

**Polity and Proclamation: The Relationship Between
Congregational Polity and Evangelistic Church
Growth in the SBC**

Alvin L. Reid
Professor of Evangelism/ Bailey Smith Chair of Evangelism
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
P.O. Box 1889
Wake Forest, NC 27588

In 1988 near Washington D.C., 175 people gathered together for what they called a war meeting. This group had been the outcasts of American culture. They decided the only way to change this perception would be for them to recast their community in a different light. For a week they met, concluding that they would use rhetoric and other forms of persuasion, and invade the arts, media, politics and yes, even religion. They left the meeting committed to use the freedom and democratic processes we have in America to reshape completely American opinion. Sixteen years later, because of this meeting and other related factors, Americans as a people look at homosexuals differently in America, especially in our popular culture. Since then, sodomy laws have been struck down. Shows like “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy” are found on cable television. Homosexuals are as common now on network shows as any other group. Madonna and Britney Spears kiss on television, and issues from gays in the military to gay marriage have become frontline political topics. Why has this change come so widely and so rapidly? Because a movement, utilizing our system of government and the free society it promotes, has spread. It has changed America, but not for the better.

Go back in history 2,000 years, and you will find a smaller group. In a culture far less free, 120 people met together in Jerusalem. They had no political might, no economic power, and

no well known leaders. They had one faith, one Lord, one mission—they were one movement. And the world is different because of them.

From the early church until now, cultures and societies have been affected by movements. In our own Southern Baptist Convention, we have witnessed, and many of us have been zealous participants, in a conservative resurgence moving a massive Christian tradition back to a more biblical, conservative stance on biblical authority. This movement has come through three fundamental forces. First, leaders arose who, at great personal risk, moved for theological change. Second, a consensus about the authority of Scripture and biblical inerrancy brought together a large number of Southern Baptists who agreed that the issue was so critical, that unless the SBC turned to a more orthodox view of Scripture, she would cease to exist as a legitimate force for the gospel.

Leadership and a common purpose compelled leaders to seek to change our convention. But those two factors alone were not enough. A third, equally vital factor gave those seeking to bring theological renewal the mechanism for that change. The third factor was our Baptist conviction and heritage of congregational polity. Using our congregational system of government, primarily on the national level, presidents were elected, committees appointed, and trustees changed to reflect the view of those convinced of inerrancy. Today, twenty-five years later, our seminaries look radically different than they did previously.

Congregational polity has been one of our marks as Southern Baptists. The purpose of my address is neither to prove nor to demonstrate this reality. My colleague Gerald Cowen's recent book, *Who Rules the Church?*, offers a biblical look at congregational rule, while colleagues Emir Caner and Steve Prescott add appendices showing congregational rule in the Anabaptist and early English Baptist traditions, respectively. Many others have done so, and

many will do so in this conference. My purpose is to look at how we as Southern Baptists have used congregational polity, or more importantly abused it, to hinder the work of the gospel especially in my lifetime.

Our new president at Southeastern, Danny Akin, observed in a forthcoming chapter for a book on polity that our churches can have a “somewhat paranoid autocrat as a pastor, monthly business meetings dedicated to senseless issues that only eat up time, a committee structure that looks like the Department of Education and is about as efficient, and a deacon board that functions like a carnal corporate board.” Such practices, although common, are not, according to Akin, “what the Bible teaches about congregational church government.” In other words, both our statements of belief and our practice of those beliefs must be consistent.

Before I begin asking serious questions about our polity and its relationship to evangelistic church growth, I want to be clear: theological conviction has been central to Southern Baptists, and we must be united on certain key tenets if we are to continue as a people. I grew up in a Southern Baptist church, where I met the Lord and was baptized. I surrendered to preach at a Baptist youth retreat and attended a Baptist college. I even met my wife there! I have served as a pastor or staff member of SBC churches. I attended a Southern Baptist seminary, was commissioned as a home missionary, and served on a state convention staff. I am finishing my twelfth year of fulltime teaching first at a Baptist university and now at a seminary. I am like the old saying: I am Baptist born and Baptist bred, and when I die I will be Baptist dead! However, I also confess to having a greater appreciation than many for the radical side of our history, for I came to Christ out of the Jesus Movement and have witnessed God work outside Southern Baptist programs! Since surrendering to the ministry in 1977, I have preached in about 1000 Southern Baptist churches and in the vast majority of our state conventions. In addition, I have

served on a number of task forces with our North American Mission Board. During all these opportunities I have continually asked the question, “How could we better fulfill the Great Commission?” and “What are the major reasons we fail to reach people with the gospel?”

