

Congregationalism For A Church Plant In The Confucian Culture

Paul Luo

Introduction

Culturally, I am a Chinese Christian who grew up in a Confucian cultural context. Theologically, I am a Baptist who is convicted that congregationalism is the most biblical form of church polity. Out of my love for the Chinese church, I intend to identify three challenges arising from a Confucian worldview that could potentially hinder church health. Out of my desire to see churches grow toward health in the Confucian context, I intend to meet those Confucian challenges with a congregational solution. In this article, I will build a congregational case for a church plant in the Confucian context to illustrate the elder-led and congregation-rule model of church governance beneficial for the development of churches in East Asia. This article consists of two sections. In section one, I will identify three cultural challenges for churches in the Confucian context. In section two, I will build a case for planting a congregational church in the Confucian context by offering some contextualized solutions to answer the aforementioned challenges. This article will land on the intended conclusion: congregationalism is not only

applicable for starting a church in the Confucian context but also beneficial for the long-term health of churches in East Asia (EA).

Confucian Challenges for the EA Church

Does congregationalism work in the Confucian context? Once the two benchmarks of congregationalism are understood, namely autonomy and democracy,¹ many Chinese believers would say no due to its cultural incompatibility.² To further this conversation, three major challenges in Confucian culture³ need to be identified at first.

Paternalistic Leadership

Paternalism simply indicates some limitation on the freedom or autonomy of an agent for any reason. In terms of policy, paternalism stands in contrast with personal choice—paternalists tend to control, intervene, and restrict individual choices.⁴ To be fair, Confucianism is a softer version of paternalism as an approach to government. Originally, the Confucian paternalism was not about hard control or coercion. Instead, Confucian paternalism assumes

¹ James Leo Garrett, Jr., “The Congregation-Led Church: Congregational Polity,” in *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, eds. Chad Brand and Stanton Norman (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2004), 157–58.

² Nearly every Chinese believer and pastor that I have talked to about congregationalism in their context gave me the similar pushback: Will Chinese believers confront their pastors for their wrongs? Do Chinese really understand and practice democracy? Would Chinese be courageous enough to break their “face” culture to make decisions that are more biblically sound rather than culturally appropriate? At a first glance, Chinese Christians are hardly convinced that congregationalism would work in their Confucian context.

³ I am not demeaning Confucianism in which I was brought up. I merely intend to analyze three Confucian challenges which could impede a healthy development of churches in EA.

⁴ Sigal Ben-Porath, “Paternalism, (School) Choice, and Opportunities,” in *Paternalism: Theory and Practice*, eds. Christian Coons and Michael (Michael E.) Weber. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 247.

people do not know what is best for themselves and therefore are not likely to act in their own best interests if they are left to their own choices. As a result, the properly informed and organized authority knows what is best for people, and therefore makes better decisions on their behalf.⁵ Gradually, however, Confucian paternalism was led to a submissive attitude to authority of all types in Chinese culture from students to their teacher, citizens to their king, and children to their parents.⁶ Inevitably Confucian paternalism yields a few ramifications to the EA church. First, church leaders tend to have the “final say” for church decisions since Chinese believers would naturally submit to their pastoral authority by the influence of Confucian paternalism. Secondly, the chance for power abuse among EA churches is probably higher than that in the Western church since the EA church leadership is less regulated due to the Confucian tradition.⁷ Thirdly, it is not easy for church members to offer their advice to church leaders since the paternalistic authority should not be challenged.

“Face” Culture in Confucian Collectivism

A second byproduct of Confucianism is the “face” culture which is paramount in every aspect of EA society.⁸ Essentially, Chinese *mianzi* (face) functions as an ethical system in the collective culture. Every Chinese person seeks acceptance, approval, affirmation, recognition, and praise from other people by

⁵ Sarah Flavel and Brad Hall, “Exemplary Paternalism: A Consideration of Confucian Models of Moral Oversight,” *Brill: Culture and Dialogue* 8 (2020): 223.

