



**Are We Who We Say  
We Are?**

**Toward a definition of  
the mission of the  
Congregational Church  
In the new Millennium**

A Theological Symposium  
of the  
National Association of  
Congregational Christian  
Churches

Symposium 2000  
November 9 – 12, 2000

***A collection of papers given for the  
Second Congregational Symposium***

***Central Congregational Church  
Derry, New Hampshire***

# Are We Who We Say We Are?

Towards a Definition of Congregationalism in the New Millennium  
Foreword to the Proceedings of the Symposium 2000

As we begin this new millennium it is of utmost importance to step back and do an assessment of our standing as a Church, as a community of Churches, as a discipline, and as a way of life. It has been over 400 years since the planting of the roots of Congregationalism in England. It has been almost that long since the Pilgrims landed in Plimoth. It has been almost 2,000 years since the beginnings of the primitive Christian Church as recorded in Acts, chapter 2. We find ourselves at this junction asking the question, "Are we who we say we are?"

Who are we? Who do we say that we are? We are Christians seeking an authentic, Christo-centric way of living out our lives in the modern world. Asking ourselves "What would Jesus do?" Teaching our children the gospel, the good news. Trying everyday to live out our existence by applying Biblical principles to everyday circumstances. Trying to keep it simple. Injecting faith, hope and love into our work, our shopping and our play.

We are sinners, seeking forgiveness, yet already forgiven and washed clean by the sacrifice of Jesus, the immortal Lamb of God. We are participants in the sacrifice when we take up our cross and walk the path that Jesus walked; we walk the talk. We are Jesus' followers and imitators.

This is who we are as individuals, as Christians, but what of our communal life, what of the Congregational Way. Who are we as Congregational Churches? Does the concept of Congregationalism hold value and meaning in the modern world? Was the Congregational movement simply a reaction to an evil, despotic King of England, a warped union of Church and State, greedy and corrupt bishops? Was Congregationalism an important reform of the Church of England, which served its purpose in its time? Has it lost its *raison d'être*, its meaning and reality in 2000 and beyond? Or is there something more, something much deeper and meaningful that we can take away from this dialogue?

One must dare say that there is. There is a deep, spiritual root that the Congregational Way taps to bring life giving water to its members. In November 2000 about 100 Congregationalists came together to investigate, probe, challenge and study this very question. We asked the question: Are we who we say we are? Eminent scholars, pastors, seminarians, and leaders in the Congregational Way prepared papers in advance. These same papers were presented to the assembled congregation, both lay and clergy. This work is a compilation of those papers, here presented to the reader.

Jesus taught us so many things during his life: to love one another, to give everything you have to the poor, to worship God our Father, to eschew the ways of this world and store up your treasures in heaven. But, perhaps because it was not His mission - His was the sacrifice - He left the task of organizing the Church to his apostles and disciples. It was the Holy Spirit who would inspire the apostles to lead the Church in "the Way." The Holy Spirit would teach us how to be a covenanted people, sharing our goods in common, supporting the missions, raising up and educating the clergy, feeding the widows and the orphans, celebrating the remembrance of the Last Supper, worshiping, singing and praising God our Father for taking care of us in this world. Ever since that primitive beginning, the Church has struggled with how to organize, how to live an authentic Christian life, how to "legislate," and how to be in the world but not of the world.

When the Puritans began their reform movement in England in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, they had a vision in which civil life, family life and church life all blended together in the Gospel. Their vision included an organization without a hierarchy, where every man, inspired by the Holy Spirit, had an equal voice, both in Church and civil governance. Their vision included a world in which all decisions, ethical, moral, civil and private, reflected back to the Biblical truths and the Gospel. Gone was the hierarchy of bishops, archbishops, not to mention cardinals and pope! Gone were the rituals and the canons and the legalistic approach to life. In their reformed way of life, the Puritan relied on the Holy Spirit to guide and direct his

affairs. Matters of the local Church were settled by a vote of the members. Matters of the universal Church were settled by cooperation among the gathered local Churches, with a heavy reliance on the Lord's grace. While giving a nod to the king, civil matters were settled by a vote of the citizens, at least in the colonies, that is.

Does this reform, this "Way," still hold relevance for us in 2001? We say that we are people of the Way, people of the Covenant, walking in the footsteps of our forbears. Are we? Are we that or are we something else, something of our own modern invention. Are we carrying the banner of the Puritans, the Evangelicals, the Christians? Or are we carrying our own Congregational banner? When a person of the world looks at our Churches and their members, what does he or she see? How do we define ourselves? That is why the sub-title of this Symposium was "Towards a Definition of Congregationalism in the New Millennium." This is the difficult question that we had to pose to each other. This is the issue with which we had to wrestle during our meetings.

There is no doubt that we are dealing with good people, saved people, people who believe in the salvific power of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. That is a given. Congregationalists do not have a monopoly on that distinction, nor do they claim to. There is, however, a special character about the Congregational Way that separates it from all the other methods and modes of Christianity. It boils down to this: the local gathered Church, the covenant, and reliance on the Holy Spirit for direction. All other churches share the important foundational principals of our faith: the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the salvation through faith in Him, the call to evangelize the world, the importance of nurturing our new brothers and sisters in Christ, the gospel responsibilities of faith, hope and love. No other denomination puts the emphasis on these three fundamental Congregational principles:

- The independence and autonomy of the local gathered Church, the Saints
- The binding nature of the covenant, entered into freely as an individual, yet realized fully in fellowship as a community
- Total reliance on the leading of the Holy Spirit for decisions in the Church

To you who are reading this foreword and have been in Congregational circles for many years, this may not seem to be new ground. As you read through these papers, may the light of Christ and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit add new meaning to your rich and experienced walk.

To the others who may read this foreword, who are curious about the future of the Congregational Way around the world, you may be struggling with the idea of becoming a member of a Congregational church in your town. What makes it different from the Methodists or the Baptists up the street? You may be searching for authenticity, experimenting with newfound faith, or longing for new meaning in your life. Whatever is happening in your life, wherever you find yourself right now, it is our sincere hope and prayer that the papers presented here shed new light on your path.

We are all pilgrims, struggling to find meaning in our lives. We live out our lives as best we can live them, in some cases clawing and scratching for significance in the modern age. We filter out good ideas from bad ones, meaningful from uninteresting, important life giving ideas from the "noise" of our daily existence. Hopefully we put on the good ideas, take to heart the meaningful ones and incorporate into our lives the important principles with which we will guide our walk. Some of those good ideas are to be found in this small book. Enjoy the search and rejoice in the discovery as you share with these pilgrims their ideas and beliefs.

Thank you for reading our story. Many blessings in the heavens upon you, fellow pilgrim.

I. David Pfalzgraf  
Londonderry, NH  
April 2001

# **Are We Who We Say We Are?**

## Defining the mission of the Congregational Church In the new Millennium

A Theological Symposium of the  
National Association of Congregational Christian Churches

**Symposium 2000**  
November 9 – 12, 2000

### **Contents**

- |                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| <b>Foreword</b>   | David Pfalzgraf   |
| <b>Chapter 1</b>  | <b>Opening Service – It's Our Choice</b><br>Rev. Dr. Douglas Lobb, D.Min. D.D.  |
| <b>Chapter 2</b>  | <b>Gathered: The Essential Nature of a Congregational Church.</b><br>Rev. Dr. Lloyd M. Hall, D.D.   |
| <b>Chapter 3</b>  | <b>Beyond 'Congregationalism C': A Study of Ecclesiological Evolution</b><br>Rev. Dr. Steven M. Peay, Ph.D.   |
| <b>Chapter 4</b>  | <b>The Spirituality of the Covenant; Recapturing True<br/>Congregationalism Through Scriptural Devotion</b><br>Mr. Shawn Stapleton                                  |
| <b>Chapter 5</b>  | <b>"Are We Who We Say We Are?" A Dialogue</b><br>Rev. Dr. David Nasgowitz   |
| <b>Chapter 6</b>  | <b>Fundamentalism, Evangelicalism and the Congregational Way</b><br>Rev. Douglas Warren Drown   |
| <b>Chapter 7</b>  | <b>Simeon's Embrace: Intentionality in Theology and Administration of<br/>the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Early Puritan New England</b><br>Mr. Charles Packer |
| <b>Chapter 8</b>  | <b>Encouraging Mission Involvement</b><br>Rev. Henry F. (Jack) Brown  |
| <b>Chapter 9</b>  | <b>Congregationalism and the World Wide Web - A Metaphor for<br/>Changing Times</b><br>Rev. Douglas L. Gray   |
| <b>Chapter 10</b> | <b>Crisis of Credibility in Leadership Formation Changes Needed in<br/>Theological Education</b><br>Rev. Dr. Manfred W. Kohl, Th.D.                                 |

- Chapter 11**                    **Congregationalists Renewing**  
Rev. Dr. Janet Wootton, Ph.D. – Keynote Speaker
- Chapter 12**                    **Pilgrim Hymnal Survey Final Paper**  
Rev. Cynthia Bacon
- Chapter 13**                    **Do We Have an Educated Clergy?**  
Janet Bell Garber, Ph.D.
- Chapter 14**                    **Renewing Congregationalists**  
Rev. Dr. Manfred W. Kohl, Th.D. – Keynote Address
- Chapter 15**                    **Are We Who We Say We Are?**  
Rev. Dr. Leo D. Christian, D.Min.

**“IT’S OUR CHOICE”**  
Derry, N.H.

There is not enough attention being paid to the Biblical theme of covenant by our Congregational Christian Churches. Far from being a new concept, the covenant principle is intrinsic to the Biblical material in that it defines the relationship of God to his people. (Freedman, David Noel, Interpretation, October 1964, page 3)

In the Hebrew Bible, two kinds of covenant appear describing the relationship between God and humanity. In each of these, there are two parties to the agreement but, they are not of equal footing. In each, the initiative rests with the divine Lord. In one, the pattern corresponds to that of the Hittite Suzerainty or vassal treaties. The terms are imposed upon the human party in what may be called a human obligation, as the Hittite’s allowed the conquered to remain in their land doing their own business so long as they granted allegiance to the conquering king.

In the other series, God takes upon himself certain obligations. This is an apodictic covenant. (Freedman, 1964, Page 4) This covenant is God initiated and accepted by humans.

An example of a suzerain covenant, that is a pact with a human obligation, is found in the events of Mt Sinai or Horeb when Moses mediates a covenant between God and Israel. Exodus 19-24. Examples of conduct are bluntly stated. God will honor as his chosen people those who obey, but the human obligation is obedience to the Lord God.

An example of divine commitment is found in Genesis 15, the story of God’s promise to Abraham. God said, I will give you this land and you will have many descendants. This was done before Abraham, and then an old man had many children. Shortly thereafter, after falling down in laughter at the announcement that she would have a child Sarah is pregnant. She laughs herself all the way from the geriatrics ward to the obstetrics ward.

God also made a covenant based upon himself when he said to Noah and his descendants; I will never destroy the earth again in such a manner. (Gen. 8:21)

Christians embrace the reality of a new covenant in which Christ is both mediator and sacrificial ratifying victim. (Edward Campbell, Zeon Lectures #1, April 26, 1983, Pg 18f). This is a crucially important concept because as David Noel Freedman points out (pg 15) In the new age of the covenant- the new spirit, the new life- the conflict between the two covenant types is resolved in reciprocal fulfillment. Yahweh’s irreversible commitment to Israel flows into the blessings which he bestows on an obedient people who, through the power of the spirit, fulfill all the requirements of the covenant.

Biblical scholarship reveals that covenant means a sworn relationship based on trust, yet one having consequences. In the radical interpretation of covenant embraced by the Christian community, the community sees itself as the heir to the Abrahamic covenant and itself, that is the Christian community, as the mediator of God’s blessing to the world. (Campbell lecture 3, pg 18). Lew Mudge of McCormick Seminary stated it this way, “How might the Christian covenant sign appear in such a world? Possibly through the living out of a network of obligation, in freedom, to norms of conduct and relationship needed to hold a fabric of decent life together. Possibly through continued demonstration that such a network of obligation knows no “tribal” boundaries: that it is inter-racial, inter-cultural, and world-wide. The witness of faith- communities committed to such a freely chosen standard of life might do much to keep life human for all”. (Mudge 1981:58)

Well, we could dwell on the theme of covenant for our entire time and barely scratch the surface. Suffice it to say that at base, a covenant is an elaborate sworn promise and agreement between two parties, which finds its guarantee in an oath: trustworthiness and trust rather than coercion, are the basic relationship. (Campbell, lecture 2, pg 1f)

For Paul, the requirements of the Sinai covenant are seen as requirements that strangle one, but Paul does not dismiss the requirements. In Romans 7, they make one conscious of sin, but are nonetheless holy, just and good. In Romans 13:8-10, Paul, like his Christ, sees the requirements summed up in "you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The question before us today is, what does this have to do with Congregationalism and if it has something to say, are we today who we say we are?

In 16th century England, the National Church of England was having trouble. The Queen and parliament were at odds with Church legislation where a fairly large group wanted an 'a Presbyterian and not an Episcopal Church'. Thomas Cartwright, a professor at Cambridge was the contender for the Presbyterian Puritans; the Archbishop of Canterbury championed the establishment. Cartwright lost. He and his party had put their faith in the Queen and the Bishops and they were treated very badly by both.

Meanwhile, a wild man who was a storm center proclaimed that he, "would not tarry for any". Robert Browne put his hope in the great head of the Church, our Lord Jesus. After many confrontations and a great deal of misrepresentation, Brown left the established Church entirely, the Church whose Bishops had forbidden him to speak. (Atkins and Fagely, History of American Congregationalism, pg 31ff) but the huge difference of perspective set the tone for the congregational way, a gathered Church as opposed to the established Church. It was in Norwich, under a covenant where Brownes group ceased to be a parish and became a congregation.

In Norwich, they gave their consent "to join themselves unto the Lord, in one covenant and fellowship together and to keep and seek agreement under his laws and government and therefore utterly flee and avoid such-like disorders and wickedness as were mentioned before." (Atkins and Fagely Pg 35)

Congregational Churches grew out of a movement of the heart. Participation in the life and work of the fellowship was conditioned on the individuals' personal relationship to God. They believed that there was great spiritual value in fellowship and that Christ was present in their meetings. The basis of their fellowship was the covenant and those so covenanted formed the Church. (Atkins and Fagely, Pg 265).

In my opinion, it is only when a covenant to work together for a purpose is based on an individuals relationship to Christ as the basis of fellowship will it have vitality. I am a Canadian. In my country, in 1925, the Methodist church, the Congregational Churches and most of the Presbyterian Churches merged to become the United Church of Canada. To this day, the United Church of Canada is the largest Protestant Church in the land but, I feel, it has lost its vitality.

In a merger of that proportion, the soul that fired passion within various groups gives way to what can be agreed upon. In Canada, the Methodists lost the evangelistic zeal that was part and parcel of the circuit riding parson on the plains and in the, mountains. The Congregationalists lost the conviction of the autonomy of the local Church and with it the covenant as a basis of membership. The Presbyterians, who merged compromised their reformed theology and the decency and order that was a part of their way of working. They won the battle since the type of government in the merged body is presbyterial, but the fire that characterized their Calvinistic theology gave way to a moderate form that could be accepted by many. The only thing that mergers can agree upon is the least common denominator. The emphasis that gave each persuasion its zeal and enthusiasm sagged in a sea of mediocrity.

Here in America, the separatist emphasis of the believers in Plymouth was cast against the pseudo-Presbyterianism of the Massachusetts Bay colony. Each persuasion tried to continue being what they had been in Great Britain. But, trying to be Churches far away from the intellectual, administrative and training areas across the ocean proved to be unworkable. The solution was the compromise reached in 1648 in Cambridge MA where the Cambridge platform became a reality. The Platform stated four great and fundamental points that remain powerful to us even to this day.

1. We believe in the autonomy of the local Church and in its completeness as an ecclesiastical reality under the headship of Jesus Christ alone.

2. We believe in the representational nature of the ministry, that is, ministers arise from within a congregation and/or are called by a congregation. All are ministers but some are called to be enablers, teachers, interpreters and models so that ministry is done. Clergy are responsible to the Church to which they are called not any judicatory or higher authority other than our Lord.

3. We believe in the covenant as a reasonable basis for membership. Nothing should or can supersede one's personal relationship to Christ. Individual interpretation and practice is honored. Congregations are united by a covenant which is an agreement to work together for a purpose.

4. We believe in the necessity of fellowship, not just for fellowship itself but for the orderly conduct of ministry. Ministers need to be properly questioned and accepted in ordination, even though the local Church ordains, proper procedure and intelligent questioning is important in an installation or in ending a pastorate. Proper procedure needs to be ensured as does the weight of wisdom, the assistance of sister Churches, the wisdom of a larger body all without binding quality upon the local Church. An advisory council is a great assist to any willing congregation.

In my travels over the last few years, it seems to me, that we are doing a good job of proclaiming our belief in the autonomy of the local Church and its completeness as an ecclesiastical reality. We need to be aware that there is nothing unique about this claim anymore. Millions of Christians and thousands of American congregations believe this tenet.

We are beginning to do a better job of using council of the vicinage to assist local Churches in the ordination process. While, it remains one of our principles that ordination takes place in the local Church, a council composed of clergy and delegates from sister Churches is a necessity to insure that orderly declaration of a candidate's training and call to ministry is articulated. Questions from such a council help insure that the qualification, clarity of thought and evidence of call are articulated well to all concerned.

There are still too many congregations who by-pass this time tested and important step in the ordination process. Such failure does not bode well in many instances and, in truth, a local Church ordination without a vicinage council of sister churches clergy and delegates is really an ordination to that Church alone. Validation and authentication is part of what it means for an ordination to be accepted by the religious community.

Vicinage councils are also highly desirable in dealing with conflict within a congregation and insuring that an orderly and appropriate severance results when a pastoral relationship is dissolved for any reason.

We must, I believe, be more emphatic about the importance of the covenant in our churches. Embracing a covenant, as a basis for membership is a congregational concept of the utmost importance in our age.

In a time when pluralism and the freedom to wrestle with new ideas is being championed, the proclamation of a covenant whereby people are accepted to work together for a purpose while they wrestle with the specifics of their faith seems to me, to be of crucial importance.

The 1954 document, (*The Report of A Study by the Committee on Free Church Polity and Unity*), a valuable doctrine neglected at the time of the merger discussions and sadly neglected since says what I am suggesting, very succinctly: "Congregationalism believes that the Church is both local and universal. While the one aspect is not to be stressed at the expense of the other, Congregationalism has always been sensitively aware of the danger of losing sight of the completeness of the local church, which within itself compasses both the local and the universal. For that reason, while we have emphasized the fellowship (and it is fellowship in Christ), we have insisted on the fact of the autonomy of the local church. This autonomy rests upon a specific binding religious experience- a seeking of and a following of the guidance of the Holy Spirit by the people of this gathered church.

Congregational Christians do not set a doctrinal test as a condition of admission to the covenanting church. This fact is recognition that no Christian has the right, under God, to exclude another Christian from the church because of his devotion to Christ and in his experience of Christ there are differences in the expression of that experience and devotion. The Congregational Christian Churches have felt that to impose such a test is to distort the relationship between a human and his or her God, made known in Christ. But always the relation between the believers is the binding relationship of having covenanted together in Christ to be Christ's men and women."(The Report of a Study by the Committee on Free Church Polity and Unity, pages 10-11)

Thus, as Steven Peay reminds us, the congregational pattern does the difficult thing of keeping the door of Christian fellowship open to admit into one fellowship sincere followers of Christ between whom there may be wide differences of Christian experience and practice." (S. Peay, Some Thoughts on The Future of Congregationalism, pg 4)

From their founding, Congregationalists by whatever name have championed the right of individual interpretation in one's relationship with God. Whenever binding creeds or statements of faith were proclaimed as necessary or absolute, we have rebelled, insisting that the individuals' relationship is paramount while we agree to work together for a purpose. We have sought to be a Church without a Bishop and a State without a King to promote this freedom.

In this promotion however, let us remember, we believe one must be free from binding faith requirements in order to totally free to be bound to Christ without any interfering intermediaries. The emphasis has always been freedom TO rather than freedom FROM. Freedom from creeds and pronouncements is of no value UNLESS one is bound to Christ and free to believe the dictates of his or her own conscience in obedience to the Master.

Lastly, we have done a poor job of keeping the Congregational requirement of fellowship alive. Part of this is due to the extraordinary distance between many of our congregations, however, many congregations in proximity of others do not share in fellowship, do not work in or ask for the opinion and advice of vicinage councils; in fact these Churches act as independent Churches and an independent thinking and acting congregation, no matter what its name might be is NOT a congregational Church. The fellowship of the Churches, the sharing of wisdom, the spiritual life together free from binding decisions IS part of what it means to be a congregational Church.

Throughout history, whenever congregationally named Churches have taught, practiced, proclaimed and lived their congregational principles they have fared well and actually grown. Whenever they have forgotten their congregational heritage or failed to proclaim and practice them, things have not gone well and we have succumbed to all sorts of mergers and lack of vitality. We MUST learn that lesson lest we fall prey to the words of George Santayana, "those who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it."

It is not exaggeration to see that our history amazingly parallels that of the ancient Hebrews. Bearers of the ancient covenant, the Israelites over and over again rebelled against the covenant, neglected their history and fell to worshipping other Gods and found a general weakening in their ranks. Over and over again, the prophets thundered against this neglectful tendency informing the people that failure to follow God, would result in grave difficulty. When they listened, repented and returned to the ways made known to them they prospered. God accepted their confession and honored their faithfulness. Whenever they ignored the advice and counsel of the prophets they fell from being a strong and vibrant society to be a trampled and conquered nation all over again. That story is mirrored in our existence.

It has been said by several modern theological observers that Churches which do not grow when there is opportunity to grow are Churches who have CHOSEN NOT to grow. It may also be said that this is true of associations. There is too great a tendency, particularly when an Association of Churches have come together for a stated purpose to forget that purpose and become very comfortable with those of like mind.

We of the National Association of Congregational Churches, do well to remember that the Association was founded as an instrument of fellowship for those who were concerned about the eroding of fundamental values as stated by the National Council itself. We were developed first as an Association within an Association to provide for fellowship for Churches opposed to the merger efforts. Churches in this original organization, retained their local/regional association membership and their ties to the general council. Thoughts of succession were discouraged since such action could jeopardize legal actions being undertaken. We were, at first trying to be an Association to save the General council and when the merger did occur, the NACCC became a reality when it was forced to and it began without much of the structure known and helpful. (Peay, pg 5-6)

We err, when we fall back, in comfort, saying, we were the Churches who opposed the merger. Such a comfort zone is easily interpreted as being exclusive to those looking in from the outside or a non issue to those who did merge. Ours was an attempt of preservation and resuscitation of valued principles that were squeezed out in the passion of merger and compromise. We must be for those values not merely against an existent Church.

In, the second law, the writer speaking for God says, "Today, I am giving you a choice. You can choose life and success or death and disaster. I am commanding you to be loyal to the Lord, to live the way he has told you, and to obey his laws and teachings. You are about to cross the Jordan River and take the land that God is giving you. If, you obey God, you will become successful and powerful. On the other hand, you might choose to disobey the Lord and reject him. So, I am warning you that if you bow down and worship other gods you won't have long to live.

