

Congregational Adventism

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Your local church just might enjoy a congregational style or organization. Imagine what you could accomplish, as a local church, if you retained all of the tithe and offerings that were not used to pay your minister. And imagine if you, as a church, were free to determine whether you would ordain women? And what if your congregation were as free to hire and fire ministers of its choosing as it was to ordain local elders?

Another benefit would be freedom to develop doctrine without fear of losing your church building, or being disbanded, by a disapproving conference.

Congregational churches were common in New England where Adventism was born. The congregational mode of organization there was adopted as the best way to avoid the overbearing control of central organizations. Many viewed the Roman papacy as a natural consequence of structure above the local level. Power corrupts. You get the idea. And so it was that many of the puritans established self-governing churches.

Congregational churches today are often associated together in loose forms of higher organization. The Southern Baptist Convention, for example, is a collection of self-governing churches. The liberal United Church of Christ, with just over one million members, and the more conservative bodies known as the Churches of Christ, with just over five million members, are all congregational in polity.

Adventism began as a collection of believers that retained their previous denominational connections. And while this might naturally tend to produce a congregational structure, another large force was also at work to keep Adventism from becoming thoroughly and legally organized.

The followers of Miller didn't want to become Babylon. And if Babylon were defined as the union of church and state, then it was difficult for many to see how an organization could legally organize (and thus be recognized by the state) without imitating the dread union.

So when Sabbatarian Adventism arose, it inherited Millerite Adventism a lack of authoritative organization. This lack of order brought no boon of evangelistic success, no financial benefit to the cause. After 1844 the message of Adventism lost its ability to inspire droves of people to spontaneous giving. Some ministers, with no means of regular support, returned to secular means of making a livelihood. And so, after a dozen years of congregationalism, James White argued for church order after recounting the financial woes of itinerant ministers:

It is true that these are hard times, and that many of the brethren are poor, but we do think that if they felt the importance of church order and systematic benevolence, they would sustain the cause among them. Bro. Ingraham received \$1 at this conference, Bro. Sanborn nothing, and we, of course, expected nothing, and were not disappointed. Our expenses from last conference in Iowa were \$8. – James White, ARSH November 13, 1860

Ellen White offered other observations in favor of establishing church order. The fear of structure and administrative order was leading to “self-sent men” teaching the gospel abroad, but without proper oversight. These persons, trusted prematurely, were bringing the church into disrepute by their blunders.

The Lord has shown that gospel order has been too much feared and neglected. Formality should be shunned; but, in so doing, order should not be neglected. There is order in heaven. There was order in the church when Christ was upon the earth, and after His departure order was strictly observed among His apostles. And now in these last days, while God is bringing His children into the unity of the faith, there is more real need of order than ever before; for, as God unites His children, Satan and his evil angels are very busy to prevent this unity and to destroy it. Therefore men are hurried into the field who lack wisdom and judgment, perhaps not ruling well their own house, and not having order or government over the few that God has given them charge of at home; yet they feel capable of having charge of the flock. They make many wrong moves, and those unacquainted with our faith judge all the messengers to be like these self-sent men. Thus the cause of God is reproached, and the truth shunned by many unbelievers who would otherwise be candid and anxiously inquire, Are these things so? {EW 97.1}

Workers that would not have been ordained by “the brethren generally” can easily be “the most confident that they are . . . called [of God] and that their labors are very important.” Even if “souls receive the truth by hearing them talk it, this is no evidence that they are called of God. . . . These self-sent messengers are a curse to the cause.” And how might this problem be

alleviated? “I saw that this door at which the enemy comes in to perplex and trouble the flock can be shut. I inquired of the angel how it could be closed. He said, ‘The church must flee to God’s Word and become established upon gospel order, which has been overlooked and neglected.’” EW 98-100.

By 1907 the church was ready to publish a book on the topic of church order. An excerpt from that book forms another chapter of this edition of *Adventist Affirm*. In that book Loughborough rehearses how the brethren of experience shuddered when they heard W. W. Prescott promote at the 1899 General Conference a view of church order similar to that of the opposition in the 1860’s. It was a view of church order that would replace representative voting with direct dependence on the Spirit’s guiding.