⁶ Alan Kam-leung Chan and Sor-hoon Tan, *Filial Piety in Chinese Thought and History* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 1-2.

⁷ Besides the issue of paternalistic leadership in Chinese house churches, LI Jin (a Chinese author) also points out Chinese church leaders are susceptible to power abuse and financial corruption due to the lack of supervision since Chinese house churches are not registered at the government. See his helpful article “Not Ruling Over But Feeding the Sheep: Thoughts on the Boundaries of Authority and Power in the Chinese Church,” in *ChinaSource*, 21:2 (Summer 2019), 8-9, 13. <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/chinasource-quarterlies/leadership-ethics/>.

⁸ Face culture is commonly known as *mianzi* culture 面子文化 in Chinese.

gaining *mianzi*.⁹ The *mianzi* culture that is built upon Confucian humanism prompts every Chinese person to seek a better “self” by the judgment of their community.¹⁰ This “harmony-driven” *mianzi* culture steers Chinese people to avoid confrontations at all costs.¹¹ The *mianzi* culture can impact the EA church in several ways. First, while it is always good to pursue harmony in Christ, *mianzi* makes it hard for EA believers to confront sins found in other believers, let alone the practice of church discipline. Secondly, *mianzi* culture sometimes stand in the way of the church body to seek God’s will corporately. For example, a majority of the church may agree on a questionable proposal, but a minority in the church body may remain silent because of their instinct for maintaining “harmony.”¹² Thirdly, *mianzi* also makes it difficult for an EA believer to inform or even confront his/her pastor/elder in cases of problematic teaching or conduct unless the problem is obviously heretical or immoral.

Lack of Experience in Democracy and Autonomy

At the influence of Confucianism, people in EA are accustomed to submitting to authority of various kinds. That coupled with the political restrictions for democracy in EA, people in that cultural context naturally fall short of the mentality of “democratic participation” and “autonomous rule”. The lack of experience and imagination in democracy can limit EA believers’ under-

⁹ Jackson Wu sees honor is about gaining face and shame is about losing face. See his “The Gospel with Chinese Characteristics: A Concrete Example of Cultural Contextualization,” *Global Missiology* 1:11 (October 2013), 6. <http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/1248/2872>.

¹⁰ Wei-ming Tu, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, SUNY Series in Philosophy (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), 52–55, 60.

¹¹ It does not mean that Chinese seldom engage conflicts. It means Chinese people prefer to avoid a direct conflict or confrontation to save each other’s face unless a confrontation is inevitable. Once Chinese engage a confrontation, the “face” is torn and animosity is built.

¹² It is often a superficial harmony at best. Chinese people place such emphasis on “face” that the minority often chooses silence instead of objection.

standing of what they could do should they possess the democratic power for making autonomous decisions. In sum, the three identified Confucian challenges could be roadblocks to health of the EA church and congregationalism. Without addressing these cultural obstacles, there is little chance to see congregationalism succeed in EA. In the following space, I will answer those Confucian challenges while building my case for a congregational church plant in the Confucian context.

Building the Case for a Congregational Church Plant

This case is built with two aspects: the qualities of a congregational leadership and the expectations of a new congregation. Each aspect provides some practical guidelines to address the Confucian challenges while advancing the congregational agenda.