Right now I call the sky and the earth to be witnesses that I am offering you this choice. Will you choose for the Lord to make you prosperous and give you a long life? or will God put you under a curse and kill you? Choose life!"

Can that be the message to us? Can God be saying to us, look, I have set before you unparalleled possibilities? The way I have given you is confused right now and seeking direction. Will you proclaim and live the way that leads to prosperity and growth or will you wallow in your own contentment functioning as non cooperative branches when all along you need the whole tree to provide you with nourishment.

Dear friends of the Congregational Way of worship and work, it's our choice. I beg of you, let's choose life.

# GATHERED

Lloyd M Hall Jr

## Preamble

At the end of the Twentieth Century, we Congregationalists are surrounded by Roman Catholic parishes that are comprised of a larger number of families than any of our Churches can claim as members. We are reminded constantly by the media and the popular Christian press that there are successful mega-Churches sprouting in most urban settings and that the evangelistic Churches are growing at a faster rate than the older mainline Churches, who, in fact, may be declining in membership. All this has led to an ill-founded insecurity complex on the part of our Churches and a generalized sense of failure.

In part this reflects the observable reality that too many of the continuing Congregational Churches since 1957 have been firmly committed to certain details of our polity without sufficient grounding in our ecclesiology. What escapes the religious news headlines is that the vast majority of Protestant Christians still worship in small and medium sized Churches. Is it possible that this remains true because those Churches most closely resemble the apostolic Churches formed under the immediate authority of Christ? Is it possible that congregationalism (note the lower case "c") is becoming more and more dominant in Christian Churches because it is closer to the way Christ would have us be?

We have a wealth of literature and tradition that explores the rationale and the reality of the apostolic Churches; and of the re-incarnation in the Congregational Way. The future for that Congregational Way is not to be found in becoming a mimic of the world's promotional and organizational patterns but, rather, in understanding and authentically practicing the Way commended to us by our Lord. Authenticity and, therefore, validity demands that we come to understand our polity as a necessary result of our ecclesiology and not as an end in itself.

## Introduction

In his wonderful lecture series, *The Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years as Seen in Its Literature*, Henry Martyn Dexter suggests that Nathaniel Emmons, by the middle of the eighteenth century,

"included in his understanding of the Congregational way the notions that (1) A specific form of church government was instituted by Christ in the eighteenth of Matthew - which is Congregationalism, (2) Christ is the sole lawgiver of His church, and all the power which Congregational churches have is to interpret and apply His law; being entrusted with no legislative, but only ministerial, functions, and (3) A Congregational church is a pure democracy (508)

The notion that a Congregational Church is a pure democracy is tied to our understanding of Covenant; and the power of the Church relates most properly to the mission of the Church, which follows its establishment.

## The Nature of the Church

To launch discussion and provide a "handle" for our understanding of Church, I have long suggested to Confirmation Classes that what is required for a Congregational Church is that you have "Christian people, together, praying." This, after all, is the Pentecost paradigm. And it points to the radical character of a Congregational Church. Dependent, as we are, upon Matthew 18.20<sup>1</sup> we come together, believers in Christ, prayerfully certain that Christ - REALLY! - will join us. Not only is that sufficient warrant for a Church but is the New Testament pattern that best enables Christ's Church to be what he intends.

---

<sup>1</sup> 20 (NRSV) For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Fredrick Meek wrote in 1947 that

"The needed and effective doctrine of the Church is that conception of the Church found in the New Testament itself, unencumbered by the accretions of institutional necessity [. . .] which our Congregational forebears knew, and which American Congregationalists in this century [. . .] have allowed to slip from the center of their thought and life" (32).

That Church begins with believers in Christ who are called, by Christ in the Holy Spirit, to unite with a particular congregation--a visible Church. It is a voluntary act of affiliation, an act of the will responding to the leadings of the Spirit.

When that fellowship of saints meets and worships together, they are lead by Christ. R. W. Dale affirms that "Christ is the true Lord of the Church, and His authority is to be exerted through the concurrent action of all the members of the Church, because according to the Christian ideal, all the members of the Church are one with Him "(62). It is not enough that we simply gather in the name of Jesus Christ. We need to exert those offices of fellowship and worship that allow us to know the presence of our Lord.

Lifting up Acts 2:44, 45<sup>2</sup>, interpreted by 4: 32-34<sup>3</sup>, which refers to the social life of the believers in Jerusalem in the opening stage of the existence of the Christian Church, Dexter tells us that they "'were together;" that is, they met in the same place--which is one radical feature of a Congregational church [. . .]" (*Hand-Book* 28).

Indeed, the literature and experience of the Congregational Churches throughout the ages has been as the Boston Platform suggests:

The members of one church ought ordinarily to dwell in such vicinity to each other that they can meet in one place; and ordinarily, the members of one church ought not to be more in number than can meet in one assembly, and manage their affairs by one administration<sup>4</sup> (16).

The idea of a "gathered Church" is not a list of subscribers to an article of organization, largely unknown to one another, but a body of believers who meet together with such frequency and in such numbers that they are well acquainted. As Richard Mather said of the Church, "in respect of Quantity no more in number [than] in the days of the New Testament, but so many as may meet in one congregation" (Sell 31). The ideal to which we aspire according to Arthur Rouner Jr. is that the Church should be

[. . .] a living testimony to the sense of community in Christ, of 'koinonia' as the Greek has it, which from the earliest days has been the essence of the Christian life. The whole power of the early Church was in the fact that it was a fellowship, a family of God who deeply loved and cared for one another because they loved Christ. This was their power! (140).

"In the New Testament," wrote Henry David Gray, "we have before us a Church which is the corporate life of men and women holding a common belief in Jesus Christ, and knowing themselves to be animated by a common possession of the Holy Spirit" (*Holy Spirit* 16). I have suggested that P. T. Forsyth "recognized that for Church to be Church there must be a continual and reciprocal interaction between members and the Holy Spirit. Anything less is not Church" (Hall 12).

---

<sup>2</sup> (Acts 2:44-45 NRSV) All who believed were together and had all things in common; [45] they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

<sup>3</sup> (Acts 4:32-34 NRSV) Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. [33] With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. [34] There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold.

<sup>4</sup> Boston Platform, II, I, 3

## **Walking Together Covenant**

The first implication for a body of gathered saints is that the common unity with Christ and the call into a particular Church establishes a particular relationship among those saints and with Christ.<sup>5</sup> That relationship finds its expression and permanence in the Church's covenant. As Steven Peay observes,

"The covenant is not simply an individual act, but is, as Ames noted, involved in the gathering of the church which is the result of entering into this relationship. As a consequence of the lasting nature of the covenant, the church's continuity is also assured" ("Congregationalism" 3f).

It is critical to remember that the Church's covenant, regardless of its explicit content, is primarily about relationship. The Congregational Way, in spite of common misunderstanding, does not, Peay continues,

"speak of the constitution and by-laws or the mission statement before we do the church covenant, [doing so] will reduce our Way to the level of an organizational model rather than a living relationship. Everything we do as churches should derive from our oneness of profession of the Lordship of Jesus and our covenant relationship with him and with one another (Peay "Saints" 43).

As David Travell notes, the Church's covenant is an exquisite way of uniting people and enabling a common witness, "providing they are true covenants, that is, they are about a commitment to a relationship, not about making rules and agreeing conditions" (10).

We should note again that the vision of the Church in the Congregational Way is always of a Church that both can and does meet regularly all together in one place. It is a fellowship of believers well known to one another because they engage in frequent and meaningful intercourse.  
The Democratic Character

The second implication for the Church is that the establishment of equality in Christ and mutual responsibility in covenant lead us to understand that the Church of the New Testament necessarily implied a Church of a purely democratic character. As John Wise writes in his defense of the Congregational way:

For certainly if Christ has settled any form of power in his church, he has done it for his church's safety and for the benefit of every member. Then he must needs be presumed to have made choice of that government as should least expose his people to hazard, either from the fraud or arbitrary measures of particular men. And it is as plain as daylight, there is no species of government like a democracy to attain this end (137).

Another tenet of our Way that runs against the grain of popular understanding is that democracy, in a Congregational Church, is not an axiom of power or entitlement but of obligation. While it does preclude the presumption of power by external or internal authorities, it equally precludes the evasion of responsibility by any covenant member. We cannot have it both ways: to proclaim democracy when we would exercise authority but practice Presbyterianism when we would foist our obligations off onto others. Ours is a pure democracy not a "representative democracy."

As Forsyth reminds us, "it was in no idea of political democracy or individualism that Congregationalism took its historic rise, but in obedience to Jesus Christ in the face of all the powers or majorities around it. It was the mother of political democracy and freedom, but not its child" (*Faith* 193).

The fundamental understanding of the ekklesia, for us, is that Christ is immediately present in--and only in--the gathered fellowship of believers. We can only be who we say we are when the work of the Church,

---

<sup>5</sup> See Cambridge Platform, IV and Boston Platform II, I, 4

be it worship or service, is done under the immediate headship of Christ; and that is only possible when we " meet constantly together in one Congregation, for the public worship of God, & [our] mutual edification<sup>6</sup> (Walker 208).

We should consider three quick points before leaving this exploration of what it means for us to "walk together."

The gravest challenge to Congregational polity in the last century was not organic ecumenism but, rather, American individualism. We have raised "the right of private judgment" to the apex of our value scale at the expense of our corporate--and, therefore, Christ-centered--life. John von Rohr reminds us that Horace Bushnell retained the sense of our polity when he opposed revivalism as "too individualistic, too separated from the organic social connections in life where friends, family, and church provide context and help us as vehicles of grace" (289).

Rouner almost seems to be speaking to a different age when he states that this is "the whole meaning of the Church Meeting: that the people gather together in prayer to do the church's work; that they refuse to cast the burden solely upon a few directors or trustees, [ . . .]" (111). This preservation of the burden is not often our contemporary experience. Too often, we are ready, as Gray suggests, "to let others who know better decide" ("Congregational Way" 5). But it is simply not enough to elect, or to otherwise select, the ones who will do the work of the Church. To transmit the work--and therefore the responsibility and decisions--to the clergy or to select Boards and Committees is to drift toward what Dale called "intra-congregational Presbyterianism."

Anthony Pappas and Scott Planting in their little book, *Mission: The Small Church Reaches Out*, confess to not being prepared to define "small church." You gather from the text what kind of Church they have in mind but the critical relevance for us is that the Church they address is a Church that potentially operates as a Congregational Church. The dynamics are of a body of folk who know one another very well and work together more by inspiration than plan. "When things go right," they say, "in the small church, they go right at the personal level and no impersonal organization or structure can compensate for the personal. The small church lives and moves and has its being in a world of persons and relationships" (38).

## **What We Do**

As with so much that he wrote, Forsyth's words at the beginning of the twentieth century seem equally pertinent at the beginning of the twenty-first:

Christian people are more devoted to the busy effort of getting God's will done on earth than to the deep repose of communion with God's finished will in Christ. It is characteristic of the last half-century that it aims not so much at a Christocracy, where Christ has a household and is master of it, as at a Christolatry – a mere *latreia*<sup>7</sup> of Christ, where he is worshipped mainly through the service of the public (*Positive Preaching* 76)

Loren Mead echoes the same thought when he writes, "*What the church is is more important than what it does.* And the heart of the church's being is the deep conversation between God and God's people that the community works out in its life of worship – in its temple" (117)

Neither would suggest that the good works of service to humankind are inappropriate for the Church. They simply are not primary, nor are they the stuff of salvation. The Church, first, must turn itself to "the ministry of the Word<sup>8</sup> [which] is the chief agency of the Holy Ghost, and the chief function of the Church; whose business is not simply publication of a truth but confession of an experience--of the indwelling Spirit as its life" (*Faith, Freedom* 15). We are challenged to provide the environment in which our fellow

---

<sup>6</sup> Cambridge Platform, IV, 4; spelling modernized.

<sup>7</sup> **latreia** = religious duty

<sup>8</sup> Forsyth holds the "Word" to be the Gospel, which is in Jesus Christ and not the scriptural canon *per se*.

saints can continue to grow, to serve, and to be healed. "The Church" writes Gray, "is a fellowship of persons by means of which each is enabled to seek richer communion with God, fuller development of self, and greater service to others. The church is a free association of persons under the leadership of God's Spirit apart from Whom we cannot know God " ("Nature and Purpose" 7).

And it is from that foundation we proceed to wider service. As Meek said:

Here in the Church local is the fellowship of the redeemed; that Christian society who are in truth separated from society, and who because of their experience of Christian fellowship together under Christ, go out into that society reinforced and reinvigorated, a Christian army of invasion (40).

We do well to think of the Church (and here, as usual, I mean the Church local), as did Forsyth when he wrote, "The Church is precious not in itself, but because of God's purpose with it" (*Work of Christ* 4)

### **Less Is More**

Rouner reaches beneath the mechanism of the Church covenant to the heart of the relationship. Christian people, members of the same church, must meet together often enough to know each other; often enough to know each other's deep concerns, differences in viewpoint, and special needs. You cannot love a man you do not know. You cannot achieve unanimity of spirit with someone with whom you have not talked and prayed (57).

The closer we grow to one another, the better the chance that we will be able to surmount our human idiosyncrasies and power struggles and become the body of Christ. It is only in the congregation that is small enough to allow the development of those relationships that authentic Congregational witness is possible. A church is possible on many other grounds but, on any other ground, it would not be a Congregational Church.

"In American culture," write Pappas and Planting, "a small church is often incorrectly seen as a diminutive, voluntary organization when, in fact, it is a face-to-face society, a culture-bearing organism [ . . .]. It's a living entity in which persons and relationships are the foremost reality" (xii). It is, perhaps, a radical thing to suggest that "persons and relationships" (horizontal and vertical, if you will) are and ought to be foremost in the life of a Church. That, however, is what we think. It is not the institution, the clergy, the buildings, nor even the theology. It is the face-to-face-relationship of believers with one another and with our Lord.

The cover of Carl Dudley's *Making the Small Church Happen* carries these words:

In a big world, the small church has remained intimate. In a fast world, the small church has remained steady. In an expensive world, the small church has remained plain. In a rational world, the small church has kept feeling. In a mobile world, the small church has been an anchor. In an anonymous world, the small church calls us by name (qtd. in Pappas and Planting 72).

Or, as Pappas and Planting argue, "The small church is valuable in and of itself, and its unique identity offers a perspective that needs to be clearly heard on the denominational level."

The membership of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches includes Churches that fall into the "larger Church" category, those that incorporate a membership of 500 or more. Their fellowship and witness bless us. But most of the Churches of this Association are - like most Protestant Churches - in the "smaller" or "medium-sized" categories.<sup>9</sup> In the NACCC 2001 Yearbook, 48% of our

---

<sup>9</sup> Most of the larger Churches practice a polity that Dr. Dale called "intra-Church Presbyterianism." They, nonetheless, usually maintain critical characteristics of Congregationalism and are unlikely candidates to become mega-Churches. Indeed, the tension between the Congregational character and a "practical and efficient management" is sometimes troublesome. Work needs to be done in exploring this phenomenon.

reporting Churches have at least 100 members but fewer than 500 members. An additional 44% of our Churches report fewer than 100 members. We are not a denomination with many large Churches. Speculation might suggest, in this "bigger is better" world, that this marks some fundamental flaw in our way of being Church. I counter that we have a tendency toward smaller Churches precisely because that is what our understanding of Church requires.

In this respect the answer to the question of this symposium, "Are we who we say we are?" is, "yes"--at least potentially. The vast majority of our Churches are of a size to affect true community in the covenant life of the Church. That we are sometimes dismayed about that is perhaps a neurotic response stemming from our failure to appreciate the absolute authenticity and advantage of the New Testament Church pattern.

A caveat and reality: The Cambridge Platform, in the same breath in which it argues for a Church of one congregation, goes on to say that the number gathered should not, ordinarily, be "fewer, then may conveniently carry on Church-work" (III, [4]). Local circumstances will dictate, but it is clear that a Church may decline in numbers to a point where it is no longer viable. Our polity cannot be an excuse for failing to evangelize and to maintain the vitality of the Church for Christ.

### **Implications**

(First) While there are real tensions for some of our Churches about "survival," the greater problem is the continuing conviction that our general failure to replicate the theater/arena church life of contemporary "successful" churches represents a failure in our mission. It was a similar social reality into which Forsyth spoke when he suggested that

The greatest problem before independency [Congregationalism] is how to regain its place in the great world Church. [. . .]. Some way which shall make the Church a real and respected power for the practical purpose of God with society. (*Faith, Freedom* 306).

With an appeal not to press this analogy too far, let me suggest that in most of our communities--or a larger community nearby--we know of a large and successful restaurant. We also know that almost anywhere we go we can locate a much smaller McDonald's. The Congregational pattern is the smaller community-based Church. Our "success" in the world will not be marked by the great campus but by the proliferation of Churches witnessing to Christ according to our Way. When it comes time to consider a "second service," we are well advised to consider a second Church.

(Second) The grounds upon which Church life is to be established and/or evaluated need themselves to be defended. Are those grounds to be the values of a secular and avaricious society? Of academic sociology? Or shall their ground be in Scripture and the immediate headship of Christ? In the final sense of things, the freedom retained by the continuing Congregational Churches can only be validated, indeed justified, by its strain against those forces that would subvert its radical loyalty, its obedience to the living and redeeming Lord.

There can be no rationalization that permits the ekklesia, the called out of the world, to evaluate its holy authenticity by the standards of the world from which it is called. As I have suggested, "When we live our ecclesiology, when we are intentionally charismatic, when we are Christ-lead, we are the way that has the greatest potential for being open to what God has in mind" (Hall 16).

(Third) I periodically receive stockholder notices of annual corporate meetings where Boards of Directors are to be elected and perhaps some other business transacted, though not much. Too often our participatory level in the Church is of a similar magnitude. We show up for the Annual Meeting to elect those who will, actually, be the Church for the coming year. The validation of our life as Christian communities according the New Testament pattern demands greater commitment and participation. Our opportunity to be parts of the body of Christ, not just "virtually" but actually, demands our active ownership and work in the Church.

It is the gathered saints, constantly following Christ's lead, that give us the capacity to respond to the world around us without cumbersome mechanism and bureaucracies. It was with that in mind that Washington Gladden wrote, "it is the glory of our Congregational system that it is so flexible, free from the wrappings of ecclesiasticism, that it feels these quickening divine influences sooner than some other systems do and responds to them more promptly" (28).

(Fourth) As ministers, lay-people, and as a denomination we need to both recognize that we are a denomination of mostly small and middle-sized Churches; and celebrate, develop and exploit that reality. We should encourage the awareness that Pastors called to modestly sized Congregational Churches are called to actual Churches in the actual world—not way stations *en route* to a "real" Church.

(Fifth) Each Church will need to revisit the basic understandings as it moves forward. Our goals and objectives, while being responsive to contemporary needs, must also be consistent with our way of being Church.

(Sixth) We need, as a fellowship of Churches, to work together on creative ways to finance our way of Church life in the twenty-first century.

### **Finally**

Gaius Glenn Atkins & Frederick L. Fagley in 1942 observe that

Dr. Bacon said that the study of the Cambridge Platform was of interest primarily because it showed how little the churches had departed from the principles of their fathers in the 200 years that had elapsed since its adoption. It should be noted that the churches have changed very little in principles and methods in the years since 1865" (289).

It remains true in the year 2000 that the essential character of a Congregational Church is consistent with the historic realities on American soil and with the core of the practices of the New Testament Church. "So great a cloud of witnesses" should give us pause before we criticize or bemoan who we are. I close with these additional words from Peter Taylor Forsyth:

[...] the test to which Congregationalism is being exposed does not concern its power to show a fine spirituality, or a keen philanthropy, or a zeal for social reform. But it is the question whether it is a capable trustee for God and man of anything so searching, critical, and revolutionary, so creative, universal, and eternal as the Gospel committed to the Church in the New Testament is. (*Faith, Freedom*, 253).

### **Works Consulted**

Atkins, Gaius Glenn and Fredrick L. Fagley. *History of American Congregationalism*. Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1942

Boston Platform. See *The Government and Communion Practiced by the Congregational Churches in the United States of America*

Butman, Harry R. "The Biblical Basis of Congregationalism." *The Congregational Way Series*. Ed. David L. Gray. n.p.: National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, n.d.

