol. 2, p. 380.