The Qualities Needed in Congregational Leadership

Biblically qualified leadership is essential to every church. This is most certainly true in a congregational church plant in EA where church leadership often falls short of the biblical qualifications (1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9).¹³ Unlike strategies that set a low bar for the church leadership in hopes of a

¹³ I am not demeaning the quality of Chinese church leadership in general. I simply want to point out the much needed theological training for church leaders in midst of the exponential growth of the Chinese church especially from 80s to 90s. David Aikman reports that theological training of various levels started growing in Chinese villages and cities since 2000. See his *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing Inc., 2003), 140-43. Still, the need of theological education in China is enormous. Bruce Baugus sees the high demand for any kind of evangelical theological education in China. See his "A Report of the State of Reformed Theological Education in China," in *China's Reforming Churches: Mission, Polity, and Ministry in the Next Christendom*, ed. Bruce P. Baugus (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 273.

rapid and reproducible momentum for church planting,¹⁴ a congregational church plant requires solid leadership at the beginning which will encourage ongoing self-governing, self-propagating, self-supporting, self-teaching, self-expressing, self-identifying, and self-theologizing.¹⁵

Able to Lead by Solid Teaching and Modeling¹⁶

Church planters need to meet the biblical qualifications for church leadership to begin the new church plant because they initially function as pastors/elders for the new church plant.¹⁷ At least one man on the church-planting team needs to be a gifted Bible teacher/preacher and have some level of theological training.¹⁸ This is vital for several reasons. First, the new

¹⁴ David V. Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2004), Kindle Edition. Garrison defines CPMs as a rapid multiplication of indigenous churches planting indigenous churches that sweeps through a people group or population segment (location 245). Garrison confesses that new believers take the church leadership over from the church planters immediately upon their baptisms (locations 799–879).

¹⁵ J. D. Payne and David J. Hesselgrave argue that if a church-planting team does a good job of developing leadership, the church will continue to be vital without the church-planting team with their asserted seven “selves.” Similarly, the writer sees the seven “selves” as a natural result of a healthy congregational leadership. Jervis David Payne and David J. Hesselgrave, *Discovering Church Planting: An Introduction to the Whats, Whys, and Hows of Global Church Planting* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), 122.

¹⁶ The ability of teaching Scripture is essential and distinct for church leadership as other qualities in 1 Tim 3:2–7 and Titus 1:6–9 are commonly shared by deaconship (1 Tim 3:8–13). Additionally, church leaders shepherd by being examples for believers (1 Pet 5:3).

¹⁷ If a missionary and or his team start the new church plant on the mission field, the missionaries also need to be theologically equipped. Will Brooks encourages missionaries and church planters alike to follow apostle Paul’s model for planting NT churches by laying a strong biblical and theological foundation. See his “Paul as Model for Practice of World Mission,” in *World Mission: Theology, Strategy, and Current Issues*, ed. Scott N. Callaham and Will Brooks (Lexham Press, 2019), 311.

¹⁸ The importance of theological training has been elevated increasingly in EA in the last two decades. While more and more church leaders have been trained in EA, their levels of training vary greatly. Though an accredited seminary degree is not necessary, the lead/teaching church planter should have undergone the core courses in theology. At minimum, I suggest a church planter who functions as the main Bible teacher/preacher

church begins on a solid ground by learning God's Word so that believers are always pointed to the ultimate source (Scripture) to find answers and seek agreement. Secondly, the church planters should model for the future pastors/elders how to fulfill the primary pastoral responsibility (teaching the Word) by rightly handling Scripture (1 Tim 4:16; Titus 1:9, 2:1).¹⁹ Thirdly, church planters model for the future pastors/elders how to lead by teaching and teach by leading.²⁰ Gradually, EA believers could get a new taste of an "unusual" experience from the start: their leaders actually convince them by always going back to Scripture rather than by telling them what to do with an authoritative tone.

Able to Establish and Defend Congregational Authority

While the church is in its rudimentary stage, congregational church planters need to do two things without delay. First, they need to provide a coherent teaching on ecclesiology over a course of time. The new but growing congregation needs to have a firm grasp on the biblical notion of church. In particular, the new church needs to understand and embrace the biblical truth that the church both universally and locally holds the ultimate

in a new church plant should have taken the B.Th. level of NT and OT Intros, Systematic Theology, Hermeneutics, etc.