---. "The Conies Are a Feeble Folk." *Congregational Journal*, Vol. 7., No. 3. Hollywood: Hollywood Congregational Center for Study and Service, April, 1982

Dale, R. W. *Manual of Congregational Principles*. London: Congregational Union of England and Wales, 1920

Dexter, Henry Martyn. *The Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years as Seen in Its Literature* .(1880) New York: Burt Franklin 1970

- . *Congregationalism: What it is; Whence it is; How it works; etc.* Boston: Noyes, Holmes, and Company, 1871. <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/books/search.html>
- . *A Hand-Book of Congregationalism.* Boston: Congregational Publishing Society, 1880.
- Fisher, David. "Blest Be the Tie That Binds." *A Past with a Future*. Ed. Steven A. Peay. [Oak Creek, WI]: The Congregational Press, 1998
- Forsyth, Peter Taylor. *Faith, Freedom, and the Future* (1912). Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996
- . *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (c.1907). Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham
- . *The Principle of Authority.* New York: Hodder and Stoughton, n.d.
- . *A Sense of the Holy* (1899). Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996
- . *The Work of Christ* (1910). Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996
- Fry, C. George and Jon Paul Fry. "Thomas Hooker." *Congregational Journal*, Vol. 5., No.12. Hollywood: Hollywood Congregational Center for Study and Service, January, 1980
- Gierke, Dewey E. "Faith, Freedom, and the Future." *A Past with a Future*. Ed. Steven A. Peay. [Oak Creek, WI]: The Congregational Press, 1998
- Gladden, Washington. "Is It a Creed-Bound System?" *The Journal of the Washington Gladden Society*. Vol. I, No. II, December, 1986 (no publication data)
- Government and Communion Practiced by the Congregational Churches in the United States of America, The.* (The Boston Platform). Boston: Congregational Publishing Society, 1872. Photographically reproduced, Milwaukee: National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, 1967
- Gray, Henry David. "The Congregational Way." *Congregational Journal*, Vol. 5., No. 3. Hollywood: Hollywood Congregational Center for Study and Service, April, 1980
- . "The Experience of the Holy Spirit." *Congregational Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1. Hollywood: Hollywood Congregational Center for Study and Service, September, 1976
- . "The Nature and Purpose of Free Churches." *Congregational Journal*, Vol. 3., No. 3. Hollywood: Hollywood Congregational Center for Study and Service, April 1978
- Hall, Lloyd M. Jr.. "Congregational, but Not Church." To be published in *Proceedings of the Wisconsin Congregational Theological Society*, Vol. 2. n.p.: Wisconsin Congregational Association, 2000. Also <http://www.congregational.net> (Page numbers from the original WCTS paper)
- Heads of Agreement* contained in General Association of Connecticut, *The Ancient Platforms of the Congregational Churches etc.* Hartford: Edwin Hunt, 1845
- Johnson, Edward. "Wonder-Working Providence of Sion's Savior." (1654) *The American Puritans, Their Prose and Poetry*, Ed. Perry Miller. New York: Columbia University Press, 1956
- Kohl, Manfred Waldemar. *Congregationalism in America.* Oak Creek, WI: The Congregational Press, 1977
- Mead, Loren B. *Transforming Congregations for the Future.* n.p.: The Alban Institute, 1994

- Meek, Fredrick M. "This Is the Church." *Congregational Journal*, Vol. 8., No. 3. Hollywood: Hollywood Congregational Center for Study and Service, April, 1983
- Pappas, Anthony and Scott Planting. *Mission: The Small Church Reaches Out*. Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1993.
- Peay, Steven A. "Congregationalism: a Christocentric and Charismatic Movement." To be published in *Proceedings of the Wisconsin Congregational Theological Society*, Vol. 2. n.p.: Wisconsin Congregational Association, 2000. Also <http://www.congregational.net> (Page numbers from the original WCTS paper)
- . "Saints By Calling: An Approach to Congregational Ecclesiology." *A Past with a Future*. Ed. Steven A. Peay. [Oak Creek, WI]: The Congregational Press, 1998
- . "We Covenant with the Lord and One with Another." *Proceedings of the Wisconsin Congregational Theological Society*, Vol. 1. n.p.: Wisconsin Congregational Association, 1998. Also <http://www.congregational.net>
- Rouner, Arthur A., Jr. *The Congregational Way of Life*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1960
- Sell, Alan P.F. *Saints: Visible, Orderly & Catholic*. Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1986
- Travell, John C. *The Congregational Contribution*. Oak Creek: The National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, (1982)
- VonRohr, John. *The Shaping of American Congregationalism, 1620-1957*. Cleveland OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1992
- Walker, Williston. *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*. (1893) Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1960
- Wise, John. "Vindication of the Government of New England Churches." (1717) *The American Puritans, Their Prose and Poetry*. Ed. Perry Miller. New York: Columbia University Press, 1956

***Beyond 'Congregationalism C': A Study of Ecclesiological Evolution***  
***A Paper Presented to the Derry, New Hampshire Symposium:***  
***"Are We Who We Say We Are"***  
***November 2000***

by  
***The Reverend Steven A. Peay, Ph.D.***  
***Minister, Heritage Congregational Christian Church, Madison, Wisconsin***

## **Introduction**

"...the Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his holy Word." Pastor Robinson's words to the Pilgrims departing Leyden have become something of a mantra for Congregationalists. The thought of "more light" is what will be looked to in the following study, since it has seemingly been the fate of Congregationalism to repeatedly sail between the Scylla of Independency and the Charybdis of Presbyterianism with more light needed to chart the way. This dangerous course was noted by the late Reverend Dr. Harry Stubbs who said in 1969, "Fifteen years ago 90% of Congregational churches in this country allowed themselves to be Presbyterianized. Now, if the other 10% allow themselves to be seduced by Independency, *there will be no Congregational churches left.*"<sup>10</sup>

What has been attempted here is a study in the evolution of Congregational ecclesiology from roughly the middle of the nineteenth century to the present. Thus, it will examine Congregationalism A, B, and C, as three discrete models of both ecclesiology and polity. This study also offers a possible new permutation of the classical Congregational ecclesiology and polity for the immediate future. It is hoped that this work will offer a bit more light.

## **Congregationalism A**

Douglas Horton first used the term Congregationalism A in an address to the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches in June 1950. Congregationalism A was used as a descriptor for the polity practiced at that time by Congregational Christian Churches. The practice rested upon the autonomy of the local churches and the associational relationship of those churches at the regional (association), state (conference), and national (general council) level. Horton's description of A says, "...according to Congregationalism A the organs like the General Council, the Conferences, and the Associations are controlled by the local churches. . . ." <sup>11</sup> Congregationalism A, it can be said, is representative of classical Congregational church order.

Congregationalism A, though not denominated as such, was demonstrated in 1954 by way of historic documents and actual usage by the Committee on Free Church Polity and Unity. The committee described a Congregational Church as follows:

A Congregational Christian church originates as a body of believers in a particular Christian community. It writes or chooses its own statement of purpose, belief, covenant or creed, adopts its own constitution, or other governing rules, and is subject to no external ecclesiastical authority for the substance of them. In practice there is often consultation with representative Congregational Christian individuals or organizations. Provisions for extending fellowship to a church by an association vary, but in no instance do they or can they prevent a church from governing itself according to its own desires. "Recognition" is recognition of a church that already exists; it is not the "creating" or "constituting" of a church which had no prior existence. But recognition by other Congregational Christian churches is a prerequisite of denominational standing.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Harry Stubbs "On Recovering the Genius of Classical Church Order" The Proceedings of the Wisconsin Congregational Theological Society Vol. I, August 1999, p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> Douglas Horton, "Of Equability and Perseverance in Well Doing" Address to the General Council, Minutes of the Tenth Regular Meeting, Cleveland, Ohio June 22-26, 1950, p. 65.

<sup>12</sup> "The Report of a Study by the Committee on Free Church Polity and Unity to the General Council of the

The foregoing description is consonant with the historic Congregational understanding of the completeness and autonomy of the particular, gathered church under the headship of Christ.

The traditional understanding of the church also sees the local, or particular, church as the only true expression of the church. One can speak of, or profess belief in, the "communion of saints" or the "catholic church," but this does not imply the reality of the church. William Ames related this position in his Marrow of Theology, a text which would have a formative influence on the development of American Congregationalism. Ames wrote:

6. Such a congregation or particular church is a society of believers joined together in a special bond for the continual exercise of the communion of saints among themselves.

7. It is a society of believers because the same thing makes a church visible in profession which in its inward and real nature makes it a mystical church, namely, faith.

14. Believers do not make a particular church, even though by chance many may meet and live together in the same place, unless they are joined together by a special bond among themselves. Otherwise, any one church would often be dissolved into many, and many also merged into one.

15. This bond is a covenant, expressed or implicit, by which believers bind themselves individually perform all those duties toward God and toward one another which relate to the purpose [*ratio*] of the church and its edification.

21. No sudden coming together and exercise of holy communion suffices to make a church unless there is also that continuity, at least in intention, which gives the body and its members a certain spiritual polity.<sup>13</sup>

No other visible body, save one joined in covenant, can truly be considered a church in the classical Congregational understanding of ecclesiology.

The reality that the gathered, particular church is the only valid ecclesial expression does not preclude the 'communion of saints.' Rather, it encourages the fellowship of these churches. In fact, the only means by which a church may come to be denominated "Congregational" is by the mutual recognition of the sister churches. While A. Hastings Ross notes that fellowship is not the sole property of Congregational polity, he nonetheless declares it the means by which a Congregational Church ceases to be a purely 'independent' church.

2. These independent churches, sustaining the same relation to the indivisible kingdom of heaven, stand in the closest relation to one another in fellowship, a fraternity or brotherhood, with obligations and duties that bind them into associations of communion, assistance, cooperation. No church can live unto itself alone. The oneness of the kingdom constrains all useful modes of fellowship.

3. This fellowship may find expression in occasional councils of churches, to inquire and advise in matters of common concernment, or of church discipline and peace, or respecting any questions where light and advice may be needed.

4. But as fellowship is a constant force wider than advice, and should therefore have stated and systematic expression, the churches should meet statedly for consultation and cooperation, in bodies that should have and exercise no authority of coercion, but only the right of self-protection.

---

Congregational Christian Churches of the United States," June, 1954, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> William Ames Marrow of Theology John Dykstra Eusden, ed. and trans. (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1968), p. 179-80. Also cf. Robert Browne's "Book Which Sheweth. . . ." in Williston Walker The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969), p. 18-21, Henry Barrow's "A True Description. . ." in The Reformation of the Church: A Collection of Reformed and Puritan Documents, Iain H. Murray, ed. (Carlisle, Pa: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), p. 196-7, both of the foregoing clearly demonstrate the concept of the local church as the only visible expression of the 'church catholic.' The same position is also articulated in the 1648 Cambridge Platform, see Walker "The Cambridge Synod and Platform," p. 204 ff. and Steven A. Peay, "Visible Saints: An Approach to Congregational Ecclesiology" in A Past With a Future: Continuing Congregationalism into the Next Millennium Steven A. Peay, ed. (Oak Creek, WI: Congregational Press, 1998), p. 35 ff.

*{author's note: Ross then describes the various levels of fellowship at regional, state, and national levels.}*<sup>14</sup>

These organs of fellowship exist so that churches can truly be Congregational churches. Henry Martyn Dexter made it clear that it is only when a church is gathered by mutual covenant and then is "in fraternal relations with kindred organisms" is it a Congregational church.<sup>15</sup>

These organs of fellowship arose first out of the very nature of the covenant community as a Congregational church and its need to fellowship. This is what Dexter, and later Harry Stubbs, would reference as the "adelphity," or sisterhood, of the churches.<sup>16</sup> When the Cambridge Synod produced its *Platform* in 1648 it was to provide a framework for the churches to exercise their covenant communion one with another. This concern for fellowship and for the achievement of mutual work was to be accomplished through the working of the Ecclesiastical Council of the Vicinage.<sup>17</sup> As the Vicinage Council became less and less visible as a means of fellowship and service, various associations of church and individuals evolved. At each step of the evolution, which led to several layers of associational fellowship, culminating with the formation of the National Council in 1871, the primary concern was still the safeguarding of the local church as the only valid ecclesial articulation.<sup>18</sup>

So the association (including the Vicinage Council), state, and national structures were formed solely for the purpose of the fellowship of the local churches. It is clearly demonstrated in the Report of the Committee on Free Church Polity and Unity, especially in the section on Congregationalism in its practice, that fellowship structures came as the result of local churches extending themselves as covenant bodies into covenant relationship with each other. These structures, then, do not form 'the church' or serve to articulate it. The Committee's Report sums up very nicely what appears to be classical Congregational order in praxis.

The Congregational Christian churches are distinguished by a unique combination of attributes. Basically, these churches accept the will of God made known in Christ as their sole authority and refuse to give spiritual allegiance to any human agency at all. The local church is a company of Christ-followers held together by a covenant agreement and governed solely by itself. All wider agencies gain their power to act by winning the support of the local churches for common causes, on the basis of voluntary assumption of responsibility in a purposeful fellowship.

They are further distinguished by the absence of external compulsions, either of the local church on its members or of wider bodies on the local church, by the adoption of positive statements of faith or purpose rather than creedal tests of membership, by the "gathered" rather than the territorial nature of the local church, by historic rootage in the traditions of the Congregational Christian churches, and by an over-arching faith that God "has yet more truth and light to break forth from his holy Word." Our churches seek to express their adventurous and pioneering Christian faith by ever continuing revisions of such statements as the 1913 Kansas City Statement of Faith. We are a voluntary fellowship of a responsible nature.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> A. Hastings Ross *The Church Kingdom: Lectures on Congregationalism* (Chicago: Congregational Sunday School and Publishing Society, 1887), p. 80-81. See also Henry Martyn Dexter *The Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years, As Seen In Its Literature* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1879), p. 523 where Dexter analyses the evolution of Congregational polity in terms of fellowship. Both Ross and Dexter reflect the position taken by John Owen in *The Nature of A Gospel Church*, p. 198-9.

<sup>15</sup> Dexter, p. 696.

<sup>16</sup> Dexter *A Handbook of Congregationalism*, p. 65 as quoted in Harry Stubbs "On Recovering the Genius of Classical Church Order" *The Proceedings of the Wisconsin Congregational Theological Society* Vol. I, August 1999, p. 45.

<sup>17</sup> For the best contemporary explications on the role and use of the Vicinage Council see Lloyd M. Hall, Jr. "Advice Sincerely Sought and Taken: The Vicinage Council and Ordination," *A Past With A Future*, p. 100-110 and his "Especially for Light and Peace: The Usefulness of Inter-Church Councils in the Resolution of Conflict," seminar presented at the Hartford, CT. meeting of the NACCC, June 28, 1999.

<sup>18</sup> Gaius Glenn Atkins and Frederick L. Fagley *History of American Congregationalism* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1942), p. 182ff, nb p. 201.

<sup>19</sup> Report, p.57.

## Congregationalism B

Douglas Horton's articulation of Congregationalism B struck at the foundational principal of the Congregational Way, namely, that only the particular, covenanted church is a valid ecclesial expression.<sup>20</sup> Horton based his theory on the 'freedom' of the organs of fellowship to act and to constitute themselves. In this way, he opined:

At one all-important point, however, according to Congregationalism B, organizations like the General Council are *like* the local churches of Congregationalism. *They are free.* They are controlled by their own members and by nobody outside their membership. They and they alone can say who shall be their members and how they shall be elected . . . the constitutions of these organs are their own. They are not merely the articles of agreement under which their own members work together to give aid, advice, and fellowship to the local churches – and the Associations, the Conferences, the Mission Boards, the colleges, and the other groups within the denominational framework.<sup>21</sup>

In essence, Horton moves from the democracy of the covenanted churches to a form of republicanism in which each level may function autonomously.

He posits a freedom of action and existence never envisioned by the architects of Congregationalism A, where organs of fellowship and mutual service have a life of their own and are valid expressions of the church. Horton wrote, "According to this view the independency of the local churches does not *blight* the independency of Association, Conference, Council, Board, College, or any of the other denominational units."<sup>22</sup> The particular gathered church becomes simply a part of, in Horton's words, "a spiritual solar system," where no body is really answerable to another. He says,

Each one of these controls itself under Christ through its own members. None are regarded as being agents of the others . . . between the various bodies in this kind of Congregationalism there is no master-servant relationship: it is that of friend and friend. The organs of fellowship serve the local churches not because they must but because they may, and it in the same spirit the local churches contribute to the organs of fellowship.<sup>23</sup>

Horton makes the leap to this new form of Congregationalism – which looks a great deal like Presbyterianism with different names – based upon a new concept of Congregational ecclesiology. No longer is *the church* the particular body of covenanted believers; it is now all the levels of ecclesiastical fellowship and service functioning in a co-equal manner. He supports his thesis with the traditional Matthean text. In fact, in the one paragraph summary of Congregational ecclesiology he offers, he beautifully articulates the classical understanding:

What is it that gives the local church its authority? What is the rock upon which it is founded? A greater than Peter is here. The answer to the question is well given in the message from the International Congregational Council to the churches of the world: "As Congregationalists we base our churchmanship upon the amazing assurance that 'where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I in the midst of them.'" That is the heart of it, P. T. Forsyth called the local church the outcrop of the Church Catholic in a particular place. In that local church is everything that is in the greater Church, because Christ is there – and Christ is all-in-all. This is the beginning of all authority in the Church, a worshipping community in one spot inquiring for the will

---

<sup>20</sup> Charles Sumner Nash would refer to this as "essential Congregationalism": "Essential Congregationalism resides in the local church. If we try to state our polity in a single sentence, we must affirm the native right of individual Christians to organize themselves into a church, sovereign in private life and uniting with other sovereign churches in voluntary forms of fellowship and work. It is in the local church not as an isolated and self-sufficient integer, but as a social being and member of a body, that we find the essence of our Congregational order." in Congregational Administration (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1909), p. 73.

<sup>21</sup> Horton, p. 66, emphases his.

<sup>22</sup> Horton, p. 67, emphasis mine.

<sup>23</sup> Horton, p. 68.

of God with Christ in its midst. Here lies the ageless power, here lies the historical inevitability of Congregationalism.<sup>24</sup>

It is so unfortunate that Dr. Horton did not simply stop there. What follows is what created the great difficulty.

In the next paragraph he tries to apply the "where two or three are gathered" to the meetings of the organs of fellowship. At this point he ignores the classical Congregational distinction articulated by Ames, Owen, Cambridge, Savoy, Dexter, Ross, Barton and Forsyth of the fundamental distinction between the Church Catholic as a spiritual, and thus invisible, body encompassing all believers in all times and places, and the concrete, visible church of gathered, covenanted saints. At this moment Congregationalism B becomes another term for Presbyterianism, since classical Congregationalism sees no valid expression of ecclesial identity apart from the local church.

Horton's Congregationalism B provided the theological rationale to challenge the initial decision in the Cadman case, to ignore the findings of the Committee on Free Church Polity and Unity, and to pursue the essential dissolution of the Congregational Way.

### **Congregationalism C**

When it became clear that the merger movement was going to proceed, those dedicated to the continuation of Congregational polity assembled first at the Fort Shelby Hotel in Detroit, Michigan (1955) and then at the First Congregational Church of Wauwatosa, Wisconsin (1956) to form what became the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. While it was clearly the intention of these dedicated people to preserve the classical way of the Congregational Churches, the result of their effort was yet a third way, Congregationalism C, if you will.

Part of the difficulty, or so it seems, is that the structure of the NACCC was devised within the extant structure of the Congregational Christian Churches.<sup>25</sup> Its design was as an association of churches to promote the Way as it then existed. Those present at the Wauwatosa meeting were warned by Reverend Malcolm Burton that setting up parallel ecclesiastical machinery would jeopardize future lawsuits. Reverend Harry Johnson, the first executive secretary, supported Burton by pointing out that by such action the 'Continuists' would lose "our legal status as Congregationalists" and would forfeit "all possibility of our own legal defense."<sup>26</sup> However, when the merger proceeded and the United Church of Christ was formed, there was no accommodation of the polity structures into the already extant NACCC.

Where Congregationalism B extended fellowship to the point that it destroyed the distinctive Congregational understanding of local church autonomy, Congregationalism C has extended the freedom of the local church to the point of damaging the necessary fellowship implicit in the Congregational tradition. This position, no doubt a reaction to the 'presbyterianizing' tendencies of the United Church, assumes both faith and fellowship, but doesn't articulate them or provide venues for their nurture or accomplishment, all because the dominant operative understanding has become the freedom of the local church. The first paragraph of the Preamble to the Articles of Association makes this emphasis very plain:

Whereas Churches of the congregational order have historically held to certain truths, chief among which are the freedom of the Christian man maintained at all costs and all hazards; the right of the local Church to self-government in all matters temporal and spiritual, because Christ's word that where two or three are gathered together in His name He is in their midst; the

---

<sup>24</sup> Horton, p. 70.

<sup>25</sup> cf Arvel M. Steece A Thoroughfare for Freedom (Oak Creek, WI: Congregational Press, 1993), p. 25-30. Also see, Alan B. Peabody, "A Study of the Controversy in Congregationalism Over Merger with the Evangelical and Reformed Church," D.S.S. diss. Syracuse University, 1964, pp. 534-5.

<sup>26</sup> Peabody, p. 598. Peabody cites two sources for his construction of the account: Rev. Clarence M. Kilde, "Continuing Congregationalists Convene," Advance, CXVIII (Nov. 30, 1956), 15f; Kilde, "'Continuing' Hope Struggles Ahead," Christian Century, LXXIII (Nov. 14, 1956) 1340-1342. It should be noted that both of these accounts were thought to carry a "belittling tone," cf. Peabody, pp. 598-99.

fellowship of Churches in the spirit of love without compulsion or restraint and free from the bondage of creed and ecclesiastical control. . . .<sup>27</sup>

This extreme emphasis upon freedom lends itself more to an Independent ecclesiology, rather than that of classical Congregationalism. The late Reverend Dr. Harry Stubbs articulated this tendency in a paper given at Toledo, Ohio in 1969. He wrote:

To go back to my original metaphor, if we are amnesic about who we are, it is not due to the fact that we confuse ourselves with Presbyterians. It is, rather, due to the fact that we do not sufficiently distinguish between Congregationalism and Independency. The truth of the matter is that in our declarations, policy statement and practices we could hardly more thoroughly succeed in confusing the two. I asseverate that we presently have nothing in the Articles of Association of the National Association that defines Congregational Churches over against Independent churches . . . we assume a definition rather enunciate one.<sup>28</sup>

Dr. Stubbs would be pleased to see that definition of a Congregational Christian Church is now supplied, but the operative phrase "in fellowship with sister Congregational Christian Churches" (Article III, 1.a) is nowhere explicated. In short, now we talk about the fellowship but do not provide all the available means, or the incentive, for the fellowship to take place.

The two areas where Congregationalism C's shortcomings become most glaring are in the areas of state/regional associations and the question of ministerial standing, both are directly related. Local fellowships and Associations are listed in the NACCC *Yearbook* "for informational purposes," but there is no organizational tie to the NACCC. Such a structure leaves out an important means for local fellowship. It further makes the whole question of ministerial standing problematic, since it returns the locus of standing to local churches, which is a deviation from classical Congregational understanding.<sup>29</sup> Stubbs summed up the difficulties of Congregationalism C when he wrote:

I think we have constructed a marvelous chassis in the National Association. However, the National Association is not an ecclesiastical body. It is not in the business of legitimating or authenticating either Congregational Churches or Congregational ministers. All it can do for Congregational ministers is to record their standing that has been achieved by some prior process or indicate the lack of same. The only instrument for the legitimation of church or minister is an ecclesiastical body, and the only authentic ecclesiastical body possible in Congregational ecclesiology is the ecclesiastical council of either local association or vicinage. The truth of this and the necessity for it are two things we must learn before it is too late for the churches of the National Association.<sup>30</sup>

### **Beyond Congregationalism C**

The task before 'continuing Congregationalists' is not the restoration of Congregationalism A; quite simply, one can't recreate that ecclesiological experience any more than one can reproduce the church of the New Testament. We can't and we shouldn't because the church, like its doctrine, is a living, growing organism. The task at hand is to move beyond these models of church life in order to offer a viable, responsive, authentic form of the church for the new millennium. As Stubbs said,

On this continent, through almost three hundred fifty years the Congregational churches have carried on their individual and collective lives within an evolving Church Order living in the context

---

<sup>27</sup> Preamble, Articles of Association of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches in the United States in the *Yearbook* (Oak Creek, WI: Congregational Press, 2000), p. 223.

<sup>28</sup> Stubbs, p. 43-4.

<sup>29</sup> cf. Steven A. Peay "And his gifts were that some should be . . . pastors and teachers: A Consideration of the Ministerial Office and 'Standing' in Light of Congregational Ecclesiology," unpublished paper presented to the Wisconsin Congregational Theological Society, September, 1999.

<sup>30</sup> Stubbs, p. 52.

of an evolving civil order. The nature of this Church Order has not been identical from one decade or one century to the next – nor, for that matter, from one place to another.<sup>31</sup>

The emphasis, however, must be on the authenticity of the formulation. The church, again, like doctrine, should not grow into something that it is not, but into the ever-increasing fullness and expression of what it is: Christ's Body. Thus, the relational principle of covenant church life comes fully into play. As we have seen, the hallmark of Congregational ecclesiology and polity is the notion of the completeness and autonomy of the local church. This fellowship among the churches is what provides the constitutive element of the Congregational understanding of both unity and catholicity.

While the hallmark of Congregational ecclesiology and polity is the notion of the autonomy and completeness of the local church under Christ, it is to be understood that this in no way negates the catholicity or oneness of the 'great' or Catholic church. R.W. Dale offers a description of the New Testament church which applies directly to Congregational ecclesiology.