When those who back in the “sixties” witnessed the battle of establishing church order now hear persons, as conscientious no doubt as those back there, utter almost the identical words that were then used by those opposing order, it need not be wondered that they fear the result of such statements as the following:

“Perfect unity means absolute independence, – each one knowing for himself. Why, we could not have outward disorganization if we all believed in the Lord. . . . This question of organization is a simple thing. All there is to it is for each individual to give himself to the Lord, and then the Lord will do with him just what he wants to, and that all the time. . . . Our only safety, under God, is to go back to the place where God is able to take a multitude of people and make them one, without parliamentary rules, without committee work, without legislation of any kind.” – Prescott in the General Conference Bulletin of 1899.

Prescott’s ideas did not prevail in 1899. Nor were the opposers able to prevent organization in the 1860’s. Ministers began to receive regular support. Erratic workers were identified. Heretical ones were hushed. Institutions came into legal existence and received support.

Yet almost one century later the question of congregationalism resurfaced in three Adventist movements. None were alive who remembered firsthand how mission, finance, and discipline had floundered before the development of the structure. The recent congregationally organized congregations fall generally into one of the following camps.

Historic Seventh-day Adventists

On the conservative side, “historic” Adventist churches have risen up. In 1996 John Grosboll, the leader of a Wichita-based ministry called *Steps to Life*, wrote an insightful article titled “Who and What is the Church.” This article developed the truth found in the following paragraph:

The church is God’s fortress, His city of refuge, which He holds in a revolted world. Any betrayal of the church is treachery to Him who has bought mankind with the blood of His only-begotten Son. From the beginning, faithful souls have constituted the church on earth.—Acts of the Apostles, pg. 11

This definition of the “church”, often today called the “invisible church”, corresponds to the “wheat” in the phrase “let the wheat and the tares grow together.” John Grosboll developed this idea into part of a theological justification for promoting a congregational approach to church order. Two such congregational churches, congregations with no affiliation with the Seventh-day Adventist Church, have been planted south of Wichita.[\[1\]](#)

Large Policy-Flaunting Congregations

On the other side, some (large, affluent) churches have adopted a congregational approach in ignoring denominational policies. Several churches in North America have hired a female to be their head minister. A notable example of these is Sligo, near Washington D.C. Though the senior pastor there is, at the time of writing, a male (Charles Tapp), three of members of the five-person pastoral team are females.

These congregations, at least for a time, differ from historic Seventh-day Adventists in that they maintain their organizational connection to the larger structure. While legally organized as part of the structure, they operate in certain lines, as congregational structures. And by failing to separate from the structure they save themselves legal hassle that has hounded “historic” Seventh-day Adventist churches.[\[2\]](#)

Mission Catalyst

On the liberal side, some congregations have joined the Mission Catalyst movement. Ron Gladden, the founder of the Mission Catalyst movement, is raising independent churches.

Though not thoroughly congregational (10% of donated receipts are committed to the stewardship of the parent organization, making them similar to congregational associations mentioned in the head to this article) Ron's organization is not shy about its congregational nature:

Why are we independent? The churches we plant are not officially affiliated with any denomination because an independent structure allows the churches flexibility, freedom, and funds to invest more in winning people to Christ.[\[3\]](#)

And that brings us to the crux of the matter. Is the work of God's church on earth better served by congregational flexibility or by denominational oversight and order?

—1682 words to here. ½ of the following words need to be erased:

Several years ago I was working with the Three Angels Seventh-day Adventist Church in Wichita. I learned that one of my classmates from academy was working nearby with *Steps to Life* organization, mentioned above as a leader in the home church movement.

The night that I visited, the leader of Steps to Life (John Grossboll) was preaching on Revelation 18 to an audience of not-yet-Adventists that had presumably been listening to a fairly standard series of evangelistic sermons.

But the sermon on Revelation 18 was not standard. Grossboll advised the audience that there was no denomination that kept the commandments of God and had the Testimony. In view of this, each listener was invited to seek to covert his own local congregation into a remnant congregation. And if this should fail, to leave that local congregation and seek the fellowship of fellow believers in a congregation that had the qualities of the remnant.

Is the nature of the world-wide church that is described by scripture? Is it a loose association of fellowships and congregation? What about ordination and respect of traveling teachers? And what about apostasy of the head of a congregation if the members support him?