¹⁹ The primary responsibility of pastors/elders is teaching the Word which sets their role apart from that of deacons. Merkle, "The Biblical Role of Elders," in *Baptist Foundations*, 274. See also Mark Dever, *A Display of God's Glory*, 40. The future pastors/elders would only know where to begin to prepare the teaching of God's Word by getting used to hearing the faithful delivery of God's Word and watching the nitty gritty preparation for an expository sermon. Tony Merida, an expository preacher/theologian who takes teaching seriously, is indebted to not only his mentor Jim Shaddix but also a number of pastoral models. Tony Merida, *The Christ-Centered Expositor: A Field Guide for Word-Driven Disciple Makers* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2016), xvi-xvii.

²⁰ Daniel Evans and Joseph Godwin Jr., *Elder Governance: Insights into Making the Transition* (Eugene, Or.: Resource Publications, 2011), 52.

human authority dispensed by Christ (Matt 16:18–20; 18:17–20).²¹ Second, church planters should differentiate congregational leadership from the paternalistic leadership by intentionally leading the church to understand and implement congregationalism.²² Understandably, the congregational leadership will be a bit uncomfortable and unnatural to Chinese believers at first. But the notion of congregational authority anchored in Christ and Scripture will be gradually established over time if started well and maintained with persistence. Specifically, the church planters (as the interim leadership) must seek the congregation's approval for major decisions. In other words, they need to establish the congregational pattern by repeatedly sending this message to the young congregation: the will of leadership cannot hover above the will of the church.²³

Here is an example. Though functioning as the interim leadership at the outset, church planters are not pastors/elders officially because their leadership has not yet resulted from the corporate decision of the church. Instead of appointing themselves or others to be pastors/elders, church planters must set the precedent for the entire congregation to recognize and elect their own pastors/elders in the first place whenever the congregation is mature enough to do so.²⁴ With that said, church planters may or may not be elected as pastors/elders.²⁵ When the (first) pastor(s)/elder(s) are elected by

²¹ John Hammett asserts that the highest authority is vested in the congregation as the supreme authority over the church is Christ himself. John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 112, 155.

²² Despite the deeply rooted tradition in Confucianism, the church planters (foreign missionaries or indigenous church planters alike) must intentionally proclaim and demonstrate that the authority of Christ and Scripture is higher than that of leaders as promoted in Confucianism.

²³ In the eyes of the paternalistic Chinese culture, the church planters would seem to deprive themselves of authority by yielding to the congregational authority.

²⁴ Payne and Hesselgrave think that the potential new elders that the church planters have in mind are usually recognized by the church. Jervis David Payne and David J. Hesselgrave, *Discovering Church Planting*, 132.

²⁵ There are two different scenarios: (1) If the church planters are international missionaries, I would agree with Payne and Hesselgrave that it is healthy for them to help establish the

the congregation, an ordination ceremony may serve the purpose of public recognition and endorsement of the congregational decision.²⁶

Able to Raise a Responsible Congregation

“Congregation” should not be an empty word to congregational church planters. They must constantly remind themselves about one thing at the outset: the goal of starting this church is to raise up a group of mature believers who can represent Christ and govern Christ’s body responsibly. Congregational leaders exert their pastoral authority while also teaching a drastically different mentality than paternalistic leadership.

There are several things that church planters could do to challenge the old (Confucian) tradition and develop a new (congregational) tradition: (1) encourage believers to seek opportunities or find ways to serve one another in the household of God—especially those in need (Gal 6:2, 10);²⁷ (2) help believers discover their spiritual gifts and use them in church ministries; (3) train believers how to make small decisions together so that the congregation takes baby steps toward making bigger decisions by seeking God’s will

indigenous leadership as soon as possible. The church planters can continue to function as mentors to the new pastors/elders. Payne and Hesselgrave, *Discovering Church Planting*, 121–23. (2) If the church planters are Chinese nationals, they will most likely be elected as pastors/elders as a natural result since they have been functioning as church leaders. However, the congregational involvement and corporate decision-making is underscored for important events like choosing their pastors/elders.

