

RESCUING CONGREGATIONALISM FROM 'MERE DEMOCRACY'

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Abstract

This article analyses Paul's vision for the ekklesia in Ephesus, suggesting that, particularly in larger Baptist congregations, one of the causes of the Arab Spring may be alive and well. Throughout the world leaders are losing touch with those they lead. Jesus, the 'Good Shepherd' set the standard: 'I know my sheep and they know me.' Hearing [in the Hebrew sense] is not easy when communities become large.

Paul envisions congregations being active with 'each part [doing] its work'. The traditional meeting of members can become too large for the more intense sharing, listening and understanding in the sense of an indaba - a term that should have resonance with South Africans – but indaba is what is needed if congregations are to discern the corporate 'will of the Lord'. The danger is that the role of members of a local ekklesia, however, can be gradually eroded to 'mere democracy', where their only function in the corporate body is to elect leaders.

The article sets out to challenge the traditional division of leadership roles between the spiritual and practical. It draws on late 20th century research to show that the elders of the early churches were the local 'big men'. It then suggests that, instead of deacon, a modern translation of 'minister' for diakonos would be helpful in understanding the role of members.

The article therefore suggests a listening function for overseers that could achieve three goals: enable members to recapture their corporate role; help release shepherds to say, progressively, with Jesus 'I know my sheep and they know me!', and equip more sheep to become effective ministers. In this way, 'the body of Christ may be built up until we all ... become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.' (Eph 4:12-13)