In this, one of her first visions of the early church, Ellen White saw that church organization was intended to resolve these issues:

This is indispensably necessary in order to bring the church into the unity of the faith. I saw that in the apostles' day the church was in danger of being deceived and imposed upon by false teachers. Therefore the brethren chose men who had given good evidence that they were capable of ruling well their own house and preserving order in their own families, and who could enlighten those who were in darkness. Inquiry was made of God concerning these, and then, according to the mind of the church and the Holy Ghost, they were set apart by the laying on of hands. Having received their commission from God and having the approbation of the church, they went forth baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and administering the ordinances of the Lord's house, often waiting upon the saints by presenting them the emblems of the broken body and spilt blood of the crucified Saviour, to keep fresh in the memory of God's beloved children His sufferings and death. {EW 100.2}

The Bible gives abundant evidence in favor of a world-wide structure with delegated authority.

Evidence in Scripture for Organization above the Local Level

Jethro's organizational plan in Exodus 18 with captains of tens, fifties, hundreds, and thousands (Ex 18:21), mimics our own reasonably well, if we consider ten to be ten fairly large families.

Jethro's 'Tens' would be equivalent to our churches; the three administrators of the two fifties that make a hundred in Jethro's time would be roughly similar to the administrators of a small conference a century ago; and a thousand large families would roughly similar to our smallest unions then and even now.

Aside from this Old Testament model of a multi-tiered organizational level we find abundant evidence that the New Testament church also had a multi-level form of organization.

The clearest evidence is found in Acts 15. There, after Gentile churches had suffered under confusing and contradictory teachers, the world church made a pronouncement in Jerusalem that would have authority around the world.

The nature of the proceedings show that the decision of the council was the result of deliberative process. Paul had a chance to present his views. Messianic Pharisees had a chance to present their case as well. (Acts 15:4-5). In the actual meeting we find no pope-like pronouncement. Rather, “when there had been much disputing” (Acts 15:6) Peter rose up and shared undeniable practical evidence in favor of Paul’s position. (v. 9-12) After a period of quiet James rose and presented scripture evidence in favor of the same position (v. 13-18). With that he made what we could call “a motion.”

That his “sentence” (v. 19) was not autocratic can be seen from the fact that it had to please the brethren and from the fact that the council’s decision was published as coming from them as a group. They reported hearing of the details of the problem as a group.

22 Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren: 23 And they wrote letters by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia: 24 Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment:

The decision was made and finally presented as that of the leading brethren working in concert, “with one accord”. A representative delegation was sent to communicate the decision to the churches:

It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, who shall also tell you the same things by mouth. 28 For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; 29 That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well.

Another evidence for multi-tiered organizational authority can be seen in the third epistle of John. Somewhere a rogue local church elder with domineering tendencies had gained control of his own congregation. Such was his hold on that body that he was able to prevent the proper administration of church order there. Representatives from “the brethren” (presumably with messages, perhaps like those sent in Acts 15) were “refused.” And more than that, faithful persons who tried to respect such brethren were disfellowshipped from the church.

Someone might ask, “This sounds like congregationalism to me, so where is the evidence of authority above the local level?” Listen to what John (3John 9-10) says about the waywardness of Diotrephes.

I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church.

This plan of John, to “come” and “remember his deeds”, shows an authority at a distance with ability to hold local leaders accountable. That is the antithesis of congregationalism.

Paul’s method of setting up church order also demonstrates authority above the local level. Elders were ordained “in every city,” but by who? By Titus, someone who was not a member of those churches but who had been appointed to “set in order” the things that “lacked” in their organization.

Titus 1:5 For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee:

And when Paul lists the gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12, he assigns ordinal numbers to three of the gifts:

1Co 12:28 And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.

Apostles and prophets, of course, are inspired. Their authority is God's. It is interesting that teachers, after these two, are set "thirdly" in the church. These, we learn from another list of gifts, are the pastors. They are pastoral teachers and they have authority in the church. They are part of a body and bodies are, of course, organized above the organ level.

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; Ephesians 4:11

Paul perceived authority in Jerusalem above the local level. He spoke of "James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars," and who affirmed the work that he and Barnabas were doing. Gal 2:9. And when seven deacons were appointed in Jerusalem, these were not local figures only. Philip was recognized much later, while doing international evangelism, to be "one of the seven." Ac 21:8.