As a lifelong Southern Baptist, I also identified early with the Conservative Resurgence, or as Jerry Sutton calls it, the Baptist Reformation. As a conservative, in the majority group of SBC life, I think we need to undergo some serious self-examination. History may be the story of winners, but if we find ourselves at the end of the day far from fulfilling God’s purposes, we may yet lose. I want to pose a series of questions that concern polity and the present state of evangelism, or perhaps I should say the present lack of evangelism, in our convention.

The first question is introductory in nature. Why have we been successful utilizing congregational polity at the national level to bring the SBC to a far stronger position on the authority of God's Word, yet in our churches baptisms have declined for a generation? The Southern Baptist Conservative Resurgence demonstrates how congregational polity can move a community of believers to a more biblical direction. Yet while we have headed toward a stronger view of Scripture, baptisms have not shown such strength. In fact, baptisms in the United States have been flat since the early 1970s, while the population has grown dramatically. In real numbers, therefore, we have declined in baptisms at an alarming rate.

It has been demonstrated time and again that those groups—either local churches, denominations or missions agencies—that have a strong commitment to the Word of God also are those who are most effective at reaching people and growing. We have seen Southern Baptists, working within our understanding of polity, experience a conservative resurgence resulting in a radical change of leadership in our seminaries and other agencies. We have not seen a corresponding impact on baptisms. In fact, Baptist Press reported on April 12, 2004, that

we were in our fourth year in a row in baptismal decline. Theologically it can be shown that leaders of denominational agencies are overall more conservative theologically than their counterparts of half a generation ago, but this theological change has not led to evangelistic prosperity.

Such a reality has not followed overseas. During this same period overseas baptisms have increased dramatically. I recall celebrating as a seminarian in the 1980s when we surpassed 100,000 baptisms annually overseas. In the 20 years since, baptisms reported by the IMB have grown to surpass 500,000 in the most recent reporting year. The highest number ever for a year in the United States was in 1972, over thirty years ago. Southern Baptist church and membership numbers have grown dramatically for decades, yet our greatest five years of baptisms were the early 1970s.

Certainly one could argue that since it took a generation to depart from Scripture, it will take a generation for the stronger biblical stance in the SBC to move to the churches throughout the convention. That no doubt plays a part. But is this the total picture? Could it be that our polity of congregational rule by its nature has caused us to drift toward the path of least resistance over time? Could it be that congregational polity, without a clear focus or strong leadership, will inevitably drift away from biblical practice, even if theological orthodoxy has been attained? Could it be that the same passionate leadership we had over the past 25 years to convince us afresh of the truth of the gospel now needs to be seen in the coming years to convince us that we also must practice what we profess? Could it be that deviant neo-orthodoxy stymied evangelistic fervor in the recent past, while dead orthodoxy runs rampant in our churches today?

Baptisms alone do not tell the whole story. As I tried to show in my book *Radically Unchurched: Who They Are and How to Reach Them*, evangelicals in general and Southern Baptists in particular simply are not penetrating the unchurched culture in America. By some estimates, over 40% of our nation can be considered not only unsaved but also unchurched, beyond the reach of our local congregations. In the SBC, one study showed that only one in nine adults reached in a year in the SBC came from the unchurched population. Has our lax version of polity kept us from moving outside our comfort zones and our sanctuaries to reach into the depths of sinful humanity for the sake of the gospel?

So I pose the next question: **Has our polity created a mindset in the SBC, especially among local church lay leadership and among its denominational leadership, that rewards conformity and ostracizes creativity? To say it another way, can polity left to itself drift toward maintaining the status quo, and away from heroism, risk taking, or sacrifice for the sake of the gospel?**

Anything which has the potential for good has the potential for harm. This is why the uncle in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* stated that the Bible is more deadly in one man's hand than a whiskey bottle is in another. Congregational polity may be biblical, but even so it can be abused. It would be easy to take my time to slam the new models of church growth, and certainly some need to be scrutinized. We have a number of prominent megachurch pastors who have traded a shepherd's staff for a CEO's gavel. This is a concern, and I will speak to that shortly. But I too am concerned about the many thousands of churches in the SBC annually who baptize no new believers, as well as the fact that a miniscule number effectively reach teenagers, and the even smaller number who reach the unchurched. While the CEO model is a high profile

matter of concern among some churches, the more insidious problem stems from the vast number of SBC churches who demonstrate a perennial ineffectiveness in evangelism.