.... these are descriptions of the Holy Catholic Church, and not of separate communities of Christians. For, according to the spirit and idiom of apostolic thought, what is affirmed of the universal Church appears to be affirmed of every organized assembly of Christian men. It is not the manner of the apostles to address any particular Church as though it were a fraction of a larger community. The Church at Corinth is not a mere member of that "one Body" into which all Christians are "baptized" by the one Spirit; it is itself the "Body of Christ." The whole is present in every part.<sup>32</sup>

Each particular church embodies the wholeness of the church, since the body of Christ is never dismembered. Does this catholic completeness of the particular church mitigate against the broader fellowship of the churches? The Elders and Messengers assembled the Bay Colony in 1662 thought not. Cotton Mather cites their response in the 'synodicon' section of his Magnalia Christi Americana.

"1. Every church or particular congregation of visible saints in gospel-order, being furnished with a presbytery, at least with a teaching elder, and walking together in truth and peace, hath received from the Lord Jesus full power and authority ecclesiastical within itself, regularly to administer all the ordinances of Christ, and is not under any other ecclesiastical jurisdiction whatsoever. For to such a church Christ hath 'given the kingdom of heaven, that what they bind or loose on earth, shall be bound or loosed in heaven,' (Mat xvi.19 and xviii.17). Elders are 'ordained in every church,' (Acts xiv. 23; Tit. i. 5) and are therein authorised officially to administer in the word, prayer, sacraments and censures(Mat. Xxviii.19, 20; Acts vi. 4; I Cor iv. 1, and v. 4, 12; Acts xx. 28; I Tim v.17 and iii. 5) The reprovng of the church of Corinth and of the Asian churches severally, imports they had power each of them within themselves to reform the abuses that were amongst them (2 Cor. v; Rev ii. 14, 20). Hence it follows that consociation of churches is not to hinder the exercise of this power; but by counsel from the word of God to direct and strengthen the same upon all just occasions.

2. The churches of Christ do stand in a sisterly relation each to other (Cant viii.8) being united in the same faith and order, (Eph iv. 5; Col ii. 5). To walk by the same rule, (Phil iii.16) In the exercise of the same ordinances for the same end, (Eph iv. 11, 12, 13; 1 Cor xvi 1) under one and the same political head, the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph i. 22, 23 and iv. 5; Rev ii.1) which union infers a communion suitable thereunto.<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, the completeness of the local church is not compromised by the communion of the churches and vice versa. The ministerial office, then, relates directly to both since it affects the Body itself. We simply cannot say that we live, as Christian communities, independent of one another. Nor can we

---

<sup>31</sup> Stubbs, p. 43, on this point Stubbs echoes the thought of Dexter toward then end of his Congregationalism.

<sup>32</sup> R.W. Dale, The Idea of the Church in Relation to Modern Congregationalism (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1871), p. 396.

<sup>33</sup> Cotton Mather, Magnalia Christi Americana, or the Ecclesiastical History of New England, From Its First Planting in the Year 1620, unto the Year of Our Lord 1698, vol. II, book five (Hartford: Silus Andrus & Son, 1853), p. 299-300.

say that the ministry of any particular church is of no concern to the larger fellowship of churches. This issue was argued very forcefully before the National Council of Congregational Churches at Boston in 1865. The Reverend Dr. Leonard Bacon stated that not only was the autonomy and completeness of the local churches one of the distinguishing marks of the Congregational Way, but also the fellowship of the churches. He said:

Do we believe in the importance of the communion of the churches one with another, as that idea has been developed and applied in the experience of the two hundred and seventeen years that have elapsed since the Cambridge platform was formed? Do we believe in it? I do, for one; and I believe in it so firmly that I will have nothing to do. . . .with any denomination of Congregationalists in which that principle of communion of churches one with another, in all matters of common interest, is not recognized and acknowledged. Now how do our brethren in England ordain their ministers? According to my understanding of it, a church elects its pastor and ordains him, and it is nobody's business who he is or what he is. According to our principle, the church elects its pastor and ordains him and it is the business of all the churches who he is and what he is; and the church that ordains him is responsible to all the churches to give an account whom it is that they elect to that office, and of his ordination – what he is, what theology he holds, what faith, what principles of order — what qualifications he has by nature, by education, and by the grace of God for the performance of that duty; and if a church falling back on its reserved rights, its extreme powers, says: "We will have nothing to do with other churches, we will elect whom we please to be our minister, and we will turn him away when we please," we say, "Very well, only you don't ride in our troop, that's all."<sup>34</sup>

The operative term here is the *communion* of the churches. Congregationalism D, if you will, is made operative by the relational nature of the church. As local churches are brought into being by individuals entering into covenant relationship, so too are the churches brought into communion. The relationship, however, must be cyclic rather than hierarchical, since each local church fully incarnates the reality of the church universal.<sup>35</sup>

The cyclic relationship of the churches reaches first to the churches of the vicinity or region for fellowship. Here the churches would serve each other for the purpose of authenticating themselves and the clergy called to serve them. The regional association would also provide a venue for the 'self-care' needed by churches, as well as by their ministers. The second cycle of relationship would be to the churches in their regional associations across the country in a national association. This cycle of fellowship would allow for the accomplishment of tasks or services achievable only by cooperation in a larger body. Within this proposal, in contradistinction to the current approach, the regional associations are included in the organizational structure.

We use the cyclic understanding based upon Henry Martyn Dexter's notion of Congregational polity as an ellipse with two foci: the independence of the local church and the mutual friendship and helpful co-working of all local churches. True Congregational church life must cycle between the two foci, drawing the covenanted believers that constitute it into ever closer relationship. This cyclical understanding does not see the regional or national associations as expressions of church. Rather, they are simply venues for the sharing of fellowship and mutual service. These associational organizations exist only to enable the articulation of the completeness and autonomy of the gathered, covenanted community of faith.

## Conclusion

---

<sup>34</sup> Leonard Bacon, "Report of the Committee on Church Polity" in Debates and Proceedings of the National Council of Congregational Churches Held at Boston, Mass., June 14-24, 1865 (Boston: American Congregational Association, 1866), p. 452.

<sup>35</sup> cf Miroslav Volf After Our Likeness: The Church in the Image of the Trinity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p 214-19, Volf notes the 'perichoretic' relationship which exists in both intra and inter church relationships, a relationship which he implies binds these bodies ever closer in a sense of oneness.

Congregationalism is an organic approach to church life and order. Its emphasis upon relationship, first to Christ, then to those who seek to join together in following him, and then to others so gathered, lends itself to the desperate search for community and stability in this new century. For that community to become evident and viable the necessary freedom must be accompanied by fellowship. As we have seen, Congregationalism A offered this, served well, but its time is now past. Congregationalism B was/is an exercise in the deforming of the Congregational Way. Congregationalism C has been a valid attempt to continue the Way, but has systemic shortcomings that make it less and less a viable approach. This writer, then, firmly believes that a fresh approach to Congregational church order – with none of the institutional overtones overt in B and often implicit in C – can bring a fresh vitality to the Way of being Christ-followers in search of yet more light and truth.

“Communal Spirituality and the Congregational Way”  
06/15/2000

## **The Spirituality of the Covenant**

A paper by Shawn P. Stapleton, CFTS Fellow

Submitted for consideration for the Congregational Symposium  
“Are We Who We Say We Are?”  
To be held in Nov. 2000 in Derry, N.H.

Submitted June 19, 2000

## **Recapturing True Congregationalism Through Scriptural Devotion**

I must confess at the outset of this paper that I have not been in ministry but a fraction of the time as my colleagues. But I can say that I have been an observer of religion for some time now, and a student minister for the last two years. In that time, I have been greatly disturbed by the rampant individualism that I have seen in Christ's churches. I believe this individualism runs contrary to scripture, and I don't see it changing.

I see it especially pronounced in our Congregational churches, which seems a great and tragic irony to me. I hear our people say that one of the blessings of Congregationalism is that “we can believe what we want.” I see our churches flying only the flag of freedom and, as a result, becoming functional independents. That is not what I understand Congregationalism to be. Instead, I understand the Congregational Way to be a Way of covenant, in which believers are bound to each other in the locally gathered church. However, it doesn't stop there. The covenant also binds churches to each other, and the entire body of believers to God. The way of the covenant is a way of unity.

In light of these assertions, I believe that we must renew a biblically based spirituality in our churches; one that stresses the unity of the believers rather than their individualism.

### **A Scriptural Basis for Unity**

In Christ, God calls God's people into unity. Christ tells us that He is most present where believers gather together in His name (Matthew 18:20). In what many call “the *real* Lord's Prayer,” Jesus prays to the Father that His disciples “may be one, as we are one” (John 17:11 NRSV). But we are not made one with each other and with Christ without some participation on our part, for Christ says, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.” (Luke 8:21 NRSV).

In other words, it is clearly the desire of God for God's people to be joined in the Spirit so we may learn from each other and correct each other when necessary. In Paul's letter to the church in Rome, the apostle desires “that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.” (Romans 1:12). Jesus tells His disciples to point out to another member of the church when he or she sins against someone. (Matthew 18:25). However, He also tells them to forgive ceaselessly. (Matthew 18:22).

### **Covenant Theology Revisited**

The scriptural understanding of unity is best expressed in the covenant. Throughout the canon of scripture, God is presented as a God of covenant, meaning God makes either verbal or symbolic pacts with God's people. Scholars have held that the covenant found in scriptures is not simply a contractual agreement, but instead is a gift from God which binds believers to one another and, as a body, to God, with the Holy Spirit as the binding element.<sup>1</sup>

The covenant was the driving force behind the early Christian church and the force that the English Puritans sought to recapture after the Elizabethan Compromise of 1559. In response to the persecution they felt in England, and what they saw as the continued (though somewhat softened) "popery" of the queen's church, the Puritans sought to recapture the practices of the early church and formulate their meetings around the concept of covenant, rather than around an institutionalized church.

Robert Browne, writing in Holland in 1582, was among the first to articulate the covenantal nature of the Congregational Way. Browne wrote, "Christians are a company or number of believers, which by a willing covenant made with their God, are under the government of God and Christ, and keep His Laws in *one Holy Communion*."<sup>2</sup> The church becomes the church, Browne wrote, first by a covenant made by God, secondly by a covenant made by the community of believers, and third by "using the sacrament of Baptism to seal those conditions, and covenants."<sup>3</sup>

The Puritans asserted that the church is made up of a community of believers, called together by God but bound together and set apart by the covenant. It is the covenant of God that binds believers together, not as a collection of individuals seeking personal fulfillment, but instead as part of the body of Christ.

But this understanding of covenant does not just apply to the individual believers. We also understand that to apply to each locally gathered church. Those gathered in Cambridge in 1646 called for churches to internally unite in Christ, but also to unite one church to another in the same divine covenant. Framers of the Cambridge Platform compare the churches to the apostles, saying the churches, like the apostles, are bound together in Christ and therefore in covenant. That is to say, the Congregational understanding of covenant transcends the walls of the meetinghouse and is an organic union that unites individual believers as the locally gathered church and unites gathered churches as the body of Christ. It should be said here that I see no evidence of this applying only to Congregationalists. We are called as a covenant people to be united in Christ with all denominations, including the United Church of Christ. St. Paul wrote, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the Spirit we are all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we are all made to drink of one Spirit." (1 Cor. 12:12-13 NRSV).

---

<sup>1</sup> George E. Memdenhall, "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition" in The Biblical Archeologist Reader vol. III, p. 52., as quoted in Peay, *We Covenant With the Lord*, 2-3.

<sup>2</sup> William Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1991), 19 (spellings updated and emphasis added).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

## **The Ramifications of Scriptural Unity on Congregationalism**

I believe too often our churches of today – churches of any denomination, but especially our Congregational churches – are plagued by a narcissistic individuality, in which our congregants are seeking a deeper relationship with God but are ignoring their contribution to the covenanted community of the church. We all see people who come to church occasionally on Sunday but in no way participate in the life of the church. Based solely on anecdotal evidence, I am forced to conclude that those folks make up a frighteningly large segment of our church population. As such, the church is not the church, but is instead some kind of social club.

That kind of individual attitude is inevitably reflected at the communal level. The Roozen Report states clearly that many of our member churches are ignoring their covenanted duty to be in active and intentional fellowship with neighboring Congregational churches. Relatively few churches are holding vicinage councils when calling a new minister or in times of strife, despite the admonitions of our forebears.<sup>4</sup> Where we have been in fellowship with sister churches, many of us have become too devoted to denominationalism, drawing lines in the sand where lines ought not to be drawn. What else can explain the fact that for the past 43 years we have shouted with bitter tones that we are not the United Church of Christ? Being a people of covenant means working to blur denominational boundaries, not etching them deeper.

As I see it, we are not one as God is one. We are not living as a covenanted people. We are not who we say we are.

### **A New Congregationalism**

I believe we must reorient ourselves away from the culture of individualism and toward a renewed understanding of what it means to be a people of the covenant. Congregational churches are uniquely suited to do so, since we are not restricted or hindered by ecclesial authority above the local church.

I think the movement begins from our pulpits and classrooms. It may seem too basic for some, but I believe the message of our churches has been twisted somewhat and has wandered away from Christ. We must again proclaim what St. Polycarp said, "Our Lord Jesus Christ is the Savior of our souls, the Governor of our bodies, and the shepherd of the catholic church throughout the world."<sup>5</sup> That does not mean that our faith stops with a one-on-one relationship with God! It means that we must recognize that our Lord Jesus is our shepherd, and that means we belong to a flock. Being a people of God means being of "one body and one Spirit." (Eph. 4:4).

---

<sup>4</sup> The Cambridge Platform calls specifically for such councils to be held in such instances.

<sup>5</sup> *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (c. 135, E) 1.39, David W. Bercott, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1998), 146.

Similarly, we must once again proclaim what it means to be a people of the covenant. We must again stress the communal aspect of the covenant and the responsibility of each member who owns the covenant. We must proclaim the necessity of a covenanted body to live in community, and not as a collection of individuals.

Another way to recapture that unity is through pastoral visitations, conducted both by clergy and laity. If our only time together is an hour on Sunday morning and perhaps a mid-week Bible study, how can we be one in Spirit? We must come together as God's people through caring non-emergency visits, where we can bare our souls to one another and keep each other in spiritual check. One of John Wesley's frequent questions for those he visited was, "How is it with your soul?" We should be asking the same questions of each other, and we should be doing so regularly. When one member of the body is hurting, the whole body hurts. God designed the physical body to heal itself when a part of the body is injured. The injured part does not heal itself. If the body were to ignore the injury, then the injury would never heal. Infection would set in, which results in more injury. Eventually the body dies.

So it is with the body of Christ. We must be ever vigilant for injured members of the body and must rush to their aid by praying with them and listening to them. We, as members of the body, must nurture the injured members back to health. As God designed the physical body, so God designed the spiritual body.

Consider for a moment what would happen if in fact our members felt as though they truly belonged to a covenanted body. Just as the rampant individualism has plagued our Way, so would the caring covenant-ism infect our Way. Churches would naturally reach out to other churches in the same way members reached out to members. Our churches would begin to feel the bond of covenant in ways not felt in 200 years or more. I believe positive results are inevitable when we live out the covenant in the way that God has designed.

## Conclusion

It's clear that I agree with author Kenneth Leech when he says much of modern spirituality is self-centered and individualistic. A truly biblical spirituality, however, is a social spirituality, Leech says.

To move from the intensely individualistic religion of our day to St. Paul's letters is to enter an entirely different realm. There is in fact very little in the New Testament letters about personal spiritual formation as such. The center of gravity is always the body, the solidarity; its spirituality is social. To be Christian, to be *en Christo*, is to be part of an organism, a new community, the extension of the Incarnation.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Leech, *Spirituality and Pastoral Care* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1989), 9.

I would never suggest that we abandon individual spirituality in order to focus solely on the communal. Neither would Leech. Instead, we must grow in Christ not for ourselves, but so we can better serve the body. Congregationalists are best poised to do that. Once we as individuals retrain ourselves to live in covenanted community, then we will begin to live as churches in community. We can even move beyond our denominational boundaries and live in covenant with the Presbyterians, Methodists, UCCs, and so on. There is no ecclesial authority standing in our way. Once the covenant concept is truly embraced and begins to infect us, we may even see a blurring of denominational lines and begin to see the one holy, catholic and apostolic church designed by Christ 2,000 years ago. Are we who we say we are? No, not yet – but it's not beyond our reach.

# Are We Who We Say We Are? A Dialogue

By David Nasgowitz  
Pastor, Big Woods Congregational Church  
Warrenville, Illinois

**CHIP:** Are we Congregationalists really who we say we are? Or, are we groups of individuals who occasionally only come together to assert our common belief in free and independent thinking?

**WINSLOW:** Maybe that's why some people call us: 'the Congressional Church.' Seriously though, I've heard and read a lot by Congregationalists about the 'autonomous local church.' They publicly pride themselves in a church that doesn't dictate what to believe. "You can have your beliefs. Let me have mine, even if we don't agree," they say.

**CHIP:** But is that all that the word "Congregational" really means: independence and think as you like? Why not call it the "Independent Christian" Church, or the "Individualist" church? Wouldn't that better describe who we are?

**WINDSLOW:** Maybe, but that's not good PR today. "Individualist" church or even "Independent Christian Church" doesn't have the ring of goodness that "Congregational" does. Besides, Congregational Christians do come together to do things together. They pool their resources for missions that a single person or a single church could not accomplish alone. They help each other in times of financial difficulty. They work together for an educated leadership. They assist with pastoral searches. They make themselves available to advise a local church for ordination or conflict resolution. They work together to provide literature for Christian education, spirituality, and evangelism. Isn't this the Congregationalism that we think we represent?

**CHIP:** We-e-ll, sort of. There still seems to be a lot of individualism in it – independents advising independents, aggregates pragmatically pooling resources to enhance the pride of individuals in the accomplishment of a great work. Where is the *esprit de corps*? Where is the common cause for which to live and die? Or, are we too suave for that?

**WINSLOW:** Does Congregationalism need some kind of élan to be authentic? Isn't it enough to come together when we need to come together, and give each other space the rest of the time? Some are for Bible study, others for social action, still others for spirituality. Does Congregationalism mean being all things to all people?

**CHIP:** Some seem to think so. People like to have a church as a kind of "insurance policy" – a resource community in times of personal crisis. When the crisis is over they return to their private lives. Some seek churches as a place to serve – a place to lead, a place to "do their thing>" Some seek churches for the celebration of important events in their lives: weddings, baptisms, confirmations, funerals, Christmas and Easter. Others seek churches for the Christian education of their children, a place of "good people" and "wholesome programs" to socialize, and evangelize their youth. All of these are temporary, and largely superficial. Few make the church a community of persons in a lifelong quest for the highest and the best in the Gospel of Christ.

**WINSLOW:** Maybe that's all we can expect of Congregationalism in this day and age. In this fast-paced world, most people have lots of temporary and superficial relationships. Few live in the same house all their life. Many change jobs and careers several times during their working years. Half of the marriages are not "til death do us part." How can we expect people to be any more committed to a Christian community than to anything else in their life?

**CHIP:** That's no excuse. Our mobility is not much different from the people moving west in the 1800's? Many of them saw the importance of establishing Christian communities on the frontier. They brought

their commitment to Christianity with them, and supported it wherever they found it. They founded Christian colleges and church associations for the “long haul.” Can we do any less in a society where children become killers, where drugs are popular escapes from reality, where terrorism is a common mode of political change?

**WINSLOW:** Now you’re preaching all the fun out of Congregationalism. People are better motivated by “feel good” carrots than by sticks of responsibility. As long as we’re doing fine, let the others work things out the best they can. Isn’t that a Congregationalism of “live and let live?”

**CHIP:** That’s just it. Today we’re connected more than ever before. New York and California broadcast their materialist values into our homes around the clock through television. Children are being introduced in school to the phantasmagoria of the World Wide Web. Investments are greatly impacted by events half-way around the world. Our soldiers, sailors, and marines are increasingly being dispersed for peace enforcement in trouble spots of Asia, Europe and Africa. A single computer hacker in Southeast Asia can upset business as usual around the world and whether we have a computer or not, we are effected. People can network with others for the same political and social aims – whether good or bad. A Christ-centered Congregationalism needs to influence it for good.

**WINSLOW:** Okay. How is Congregationalism any better able to do this than any other Christian group?

**CHIP:** There you go again, promoting separatism. We’re not in competition with other Christian. Congregationalists do not claim to be the only Christians on the planet. “Congregational” means being only part of the world-wide body of Christ. There are, to be sure, some advantages in the Congregational Way that I propose. Aside from devotion to seeking together the highest and best of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Congregationalists can be flexible. We are not bound by centuries of tradition as Roman Catholics seem to be. We can adapt to personal and local issues without a presbytery, or synod imposing rules of conduct and administration to determine a course of action, or a way of thinking. We can draw from any insight, any source of enhancement, and any effective strategy that does not contradict the Gospel of Christ. In short, we are free in Christ to work with any Christians any time, anywhere. We can baptize infants; we can dedicate infants. We can baptize by aspersion; we can baptize by immersion. We can affirm the Apostle’s Creed; we can not affirm the Apostle’s Creed. We can do all these things, so long as Jesus Christ is Lord. That means emulating Christ’s integrity, compassion and faith.

**WINSLOW:** All right. You made your point. Be more specific.

**CHIP:** It isn’t going to be easy. There are people out there who are quite willing to talk, so long as nothing concrete comes of it. Dialogue? Yes. Act on it? No. For some, dialogue simply proves that they were right. Opinions are polarized, positions are hardened. Some people can complicate what seems like a simple solution, so that the net result paralyzes any effective response. So many Congregational churches have been so culturally homogenous for so long that people don’t know how to communicate with people of diverse racial and social backgrounds, except maybe on the job, or in school.

**WINSLOW:** Wait a minute! Are you proposing multi-racial, multi-cultural congregations? What happens to teens dating others in a church youth group that have different cultural backgrounds, and what does that mean for multi-cultural and multi-racial marriages? Does a New England church have to sing Gospel music? Do we need to provide for Spanish Sunday School classes? Are we ready for this much diversity?

**CHIP:** That depends on what each congregation perceives as the will of Christ. Some situations may call for it; others may not. All Christians need to be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Maybe there needs to be Spanish – speaking congregations that come together with Korean-speaking congregations on an association level, so each can maintain it’s cultural integrity, yet share in a Congregational Christian witness. Anglo-Saxon, Christian, individualists can learn something about the Christian family from Hispanic Christians, and Hispanic Christian families can learn something about Christian entrepreneurial individualism from Anglos.

**WINSLOW:** Hold on there. What happens to the New England spirit of Congregationalism? ... the stately hymns of Isaac Watts ... the Salem Church Covenant of 1629 ... Plymouth Colony ... the Mayflower?

**CHIP:** All were products of their time. Watts reacted against the hymnody of his day, for songs of vital Christian witness for his time. The Salem Covenant was framed for needs of a new beginning in the founding of the first new church in America. Plymouth Colony was an experiment in a vital Christian community free of state church domination. The Mayflower was the means of passage from bad societal influences to creation of a Christian community. Let these icons teach us what we need to respond creatively to the spiritual needs of our times and places.

