

## *Congregationalism and the EFCA*

Though not included among our central doctrinal convictions, the Evangelical Free Church of America is congregational. That is, Evangelical Free churches are autonomous and self-governing.<sup>1</sup> We hold this as an integral part of our history and tradition, and on the basis of our understanding of biblical teaching.

Jesus is the lone Head of the Church (Eph. 1:22; Col. 1:18). This means the church is governed preeminently as a Christocracy not a democracy. Based on the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6; 5:9), we believe that the will of Christ or his church is best discerned through the collective understanding of the congregation. Therefore, the congregation is the highest governing authority under Christ for the local church (cf. Matt. 18: 15-18; 1 Cor. 5:4).

With Christ as the Head of this priesthood of believers, he has also given spiritual gifts to each one to be used to glorify him and build up the body (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-7, 28-30; Eph. 4:11-13; 1 Pet. 4:10-11). Some of these gifts are to be used for positions of leadership in the local church, specifically elders/overseers/pastors (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9)<sup>2</sup> and deacons (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8-13). These servant-leaders are to be affirmed/chosen by the people they serve (cf. Acts 6:5). This addresses an internal call of God and gifting by God and an external recognition and acknowledgment of this by the people in the local church.

What does congregational church government look like? In 2000 the District Superintendents and other national leaders (composing what was then called the National Ministries Team) created a statement (updated in 2008) seeking to provide some guidance to local churches on this issue. Here is what they wrote:

1. An EFC [Evangelical Free church] has the freedom under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to govern its own affairs in accordance with both the mind of Christ and the Word of God.
2. An EFC develops a local church polity that fits within the following parameters of congregationalism:
  - a. The membership includes only those who have a personal faith in Christ (a believers' church).
  - b. The collective membership in a duly called meeting is the highest authority, under Christ, in the local church, exhibiting both a willingness to be scripturally accountable to the elected leadership and encouraging elected leadership to be mutually accountable to them as the ultimate authority in the local context. Moreover, members and leaders unitedly subscribe to a relationship covenant based on Matthew 18 giving priority to biblical patterns of conflict resolution and exercising biblical discipline within the context of Christian love and cultural sensitivity.
  - c. Congregationalism is that form of government wherein the highest authority under Christ in a local church resides in the corporate understanding of the mind of Christ and in which a realistic process and reasonable opportunity exists by which that understanding is determined and carried out, especially as it affects such matters as:
    - 1) Determination of membership.
    - 2) Selection or appointment of the principal governing board (elder, deacon, etc.).
    - 3) Selection of the senior pastor or senior directional leader(s).
    - 4) Approval or alteration of constitution/bylaws.
    - 5) Approval of an annual church budget.
    - 6) Approval of any major purchase or dissolution.
3. An EFC has as its local polity a form of congregationalism that fits the size and demographics of the congregation.
4. An EFC teaches that congregationalism includes the involvement of the entire body in ministry.
5. An EFC entrusts much of the decision-making to godly leaders who are trained, trusted and allowed to lead.

<sup>1</sup> The Articles of Incorporation of the Evangelical Free Church of America mandate that the EFCA "shall be an association and fellowship of autonomous but interdependent congregations of like faith and congregation government" (II.A).

<sup>2</sup> Note that these terms are used synonymously: Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2; 1 Pet. 5:2.