In 2000, almost 7,000 churches in the SBC reported no baptisms. This means almost one in five churches baptized no one. About 10,500 churches, 28.3% baptized more than ten in a year. This means approximately one-fourth of the churches in our convention baptized as many as a person a month on average in a year. For all the concern over CEO-style leaders, and the concern is legitimate, the problem of ineffective evangelism is a far greater one than this. Ironically, the CEO-led churches are typically in the category of the largest churches, and these churches tend to be the most effective in evangelism. This does not justify the CEO approach, but does demonstrate that other factors relate to our anemic evangelism in the United States. Is there any relationship between the polity of multiple thousands of our churches who reach pitifully few lost people and their lack of evangelistic fervor?

Congregational polity can produce a status quo mindset. Polity can lead to a form of individualism where, as it was at the close of the book of Judges, everyone does what is right in his own eyes. In such a model, loud voices, not necessarily godly ones, tend to rule the day. Congregational polity can lead to a “good old boy system” where a few who know how to work a crowd or win their positions run the church. The good old boy crowd in a given local church, liking the way things are, often unknowingly do everything they can to hinder a church from growing. Their control stifles evangelism and wilts young pastors. After all, reaching new people and numerical growth could threaten their authority.

The theological drift requiring the conservative resurgence did not occur only because of liberal drift; it also came because of the failure of many who could have risen up and stood against it before it reached national proportions. Liberalism was aided by laziness. Laziness

breeds a reluctance to challenge the status quo, a reticence to rock the boat. But if the boat is sinking, rocking it is preferred over drowning.

Some pastors have moved to elder led approaches to ward off the good old boy syndrome that exalts the church as a hotel for saints rather than a hospital for sinners. Weary of battling deacons in monthly meetings, exhausted from business meetings that discuss anything except eternal things, the elder model becomes quite attractive as an alternative. I am not advocating this, but I have seen new churches adopt this model for such a practical reason.

Remember the Alamo? It began as a mission, became a battlefield, and it is now a museum! Howard Hendricks said some of our churches should charge admission, since they look like life in the old South in the 1950s. Congregations which drift along, led by a good old boy system of the vocal few, perpetuate a form of church life which most pleases them, emphasizes personal preferences over biblical truth, sternly resists change, and decreasingly concerns itself with pleasing God.

A polity which fosters an environment friendly to conformity and hostile to creativity can have a sinister effect. The issue of the authority of Scripture, of both its inerrancy *and* its sufficiency must be upheld. The Word of God must never be compromised. We do well to be wary of those who in the name of reaching people do much harm by drifting from God's truth, regardless of how "successful" they may be. But the picture is not so simple. Those of us who criticize some who in the name of reaching the culture have abandoned Scripture may be just as open to criticism for abandoning the practice of the Great Commission while we claim to uphold orthodoxy. If we claim to be people of the Book, we would do well to heed its teaching. Jesus was criticized by the religious crowd, who called Him a "friend of sinners." Can that charge be made of our churches? When virtually all of church life today has to do with a building at a

specific location, when in Acts the emphasis was on being in the culture daily, is it time to compare our practice with our theory?

The next question stems from the previous one: Could it be that our polity, with its tendency toward conformity, has failed to make a distinction between our core beliefs, which must not change, and the living out of our faith in a godless world, which will look differently in varying cultures?

The message of the cross is unchanging; the manner in which it is presented in a given culture may, and yes, must be varied. But if we use our polity to reach a consensus that focuses on maintaining the status quo, we face grave danger. In a presentation to state denominational leaders in evangelism and church planting, Timothy George spoke about presenting the gospel in a postmodern culture. George observed in part:

1. *We must be kerygmatic, not apologetic, in witness.* In other words, the message of the cross must be our focus over intellectual arguments.
2. *Remember the gospel is culture-permeable.* The gospel can be related to various cultures; yet we must avoid wedding the gospel to a given culture. Here is where we must be careful about allowing our polity to foster a status quo mentality. Some evangelistically successful SBC churches look much like the culture of thirty years ago. A strong passion for evangelism can overcome this for a time, but the long-term impact could be less encouraging.
3. *The context shapes our proclamation strategy, but not our proclamation content.* Read the sermons of Peter in Acts 2 and Paul in Acts 17. Both proclaim the gospel, but in differing ways to very different audiences.
4. *We must keep passing on the faith intact.* In a changing culture clear confessions of faith must be affirmed and maintained, in particular a high view of Scripture.