**WINSLOW:** So, what creative ideas do you suggest?

**CHIP:** Begin where people are, and discover every Christian means to be bringing them together. Some will gather in the sanctuary for worship in songs, prayers, hearing the Word, and the Holy Eucharist, followed by conversations around refreshments. Some like the give-and-take of Bible study discussions in a church parlor or a private home. Some are energized by mission projects, whether a kind of habitat for humanity, or rolling bandages for a mission hospital. Some like to bowl on a church team, or play ball in a church league. Some like to sing in a church choir or play in a church band or orchestra. Some like to cook for church breakfasts, brunches or dinners. Some will join computer chat rooms, or communicate by e-mail. There are a myriad of ways to bring people together in a Christian setting, limited only by resources and ingenuity.

**WINSLOW:** Okay. So you've got them together. What's next?

**CHIP:** Now comes the hard part – bringing Christ into the mix. Here we back off. Here we compromise. Here we preach. How does one create an atmosphere of caring when teens think it is cool to cut each other down verbally and sometimes physically? I can't go into all the details now, except to say that leaders need to gain the respect of their followers before anything meaningful can happen here. Patience and fortitude with a lot of togetherness can form a caring, Christian community. There will be varying degrees of participation, but understanding persistence can bring happy results. Clearly, the pastor-facilitators need to be engaged long enough with people to broker such results.

**WINSLOW:** Is that it? Congregationalism is togetherness in a Christian context?

**CHIP:** We-ll, no. A Christian leader promotes circumstances for the individuals in a group that will foster maturing in Christ. Persons in two-parent homes need to listen to and care about concerns of persons in one-parent homes; persons in one-parent homes need to listen to and care about concerns in two-parent homes. Residents of one community adjacent to the church need to listen to the concerns of another community adjacent to the church, if the church is in a diverse community setting. Men need to listen to women; women need to listen to men. Adults need to listen to teens; teens need to listen to adults. Liberals need to listen to conservatives; conservatives need to listen to liberals. Even talking is not enough. People need to be brought together in a common task: ministering in a nursing home, working together in a food bank, planning and doing a special worship service. A coordinator needs to keep them engaged, encourage their progress, and celebrate with them when the task is accomplished. People should find the local Congregational community irresistible, the place to be, "where it's at."

**WINSLOW:** Okay. But this looks like a closed community. How are you going to influence the whole society for good?

**CHIP:** Association, association, and more association. Association is a mandate of Christ, "Make disciples of all nations," He said. One Congregationalist cannot do that single-handedly. One local congregation cannot do it. A nation of churches cannot even do it. We need to develop strategies of cooperation with Christians everywhere to do it.

**WINSLOW:** Unrealistic. Christians are imperfect saints. Each group has its own turf. Church organizations are jealous of their own accomplishments. Within Christendom there are competing factions. Cultural barriers are everywhere.

**CHIP:** That's the challenge worth living and dying for. In fact, we have a model. It is the model of our missionary society. We support missions around the world – some are clearly Congregational by name, some are not. All are Christian. All are evaluated for their good influence according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Instead of competing, we support a good Christian cause. Similarly, we encourage seminarians to attend the best theological school they can find, and we help to support them. Instead of competing with a school of our own, we promote the best there is as it already exists.

**WINSLOW:** But your model has a flaw. Because the missions are not our own, and receive support from other sources, we become lax in our missionary involvement. Let others fill in when we don't. The mission will not die. Similarly, the divinity student attending Princeton Theological Seminary, that Presbyterian school, does not seem to be wholly ours to care for and support. We need to somehow make up for the psychological need for "possession" of some unique cause that only we can make succeed.

**CHIP:** that is a problem. It undermines the whole idea of Congregationalism as coming together to seek the highest and best in the Gospel of Christ. Maybe that's because we don't congregate enough. People need to meet the leaders, even the people in missions that we support. Regular missionary tours of churches followed by regular communications by newsletters, e-mail, and correspondence keeps missions in touch preferably with people in the pews. Seminarians need opportunities to serve in churches that support theological education, perhaps in summer Vacation Bible Schools, Christian day camps and intern ministries. Some of the more affluent churches could underwrite some of the expenses so that some of the smaller churches could participate. That's Congregationalism on an association level.

**WINSLOW:** That's a fine ideal, but we all know that "money talks." We live in an age of power and influence by whatever means. And Congregationalists are no exception. Togetherness in a local congregation can be scuttled by people asserting their authority, sometimes their "hang-ups," often their control. Local pastor teams often tend to be hierarchical. If we call ourselves Congregationalists, what do we do?

**CHIP:** Such circumstances often prompt a pastor to leave, and avoid the hassles that may ensue, but then the problem for the congregation is not solved. A Congregational Church Covenant can help, especially if it is written to promote cooperation rather than domination, and is signed by everyone who joins the congregation. It can be posted in a prominent place in the church. It can be renewed annually by producing a copy that is signed by all the members at a Covenant Renewal Ceremony. This keeps before the congregation the reason for its existence. The New Testament is full of opportunities to preach about the aim of a congregation to seek the best and highest in Christ Jesus. Every opportunity to emphasize this from the pulpit needs to be exercised. It needs to be taught in Covenant Classes leading to Confirmation, and in Sunday school classes and membership orientation classes. If these efforts are misinterpreted to justify power-brokering, appropriate congregational discipline may be required. But that topic is beyond the scope of our immediate concern. Freedom to come together under Christ needs to be preserved at all costs!

**WINSLOW:** What about those people who energetically adopt the Congregational Way that you propose with every intention to follow through, but drift away in time as other interests capture their attention and they lose touch with the congregation altogether?

**CHIP:** If the goal is to congregate for the sake of the Gospel, and people don't want to congregate, a congregation may have to let them go, but stand for a change in the future. After some time, that person's membership may need to be terminated, or put on hold in some list for periodic updating, just to keep in touch.

**WINSLOW:** So much for the local congregation. What about associations?

**CHIP:** Local congregations are to the associations as individual members are to local congregations. The goal is the same; coming together to pursue the highest and best in the Gospel of Christ. Too often the association is seen as somehow separate from the churches – a service organization, an advisory council, an administrative center – and churches, like good consumers, patronize the association as needs arise. This is Congregationalism by proxy. In this day and age of e-mail, web sites, and fax, an association seems best seen as a facilitator to bring churches in touch with each other – urban churches with suburban churches, rural churches with small town churches, mission churches with homeland churches. Associations may need covenants to define common ministries. They might have web sites with web pages for member churches. Would it be expedient to have a national meeting with another Christian group, say Presbyterians, to promote dialogue along the lines of mutual concerns?

**WINSLOW:** Well, it would certainly agree with your idea of Congregationalism; coming together to seek the highest and best in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is a goal worth living and dying for. Congregationalists have the freedom to engage. If important things are happening in such engagement, Congregationalism has more to offer for good influences in our time. I guess this is nothing new, only a renewal of emphasis, not so much on individualism, but more on togetherness. The we can be who we say we are.

# FUNDAMENTALISM, EVANGELICALISM AND THE CONGREGATIONAL WAY

*The Rev. Douglas Warren Drown  
Minister, the Congregational Churches, Bingham and West Forks, Maine*

One of the major religious phenomena of the twentieth century, one that has been enduring and which has captured the hearts and imaginations of millions of Americans, is the thing we call *fundamentalism*. Fundamentalism is all around us, from the seemingly countless independent Baptist and independent Bible churches to the Promise Keepers movement to the controversial Pentecostal evangelist Jimmy Swaggart to the suave Dr. D. James Kennedy of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church to the flamboyant healer Benny Hinn. The majority of American Protestants are fundamentalists of one sort or another.

In addressing this subject, my purpose is to help give you an understanding of what fundamentalism *is* and what it is *not*; to offer a critique of fundamentalism; and to talk about how we as Congregationalists have historically related to this movement and whether the fundamentalists are correct in their assertion that we don't have a theology, that we Congregationalists can believe whatever we want.

The American fundamentalist movement is nothing new. It began early in this century as an effort to defend what was considered traditional Protestant beliefs in the face of such challenges as the theory of evolution, growing Roman Catholic influence, theological liberalism, and so-called higher criticism of the Bible, that analysis of Scripture that treats it as a human document. Many people regarded these things as threats to the integrity of the Christian faith as it had been propounded by the Protestant Reformers and their spiritual descendants. Such challenges arose as the result of a long trend toward unfettered thinking that began at the time of the Enlightenment, and which, one recalls, met resistance by the church way back in the days of Galileo. The challenges to America's evangelical Protestant hegemony coalesced after the Civil War. As church historian Timothy Weber points out, many evangelicals [felt] that they were losing control.<sup>36</sup>

During this time, many other Protestants, however, adjusted to these contemporary challenges by altering their theological presuppositions in such a way as to accommodate evolution and biblical higher criticism, and by reinterpreting Christian doctrine to make it more acceptable, as they saw it, to the modern mind. Theologians such as the Baptist Walter Rauschenbusch developed the so-called social gospel that tended to emphasize saving society over saving souls. A noted Congregationalist of the mid-1800s, Horace Bushnell of Hartford, dared to contradict the prevailing Calvinism of the Congregational churches by suggesting that a child baptized and raised in the Christian faith, acknowledging Jesus Christ as his or her Savior, would never know him or herself to be anything but a Christian --- in other words, it was not necessary for an individual to have a conversion experience that could be pinpointed in time. Andover Theological Seminary in Massachusetts, founded by Calvinistic, evangelical Congregationalists in 1806 in reaction to the liberalism of Harvard, had by the 1880's come to affirm evolution, biblical criticism and, to a degree, universalism (the doctrine that in the end, all will be saved and reconciled to God). All of this would have been anathema to the founders of the school.

Many of the more conservative Protestants found these trends deeply troubling. Denominations such as the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and the Episcopal Church were rocked by heresy scandals involving clergy who were accused of denying such things as the virgin birth of Christ, the Trinity, and the inerrancy of Scripture. The Presbyterians in 1893 suspended Dr. Charles Augustus Briggs from the ministry. Briggs, a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, had lost his teaching post there in 1891 because of an address in which he denied the inerrancy of the Bible and appeared to place the

---

<sup>36</sup>Weber, Timothy G., □Fundamentalism, in Dictionary of Christianity in America, Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1990, p. 462.

authority of reason on a par with Biblical authority. After his suspension, the Union trustees voted to sever the seminaries official ties with the Presbyterian Church and Briggs went back to teaching, ultimately becoming an Episcopal priest.<sup>37</sup> And yet it was the Episcopal Church that just a few years later, in 1906, placed on trial for heresy a prominent Rochester, New York minister, the Rev. Algernon Crapsey, who was accused of denying the doctrines of the Trinity, the virgin birth of Christ, and the divinity of Christ. Mr. Crapsey was deposed from the Episcopal priesthood in December of that year.<sup>38</sup> Other denominations as well were feeling the brunt of the challenge to orthodoxy. A group of conservative Baptists left the Michigan Baptist Convention around 1905 because of perceived theological liberalism among some of the churches and clergy in that state, particularly within the Grand Rapids Baptist Association, which lost all its churches but one to a new association that supplanted the original body.<sup>39</sup> The Divinity School of the University of Chicago, then a Baptist institution, was the chief target of the conservative's ire. Crozer Theological Seminary near Philadelphia, Rochester Theological Seminary in Rochester, N.Y., Colgate Theological Seminary in Hamilton, N.Y., and the Newton Theological Institution in Newton, Massachusetts were also considered suspect, to varying degrees, by evangelical Baptist leaders. In 1915, conservative Baptists in the Chicago area established Northern Baptist Theological Seminary to counteract the liberalism of the Chicago Divinity School; in 1925, a similar move was made in Philadelphia with the formation of Eastern Baptist Seminary. Clearly things were in ferment everywhere, and conservative Protestants felt themselves forced to be on guard. Bible institutes such as Moody, Gordon (my *alma mater*, which later became a liberal arts college and seminary), the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (later Biola University), and the Philadelphia College of the Bible were established to train young men and women for various kinds of ministry --- each of these schools upholding a traditional, orthodox theological stance with an emphasis on the integrity and authority of the Bible. Independent, nondenominational missionary agencies were set up that individual churches could support without fear that the appointed missionaries might be Universalists or might be soft on the matter of conversion.

The Fundamentalist movement coalesced, and the controversy came to a climax, between 1910 and 1936. The Fundamentals, a twelve-volume paperback series, was published between 1910 and 1915 and is regarded by historians as largely signaling the beginning of the organized fundamentalist movement. The project was funded by two wealthy California oilmen, Milton and Lyman Stewart. When the volumes were completed, some three million copies were distributed free to Protestant religious workers all over the English-speaking world.<sup>40</sup> The volumes contained ninety scholarly articles that addressed various issues of interest and concern to conservative evangelical Christians. The articles criticized such things as Mormonism, Christian Science, Roman Catholicism, atheism, spiritualism, modern philosophy and socialism. But they most strenuously objected to liberal theology, higher criticism, Darwinism, and anything else that was perceived to be an attack on traditional Christian doctrines and on the inspiration and authority of the Bible. The Fundamentals served as a rallying point for those conservative Protestants who came to be known as fundamentalists. The volumes identified five doctrines which came to be known popularly as the fundamentals of the faith, namely: (1) the verbal inspiration of the Bible, (2) the virgin birth of Christ, (3), the substitutionary atonement, (4), the bodily resurrection of Christ, and (5) his imminent and visible second coming.<sup>41</sup>

By the end of the World War I (which some fundamentalists blamed on the effects of German higher criticism and the acceptance of evolutionary thought)<sup>7</sup>, fundamentalism had come to be an organized movement, with, as Weber puts it, a well-defined enemy and a list of non-negotiables.<sup>8</sup> Fundamentalists were on the war path, with liberals, Catholics, and evolutionists as the enemies.

---

<sup>37</sup>B.J. Longfield, op.cit., p. 188.

<sup>38</sup>D.S. Armentrout, op.cit., p. 325

<sup>39</sup>Buchen, Philip, Liberal Legacy, Vol. III., Grand Rapids, Michigan: Fountain Street Church, 2nd edition, 1992, Roger R. Bertschhausen, ed., pp. 153ff.

<sup>40</sup>George M. Marsden, op.cit., p. 468.

<sup>41</sup>Quebedeaux, Richard, The Young Evangelicals, New York: Harper and Row, 1974, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup>Weber, op.cit., p. 463.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

Lest it be thought that all the fundamentalist leaders were ignorant and poorly educated, it must be stated that such was definitely not the case. For example, the most acclaimed fundamentalist of the period, Dr. J. Gresham Machen, was a renowned New Testament scholar regarded even by many of his enemies as a brilliant thinker. Machen was a conservative, Calvinistic Southern Presbyterian who was a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary and who later founded Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia to counteract the liberal influence in the Presbyterian Church. He was educated in the classics at Johns Hopkins, held both an M.A. in philosophy and a Bachelor of Divinity degree from Princeton (having studied for both simultaneously), and did advanced graduate work in New Testament at the universities of Marburg and Göttingen in Germany. Machen was also said to be the very epitome of an educated Southern gentleman. His desire was not to be an obscurantist, but to take a stand for what he regarded as the historic doctrines that his church had always held. Other well-known scholarly fundamentalists were Dr. R. A. Torrey, a Yale-educated Congregationalist and dean of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles; Dr. G. Campbell Morgan, the prominent British Congregationalist who served Westminster Chapel in London for many years and who later was on the Gordon College faculty, and Dr. Clarence Edward Macartney, long-time minister of the huge First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, a graduate of the University of Wisconsin, Princeton Seminary and Princeton University. These were not stupid people.

They were, however, deeply convinced of the truth of their position, and were committed to the defense of it, as were many others, some of whom, unfortunately, were *less* well educated and who had combative personalities to boot. The most notorious and vituperative fundamentalist of the period was one J. Frank Norris, a gadfly Baptist and longtime leader of the movement who served as pastor of the First Baptist Church of Fort Worth, Texas, and Temple Baptist Church in Detroit, simultaneously --- commuting between the two churches. Norris took such unrelenting delight in exposing what he felt to be creeping modernism in the Southern Baptist Convention that he was expelled from the denomination, at which point he established his own separatist Baptist group. Some maintained that he took the pastorate of the Detroit church solely because it provided him the opportunity to despise the Northern Baptists too. In 1926, Norris shot and killed a man who had entered his Fort Worth study and allegedly threatened him. He was charged with murder, but the jury acquitted him because they believed he had acted in self-defense. One can only guess what a minister was doing with a loaded gun in his desk drawer to begin with.

The famous Scopes Monkey Trial held at Dayton, Tennessee, in 1925 was a turning point with regard to public sentiment about fundamentalism. John Scopes, a young, mild-mannered high school biology teacher, had been arrested for violating a Tennessee statute that forbade the teaching of evolution in public schools. The prosecuting attorney was William Jennings Bryan, a Presbyterian politician who was a three-time candidate for president and who served as secretary of state under Woodrow Wilson. Bryan was a silver-tongued orator, a noted prohibitionist, and an ardent fundamentalist who in the early 20s gave a series of lectures on evolution that propelled him to the forefront of the fundamentalist cause. The defense attorney at the Scopes trial was the brilliant Clarence Darrow, who argued that nothing less than intellectual freedom was at stake in the trial. He succeeded in getting Bryan to sit on the stand, and using Bryan's testimony, further succeeded in making Bryan look like a fool when Bryan attempted to defend his belief in a literal interpretation of the book of Genesis. Fundamentalism wound up being the object of national ridicule.

The fundamentalists of the early twentieth century eventually lost their battle to maintain their hold on American Protestantism. Noted for their general divisiveness and discordance, the fundamentalists fought unceasingly among themselves. The fact that these conservatives seemed utterly incapable of cooperative action constitutes one major reason why [they] lost every ecclesiastical battle they undertook.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup>Quebedeaux, op.cit., p. 9.

On the other hand, the liberal wing of American Protestantism was substantially unified, and had many able exponents. Church historian Kenneth Scott Latourette points out that the liberals had some differences among themselves, but in general they had confidence in human reason, applied it to the study of the Bible, using the historical methods that had acquired wide vogue in the nineteenth century, tended to believe that essential Christian doctrines could either be demonstrated by rational processes or could be shown not to be contrary to them, and were hopeful that a society could be achieved by [humankind's] efforts which would progressively conform to Christian standards.<sup>10</sup>

What liberalism stood for was best exemplified in the pulpit ministry of Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, a Baptist minister who stands out as arguably one of the three greatest religious figures in America of the twentieth century (the others being Reinhold Niebuhr and Billy Graham). Fosdick wielded international influence during his long pastorate at the Riverside Church in New York City, writing many books and broadcasting his sermons nationwide each week on the NBC Radio Network. Fosdick was trained at Colgate and at Union Theological Seminary in New York, and very early in his ministry developed a reputation for brilliance, incisiveness, and preaching ability. He earned a Ph.D. at Columbia University and taught at Union Seminary while serving as minister of the First Baptist Church of Montclair, New Jersey, then at First Presbyterian Church in New York and finally at New York's Park Avenue Baptist Church, which later became Riverside.

Fosdick aroused the wrath of fundamentalists through a sermon that he preached in 1922 titled *Shall the Fundamentalists Win?*, which he intended as a plea for greater tolerance between fundamentalists and liberals. He suggested in the sermon that there were three central issues in which fundamentalists needed to be more tolerant: (1) that belief in the virgin birth of Jesus was not essential to Christian faith, (2) that belief in the inerrancy of the Bible was incredible to the modern mind, and (3) that belief in the literal, bodily Second Coming of Christ was outmoded and needed rethinking. Fosdick alerted fundamentalists that they could not drive out from the Christian churches all the consecrated souls who do not agree with their theory of inspiration and concluded by encouraging Christian fellowship that is intellectually hospitable, open-minded, liberty-loving, fair, and tolerant.<sup>11</sup>

It needs to be made clear that Fosdick was no Unitarian; indeed, he described himself as an evangelical Christian. But, as he put it in one of his later sermons, he insisted that the deep and vital experiences of the Christian soul with itself, with its fellows, with its God, could be carried over into this new world and understood in the light of the new knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

Fosdick's position eventually won the day. Fundamentalists became increasingly marginalized as they squabbled among themselves and sought to split several of the major denominations, taking many congregations and clergy with them in their quest for doctrinal and ecclesiastical purity but leaving many others behind who looked upon them with disdain. Even archconservatives such as Clarence Macartney refused to leave the Presbyterian Church when many of his friends left it, feeling that he could be of more influence within the mainline body than he could be outside it. Many fundamentalists felt the same way. W. B. Riley, minister of the First Baptist Church of Minneapolis and by far the most outspoken critic of theological trends in the Northern (later American) Baptist Convention, never left the Convention but remained within it, ultimately becoming the mentor to an up-and-coming young evangelist named Billy Graham.

So while fundamentalism lost its hold on the leadership of the major denominations, it was able to keep itself alive in various expressions both within and without those denominations. By the mid-1940s, the theological climate in America had changed considerably. Liberal Protestants were forced to alter their naïvely optimistic estimate of the human situation when they found it demolished by the inhumanity of

---

<sup>10</sup>Latourette, Kenneth Scott, *A History of Christianity*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953, p. 1420.

<sup>11</sup>From an article on Harry Emerson Fosdick by C. W. Whiteman in *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, p. 446.

<sup>12</sup>Fosdick, Harry Emerson, *The Church Must Go Beyond Modernism*, in *Riverside Sermons*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958, p. 354.

people like Hitler and Stalin. The confident expectation that the social order could be progressively transformed into the kingdom of God by the efforts of men and women alone was repudiated.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, a theological movement that came to be known as Neo-Orthodoxy was gaining attention in the seminaries. Theologians like Karl Barth and Emil Brunner of Europe and Reinhold Niebuhr of the United States, men trained in liberal theological academies, were now stressing some themes that conservatives had always proclaimed, such as the transcendence, or otherness, of God, and his sovereignty over creation; the reality and depth of human sin and the need for salvation through Christ (albeit a universal salvation); and the witness of Scripture as to the mighty acts of God in history that culminated in the revelation of himself in Christ, the understanding of whose ministry was by and large cast in terms that were quite orthodox theologically. Neo-orthodoxy also placed a stress on the unity of the Church, recognizing that Jesus prayed that his people might all be one (*John 17:21*).

All of this gained the attention of some young fundamentalists who were, for the most part, within the mainline denominations, were well-educated, and sought to distinguish themselves from the extreme separatism, bad manners, obscurantism and anti-intellectualism so characteristic of fundamentalism, but not from the fundamentalist insistence on the authority and inspiration of Scripture, the necessity of conversion, and the mandate for evangelism.<sup>14</sup>

They called themselves the New Evangelicals, a term coined by the Congregational pastor Dr. Harold John Ockenga of Park Street Church in Boston, a fundamentalist intellectual who in 1942 issued a call for more moderate fundamentalists to join hands in working toward a transformation of mainline American Protestantism by cooperation and by persuasion from within. The National Association of Evangelicals was formed as a coalition of these moderate fundamentalists both within and outside the major denominations. Over the past fifty-five years the NAE, which now numbers several million members, has come to encompass most of the conservative evangelical bodies in America, ranging from Pentecostals to Calvinists, as well as hundreds of churches and clergy in mainline denominations such as the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., the Reformed Church in America (which recently joined as a body), the American Baptist Churches, and our own National Association. The NAE is the evangelical counterpart to the National Council of Churches. It encompasses many evangelical interests including religious broadcasting, politics, humanitarian relief, and Christian higher education; it also addresses social issues and has spoken out on matters such as church-state separation, racism, drug abuse, pornography, and apartheid.