²⁶ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 925. Benjamin Merkle concurs with Grudem that ordination is the appropriate means to install a pastor/elder into office by the church’s recognition and election but demurs the sacred connotation of transferring special grace in ordination. See Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2008), 209–12.

²⁷ Thabiti Anyabwile terms membership as committed love. He asserts that a healthy Christian is committed to expressing this kind of love toward other Christians. Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *What Is a Healthy Church Member?*, IX Marks (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 67–9.

corporately through prayer and God's Word;²⁸ (4) create channels for honest feedback from church members. This deliberation is particularly important for the "face" culture. At leaders' encouragement, church members might become increasingly more comfortable to raise constructive voices and overcome the barrier of saving face among the leaders. As a result, the more that is expected from members, the more responsible the congregation (all members) will be for their church governance.²⁹ This equipper-mentality of church planters (later for pastors/elders) would naturally lead to assuming mutual responsibilities among the congregation, which will in turn help the church to grow in maturity.³⁰

Able to Work with Other Elders in Plural Eldership

The biblical case for plurality of eldership is robust and desirable.³¹ The benefits of plural eldership are especially significant to planting congregational churches in the Confucian culture. First, there is no super pastor—no one knows it all nor can do it all. Two or more elders can provide mutual support, insight, counsel, and teaching. One can supply the skills lacking in another. A plurality of elders could prove to be a more effective, wise,

²⁸ For example, the church planters can make case studies to discuss with members how to solve certain ministry issues or personal struggles in the church body. This idea is intended to train believers to discern God's will by digging through God's Word, gradually reach an agreement with one accord.

²⁹ James Leo Garrett Jr., "The Congregational-Led Church," in *Perspectives on Church Government*.193.

³⁰ John Hammett, "The What and How of Church membership," in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, eds. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville, B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 182.

³¹ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, Rev. and expanded (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), 16–31, 38–44. Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 928–36. James R. White, "The Plural-Elder-Led Church," in *Perspectives on Church Government*, 255–96. Even earlier Baptists who usually practiced eldership in the form of single-pastor-with-deacons also believed the New Testament churches practiced plural eldership. See Greg Wills, "The Church," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 34.

complementary, and balanced method of shepherding God's flock than a single leader. Therefore, from both biblical and practical perspectives, a plurality of eldership (two at minimum) should be installed at the birth of a congregational church as soon as possible.³² Second, plural eldership can minimize the "one voice" that results from paternalistic leadership.³³ When each pastor/elder is held accountable by his peers, the inclination of Confucian paternalism is naturally minimized if not diminished.

The Expectations of a New Congregation

While biblically qualified leadership is one important aspect to be considered for planting a congregational church in EA context, the congregation itself is another important aspect. Specifically, a new congregation (regardless of its size) is expected to have three essential components to their congregational DNA built in at the start to ensure a solid foundation of congregationalism to counteract the Confucian challenges.

Two Binding Documents

At the outset, two church documents need to be drafted to identify a local church: the statement of faith and the church covenant.³⁴ The former is a list of succinct *doctrinal* statements which tell the world and themselves what this church body holds as common beliefs. The latter is a list of brief *behavioral* statements which provides basic guidelines of proper behavior in

³² Andrew Davis goes so far to suggest church planters and church revitalizers not install new elders until plural eldership is written in the constitution and bylaws. See his "Practical Issues in Elder Ministry," in *Baptist Foundations*. 293.

³³ "One voice" in the authoritarian leadership is infamously referred as *Yi Yan Tang* 一言堂 in Chinese. The strong-man leader has the final say for everything. No one can challenge that voice.

³⁴ These two documents bind members together as one congregation. The entire congregation is involved in producing, revising, suggesting, approving, and owning their manifesto.

the church body. Because the church is new, church planters are responsible to draft a preliminary version of the two documents and seek suggestions and input from each member of the new congregation for improvement and refinement. Once finalized, church planters need to teach and explain each article to the new congregation.