If indeed our polity creates a Christian subculture focused on conformity not only in doctrine but also in practice, we forget Paul used a totally different approach at Mars Hill than at other places. Was he wrong to be creative and insightful to begin from a godless idol to an unknown god to speak of our Lord? No. Was Jesus wrong to speak directly and forcefully to the rich young ruler, while showing great compassion to the immoral and syncretistic woman at the

well? Was Elijah wrong to engage the idolatrous priests, allowing them to make sacrifice? No, these and others in Scripture understood truth never changed, but the application of that truth could and must change.

It is interesting to me to observe that on the international mission field we consider it unacceptable to plant churches that look exactly like a local church in the United States. Contextualization is essential, we correctly proclaim. Yet, in the U.S., when a pastor contextualizes to a given culture, he is often derided by the establishment as a rogue, or he is ignored. This is especially true outside the traditional “Bible Belt” (which no longer exists). Two things are certain: first, if the fifties come back, most of our churches will be ready! Second, we must begin to recognize churches and honor them when they contextualize effectively in the American context. Should the red carpet of the 1950s and 60s, the robed choirs, and the pipe organs stand ossified and unchanged for years to come? Christianity has become increasingly foreign to American culture.

How many SBC churches function like they have for decades, without giving any thought that culture has changed around them, while their polity perpetuates a status quo by endorsing the continuation of past practices each year? And it is at this point we are no better off in the national convention than in local churches. We may have moved to make needed changes in doctrine using our polity at the national level, but we have failed to follow suit in our practice. David Dockery well said that Southern Baptists made two mistakes in the 1950s. First, we bought into higher criticism theologically, which permeated our seminaries. Second, we adopted a programmatic approach to ministry in our practice. I think he is right. I believe we must likewise use our polity to correct the other dire issue: programmatic ministry that has created a

bureaucracy great at spoon feeding but pathetic at leading, and even worse at reading and responding to the culture.

If our polity demands a consensus on how we do ministry at the same level we demand doctrinal conformity, we have made a fatal error. I am certain that the church in the Acts was clear about their doctrine, but some of us may be amazed to know that they “turned the world upside down” without a single program! Yet we consistently attempt to enlist churches to our strategies as the magic bullet to cure our malaise.

Ironically, both of the issues raised by Dockery have a common theme: both focus on the work of man, not the power of God. Higher criticism put the onus on the interpreter, not the authoritative Word. Programmatic ministry emphasized the skilled writer, not the simple gospel alongside the ministry of the Word and prayer. Have we forgotten that, although we have the honor of making decisions in local churches, it is still God's church?

Does every church have to look the same? Such a view inevitably leads people in the average church to elevate behavior over belief. Very rarely are church business meetings, a staple in our churches, centered on truth. They tend to focus on banal and pedantic details. The good approach we use, i.e., congregational polity, can lead to bad fruit if not focused on the great commission. For example, one of my students stood and observed his church debate for twenty minutes in a business session whether or not to trim the hedges. Examples such as this are legion. Yet how much time in such meetings is spent determining how to reach the community? Business meetings, supposedly at the heart of our congregational polity at work, rarely focus on core beliefs, and when they focus on behavior it is not normally behavior central to fulfilling the Great Commission that matters.

One of our PhD students at Southeastern Seminary served a church in Virginia. After a moving time at a youth camp when God touched the lives of many, John asked his congregation the following Sunday morning if anyone had a testimony to share of the work of God in their lives. Such a practice did not fit the liturgy of his traditional church, but John wondered whether he alone had enjoyed seeing the Spirit move in recent days. Several testified, including a passionate teenaged girl who shared of her recent salvation. Did the members rejoice? No. The only response he received was criticism that the choir did not get to sing their special! In other words, if God moves, He had jolly well better not interrupt the schedule. One elderly man, reputed to be a pillar of the church there, decried the day as evil. So, using congregational polity, John was eventually forced out of his church, in part because he would have the audacity to ignore the liturgy. Has our polity created an environment where the Spirit of God Himself cannot move because the majority of the members are so filled with carnality they would not recognize Him? Here is a church committed to congregational rule, where the people, the believer-priests, have an opportunity to express their stories of God's work, and the very leaders of that congregation complain, not because of doctrinal error, but because it did not fall within their understanding of practice. Giving reports in a business meeting about who bought flowers for the sanctuary do matter, but testimonies of salvation are not accepted. The sad thing is this is too often the rule in so many of our churches.