During the course of the 1940s and 50s there emerged a number of highly educated □new evangelical thinkers, people such as Edward John Carnell and Carl F. H. Henry, who were determined to develop a rational and philosophic apologetic for what they regarded as historic, biblical [Christianity], and who were at the same time willing to engage in constructive theological debate with the exponents of contrary views.<sup>15</sup> This kind of creative theological engagement came to predominate such historically fundamentalist institutions as Gordon College, Wheaton College, Dallas Theological Seminary, and Westminster Theological Seminary, and it gave rise to new theological schools such as Fuller Theological Seminary, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Some of these are more moderate than others; all of them are academically rigorous and have been influential in promoting the evangelical cause both within and outside the major denominations.

Dr. Billy Graham should not be overlooked as a major figure in the rise of evangelicalism. A graduate of Wheaton College and a Southern Baptist minister of Presbyterian background, Graham originally had been recruited by Youth for Christ, an evangelical ministry to high school and college youth, to serve as an itinerant evangelist for its big youth rallies. By 1949 he had stepped out on his own, conducting revival campaigns that gained him international attention and sympathy from unexpected quarters. William Randolph Hearst, the newspaper magnate, took an early interest in Graham, and when liberal British clerics snubbed him at the time of his first crusade in Great Britain, Queen Elizabeth II received him

---

<sup>13</sup>Quebedeaux, op.cit., p. 11.

<sup>14</sup>Op.cit., p. 12.

<sup>15</sup>Op.cit., p. 13.

warmly and publicly praised his ministry. He also won the friendship of every American president since Truman. Such publicity didn't hurt. What's more, early on in his ministry Graham distanced himself from the divisiveness of his more militant fundamentalist brethren and made an effort to cooperate with mainline church leaders, inviting them to participate in his local crusades. Over the years Graham has become something of an ecumenical statesman, speaking for evangelical Christianity amidst the mainline ecumenical *milieu*. In 1956 Graham, together with Dr. Ockenga and Dr. Henry, was one of the founders of Christianity Today magazine, which has become the semi-official periodical voice of the evangelical world. Until quite recently Graham served as board chairman of Gordon-Conwell Seminary.

With the advent of the New Evangelicalism as propounded by Ockenga, Graham, Henry and others, American fundamentalism, in its more moderate form, gained a new respectability within the ranks of American religion. In recent years, some of the more progressive evangelicals have developed an interest in Barth and other neo-orthodox scholars, and have begun creative engagement with such questions as the nature of the inspiration of Scripture and the extent to which the Bible is both a divine *and human* document and whether indeed the punishment of sinners in hell is merely punitive or whether it may be temporary and remedial --- questions that Biblical critics in the mainline denominations were asking over a century ago. Some evangelicals, in recent years, have been in dialogue with Roman Catholics over issues of common concern to both groups, and it has been recognized in some quarters that Catholics and evangelicals do, to a large degree, share a common faith and that they can cooperate rather than being estranged from one another. Some evangelicals have distanced themselves from the traditional political conservatism of fundamentalism. Periodicals such as Sojourners and The Other Side represent what might be called a liberal evangelicalism that advocates for the poor, presses for prison reform, welcomes gays and lesbians into the fellowship of the church, and advocates pacifism.

At the same time, evangelicals of a more conservative theological and political stripe have wielded considerable influence within American Christianity, particularly during the past twenty years. In the late 1970s a faction of fundamentalists within the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod succeeded in gaining control of that denomination, after several years of upheaval in which charges were made that the Synod had been infiltrated by a liberalism that was compromising the Synod's historic doctrinal stance. A more moderate faction left and is now part of the more mainline Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. Similarly, the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in America, has been fragmented in recent years as the result of a fundamentalist takeover. The six Southern Baptist seminaries, which hitherto had come to espouse a moderate evangelicalism bordering on neo-orthodoxy, have come firmly under fundamentalist control during the past fifteen years. Southern Baptist moderates and liberals have coalesced into two groups, the Alliance of Baptists and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, parachurch bodies both of which are organized in a loose, congregationally-oriented fashion much like our National Association. Former President Jimmy Carter has publicly announced his solidarity with the latter group, which with over a million members is as large as a number of mainline Protestant denominations, yet many of whose churches still hold dual standing with the Southern Baptist Convention.

Other denominations have seen the rise of evangelical caucuses within. The Biblical Witness Fellowship of the United Church of Christ seeks to maintain a conservative, evangelical witness within that denomination. In the American Baptist Churches, the American Baptist Evangelicals have organized to ensure that ABC evangelicals have a voice in the fellowship in the face of such issues as gay and lesbian ordination. The Good News Caucus in the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Lay Committee and Presbyterian Renewal Fellowship in the Presbyterian Church USA serve a similar purpose within those churches. The Episcopal Church contains coalitions that seek to preserve, on the one hand, a Protestant evangelical witness and, on the other hand, a conservative witness rooted in Anglo-Catholicism. The latter is organized as a separate synod within the church.

Politically conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists, alarmed by what they perceive to be the moral decline of America, have, under the leadership of Southern Baptists Jerry Falwell and Marion Pat Robertson, formed political coalitions that have gained the grassroots support of hundreds of thousands in recent years, including conservative Roman Catholics. Robertson, a televangelist, ran for president in 1988 on the Republican ticket. Both he and Falwell continue to be major spokespersons for politically conservative evangelicalism. Robertson's Christian Coalition has infiltrated local school boards, propelled conservatives into local, state and national politics, and has been *the* major catalyst toward the conservative shift in the Republican Party.

In 1977 the Reverend Donald Wildmon, an evangelical United Methodist minister from Mississippi, founded what is now known as the American Family Association, whose purpose it is to combat the influence of the liberal and secular media, particularly television, which the Association maintains, is destroying the ethics and morals of Americans. Wildmon was early on dismissed as a crank by many, but the AFA is now clearly a force to be reckoned with. It was the AFA that first mobilized evangelicals to boycott the Walt Disney Company because of its openness toward gays and lesbians. That boycott has now extended to the Southern Baptist Convention, the Assemblies of God, and a number of other smaller evangelical bodies.

Another trend prevalent within the more conservative ranks of evangelicalism since before the turn of the century has been a strong emphasis upon the imminent second coming of Christ, which has gained increasing attention among the wider population in recent years as the world has neared the new millennium. Evangelicals and fundamentalists who are preoccupied with the Second Coming for the most part take their understanding of the doctrine from the writings of a turn-of-the-century Congregationalist named Cyrus Ingerson Scofield, whose famous Scofield Reference Bible has served as *the* authoritative study Bible for several generations of fundamentalists. I was brought up on the Scofield Bible and know it well. Dr. Scofield propounded a theory of Biblical interpretation known as *dispensationalism* which, among other things, holds to the notion that the Bible teaches two totally distinct divine plans for history, one concerning an earthly people (Israel), the other a heavenly people (the church). God's plan for Israel

was revealed through a series of covenants . . . which pointed to the establishment of a Messianic kingdom on earth. But when the Messiah arrived, Israel rejected him. God then postponed the kingdom, turned away from Israel and created out of the Gentiles a new people, the church. According to this postponement theory, God will not resume his dealings with Israel until he finishes building his church and raptures it to heaven just prior to the Great Tribulation to come. Then after the Tribulation and the battle of Armageddon, Christ will return to earth with his raptured saints and set up a literal thousand-year millennial kingdom.<sup>16</sup>

A *lot* of people believe this. Initially, the embracement of dispensationalism was confined mostly to fundamentalist Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists and a few Congregationalists as well as to some smaller sects. However, with the popularization of it through Hal Lindsey's lurid The Late Great Planet Earth in the 1960s and, more recently, the series of Left Behind novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins (which have sold over fifteen million copies), it has come to be unquestioningly accepted by a vast number of evangelicals and by the wider American public --- this despite the fact that many evangelical scholars repudiate it, maintaining that it lacks adequate Biblical support. Dallas Theological Seminary in Dallas, Texas, is the leading institution that espouses a dispensationalist theology.

Having said all this thus far, it becomes apparent that American fundamentalism and evangelicalism, while united on the basic beliefs that were expressed in the volumes of The Fundamentals back in the earlier part of the century, today constitute a varied and diverse group, *the* most influential bloc of Christians in North America, for better or worse.

Congregationalism, historically, has gone substantially untouched by fundamentalism. It has had its share of fundamentalist leaders, Dwight L. Moody, C. I. Scofield, R. A. Torrey and Harold Ockenga among them; the National Association has had within it several important evangelical spokesmen including Dr. Ockenga, former Executive Committee chair Dr. Leslie Deinstadt, and, most recently, Dr. Terry Lindvall, an NA minister who served for several years as president of Pat Robertson's Regent University. And yet fundamentalism and evangelicalism have never had the influence in Congregational circles that they have had in other denominations. Why?

I think the answer is found in our history and our polity. Historically, Congregationalism has emphasized the mind above the emotions. We have always stressed the need for an educated clergy. We have, even during the years when we were rigidly Calvinistic, looked at Christianity from the vantage point of logic and rationalism. (There is nothing more airtight in its logic than Calvinism.) It was Congregationalism, you remember, out of which American Unitarianism sprang. Congregationalism provided fertile ground for free thought --- and it did so by virtue of its *polity* as well as its ethos. A Congregational church is theologically bound only by its own covenant. A Baptist friend of mine who observed this remarked to me, your polity *is* your theology. There is a set of very basic beliefs that Congregational churches generally hold in common by what might be called historic consensus. But there is nothing that *binds* us theologically as a body of churches or as a body of individual believers. As a consequence, I believe, because of our polity fundamentalism never could gain a substantial foothold in Congregationalism. There were, and are, a goodly number of individual Congregational churches that have leaned toward a fundamentalist or evangelical viewpoint, but fundamentalism has never been able to capture the imagination of the fellowship as a whole. We are *by nature* theologically diverse, and it is a singular fact of our history that of the major American denominations we have never, since the Unitarian defection of 1820, undergone a major schism over theology. To be sure, at the time of the United Church of Christ merger, a number of churches and ministers did leave to form the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference, but the number was small and their influence within the old denomination, aside from Dr. Ockengas, rather marginal. Amidst all the splits and schisms and fights in the denominations around us, our National Association, virtually alone, has survived intact because we recognize that our diversity is one of our strengths and we deliberately agree to disagree, yet love one another.

---

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Weber, Timothy G., □Dispensationalism□ in Dictionary of Christianity in America, op.cit., p. 358.

Be that as it may, fundamentalism and evangelicalism, today, are on the rise while the influence of mainline Christianity is waning. People are attracted to fundamentalist and evangelical churches for a variety of reasons. One is their upbeat music. Baby boomers, many of whom left Sunday school at age twelve or who never had any church experience at all when growing up, by and large have little appreciation for formal liturgy and traditional hymnody (which, I might add, can be *taught*, but I will leave that for another time). Weaned on television, raised with an entertainment mentality, they want worship that makes them feel good. They enjoy the comparatively informal services offered in many fundamentalist, evangelical, and Pentecostal churches. The so-called Vineyard movement, which is an offshoot of Pentecostalism, and the Willow Creek movement, which emphasizes worship that is theatrical in nature, are both geared primarily to baby boomers and their families. Fundamentalist preaching seeks to apply what are regarded as the unambiguous teachings of Scripture to everyday life. In a culture that is fairly drowning in secularism, many Americans are searching for meaning in their lives. Fundamentalism and evangelicalism especially have a deep appeal because they point simply to the infallible Bible and proclaim, this is what it says. Period. It's black or white. There are many who find that comforting and reassuring. Most importantly, fundamentalist and evangelical churches stress the importance of having a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, something which has been sidestepped and even largely forgotten in mainline liberal churches.

As a theological moderate and as a Congregationalist, I believe Congregationalism at its best offers an alternative to fundamentalism that is spiritually satisfying, intellectually stimulating, and which affirms the central truths of the Christian faith in a context that can be uniquely meaningful to people at the end of this chaotic twentieth century. There is a triad that our National Association has used for decades to define what Congregationalism is about, a triad that has been overused to the point of being hackneyed but which nevertheless serves as the best and most succinct summary of the essence of the Congregational Way. It is this: *Faith, Freedom, and Fellowship*.

Congregationalism stands first for *faith* --- a faith centered in God's self-revelation in Jesus of Nazareth, his life, death and resurrection, which demonstrate to humankind that self-giving love of God worked out in God's relationship with the human race and in our relationships one with another, in that realm which Jesus called the Kingdom. The Way of the Kingdom contravenes the world's way of thinking, and offers to people the good news of universal forgiveness and reconciliation that spells hope to a world filled with hopelessness. One need only open his or her life to Jesus and his Way to know that hope. Historically, Congregationalism has emphasized the necessity of conversion and of a personal faith in Christ. Where we differ from the fundamentalists is that Congregationalists do not all agree on every jot and tittle of theological interpretation. Nor do we insist on such agreement. Some of us are liberal, some of us conservative, many of us somewhere in-between. There is great latitude in Congregationalism.

And that is part of what our *freedom* implies the second part of the triad. Congregationalists are free to use their minds. Congregationalists are free to interpret Scripture according to their own consciences and understanding, uniting together, ideally, in a quest for a common understanding under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Congregational *churches* also are free; we are free of denominational parameters that might otherwise fence us in theologically and tell us we *have* to believe thus-and-such. Congregationalists are bound together not by creed, but by covenant.

And this leads us to third part of the triad, *fellowship*. Our theology, as Congregationalists, is not merely propositional and static; rather, it is *worked out in the context of the fellowship of the church*. A Congregational church defines itself to the community not just by what it *believes*, but by what it *is*. Back in the seventies a book on nutrition and diet appeared that became very popular. It was titled You Are What You Eat.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, we are what we believe. If we believe that Christ is truly present where two or three gather in his name, which is what he said (*Matthew 18:10*), then the spirit of Christ is with us when we explore our beliefs, when we look at Scripture, when we question (and provoke one another with our questions), when we hold business meetings, when we pray, when we do mission. Congregationalism is

---

<sup>17</sup>Gilbert, Sara, You Are What You Eat: A Common Sense Guide to the Modern American Diet, New York: Macmillan and Company, 1977.

dynamic. We hold that in the context of community, in the context of being what we are in Christ, Christ is found.

All of this serves as a powerful alternative to fundamentalism. It calls people to use their minds. It calls them to a Christ-centered faith in the God whose light and truth are continually breaking forth out of the Word. It calls them to become the people God created them to be by nurturing their faith and commitment within a loving, praying, confronting, risk-taking fellowship in which the living Lord makes himself known.

As I said earlier, people are searching. And Congregationalism has something to offer, something potentially life-changing, even *world*-changing if people commit themselves to it. For what we're about is what the New Testament church was about --- *koinonia*, the free fellowship of the people of God.

In 1629, the First Church in Salem, Massachusetts, drew up that now-famous church covenant that has been adopted by many of its descendant Congregational churches, including our own in Bingham. It is found in the Pilgrim Hymnal, and reads:

*We covenant with the Lord and with one another, and do bind ourselves in the presence of God to walk together in all his ways, according as he is pleased to reveal himself unto us in his Blessed Word of Truth.*

Seven years later, in 1636, the Salem church members, after much consideration and study, wrote an interpretation of their covenant, recognizing, as they put it, how apt we are to wander into by-paths even to the loosening of our first aims in entering into church fellowship.<sup>18</sup>

Of the nine interpretations written, I would like to close this morning by briefly reading four. Think about what it means to be Congregational as you hear these words:

- *We give ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ, and by his word of grace, for the teaching, ruling and sanctifying of us in matters of worship, and conversation, resolving to cleave to him alone for life and glory; . . .*
- *We promise to walk with our brethren and sisters in this congregation with all watchfulness and tenderness, [and] in all offences to follow the rule of the Lord Jesus . . . to bear and forbear, give and forgive as he has taught us.*
- *We bind ourselves to study the advancement of the gospel in all truth and peace, both in regard to those who are within or without, no way slighting our sister Churches but using their counsel as need shall be; nor laying a stumbling-block before any. . .*
- *Also promising to our best abilities to teach our children and servants the knowledge of God and his will, that they may serve him also; and all this, not by any strength of our own, but by the Lord Jesus Christ. . .*<sup>19</sup>

I submit that if we hold these ideals before us, we will recapture the power inherent in the Congregational Way, and can capture the hearts and imaginations of seekers and believers who would join with us in fostering God's reign. May it be so.

**Douglas Warren Drown** is Minister at First Congregational Church in Bingham, Maine, which he has served since 1977, and the Church of Christ (Congregational) in West Forks, Maine, which he has served since 1980. He has studied at Gordon College, Bangor Theological Seminary and Andover Newton Theological School. He has served on several committees of the NACCC and serves as historian and Central Region Ambassador of the Congregational Christian Council of Maine.

---

<sup>18</sup>Walker, Williston, The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism, Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1960, p. 117; quoted in Abercrombie, A. Vaughan, The Congregational Way of Devotional Life and Evangelism, published by the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, 1990, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup>Walker, op.cit., pp. 117-118, quoted in Abercrombie, pp. 6-7.

## Preface

The early Puritans held a very high view of the meaning and practice of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Within many Protestant traditions today, there seems to be a significant degree of confusion regarding the theology and administration of this sacrament. In "Simeon's Embrace," a paradigm is established for understanding historical perspectives on the Lord's Supper, and suggestions are made as to how the contemporary church can reclaim the early Puritan understanding of the sacrament, which emphasized intentionality, discipline, and clarity of heart and mind.

## **Simeon's Embrace: Intentionality in Theology and Administration of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Early Puritan New England**

By Charles A. Packer

### Introduction

In Lewis Bayly's The Practice of Piety, suggestion is given as to how a communicant might receive, partake, and meditate upon the receipt of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. One particular piece of instruction invites and encourages a person when receiving the sacrament to, "Embrace him [Christ] sweetly with thy faith in the Sacrament, as ever Simeon hugged him with his arms in his swaddling clouts."<sup>42</sup> A couple of exegetical comments are in order in regard to this biblical reference to Luke 2:25-35. First, there is the matter of Simeon's posture in "waiting" or "looking forward to the consolation of Israel." Simeon's attitude of expectant hope and devoted anticipation earned him Luke's attributions of being "righteous and virtuous." Second, and perhaps more crucially, it is noteworthy that Simeon immediately recognized the Christ-child and "took him in his arms." Simeon's was an informed embrace, one for which preparation had been made. When Simeon embraced the child Jesus, he was reflecting the understanding of the new covenant put forth in Jeremiah 31:33-34:

But such is the covenant I will make with the House of Israel after those days--declares the Lord: I will put My teaching into their inmost being and inscribe it upon their hearts. Then I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No longer will they need to teach one another and say to one another, "Heed the Lord"; for all of them, from the least of them to the greatest, shall heed Me--declares the Lord.

For Simeon, explanation was not necessary. He identified the promised messiah without pause and without benefit of introduction. Simeon understood the intention of God because it was inscribed on his heart.

The model of Simeon's embrace provides a fitting means of comprehending the Puritan understanding of the necessity of inner knowledge prior to partaking of the Lord's Supper. For the early Puritans, it was absolutely essential that the communicant come to the Lord's Table with an informed mind and an intuitive heart. This paper will examine the theme of intentionality in the theology and administration of the Lord's Supper in early Puritan New England. The chronological parameters of this study, then, will roughly correspond with the period of time beginning with 1640 Puritan New England, acknowledging English influence, and ending approximately around 1730. Because the primary orientation of this treatment will be theological and thematic, this paper will very broadly consider the trends and transitions in thought and practice of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper that characterize this period.

---

<sup>42</sup>Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England (Chapel Hill, 1982), 33.

## The Meaning of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Early Puritan New England

Within the early Puritan movement, the Lord's Supper was of unique importance. For Samuel Sewall of the Old South Meeting House, "the Lord's Supper was the center of the Christian experience."<sup>43</sup> There was a sense of sacredness surrounding observance of the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, and in fact, the sacraments in general. As Hambrick-Stowe explains, "The rituals of Baptism and Communion as they were performed in New England churches reminded participants and witnesses of the redemptive drama that framed their spiritual existence."<sup>44</sup> The sacraments functioned, then, to draw communicants into the life of faith. They deepened the meaning of their Christian lives, and enriched their understanding of Christ's sacrifice and our redemption on the cross.

This is not to say that there was any clear consensus of belief in how the sacrament of the Lord's Supper specifically worked in the heart of the believer. In considering Puritan theology of the Lord's Supper, three views were chiefly held. One of these maintained that the importance of the sacrament was located in the attitude of the recipient. This was "a highly subjective spirituality that allowed a concern for inward preparation to overshadow the objective reality of the sacrament."<sup>45</sup> A second perspective contended that the Lord's Supper acted as "a converting ordinance."<sup>46</sup> It was thus "capable of converting the unregenerate by evoking their internal assent to the Gospel."<sup>47</sup> This was very much the basis for the argument of Solomon Stoddard, who began a controversy in 1677 over the openness of the Lord's Table that would last for several decades, and in fact influence transitions in thought and practice well into the nineteenth century. The third interpretation of the meaning of the Lord's Supper claimed the mystical presence of Christ in the sacrament. This view was propagated especially effectively through the sacramental manuals produced around the turn of the eighteenth century.<sup>48</sup> There was, then, heterodoxy of thought for the early Puritans of New England in regard to the efficacy of the sacrament. What remained consistent, however, was the utmost concern for the sanctity of the celebration of the Lord's Supper and its proper administration.

The meaning of the Lord's Supper for the early Puritans must not be detached from its Reformed context. As is prominent in Calvinist doctrine, the proclamation of the word and the celebration of the sacrament were inseparable. In fact, the elements of the Lord's Supper are perceived as "themselves 'preachers' of the Word."<sup>49</sup> Thus, the sacrament fulfills its function as a "visible gospel."<sup>50</sup> Perhaps it is this emphasis on the visible gospel that encouraged the rise of conversionism and sacramental evangelism in the late seventeenth century. Both Increase and Cotton Mather "argu[ed] that the sacrament itself helped add grace to what communicants began with."<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, Increase Mather maintained "that those who received the communion in a loving frame of mind could expect a soul-ravishing awareness of love for Christ and for the church far greater than might otherwise be known."<sup>52</sup> One result of this late seventeenth century movement toward conversionism was an increase in production of communion manuals and preparatory meditations. Such publications "were written to provide assistance in mental and spiritual preparation for participation in the sacrament, and new emphasis was placed upon the experience of communion itself."<sup>53</sup> Poetic meditations such as those written by the renowned pastor-poet Edward Taylor highlight the intrinsic efficacy of the experience of communion:

Oh! Feed me at they Table, make Grace grow

---

<sup>43</sup>Doug Adams, *Meeting House to Camp Meeting: Toward a History of American Free Church Worship from 1620 to 1835* (Austin, Texas, 1981), 82.

<sup>44</sup>Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety*, 124.