From these and other passages it is clear that the early church had an authoritative organization that extended beyond the local level.

Benefits to Escaping Congregationalism

And what about the view of Mission Catalyst that congregationalism promotes greater mission efficiency? Notice what Ellen White was shown regarding the health institutions of the church and their relation to church structure. In her prophecy you might recognize a picture of present conditions:

The medical missionary work should be a part of the work of every church in our land. **Disconnected from the church, it would soon become a strange medley of disorganized atoms. It would consume, but not produce. Instead of acting as God's helping hand to forward His truth, it would sap the life and force from the church and weaken the**

message. Conducted independently, it would not only consume talent and means needed in other lines, but in the very work of helping the helpless apart from the ministry of the word, it would place men where they would scoff at Bible truth. {CH 514.1}

When Ellen White calls the independent-of-church-control medical system “a strange medely of disorganized atoms” we can gather that the church was intended to work together very efficiently. Congregationalism, the bringing in of such atomized structure, is one the mid-level delusions that we could have and should have known would be coming:

Again I say, The Lord hath not spoken by any messenger who calls the church that keeps the commandments of God, Babylon. True, there are tares with the wheat; but Christ said He would send His angels to first gather the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into the garner. **I know that the Lord loves His church. It is not to be disorganized or broken up into independent atoms. There is not the least consistency in this; there is not the least evidence that such a thing will be.** Those who shall heed this false message and try to leaven others will be deceived and prepared to receive advanced delusions, and they will come to nought. {2SM 68.3}

And just as certainly, for the church to expand into new areas requires a high level of organized cooperation between congregations.

United action is essential. An army in which every part acts without reference to the other parts, has no real strength. In order to add new territory to Christ’s kingdom, His soldiers must act in concert. . . . He calls for a united army, which moves steadily forward, not for a company composed of independent atoms. The strength of His army is to be used for one great purpose. Its efforts are to be concentrated upon one great point—the magnifying of the laws of His kingdom before the world, before angels, and before men (MS 82, 1900). {4BC 1146.4}

While church order and structure confer a great deal of efficiency to the church, they do not transform church leaders into mini-popes. Let us conclude our study of weaknesses of congregationalism with a reference to a vaccine for the same. It has often been an overbearing use of church authority that has prompted men to slide towards congregationalism. As we affirm the value of church structure at various levels, let us coat that pill with the sweetness of meekness in administrative styles.

[Members and workers] are not to be treated in a lordly, commanding manner. Laws and rules are being made at the centers of the work that will soon be broken into atoms. Men are not to dictate. It is not for those in places of authority to employ all their powers to sustain some, while others are cast down, ignored, forsaken, and left to perish. But it is the duty of the leaders to lend a helping hand to all who are in need. Let each work in the line which God may indicate to him by his Holy Spirit. The soul is accountable to God alone. Who can say how many avenues of light have been closed by arrangements which the Lord has not advised nor instituted? The Lord does not ask permission of those in responsible positions when he wishes to use certain ones as his agents for the promulgation of truth. But he will use whom he will use. He will pass by men who have not followed his counsel, men who feel capable and sufficient to work in their own wisdom; and he will use others who are thought by these supposedly wise ones to be wholly incompetent. Many who have some talent think that they are necessary to the cause of God. Let them beware lest they stretch themselves beyond their measure, and the Lord shall leave them to their own ways, to be filled with their own doings. None are to exercise their human authority to bind minds and souls of their fellow-men. They are not to devise and put in practice methods and plans to bring every individual under their jurisdiction. {RH, July 23, 1895 par. 1}

For the Word Doc, click here: [Congregational Adventism](#)

[1] One of these is in Winfield, KS.

[2] The Seventh-day Adventist church has trademarked the name *Seventh-day Adventist*. Despite Biblical injunctions to suffer being defrauded rather than to take church issues to court (I Corinthians 6) some of these congregational movements have been sued. It is the opinion of this author that such suits have done disservice both to the defendants and to the plaintiffs and should long ago have been frankly abandoned. We ought, even now, to compensate those we have sued and offer to pay them back for their legal fees in defending their right to choose for themselves a name for their church.

[3] Drawn 6/13/10 from: <http://www.missioncatalyst.org/article.php?id=2>