Throughout the history of the church a strong witness has endured from the formative centuries of the Church Fathers, the apologists, the polemicists, and the councils, through the dark ages into the light of the reformation, beyond the morass of liberalism into revival fires, till our day. Doctrinal purity has endured, fending off sinister heresies and hypocritical churchmen. Truth has not changed, nor has its spread been stopped. But across those same centuries, church

life has changed dramatically. From the *collegia pietatus* of Spener, and the believer's church of the Anabaptists, well unto the Wesleyan societies, the camp meetings and the protracted meetings of the Second Great Awakening, to the megachurches of our generation, the application of God's truth in church life has been extremely varied. Will we recognize that it is possible to be united doctrinally and be extremely varied practically? Does a pastor or church have to hold both to the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* and the church organization of, for example, Nashville, or Atlanta, or dare I say, a seminary professor?

The questions above seek to raise issues related to polity and evangelistic church growth. Now I will seek to offer some tentative solutions.

Congregational polity must be maintained with two critical features. First, a clear consensus must exist as to our purpose. We may be 100% inerrantists, but if we do not agree as a body, whether a local church, association, or state or national convention, on our essential purpose, we will be marked by division rather than unity, and the gospel will suffer. As I noted earlier, one of the marks of the success of the conservative resurgence was a core conviction about the inerrancy of Scripture shared by many. Pushing back the swelling tsunami of liberalism galvanized multitudes of Southern Baptists. How much more should the lostness of humanity and the good news of the gospel galvanize us to make whatever changes are necessary in our churches and our convention?

Let me restate the problem. I believe over the past generation our practice in our churches, associations, our states and our national convention, perpetuated a mindset that Christianity is synonymous with its institutions. I would argue that **Christianity at its heart is a movement to be advanced, not a monument to be preserved.** Recently I have posed this question in local churches and at regional meetings: do you see Christianity as a movement or an

institution? The answer overwhelmingly is we are an institution. We have institutions, but we are a movement! That is why we refer to the great awakenings as movements of God, as advances on the mission field church planting movements, and historically important events as movements. Ask your average Baptist what they do on Sunday and they will say, "I go to church." They have forgotten they *are* the church. We have developed a mindset that church is where you go, leading to the unintended consequences of giving believers a pass for the rest of the week. If every church building in America burned to the ground, the church would still be here! No, Christianity at its core is not an institution to attend weekly, but a lifestyle to live daily. Listen to the words of John Stott:

'Hostile to the church, friendly to Jesus Christ.' These words describe large numbers of people, especially young people, today. They are opposed to anything which savors of institutionalism. They detest the establishment and its entrenched privileges. And they reject the church—not without some justification—because they regard it as impossibly corrupted by such evils. Yet what they have rejected is the contemporary church, not Jesus Christ himself. It is precisely because they see a contradiction between the founder of Christianity and the current state of the church he founded that they are so critical and aloof. The person and teaching of Jesus have not lost their appeal, however. For one thing, he was himself an anti-establishment figure, and some of his words had revolutionary overtones. His ideals appear to have been incorruptible. He breathed love and peace wherever he went. And, for another thing, he invariably practiced what he preached.

If we have become a denomination whose focus, in theory perhaps if not in fact, the preservation of what we currently do, our polity may be a force in consolidating such preservation. If on the other hand, we see Christianity as a movement, certainly undergirded by institutions, but not ruled by them, our polity can be examined as to whether it hinders the advance of the movement.

I am convinced Christianity is a movement, symbolized in the physical movement of God's people from Abram's westward movement from Ur, to the wilderness wanderings, the military conquests, and especially in the New Testament expansion of the faith as especially

recorded in the Acts. Our faith is like a river, moving ever forward, with its great institutions—the church, the home, even the state, ordained as it is by God-serving as the banks to keep the river on course. And, the gravity that pulls the river to its ultimate conclusion is the unchanging Word of God.

In a congregational polity such as ours, if we at our essence approach Christianity as a monument to be preserved, we simply will not pay the price to penetrate the unchurched culture for Christ. Read the book of Acts and notice how much of the narrative concerned the early believers on days other than Sunday! If we wrote the Acts from our perspective today, I fear 90% would be a replay of our Sunday morning services. But we are a movement, not a monument.