<sup>45</sup>E. Brooks Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England, 1570-1720* (New Haven and London, 1974), 109.

<sup>46</sup>Horton Davies, *The Worship of the American Puritans, 1629-1730* (New York, 1990), 169.

<sup>47</sup>Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed*, 109.

<sup>48</sup>Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed*, 109.

<sup>49</sup>John Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism, 1620-1957* (Cleveland, Ohio, 1992), 48.

<sup>50</sup>*ibid*, 48.

<sup>51</sup>David D. Hall, *The Faithful Shepherd: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1982), 256.

<sup>52</sup>Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism*, 169.

<sup>53</sup>*ibid*, 169.

Knead in thy Bread, I eate, thy love to mee,  
And spice thy Cup I take, with rich grace so,  
That at thy Table I may honor thee.<sup>54</sup>

In his poem, "The Experience," Taylor again describes the powerful occurrence of being brought near to God in the sacrament:

Oh! that I alwayes breath'd in such an aire,  
As I suckt in, feeding on sweet Content!  
Disht up unto my Soul ev'n in that pray're  
Pour'de out to God over last Sacrament.  
What Beam of Light wrapt up my sight to finde  
Me neerer God than ere Came in my minde?...  
Oh! that the Flame which thou didst on me Cast  
Might me enflame, and Lighten ery where.  
Then Heaven to me would be less at last  
So much of heaven I should have while here.

Oh! Sweet though Short! Ile not forget the same.  
My neerness, Lord, to thee did me Enflame.<sup>55</sup>

The inner experience of the individual believer in the process of partaking of holy communion was of central significance for the early Puritans.

It is important to remember, however, that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper was celebrated by the individual believer in the context of the community of faith. John Von Rohr quotes Robert Browne's statement that in the Lord's Supper "we grow into one body, the church, in one communion of graces, whereof Christ is the head."<sup>56</sup> It is this communal understanding of the Lord's Supper that served to emphasize the responsibility of the individual to the body of Christ. In this way, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper had a covenantal function, one which was not lost on the early Puritans. Scottish commissioners to the Westminster Assembly Samuel Rutherford and George Gillespie, described the sacrament as "a confirming and sealing ordinance," one which "seal[ed] unto a man that interest in Christ and in the covenant of grace which he already hath."<sup>57</sup> Matthew Henry's Communicant's Companion also takes up the covenantal theme, characterizing the sacrament as "a commemorating Ordinance, and a confessing Ordinance; a communicating Ordinance, and a covenanting Ordinance."<sup>58</sup> A prayer given by Increase Mather on the occasion of the Lord's Supper also focuses on the covenantal nature of the sacrament:

O Heavenly Father and our God in Jesus Christ,  
wee have avouched thee to be our God,  
and now we know that thou hast avouched us to be thi people,  
because thou hast given us thi son,  
and thou wilt with him give us all things.

Father, wee humbly expect from thee,  
that according to thi Covenant, even the new Covenant,  
thou wilt forgive us our iniquities.

Such is the grace of thi Covenant  
as that thou wilt not impute our infirmities to us,

---

<sup>54</sup>Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety*, 214.

<sup>55</sup>Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Early New England Meditative Poetry* (New York, 1988), 162.

<sup>56</sup>Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism*, 48.

<sup>57</sup>Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed*, 115.

<sup>58</sup>Davies, *The Worship of the American Puritans*, 175.

if they be our burden,  
and thou knowest that they are so.

Wee put the Answer of our prayers upon that,  
and are willing to be denied if it be not so.

But thou that searchest hearts,  
knowest that thou hast created such a spirit within us.

Wee are willing to be delivered from all sin,  
and we are willing to yeild Holy perfect obedience  
to all thi commands,  
tho' how to perform wee find not.  
Father, Father, deal with us as with thi children.<sup>59</sup>

As the individual affirmed his or her covenant with God in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, he or she was also affirming unity with the community of faith in covenant relationship. The language of Mather's poetry indicates that it is with acute awareness of the binding nature of the covenant with God and with one another that one approached the table. As Hambrick-Stowe writes, "The sacraments were...explicit renewals of the covenant."<sup>60</sup> This was also made clear in Eucharistic manuals and sermons, which taught that "in receiving the Lord's Supper, we renew covenant with God."<sup>61</sup> Richard Baxter speaks of this aspect of the sacrament in charging clergy in "every administration of the Lord's Supper [to call men] to renew their covenant with God..."<sup>62</sup> The sacrament of the Lord's Supper for the early Puritans both acted to seal the covenant with God and the individual in the community of faith, and to renew it.

### **Intentionality in the Administration of the Lord's Supper in Early Puritan New England**

The covenant community in Puritan New England was entered into voluntarily and by informed consent. It was also entered into with the utmost caution. For the early Puritans, "[h]oliness of life was essential to church communion."<sup>63</sup> Participation in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper was certainly subject to this condition. Most Puritan ministers held the perspective that "it was a meal for the holy rather than a means to produce holiness."<sup>64</sup> Henry Barrow even likened the "[celebration of] the Lord's Supper in an impure church [to] 'casting the precious body and blood of Christ to dogs and hogs.'"<sup>65</sup> The administration of the Lord's Supper was a matter of the strictest discernment, precisely because it involved sealing the covenant relationship with God and with one another.

Mediating the sealing of the covenant required making communicants aware of the covenant they were affirming or renewing. This necessitated careful consideration of how the sacrament was administered, to whom, and how often. The first measure instituted by the early Puritans in this endeavor was that of church discipline. Following the model of the Reformers John Calvin and Martin Bucer, who "required every adult member of the church to demonstrate his outward moral fitness before he could receive the Lord's Supper," the Puritans maintained conditional admission to the table.<sup>66</sup> It was held in many churches that "[n]o one...could receive the benefits of discipline, including admission to the sacraments, unless he offered evidence of belonging within the covenant of grace."<sup>67</sup> Thus, as Gerald Cragg asserts, "The result of this power to admit to the Lord's Table or to debar from it was a particularly close

---

<sup>59</sup>Davies, *The Worship of the American Puritans*, 146-147.

<sup>60</sup>Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety*, 130.

<sup>61</sup>ibid, 130.

<sup>62</sup>Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Portland, Oregon: 1982), 37.

<sup>63</sup>Gerald R. Cragg, *Puritanism in the Period of the Great Persecution, 1660-1688* (Cambridge, 1957), 168.

<sup>64</sup>Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed*, 164.

<sup>65</sup>Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism*, 48.

<sup>66</sup>Hall, *The Faithful Shepherd*, 18.

<sup>67</sup>ibid, 96.

connection between discipline and the sacrament.<sup>68</sup> What was sought from the potential communicant was “repentance and faith” as “the conditions for admission.”<sup>69</sup> The way in which these conditions were determined as proven was through interrogation and demonstration of having had a religious or conversion experience. In addition, moral character and virtue were investigated. Alice Morse Earle in her book, The Sabbath in Puritan New England, even describes the practice of some New England churches of “giving during the month a metal check to each worthy and truly virtuous church-member, on presentation of which the check-bearer was entitled to partake of the communion, and without which he was temporarily excommunicated.”<sup>70</sup> Though there are no records indicating excessive discord or indignation over this procedure, “[g]reat must have been the disgrace of one who found himself checkless at the end of the month, and greater even than the heart-burnings over seating the meeting must have been the jealousies and church quarrels that arose over the communion-checks.”<sup>71</sup> It was vital that those who came to the table were honorable bearers of the covenant.

]The second means by which the early Puritans were intentional in their administration of the sacrament is by instruction. Individuals participating in the Lord’s Supper must come to the table informed about the sacrament and its meaning. The Puritans took great pains in fulfilling their didactic duty in regard to the sacrament. As “Puritan sacramental theology was practical and pastoral,” it was necessary for the minister to make plain the dynamics involved in partaking of the Lord’s Supper.<sup>72</sup> To this end, “[t]he ministers copiously described the symbolic content of the sacramental actions and elements, hoping that the service would thus convey doctrinal information.”<sup>73</sup> Richard Baxter saw the instruction of communicants as a far more effective way of preparing them for the sacrament than discipline. He “lamented the tendency to mourn over the corruptions of communicants instead of studying ‘the love of God in Christ’ in the sacrament.”<sup>74</sup> Not only were communicants to be honorable bearers of the covenant, but they were to also be educated bearers, as well.

Finally, the early Puritans found it necessary to be intentional in regard to the frequency of celebration of the Lord’s Supper. There were several different perspectives on this matter held by the early Puritans, ranging from weekly to bi-annual observance. In Puritan England, “Separatists favored weekly Lord’s Day observance of the sacrament, and Congregationalists in Cromwell’s Commonwealth also followed this plan.”<sup>75</sup> This model was also followed in John Robinson’s church in Leyden, where “[t]he Lord’s Supper was a part of every Sunday morning worship.”<sup>76</sup> Charles Chauncy, minister of the Plymouth church in the seventeenth century “practiced weekly communion as the Biblical norm.”<sup>77</sup> More common, however, in Puritan New England, was the practice of the sacrament on a monthly basis. The records at the church at Salem “report communion the first Lord’s Day of each month without interruption.”<sup>78</sup> One who sought a compromise between weekly and monthly communion was Samuel Sewall, who strongly urged First Congregational Church in Boston to celebrate the sacrament every four weeks.<sup>79</sup> Still other churches, more Presbyterian in polity, established bi-annual observance.<sup>80</sup> Regardless of the particular practice of the churches, it is clear that the early Puritans took up the matter of frequency of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper with absolute seriousness and careful deliberation. Communicants were to be regular participants in the sacrament.

All of these concerns in the practice and administration of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper served to emphasize the necessity of covenantal awareness before approaching the table. The Puritans were

---

<sup>68</sup>Cragg, *Puritanism in the Period of the Great Persecution*, 169.

<sup>69</sup>Davies, *The Worship of the American Puritans*, 17.

<sup>70</sup>Alice Morse Earle, *The Sabbath in Puritan New England* (Williamstown, Massachusetts: 1974), 120.

<sup>71</sup>*ibid.*, 120-121.

<sup>72</sup>Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed*, 73.

<sup>73</sup>*ibid.*, 54.

<sup>74</sup>Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed*, 128.

<sup>75</sup>Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism*, 48-49.

<sup>76</sup>Adams, *Meeting House to Camp Meeting*, 62-63.

<sup>77</sup>*ibid.*, 80.

<sup>78</sup>*ibid.*, 81.

<sup>79</sup>*ibid.*, 83.

<sup>80</sup>Earle, *The Sabbath in Puritan New England*, 122-123.

Careful to make communicants fully cognizant of the sacredness of the act in which they were to participate. Preparation was crucial to partaking appropriately of the sacrament.

### **Conclusion**

This historical and theological survey is not simply an academic exercise, but one which presents a binding challenge to the worship of the heirs of the early Puritans. Just as the early Puritan divines felt it to be their sacred duty to enlighten communicants about the weighty matter in which they were preparing to engage, so should ministers among current practitioners in the Congregational Way take seriously their obligation to guide parishioners to an informed understanding about the sacrament. While most adherents to Protestant traditions would balk at the notion of enacting tests by which to measure worthiness of participants in the Lord's Supper, there are certainly ways in which to preserve the intent of the early Puritans in the administration of the sacrament.

One way for pastors to educate communicants is through careful preaching about the meaning of the Lord's Supper. As word and sacrament are inextricably entwined, the word must reveal the sacrament just as the sacrament sheds light on the word. Education is the most basic way by which to inform participants about the sacrament.

A second way that clergy and lay leaders can lead communicants to deeper comprehension of the sanctity of the sacrament is through observing a high degree of reverence in its administration. Attitude can be taught by example. By conveying an attitude of holiness toward the sacrament, those approaching the table can acquire a heightened awareness about the meaning of the Lord's Supper.

The third way that a church can faithfully impart meaning about the sacrament is through regular observance. The early Puritans were very methodical and intentional about their selection of dates of celebration. A standard practice among the Puritan churches was the observance of the sacrament on the first Sunday, or Lord's Day, of the month, regardless of the frequency by which it occurred.

At the opening of this analysis of early Puritan theology and practice of the Lord's Supper, the paradigm of Simeon's embrace was suggested to assist in comprehending the intentionality by which the sacrament was observed and administered. This intentionality was not meant to enslave, burden, or bar participants wishing to come to the table, though this is often an interpretation applied to the Puritans. Rather, it was designed to create within the gathered body of Christ a proper attitude and understanding about the meaning of the sacrament. In this way, the communicant could come to the table, affirm or renew their covenant with God and with one another, and embrace the sacrament fully prepared and aware, just as Simeon embraced the Christ-child.

### **Works Cited**

Adams, Doug. Meeting House to Camp Meeting: Toward a History of American Free Church Worship from 1620 to 1835. Austin, Texas: The Sharing Company, 1981.

Baxter, Richard. The Reformed Pastor. Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1982.

Cragg, Gerald R. Puritanism in the Period of the Great Persecution, 1660-1688. London: Cambridge University Press, 1957.

Davies, Horton. The Worship of the American Puritans, 1629-1730. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1990.

Earle, Alice Morse. The Sabbath in Puritan New England. Williamstown, Massachusetts: Corner House Publishers, 1974.

Hall, David D. The Faithful Shepherd: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1972.

Hambrick-Stowe, Charles E., editor. Early New England Meditative Poetry. New York: Paulist Press, 1988.

Hambrick-Stowe, Charles E. The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England. Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982.

Holifield, E. Brooks. The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England, 1570-1720. London: Yale University Press, 1974.

Von Rohr, John. The Shaping of American Congregationalism, 1620-1957. Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1992.

## Encouraging Mission Involvement

Henry F. (Jack) Brown  
Pilgrim Congregational Church  
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan

One of the recoverable distinctives of the Congregational Way is participation in and promotion of missions. During early post-colonial days Congregationalists were leaders in mission involvement both in direct and indirect ways. There have been notable men and women who have personally served both in domestic and foreign mission projects. Just as significantly Congregationalists have been catalysts for missionary service and support.

“In New England in 1797 what was sometimes known as the Second Great Awakening broke out among the Congregational churches, and continued for a number of years,” writes Kenneth Scott Latourette. ([A History of the Expansion of Christianity; the Great Century](#). p. 77, vol. 4. Harper and Row, 1941) In the wake of these revivals a number of missionary societies were formed. In 1810, through the initiative of a group of Andover Theological Seminary students, the first society dedicated to spread Christianity outside of the American colonies was formed: The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. The leading students in this group were Samuel J. Mills and Adoniram Judson.

Mills, a Congregational minister's son, was 15 when a revival swept across his home county. His own conversion did not come until three years later and with it came a conviction that he should share his blessing abroad. To prepare he went to Williams College in New York, and became a leader of mission-minded students there. Meeting one day in 1806 with three fellow students under a haystack near the college (to get out of a rain storm) they determined to organize themselves into a mission society. Mills went to Yale to study further and to foster interest in missions. From there he entered newly established Andover Theological Seminary, as did others of the “Haystack” group.

Mills remained diligent and faithful in creating missionary interest. He and his colleagues attempted (unsuccessfully) to create mission focused groups at other colleges. At Andover they engaged their teachers and prominent clergy in their dreams.

In 1812 the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions sent out its first group of missionaries, to Asia. Judson went out with his wife (departing as a Congregationalist, but arriving as a Baptist after a prayerful change of heart aboard ship. Thus, the first American missionary to be sent out was a Congregationalist, but the first to step ashore overseas was a Baptist - the same Adoniram Judson!) It is Mills, however, who deserves more of our attention.

Mills, it seems, was intentionally held back from going overseas by his peers because he was so well suited to foster interest in missions. He had a short career, yet he developed much interest, raised financial support and recruited many potential missionaries. He traveled extensively in the States and was at least partially responsible for the plan and formation of the United Christian Missionary Society “organized in 1817 to spread the Gospel among Indians of North America, the inhabitants of Mexico and South America, and in other portions of the heathen and anti-Christian world.” (Latourette, p. 84)

He made but one mission trip abroad, dying on his way home. It is his domestic work which I believe deserves honor - his role as a promoter of missions, as a visionary, as a worker behind the scenes whose contribution was enormous. While Mills' direct participation in missions on the field was negligible, the value of his role in encouraging others to participate is immeasurable. Congregationalists can be proud of one who motivated many to participate actively in the Great Commission and to model cross-culturally the Great Commandment.

In the spirit of this unsung Congregational hero and after his own example I would like to promote one particular facet of mission, the short-term mission trip. Having participated in and led such projects I have found substantial benefits. Research and reflection have further reinforced the value of such

experiences. I would like to promote, in honor of the short-lived (1783-1818), now obscure, but nonetheless highly significant Samuel J. Mills the values of a short-term mission trip, its value to the particular mission visited, to the individuals who participate and to the church from which she or he goes out (and, significantly, will return).

### **What value does a short-term mission have to the mission which is visited?**

The particulars will differ on each trip but generally it can be assumed that expertise and resources will be supplied which would otherwise be very expensive if available at all.

Sometimes the most valuable support is having someone come in to take care of the routine but necessary issues of maintenance, safety, and development of infrastructure, so that the specialized work of the mission can proceed.

Encouragement and new ideas and perspectives can be shared both by "experts" and by individuals with simply a good measure of common sense. Sometimes the mission's aims can be sharpened or better prioritized by shared times of reflection.

Partners in mission will be developed for when the short-term missionaries return home they will promote, pray for, contribute to and otherwise be ambassadors for a mission which has proven itself to be credible and significant.

### **What might a short-term volunteer mission experience in a cross-cultural setting do for participants ?**

It can deepen and give new definition to our faith in Jesus Christ. Confidence in living, sharing, incarnating and even understanding our Christian faith grows as we get out of our accustomed environment and depend on God and try to do, as Mother Teresa would often say, "something beautiful for God."

It can motivate us to a broader and more significant commitment to missions. It prepares us for next steps. It is soul-developing to exercise a little courage; it motivates and invigorates us for even more significant involvement.

It can make us credible promoters of mission because of our experience and reflection on it.

It can show us that (if we feel we are too unskilled, theologically underdeveloped, too unspiritual, and too immature as Christians) we are big enough for God to use. Conversely, if we feel we are too advanced, God can humble us and shrink us to useful size for practical service. We will always find plenty of excuses to not participate. However, if God wants us to be involved there will always be more good reasons to do so than excuses not to, and God will provide if He is calling us.

We are or we become what we think about. A short term mission experience matures, deepens, and "empathizes" us to life all around us. It offers many worthy, noble, excellent, things to think about. (Philippians 4:8) It will sensitize our hearts and motivate us to serve more consistently.

Dr. Quentin J. Shultz in *Moody Monthly*, June 1998 writes, "...engagement with the wider culture helps the church identify its own tribal folly. Like all people, Christians tend to be so set in their ways that they fail to see themselves accurately or to evaluate their culture honestly." A short-term mission gives us perspective and may even free us from burdens we have assumed are required of us because our culture or our church subculture does things a particular way. We learn by coming along side and serving with Christians of other cultures that a lot of things that we supposed were "gospel" are merely cultural. It frees us to see and do things in fresher and better ways.

It allies us with our Congregational heritage and its positive, proactive, and practical contributions to this world. We can be proud of missionaries such as Samuel J. Mills, John Eliot and the Pilgrims themselves

who blessed their world by their faithfulness in reaching out to others in Jesus' name, in significant, helpful, benevolent, evangelical ways.

It allows us to see God as the Provider, *Jehovah Jireh*, in action. Seldom will we have more "God sightings" than as we prepare for and participate in a short-term mission.

We can involve ourselves strategically in a gloomy and under seasoned world as light and salt. Making a little difference can in reality be making a big difference.

Our unique perspective or skill or suggestion on the mission field may go on touching many, many lives after we have returned home. The pleasure of seeing and knowing that we have made a difference with our lives, even if only a relatively small one, will be personally rewarding for months if not years to come. (You may have heard about the young boy who was throwing starfish back into the Gulf of Mexico when a cynical old man asked him if he really thought he was making any difference in the face of the thousands of starfish which were still up on the beach, left high and dry by the tide. The boy said, "It makes a difference to this one!" and kept throwing them back in the ocean one by one.)

It teaches us to be thankful for ordinary things. Have you ever thanked God for drinkable tap water, flushable toilets, consistent electricity, smooth roads, and protein laden food whenever you want to eat it, that your children are not malnourished, that your kids have a playground at school or in a nearby park, for quality health care? I appreciate these things very much after visiting places where they barely exist, if at all.

I am also grateful that God taught me what hospitality is really all about. I have learned from my short-term mission experiences that if I do not have a lot that is no excuse not to share my little. Lessons of hospitality, holistic Christianity and of redemption will be learned without effort. Lessons on joy, heartfelt worship, cross-cultural friendships will be part of the package. 3-D experiences of culture, history, aesthetics, and values will be thrown in for free.

Breaking out of our comfort zones often allows God to move us into new zones of blessing - not always comfortable, but well worth experiencing. When we leave comfortable surroundings behind we become unsettled, but we often underestimate the blessings God has "out there" for us until we go to the place God has in mind for us to serve. Think of Abraham or Jonah in the Old Testament and the blessing God had in store for them in their obedience and service.

Gioacchino Campese in *Missiology* (vol. xxv. No. 2, April, 1997) in his article "*Walk Humbly with Your God!*" quotes the Spanish proverb: *No se llega a Dios con los zapatos limpios*. "God cannot be reached with clean shoes." I put it this way: "Jesus may not come close to us to wash our feet if they never get dirty." We will miss out on His closeness, His touch, His refreshing cleansing. My point is that sometimes we have to do what Jesus says we should do even though we may become "soiled": "Go out in My name...serve after My example...Inasmuch as you do it for the least of these My brothers and sisters, you do it to Me." When we do what He says we will meet Him; He will be there; He will renew us. He certainly has done so for me.

It is a way to "cast your bread upon the waters for in many days it will come back to you." Someone else will benefit from our presence and contribution, and we will as well. When we fulfill our calling or ministry (2 Timothy 4:5 NASB) God generally fulfills us. And when it comes down to it, what we share satisfies us way more than what we keep. Someone once well said that the only things we will take to heaven are the things we give away here on earth. Our time, skills, creative efforts and ideas, acts of hospitality, and friendship are tools fit for use in God's kingdom.

James Chukwuma Okoye, in "*Mutual Exchange of Energies; Mission in a Cross-cultural perspective, An African Point of View.*" *Missiology* (vol. xxv. No. 4, Oct., 1997) speaks of the concept of "missions-in-reverse." He explains how visiting, missionary workers can and should learn from the people to whom they minister. The introduction of the article reminds us that everyone has bread to give and bread they need to receive. While I do not advocate going out on a short-term mission primarily for what we can get

out of it, we will get much out of it and should expect to do so. Part of grace is giving but an equally important part of grace is learning how to receive.

It teaches that Christianity need not be compartmentalized, that it can permeate all of life, while eating and resting, while working and worshipping. It is a little bit of heaven - people with different languages, different life experiences, and different cultures honoring the Lord of life together.

It is a key (necessary?) element in becoming what God has designed us to be - servants. To be a servant we have to serve somewhere. See Isaiah 61:1 ff.