These two documents also function as the threshold of church membership. Only those who have understood and fully accepted the articles of the two documents can be admitted into the church body as members. Importantly, these two documents need to be reviewed periodically by the congregation so the congregation will not only remain firm with their commitment to Christ and one another but also bolster meaningful regenerate membership.³⁵ By treating the two binding documents seriously, all committed members will come to a realization: this is our church and we are responsible to honor our spiritual household.³⁶ In turn, democracy and autonomy would spontaneously appeal to believers as they start to take ownership of their church by corporately contributing, revising, and maintaining these two binding documents.

Differentiated Responsibilities

Christ's church involves responsibilities. It is important to have the new church circumscribe congregational responsibility and pastoral responsibility at the start, and it is best to have them distinguished in a written form.³⁷

³⁵ Hammett underlines the church covenant as a means to recover a meaningful regenerate membership for Baptist churches which is foundational for congregationalism. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Church*, 125–29.

³⁶ Owning the two binding documents could steer the “face” culture in a healthy direction: Chinese believers are naturally spurred to seek their corporate family/community identity and honor.

³⁷ Most Chinese house churches exist in cities. The urban churches are capable of composing the written form of distinguished responsibilities. In case of rural or ethnic minority church plants in China, it can be communicated in oral form: what are pastors/elders responsible for and what the congregation is responsible for?

This is not meant to convolute the church “politics” with more bureaucratic paperwork. In fact, this written document (or oral agreement, if necessary) is meant to provide clarity concerning the responsibilities of church leadership and that of the congregation.³⁸ Since the congregational authority is above the pastoral authority in congregationalism, a potential “conflict” seems apparent: how does a congregation practically follow their leaders while the leadership is under the congregation’s authority? The simple answer lies in the specified responsibilities—who is authorized to do what?³⁹

Because the congregation possesses the highest human authority on the earth, the entire congregation is responsible for making major decisions: (1) evaluating and confirming the two church offices (eldership and deaconship), the church-sent missionaries, the church budget, the purchase or sale of church property, starting a new church plant, and any change to the two binding statements, constitution, bylaws, and vision;⁴⁰ (2) carrying out the final stage of church discipline (Matt 18:17);⁴¹ (3) participating in the two ordinances; (4) judging the soundness of teaching and discerning Christ’s will through the church leadership.⁴² As argued prior, the primary responsibility of leadership is teaching and safeguarding the Word of God through

³⁸ Merkle asserts the authority of eldership is from God, not from the congregation. The congregation is instructed to follow its leadership. Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons*, 95–97.

³⁹ Jonathan Leeman, *Don’t Fire Your Church Members: The Case for Congregationalism* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Academic, 2016), 1.

⁴⁰ Allison details in his footnote that a search team is responsible to bring the candidates to the team of elders and ultimately the church membership for their approbation. Allison also precautions the search/nominating committee from obtaining unchecked authority. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 306.

⁴¹ Leeman argues that church leaders have no authority to fire church members because Christ has called all members to do that work. Leeman, *Don’t Fire Your Church Members*, 96–108.

⁴² Stephen J. Wellum and Kirk Wellum, “The Biblical and Theological Case for Congregationalism,” in *Baptist Foundations*, 76. See also Gerald Cowen, *Who Rules the Church?: Examining Congregational Leadership and Church Government* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 85–91.

which pastors/elders guide and influence God's flock. Supporting the church leadership, deacons serve as assistants to pastors/elders and are responsible for day-to-day administrative decisions.⁴³ Only in that sense are deacons considered a part of church leadership.⁴⁴

With the respective responsibilities clarified, the elders can lead and the congregation can rule with authority and confidence.⁴⁵ There should not be a competition for authority. However, in case of a power struggle, pastors/elders always yield to the authority of the congregation as they must function as fellow members first and foremost.⁴⁶ Built on a clear understanding of the distinct offices and their given responsibilities,⁴⁷ the elder-led and congregation-rule model of congregationalism can be operational and functional even in the Confucian context.