Conformity is the cry of the institution crowd. Reach people, but only our way. The problem is, even those most committed to Scripture can confuse their preferences with the whole counsel of God's Word. Creativity is the cry of the movement. So is sacrifice and risk-taking. We will not reach lost people in our great cities or on the college campuses of America without risk. How can we move forward? Does our polity hinder creativity?

If members of a typical SBC church understood as a body that they are a movement, advancing biblical truth in their community, proclaiming the gospel, discipling people to help them in this movement, it just might affect the way we conduct our business. If we understood that God has left us on this earth to change the world, to reach people with the good news, we might make significant contextual changes. We might, wisely I think, cut out most of our business meetings, and spend more time in ministry than on committees. If we as a denomination understood this, we might spend less time and resources promoting the next big event, and more time reporting what God is doing and responding to the needs in the real world.

In early 2004, thousands of churches, including many hundreds in the SBC participated in 40 days of purpose, by Rick Warren. At least one entire state convention, as well as many prominent churches and leaders (from First Baptist, Norfolk, Virginia, to James Merritt, recent SBC president) joined this movement. How much money do we spend annually on denominational programs and emphases, while we are told we do not have enough funds to send the missionaries desiring to go overseas? Could we spend less time and money convincing people to use our many programs, and focus more on being a part of God's work in the world, with or without the aid of programs? Can we learn from a Catholic actor named Mel Gibson that places not connected to our institutions, like a movie theatre, can be a great tool in the hand of a living, moving God?

Perhaps our polity, or our practice of it, has helped us to see superficial growth while planting seeds of long term barrenness. For example, in the 1950s, a decade of great cooperation, a time of success for congregational polity, we launched the Southern Baptist Program of Evangelism. It was so meticulous, telling every detail to be done. Good churches participated, and many did. Did it sew the seeds of a denomination so dependent on programs, and conformity?

Now many have taken evangelism and turned it into a program. Ask a good Baptist in a strong, loyal SBC church if they witness, and they are likely to say, "Oh, yes, I have taken FAITH evangelism." They may not even think in terms of winning their co-worker or neighbor to Christ, but if they are one of the few very committed, they do make it to Tuesday night visitation. I am not saying we should abolish our evangelism programs—I helped write some of them! I am saying the programmatic attitude permeating our churches must be challenged.

Baptism totals increased gradually the first half of the twentieth century, followed by a sharp increase in the fifties. From then until now, however, they have remained essentially flat. We have changed our theology, but perhaps we now need to change our methodology from local churches to the agency level. And, that methodology should flow from a clear, biblical, theologically founded purpose. I agree with Stan Norman of New Orleans Seminary, who has well said, “I am of the strong conviction that when you do Baptist churches rightly, you will be in the process of building and watching a healthy church thrive and grow.” His emphasis on *doing* church needs to be heeded. Believers living out a common purpose could turn churches and other entities from a collection of individuals defending their perspectives to an army of ambassadors ready to share Christ.

There is another feature in addition to a common purpose that must exist for congregational polity to be successful in reaching the lost. **A common, clear, biblical purpose would be well served by congregational polity. Related to that, congregational polity must be marked by clear, unambiguous, biblical, servant leadership.** Regardless of your use of elder or pastor as your primary term for church leaders, one thing is clear: God’s leaders are to be shepherd-leaders of their flocks. Congregations must be led. Cowen notes the relationship in our polity between the congregation and the pastor:

Under this type of government, the pastor-elder is the leader of the church, but ultimate authority to determine the direction of the church is given by Christ to the congregation as a whole. . . . Equality is demonstrated by the giving of the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts to all believers and by the priesthood of all believers.

The pastor-elder's authority comes not because of his superiority in any way, but because he is called by God and given the responsibility by the Lord to take care of God's flock. He has the authority of one commissioned by God to deliver His message. He leads by the virtue of his call, his message, and his righteous example. He is a shepherd of a flock of sheep, but they are not ordinary sheep. They are believer sheep.

Strong leadership in a democratic body is essential. We see a similar reality in our nation. American democracy must have two marks: a common standard, in our case the Constitution, and strong leadership. In our day the Constitution is often under assault by maverick judges who would rewrite our founding document rather than judge under its authority. Thus we find ourselves in a nation terribly divided, culture wars all around.

