

What is Congregationalism?

The structure of the EFCA *by Gregory Strand*

WE ARE THE EVANGELICAL FREE CHURCH of America. What does this mean?

“Evangelical” is an affirmation of our faith, our theology. We are people of one Book, the Bible, and our focus is on the gospel, the evangel. “Free” refers to our polity, our structure, the way we organize ourselves as local churches.

Historically, the “Free” in “Evangelical Free Church” meant a congregation was not part of the state church and thus was free from state or governmental control. This is not generally understood, including by many in the Evangelical Free Church. Yet it is important, as it affects how we understand life together in the church of Jesus Christ.

What, then, does it mean to be “Free”? To put it most succinctly, congregationalism is that form of government wherein the highest authority under Christ in a local church resides in the corporate will of the church membership, which includes only those who have a personal faith in Jesus Christ (a believers’ church).

This corporate will affects such matters as determination of membership; selection of principal governing board and of senior pastor; and approval of constitution/bylaws, annual budget and major purchases/dissolutions.

Historically, there are three forms of church government: Episcopal, hierarchial or monarchical; representational; and congregational.

In the first form, ultimate authority resides in the Pope or bishop(s). Adherents of this form refer to apostolic or historic succession.

The second form, representational, has the Presbyterian model (in which the church is ruled by elders but is also responsible to the presbytery, the synod and the general assembly) and the non-Presbyterian model (in which the rule of the church is in the hands of the elders and no ruling body exists above them).

The final form is congregational, in which the ultimate authority resides with the local congregation. The local body is self-governing, with no ecclesiastical ruling bodies above it except Jesus Christ, her head.

We believe the congregational form of government to be the most accurate reflection of what is prescribed and described in the New Testament. Jesus Christ alone is the head of the church; there are no intermediaries between the body and its head.¹ Because of the unique relationship the body has to its head, the local church appoints her own officers² and is given authority in matters of church discipline.³

This form best exemplifies the priesthood of all believers⁴ and explains why the whole church is responsible to maintain pure doctrine and right practice.⁵

In our congregational form of government, authority ultimately resides in the congregation (accountable to Christ). Then the congregation appoints people to lead, in recognition of God’s call and gifting on those individuals’ lives. So those leaders are accountable both to Christ and to the congregation.⁶

In essence, leaders are responsible to God for how they lead/serve the people; people are responsible

to God for how they follow/serve the leaders. This servant-leadership was modeled for us by Christ.⁷

Rooted in these key biblical truths, each local church—large or small, multiple staff or solo staff, rural, suburban, or urban—has liberty in determining how to live out congregationalism. Every decision, including the color of the carpet, does not necessarily need to be brought to the whole congregation.

Because the church is not a democracy (I have a right and I demand it!) but rather a Christocracy (because Jesus is Lord, I have died to self and I graciously give up my rights), everyone can have a say, but not everyone can have his or her way.

One more important thing: Although Evangelical Free Churches cannot be elder ruled (the Presbyterian model), they ought to be congregationally ruled (priesthood of the believer) and elder-led (gifting of God and affirmation by members).

As a group of like-minded churches, we—the Evangelical Free Church of America—will see greater impact on the kingdom than as individual churches serving alone.⁸

¹Ephesians 1:22; 5:23; Colossians 1:18. ²Acts 6:3-5; 2 Corinthians 8:19. ³Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:4,5; Galatians 6:1; 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14,15. ⁴1 Peter 2:9; Hebrews 10:19-23; Revelation 1:6; 5:9. ⁵1 Corinthians 11:23-32; 14:40; Colossians 2:4,6-8,16; 3:12-17; 1 Thessalonians 5:21; 1 Timothy 4:6-16; 1 John 4:1. ⁶1 Thessalonians 2:7-12; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Hebrews 13:17. ⁷Mark 10:45; 1 Peter 2:21-25. ⁸John 17; 1 Corinthians 16:1-3.

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