The Priesthood of All Believers

Last but not least, all members in a congregational church are urged to serve from the beginning. Congregational governance is not about power but privilege. The church is authorized by Christ to serve God with the privilege of a holy priesthood (1 Pet 2:5). The priesthood of all believers is buttressed by a few theological reasons. First, each regenerate person indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13–14) is capable of relating to God and discerning His will directly.⁴⁸ Secondly, each person is saved into the faith community where

⁴³ Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 224.

⁴⁴ Dever and Leeman, "Introduction—Why Polity?" in *Baptist Foundations*, 16. See also Cowen, *Who Rules the Church?*, 101.

⁴⁵ Leeman, "A Congregational Approach to Catholicity," in *Baptist Foundations*, 372.

⁴⁶ Wellum and Wellum, "The Biblical and Theological Case for Congregationalism," in *Baptist Foundations*, 73.

⁴⁷ Besides the two commonly recognized offices (eldership and deaconship), Leeman argues membership (the entire congregation) as the third office. See his article: "Church Membership is an Office and a Job," *9Marks*, 2019. <https://www.9marks.org/article/church-membership-is-an-office-and-a-job/>.

⁴⁸ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1004.

believers are sanctified through the vertical relationship with God and the horizontal relationship with one another.⁴⁹ This redeemed group lives life together as a family of God through sharing materials, hearts, and pains.⁵⁰ Thirdly, each believer who is baptized by the Holy Spirit into the church has some unique gifts to build the church up (1 Cor 12:13–27).

For these three reasons, a congregational church must find creative ways to encourage every member to share, participate, and contribute to the greater gain of the church body. When believers deliberately practice “one-another-ness” in a church such as loving one another, serving one another, teaching one another, forgiving one another, and even disciplining one another, it behooves EA believers to gradually weed out the pernicious side of the “face” culture while magnify the positive side of the collective culture.⁵¹ By espousing the priesthood of all believers, members of a new church plant will increase their sense of ownership by exercising his/her priestly duties.

⁴⁹ Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2009), 136–39.

⁵⁰ Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 144–62.

⁵¹ For example, Chinese believers will have to learn how to speak *truth* in love (Eph 4:15, 25). Unfortunately, the commonly used Chinese Bible (Union Version 和合本) ambiguously renders *truth* (ἀλήθεια) as **honesty** (**Chengshi** 诚实 in Chinese). Thus, church leaders not only need to nuance the biblical teaching but also need to show the church how to flesh out the *truth* in love. First, this fact again speaks of the importance of adequate Bible teaching offered by the qualified church leadership. Second, when believers are used to building each other up in biblical truth, the vanity of “face” resulted from Confucian humanism will fade. To read more Christian critiques on the vanity of face in Confucianism, see the helpful article written by Lit-sen Chang with G. Wright Doyle, “A Chinese Christian Critique of Confucianism,” *ChinaSource*, 16:1 (Spring 2014), 7–8, 16. <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/chinasource-quarterlies/confucius-and-christ-conflict-compromise-or-communication/>.

Conclusion

In this article, I have built a case for planting an elder-led and congregation-rule church in the Confucian culture. Acknowledging the deeply rooted Confucian challenges in EA context, I have demonstrated how congregationalism could minimize those challenges. I conclude that congregationalism is not only feasible for a church plant in Confucian culture but also beneficial for the continued growth and maturation of the EA church as a whole in the long run.

Paul Luo is a native Chinese speaker who has been involved in the missionary works for Chinese people in Asia in the last two decades. Besides his primary role in teaching theology and providing tailored training to Chinese students, Paul also has had experience in planting three churches in two different cities in East Asia.