Church members who meander through time like a rudderless ship from weak leadership encourage division and aimlessness, the very worst of congregational rule. As a result an increasing number of young, gifted pastors opt for beginning a new congregation free of the layers of congregational bureaucracy stemming from a lack of vision and a concomitant lack of strong leadership. Let me use two men as examples. These two men serve as pastors of large congregations who annually reach many for Christ. Both of these men are sons of men who are Southern Baptist pastors and who served as SBC president during the conservative resurgence. I am referring to Andy Stanley, whose North Pointe Church in the Atlanta area is not a Southern Baptist congregation, but whose roots are deeply that, and Ed Young, whose Fellowship Church in Grapevine is Southern Baptist. Both men are bright, highly motivated, and passionate about reaching people. Their recent book, *Can We Do That?*, gives a view of the leadership of both men. The book includes some questionable approaches to polity. There are points at which I would significantly disagree with one or both of these men. While both have some form of congregational polity, both churches feature an intentional, CEO-style of leadership that may work well for the founding pastor in these two new works, but could wreak havoc for the long-term ministry.

My point is not to defend the views of these men. I do want to ask why it is that increasing numbers of gifted leaders like these are opting for new churches only loosely

committed to the SBC, if connected at all. In the case of each of these men, a new church plant started by them was preferred to moving into an established church. Increasing numbers of bright young pastor-leaders tend to opt for a new church start. Many times the motivation for this is to avoid the baggage accumulated by congregations that has little to do with New Testament Christianity. Are we pushing away a generation of young leaders without considering anything they have to say? In the last recording year, Fellowship was surpassed in reaching young people in the entire SBC by only one church, that of his father, Ed Young at Second Baptist, Houston. We complain that these men and others like them are out of bounds, but do we take the time to recognize when they do things well? Ed's church consistently ranks in the top five in total baptisms in the SBC. Baptism, a doctrinal distinctive of Baptists, plays a major part in the life of Fellowship. He states that the Bible is to be central in all they do, and passionately defends evangelism as at the core of who they are. But this is rarely recognized because he also does unusual things, like riding a camel in a service. Do we censure them because of their creativity, or because their ilk will never promote our programs or pursue our ideas? Bottom line: does our desire to promote our denominational machinery spit out the best and brightest of our future leaders?

Churches like Fellowship and North Pointe, along with Saddleback and pastor Rick Warren, another new church plant, have hundreds if not thousands of lost people coming weekly. Why? Because their members invite them. These churches are not perfect, but the truth is that their members happily encourage their neighbors and coworkers to come. I am a member of a Southern Baptist congregation that is also a church plant younger than fifteen years. Already we are pushing the 2000 barrier in worship attendance, and we have a strong commitment to reaching unchurched people, and to being innovative without compromising Scripture. I

consistently see laypeople who are thrilled to invite their peers to come with them on Sundays. In fact, even this crusty evangelism professor has watched his next door neighbor move from being unchurched to becoming a part of our fellowship!

Congregational polity without leadership leads to endless committees who virtually always fail from over-analysis and a lack of insight. Further, the power of God found to be so necessary for New Testament ministry moves to the background as committees reach their consensus. Ponder the words of Ed Young of Fellowship Church, as he considers the place of committees: “Committees are, for the most part, sedentary bodies. The people on them are not usually active in the day-to-day operations of the church, so it is next to impossible to instill in them the same drive and vision that the staff has. Instead, their attitude becomes ‘Prove it to me - and let me take my time thinking about it.’ This is a philosophy destined to wreck the visionary thinking of any church leader.” So, he argues, churches change with the speed of a luxury liner, and become mired in bureaucracy.

He is right about that, but the answer in my mind is not necessarily to abolish committees, but to enable members to be a part of the ministries for which they must make decisions. Bureaucracy is a demonstration of a lack of discipline and purpose. Young forms members into ministry teams, which is wonderful, but he gives excessive authority to the staff. Stanley follows suit, stating his church uses elders who monitor his leadership, functioning much like a board of directors in a corporation.

I would take great issue with Ed’s opinion on deacons: “We have no elders or deacons.” But I agree wholeheartedly with his view that church membership matters greatly: “I believe the Bible teaches that growing, maturing Christ-followers will be connected and committed to a local congregation,” he writes, adding, “at Fellowship, membership is a high priority.” In fact,

his membership requirements might embarrass many Southern Baptist congregations who are more typical in their approach: “A member must meet the following criteria: be a Christ-follower (his term for a believer), be baptized by immersion, attend church at least three out of four weeks a month, tithe, join a small group, and participate in a ministry team.” He then makes a notable understatement, “We expect people who join Fellowship to be serious about their membership.”

Does congregational polity mean conformity in all we do? Must a person be dealt with at the invitation and presented immediately to the congregation, or is a new members’ class where the gospel is clearly shared in a more personal manner a better, or at least another, acceptable approach if agreed to by the congregation? Can we be excited about a congregational polity that has resulted in just over a generation in a convention where maybe one in three members (optimistically) can be found with any regularity in their local church?

So we can and should decry the movement of large church pastors such as Ed Young, Jr. or Andy Stanley to a CEO model. The larger problem for me is the impact these men, who are obviously gifted leaders, on younger pastors who do not possess their gifts but try to follow their practice. I still want to raise a bigger question. Have we come to the place that so many of our churches are so hard to lead to become evangelistic, passionate fellowships, that any model of leadership that has a high profile advocate demonstrating a measure of success will be followed? When every year about 8,000 churches report no baptisms, when in a convention of 42,000 churches less than fifty baptize as many as fifty teenagers, what will it take for us to realize a crisis is upon us?

Could part of the problem be that we are not adequately preparing leaders to lead? If we do not provide clear, biblical, leadership principles, leaders will find help wherever they can. Thus the rise of an industry of leadership books, conferences, and so called experts who teach a

secular model clothed in the garments of the faith. The best models on leadership I have ever seen are Moses, David, Paul, and our Lord. But do we teach this? We develop systematic theologies to help students learn doctrine. We glean biblical teaching for ethics courses and counseling courses, and even evangelism and missions. But when a fundamental role of a pastor is to lead his flock, why do we not glean biblical teachings on leadership to prepare them to lead? I recall when AWANAS began to overtake RAs and GAs in our churches. In a short period of time I witnessed church after church change to the AWANA program and see the numbers of children attending skyrocket. I recall having a discussion in a state convention headquarters about this phenomenon. Our leader said, “We can complain about this change and its potential impact on missions, or we can seek to discover why our churches are leaving our approach for another. It must be doing something to attract our churches.” We cannot always assume that “something” is bad, either. And thus we have young pastors, capable, called of God, skilled and wanting to lead God’s people, intuitively knowing that they must develop as leaders. Yet, we do not spend much time on leadership development in our seminaries. No wonder the leadership gurus have such an impact today.

One of the things I am grateful for at the seminary where I teach is the strong emphasis on courage. If our churches are to change, if our congregations are to return to the purpose for which God made them, if our churches will become the evangelistic salt and light in their communities God intended, then it will take strong, patient, shepherding, courageous leadership to turn them from inward, conformity-seeking, maintenance mindset to a Great Commission passion. But I believe we can teach more. Congregational polity understands that believers are not only priests with equal standing before God, but they are also sheep who need a shepherd in the local church.

Maybe it is time for us to learn from the homosexual rights crowd. Maybe we need our own war-meeting. Using democratic processes, they have changed the opinion of millions of Americans from a view consistent with Scripture to accepting a lifestyle universally condemned by God's Word. How much more could we, using our congregational polity, lead churches to become focused once again on fulfilling the Great Commission and changing the world? I recently heard a friend make the point that we no longer speak of homosexuals coming out of the closet. They are no longer in the closet; they are prominent in culture. But my friend rightly noted that Christians have gone into the closet. We must have a renewed focus on the gospel, raise up a generation of leaders, and again take the challenge of changing the world. And, we have just the form of church government to accomplish this.

If we do not change, the future is not promising. My generation, the boomers, will within the next five years, ten years max, provide leadership for our entire denomination. If the best thing we can offer our children and the generations following is, "we will just do what we are doing a little bit better," we have already failed them. We may as well put up a white flag, stop putting so much into politics, and read again Peter's First Epistle, and begin to honestly learn how to serve God as an exiled people. For that is who we are. America is not a picture of heaven on earth. It is the third most lost nation on earth. Our polity may have gained from our understanding of democracy, but our gospel will not change our culture until we realize again it is the only thing that will truly change culture.

Have we forgotten that our enemy is not the pastor who does church a little differently, but Satan? Have we left the best of our young men called to ministry with two options: be a good company boy, follow the rules (in addition to the truth), or be a maverick, sound doctrine notwithstanding, and consider yourself an outsider from this day forward?

Maybe it is time for us to learn from the homosexual rights crowd. Maybe we need a war-meeting of our own. Perhaps it is time for my generation, for the sake of those following, to examine how to pass the faith intact and actually reach people at the same time.