### **What can a short-term mission trip do for our churches?**

If we share the experience, if two or more go out together from our congregation we will likely find that we will have a deeper friendship with those involved than we have ever had before. Friendship is the sharing of experience and reflecting together on it; this kind of shared Christian experience has fostered deeper friendships with fellow church members for me.

It will create mission boosters in our churches. Just as sports teams and band groups in high schools have boosters who make sure that special things happen for the young people they support, the same dynamics result from people who have been on short-term mission projects. Budgetary support, invitations to missionaries to visit our churches, special projects to support missions, creative thinking about mission involvement, personal participation in and insistence on local benevolence project support have all come because of short term mission by members of our congregation.

It fulfills a congregation's vision and ministry foci. Most churches want to serve and thus make service and mission a part of their intentions. Short-term missions are a great way to make real the hopes and ideals of our churches. It opens up other undiscovered possibilities for service nearby and around the world.

It motivates fellow congregants to become involved in short-term missions. We have experienced a growing number of people, including young people, involved in short-term missions. It legitimizes and tends to create more ready support for short-term missions once a precedent is established. Also, better policies come out of experience. Subsequent volunteers go out with less trepidation and more support and direction.

It turns a church from looking inward and over focusing on things that are negative or problematic and allows it to look up and out to new possibilities. It is a real morale builder.

Prioritizing for missions, planning for missions, finding financial support for missions, creating more connections to missions and missionaries all become easier when someone or several from a congregation participate in a short term mission.

People who participate in a short-term mission tend to become more actively involved in their own local church, and in outreach projects locally and nationally. A young man in our church spent 10 weeks in Venezuela working and exploring missions as a vocation to ultimately conclude that his calling was to reach out here in Southeastern Michigan. His witness was to the possibilities for service close at hand.

The best promoters of short-term missions are those who have participated in a successful short-term mission experience. Following is a collection of principles which go a long way to establishing an environment for positive and spiritually satisfying short-term projects:

- Participants represent Jesus whether in public or private; all are ambassadors of Christ, sharing in the work of reconciliation and renewal. [2 Corinthians 5]

- Participants are representatives of the Mission that will be visited and its philosophy and standards all the while we are out of our country; remember to respect the dignity of each person we meet or serve or work with: people in the villages, beggars, policemen, staff members, our team members; we are participating in a mission which is committed to holistic transformation: body, mind and spirit are honored; we want to model this in our relationships, choices, and behavior.
- Participants are going out to help the staff of the mission not to impose on them. (This is the major down-side issue of short-term mission.)
- More can be accomplished side-by-side than alone; each person is an important part of the team. [Nehemiah 3, Ecclesiastes 4:9-12]
- All need to be working to support the mission and ministry of the Mission we are visiting; we develop, build, maintain and repair facilities so they can do the direct ministry they are better equipped to do. Exposure to people of the culture may be limited.
- Participants need to be respectful, flexible, patient, agreeable, open, positive and cooperative, particularly those going to a different culture.
- Participants are going out to bless others, but God has blessings in store for each person; give with generosity; receive with grace.
- Plan to have a good time, but our fun is secondary to our service; be a willing volunteer; do your fair share and a little more.
- We need to take care of ourselves; work hard but rest when you need to; drink a lot of fluids, get enough rest, eat enough to keep up your strength, protect yourself from unique environmental circumstances, speak up if you have a need.
- Short-term missionaries are on a once in a life-time adventure, make the most of it but help others have a good time too. Get to know the other team members as soon as possible; change tables from meal to meal; work with people you do not know well, volunteer for clean-up duty with those you have not yet become acquainted, take the initiative to introduce yourself and to meet others.
- Share what God has given you; if you have a special ability or skill let it be known; within the constraints of the Mission's needs and the short-term mission teams priorities, time and budget, consideration will be given concerning how to use what you have to offer.
- Trust God; rely on His resources. "Two are better than one and a three-bonded cord is not easily broken." [Ecclesiastes 4]; tie all that is done to the Lord.

Participants who follow these principles tend to have positive experiences and often return to serve again with people they have recruited to other short-term projects. While some would prefer to send money rather than become personally and directly involved the fact is that financial support follows rather than precedes these kinds of experiences.

Samuel J. Mills established a wonderful precedent of encouraging and promoting mission involvement. It is time to follow his example and reestablish his policy. The time is ripe for short-term mission involvement. There is a burgeoning interest. In the past five years we have had to turn away many extra applicants for our trips. As Congregationalists we can recover our mission heritage by taking advantage of our opportunity by participating ourselves, by becoming group leaders, and like Samuel J. Mills, by encouraging churches and individuals to get more directly and personally involved.

# Congregationalism and the World Wide Web: A Metaphor for Changing Times

By Rev. Douglas L. Gray  
North Shore Congregational Church  
Fox Point, WI

## Congregationalism and the World Wide Web: A Metaphor for Changing Times

**Introduction.** At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Congregationalism is in an enviable position. Increases in societal diversity and technological connectedness demand more education and tolerance while concurrent increases in people's spiritual interest and awareness of morality's importance suggest a wave of new church goers may be swelling.<sup>1</sup> Coupled with decreasing denominational loyalty<sup>2</sup> and less willingness to believe something just because someone else says it<sup>3</sup>, these trends are pushing churches in all traditions to be paradoxically both more independent and more connected to each other and their communities: Congregationalism (broadly defined) is on the rise as a way of doing church.

Yet the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches and its member churches have struggled in recent years to articulate and draw upon their Congregational identity. We need clear images that speak to those with whom we serve and suggest how we might effectively focus our energies for the future.

**Congregationalism and the Web.** In the final pages of his book, *Weaving the Web: The Original Design and Ultimate Destiny of the World Wide Web by Its Inventor*<sup>4</sup>, Tim Berners-Lee writes provocatively:

The parallels between technical design and social principles have recurred throughout the Web's history. Walking into a Unitarian Universalist church more or less by chance felt like a breath of fresh air. Some of the association's basic philosophies very much match what I had been brought up to believe, and the objective I had in creating the Web. People now sometimes even ask whether I designed the Web based on these principles.<sup>5</sup>

As many of you may remember, the Unitarian-Universalist Association has its roots in the same traditions as Congregationalism. Indeed, at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Unitarian Controversy raged in many Congregational communities.<sup>6</sup> To this day, the Unitarian-Universalist association is Congregational in polity.<sup>7</sup> Thus; most of the parallels Berners-Lee draws between the World Wide Web and Unitarian-Universalism are ones that are true of Congregationalism as well.

**The World Wide Web Defined.** Before comparing and contrasting the World Wide Web with Congregationalism, a brief introduction to the World Wide Web may be helpful. According to Berners-Lee, the "The set of all information accessible using computers and networking, each unit of information identified by a URI [Universal Resource Identifier, a string (often starting with http:) that is used to identify anything on the Web]."□ In his book, *The Internet Church*, Walter Wilson defines the World Wide Web somewhat less cryptically as "A graphical, user-friendly way to find information on the Internet through the use of hypertext linking. Hypertext consists of text and graphic objects that, when you click on them, automatically link you to different areas of a site or to related Internet sites."<sup>9</sup>

The Web has two critical elements: 1) it is information; 2) it is a way of linking associated bits of information. The Web requires four things in order to work: 1) addresses so that the computer can find the desired information; 2) simple rules ("language") that enable very different computers to relate in constructive ways; 3) a person's desire to gain information and 4) a person's willingness to share information. Berners-Lee originally developed the prototypes for the Web as a tool for enabling and enhancing collaboration between scientists and administrators at CERN, the European Particle Physics Laboratory near Geneva, Switzerland.<sup>10</sup> The Web is the primary way most people use the Internet.<sup>11</sup>

**Parallels of Congregationalism and the Web.** What are the parallels between the Web and Congregationalism? Writing about Unitarian Universalist fellowships, Berners-Lee suggests:

Unitarians accepted the useful parts of philosophy from all religions, including Christianity and Judaism, but also Hinduism, Buddhism, and any other good Philosophies, and wrapped them not into one consistent religion, but into an environment in which people think and discuss, argue, and always try to be accepting of differences of opinion and ideas.

...Peer- to – peer relationships are encouraged wherever they are appropriate, very much as the World Wide Web encourages a hypertext link to be made wherever it is appropriate. Both are philosophies that allow decentralized systems to develop, whether they are systems of computers, knowledge or people. The people who built the Internet and Web have a real appreciation of individuals and the value of systems in which individuals play their role, with both a firm sense of their own identity and a firm sense of some common good.

There's a freedom about the Internet; As long as we accept the rules of sending Packets [of information] around, we can send packets containing anything to Anywhere. In Unitarian-Universalism [and hence, Congregationalism as well], if one accepts the basic tenet of mutual respect in working together toward some greater vision, then one finds a huge freedom in choosing one's own words that capture that vision, one's own rituals to help focus the mind, one's own metaphors for faith and hope.

...an environment Unitarian-Universalists...would equally appreciate [is] one of mutual respect, and of building something very great through collective effort that was well beyond the means of any one person – without a huge bureaucratic regime. The environment was complex and rich; any two people could get together and exchange views, and even end up working together somehow. This system produced a weird and wonderful machine, which needed care to maintain, but could take advantage of the ingenuity, inspiration and intuition of individuals in a special way. That, from the start, has been my goal for the World Wide Web.<sup>12</sup>

Using the above and other information from Berners-Lee's *Weaving the Web*, Congregationalism and the Web share three provocative similarities: information and links, simple rules, peer-to-peer diversity, flat and decentralized structure and scalability.<sup>13</sup>

**Information and Links.** Following Christ is about information and links. The early Christians talked about their faith as Good News, information they felt compelled to share as widely as possible. Indeed, their desire to share this information led them to seek out relationships (links) to people with whom they had previously been unconnected. The information of Jesus Christ crucified, for us, risen for us and reigning<sup>14</sup> is the heart of the Gospel and the foundation in one way or another of all Christian faith. Christians are not only called to share the Good News, but also to embody the Good News in the world.

Yet we are not truly the Good News itself, only links to the one who is the Good News – Jesus Christ. As Christians, what sets us apart from non-Christians is a relationship, a “link,” with Jesus Christ.<sup>15</sup> Just as a link on the Web has two aspects – the word/image on which you click and the address to which it points – so, too, do Christians – for (at our best) we are “images” that point to the Author of our faith.<sup>16</sup> This link in turn connects us with others. These links lead us to greater information (i.e., knowledge) of God and how to live for God, and to further links which might never have been made except for that first link. Indeed, the more legitimate ways in which our lives are connected to each other and to God, the truer our information and the better our ability to point others to the Source and the Anchor of our faith.

**Simple “Rules.”** What are the basic “rules” that give Congregationalists freedom? Jesus was asked a similar question and responded, ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Matthew 22:37-39)<sup>1</sup> □ In general, Congregationalists believe these simple rules are best expressed in the following principles:<sup>1</sup> □

1. Christ is Lord. Jesus Christ is the reason our polity exists and the only Way it can continue to exist. Individuals and churches seek to make this truth self-evident in their lives and their living together.
2. We are in this together. We seek to build each other up in our individual and collective relationships with God through mutual respect, mutual sharing of knowledge and encouragement, and mutual burden-bearing.<sup>19</sup>
3. Churches depend completely on God for guidance, and are independent of all other mandatory, external authority. Beyond the first rule, churches do not presume to tell their members what is important.
4. Churches need relationships with each other in order to function effectively and as God intended.
5. All relationships between members are covenantal.

**Peer-to-Peer Diversity.** As Berners-Lee notes, the emphasis on peer-to-peer relations is critical to the Web. Each computer user is equal. On the Web, a person’s race or gender, appearance or disability, are irrelevant. What matters is the equality of a person’s ideas, the capacity of someone to learn, and the ability to communicate with others on the Web. In the same way, those who follow Christ are equal in their belovedness and distinguish themselves only by the nature of their individual gifts. Paul writes “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all people.” (1 Cor. 12:4-6) Our connection with God is what individuals have in common: “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” (1 Cor. 12:13) Our giftedness distinguishes us as individuals, and in part determines how we relate to the church body.

The differences in our giftedness also imply that diversity is important – perhaps essential – to any church fellowship. While Christ is present “wherever two or three are gathered in [His] name,” (Matt. 18:20) the more gifts present in a fellowship, the better it can hear and follow God’s call to ministry.”<sup>20</sup> In the same way, the Web was originally designed to be a tool of collaboration, linking people with questions and interests to people with answers and similar interests. Cultivating the ability to link people and gifts, passion for service and need for service is also one of the primary missions of the church in all its aspects.

**Flat Structure, Decentralized Authority, Scalability.** Inherent in this picture of peers in Christ relating through their giftedness is the flat, decentralized structure of Congregationalism. All have equal access to God and are equally dependent on God’s grace. Beyond the Headship of Jesus Christ, the authority in the Congregational tradition rests not in a hierarchical structure, but a decentralized structure in which all churches are equal in the same that individuals are equal within each fellowship. Local churches voluntarily participate (or not) in associations. The local church decides what language, music, traditions, programs and features to emphasize and how much (if at all) they will follow God’s leading. The authority on the web rests in the individuals who have websites or use the web. These individuals are voluntary participants in the cyberspace community and must decide what language to use, what features to include, whether or not to uphold the ethical principles on which the Web is based. This flat structure enables easy and multiple connections as well as the free flow of information.

**Scalability.** Congregationalism and the Web function on a number of different levels: individual, local, regional, national and international.<sup>21</sup> This flat, decentralized structure means the design principles for both the Web and Congregationalism “scale:” principles true on one level hold true on all levels.<sup>22</sup> We know instinctively that this is true of Christian faith in general and Congregationalism in particular for we

see it all the time: the Exodus event reflected in the life of a young person who shakes an addiction, the crucifixion in a local church when it decides to live faithfully in an urban environment when the rest of the neighbors are fleeing to the suburbs, Pentecost in the enthusiasm present in a national or regional fellowship which catches God's vision as it is made real through them. That Congregational principles (see "Simple Rules" above) are applicable for individuals in relation to a local church or a local church in relation to a regional, national, or international association means that Congregationalism "scales." Moreover, as finite expressions of the infinite, the symbols, myths and experiences of our faith as individuals become vital tools for approaching life on all scales.

Altogether, the similarities between Congregationalism and the Web are suggestive if not compelling. Yet as we look more deeply at Congregationalism and the Web, four primary challenges appear: the ultimate value God attaches, the particularity of Christ, the threat of fragmentation, and the hope for the future. Because Congregationalism and the Web scale, one may quite rightly your own examples at other levels of organization based on the principles we have discussed.

**The Ultimate Value God Attaches.** The first and most obvious contrast between Congregationalism and the Web is that people are more than information and relationships. One of the primary principles in the Christian faith is that each person is of ultimate value to God. This principle rests on, among other things, Christ's willingness to die on our behalf to make atonement for the sins of each and every person. (Romans 3:21-26) To say that a person is merely "information" or a "link" seems to minimize his or her value. Moreover, as information and links are becoming commodities of the Information Age, increasingly people will be seen not as individuals with souls and loves and joys and sorrows, but as commodities. As followers of the One who has numbered the hairs on our heads and who finds value even in the life of a sparrow, we must stand fast in our affirmation that individuals are more than the sum of their information and relationships.

**The Particularity of Christ.** With the advent of the Web and the Internet, people have access to an amazing (and increasing) variety of religious and spiritual options. In such a pluralistic world, advocating particularity of any kind seems doomed. Yet this is not the first time that Christianity has seen pluralism of this kind. In the first century, much of the western world was polytheistic. What we could call curious even bizarre religious practices, cults and philosophies proliferated in nearly endless variety; the depth of people's spiritual hunger meant they were interested and willing to try virtually anything. How, then, can someone say there is only one way? Where the web has a completely flat structure that accommodates – even advocates – the greatest pluralism possible and can only be hindered by bottlenecks of exclusive proprietorship, as Christians and as Congregationalists, we put ourselves under exclusive proprietorship as slaves to Christ. Jesus himself put it even more strongly, "I am the Way and the Truth and the Light. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) This will seem scandalous to some people in our time, but it was just as great a scandal in the time of the early church<sup>23</sup> and it became the passion of the Pilgrims and the Puritans during the Reformation. Nevertheless, the scandal of the particularity of Christ and His servants is part of God's plan: "...we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Cor, 1:23-24)

**The Threat of Fragmentation.** One of the recurrent themes in Berners-Lee's history of the Web is the danger of people putting up barriers of language and trust that would fragment the Web.<sup>24</sup> The reality is that fragmentation is as much a threat to continuing Congregationalism. More and more churches are satisfied with being islands unto themselves, with little or no commerce between. Some Congregationalists draw boundaries of language. They seem to say, "If you do not talk about God the way I do, I will not share your company or work with you." Other Congregationalists raise barriers of "theology." They seem to say, "If you do not believe as I do, I will not trust you with our church's young people or other ministries." The most popular of these barriers lies between the arbitrary and destructive terms, "liberal" and "conservative." In no way am I denigrating the obligation of an individual or local church to follow the leading of God, a critical element of how we believe God works in and through us. Nevertheless, our covenant with Christ and with each other and the bonds of love with which we willingly bind ourselves, seem to preclude this. Under the Headship of Christ, pluralism is an inescapable part of Congregational fellowship. Any time a person, group or church refuses to participate in the shared life of

worship, fellowship and mission, they preclude collaboration, fragment the community into which God has called us and weaken the Congregational Way. Perhaps most seriously, these barriers are contrary to the Gospel: "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." (Romans 14:19)<sup>2</sup> Congregationalism depends on the web of trust between individuals and between churches, and this web in turn rests on the love of Christ and the promise of the Holy Spirit to make us one.<sup>2</sup>

**Implications for the Future of Congregationalism.** Comparing and contrasting Congregationalism with the Web strongly indicates where, as Congregationalists, we should be focusing our energies.

1. Increasing the amount of information (i.e., knowledge, capacity, skills, etc.)
2. Increasing the number of links (i.e., relationships) between people and God
3. Increasing the number of links between people.
4. Encouraging people's knowledge of and desire for the common good.
5. Reducing barriers and boundaries.

**Local Church.** The local church was the key to the early church; the key to early Congregationalism and it will become even more the key to the success of Congregationalism in the future.

Local churches can advocate even more strongly that every member is a minister. The local church increasingly will become an equipping center, where people come to gain the knowledge, tools and relationships they need to minister during the week. In addition to basic Christian education, churches will provide devotionals and Bible study helps for families, opportunities for talking about God with their co-workers, assistance in how to make God part of their daily life, and training in how to use their God-given gifts.

Local churches will need to become incubators for creative collaboration between members. In recent years, the traditional committee structure seems to encourage people to talk about ministry more than doing the ministry. New and creative collaborations will begin when one gifted person with a passion finds another with the same passion, but perhaps a different gift. Combining their gifts and buoyed by their enthusiasm for serving God in a particular arena, these people have the potential to be highly effective. What they from the church is not rules or procedures or permission (these are barriers that make ministry harder), but encouragement and access to more information or equipment than they might have individually. As the members follow God's leading and their ministry grows, they will need others with more experience to avoid pitfalls and to add structure. Local churches then become advocates for more and more member-to-member links that will lead to more member – to - nonmember links which encourage nonmember – to - God links. The result for many churches will be an explosion of small (and large) ministry collaboration teams, with pastors and church boards equipping and supporting rather than directly leading or micro managing.

For tackling community wide challenges, successful local churches will engage other local churches in collaborations congregational – to – congregation. Banded together, local churches multiply their effectiveness to rebuild neighborhoods, provide outstanding opportunities for ministry and fellowship, provide safe havens for children, feed the hungry, offer hospitality to the homeless and more.

In addition to building up the knowledge of God and connections between people and God, local churches will find themselves standing against the barriers and boundaries imposed by the world. Local churches will quite rightly perceive that these barriers and exclusion zones are not of God and interfere with the vision God has for God's children. Barriers of race and economics, gender and language cannot stand when the Spirit of God moves in God's people.

Worship then becomes a place where ministers allow God to recharge, re-equip, re-inspire and re-commission them for God's work during the week. Worship is about re-connecting people not only to God, but to each other, and so experience the joy of being connected, enlivened, emboldened. Pastors help people to look beyond themselves, invite people to become impassioned servants, and encourage people as they grow in their knowledge of themselves, each other and God.

**Associations.** Associations will have similar goals as the local church. Just as the local church works with individuals to encourage and equip them for ministry, so the associations (regional and national) do the same. Just as local churches exist to meet individual needs, so associations exist to meet the needs of local churches and encourage ministries. Successful associations will endeavor:

- Â to provide ways to link people and churches with passions with people with needs (service)
- Â to provide ways to link people and churches with passions with others who share the same passions (collaboration)
- Â to act as an equipping/training center for local churches and their leadership, and
- Â to reduce barriers to the effectiveness and inclusiveness of those who seek to serve Jesus Christ.<sup>27</sup>

The National Association, for example, then becomes a way of linking geographically disparate churches and individuals together for fellowship, information sharing and collaboration. Collaborative enterprises could include ministry ideas, mission trips, Sunday School curriculum, sharing information on church structures and policies, and would be limited only by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and people's desire to collaborate.

**Are We Who We Say We Are?** In a sense, individuals, churches and associations will always fall short of the glory God has in store for us.<sup>28</sup> We are after all human. Nevertheless, as Congregationalists we affirm that God's Spirit communicates to each and every disciple of Jesus and is at work not only in each of them, but is also at work in local churches and associations between churches both directly and through individuals. Moreover, we are in the process of being transformed by Christ so that we might in turn transform others.

On the one hand, we are a long way from where God wishes us to be, let alone becoming who we say we are. That divisions exist at the national level is evident to any who sit and observe a National Association Annual Meeting. Some regions are not keeping faith with their sister churches in the ordering of vicinage councils, or in calling a vicinage council with no intention of hearing or heeding its advise. Differences are not dangerous to us, but divisions and divisiveness are anathema for they split the Body of Christ which is meant to be one in Christ. Another problem is structural. Many of the traditional committee structures so common in traditional churches (and after which so many of the associations were patterned) are failing if they have not already done so. The NACCC's wrestling with structure in recent years is indicative of what many churches encounter. A third serious problem is that some people have elevated Congregational polity to an idolatrous degree. Arthur Rouner reminds us that our Puritan forebears would be appalled by this.

Did they become Congregationalists just because they did not like the form and government of the established church? Not for a minute! Church polity was no sacred thing to them. Their concern was far different from ecclesiastical politics. Their concern was for Christ.<sup>29</sup>

Congregational polity is useful only insofar as it serves the faith of those who follow Christ.<sup>30</sup> Clearly, every layer of Congregationalism has work to do.

On the other hand, many of our fellowship (on all levels) have a strong sense of the Presence of God in their midst. The worship at association meetings is often inspired and inspiring. What is probably a quiet majority at every level is about the work of God, making connections, starting ministries, and reaching across barriers. We also have reasonably appropriate structures begun or already in place – locally, regionally and nationally – that the future requires. These structures scale reasonably well, despite the difficulties mentioned above. Vicinage councils and *ad hoc* local collaborations between churches are two kinds of associations particularly suited for the future. God is at work among us. The hope we have in the resurrection scales as well.

We are not who we say we are, but the explosion in the use of the Web and people's increasing interest in matters spiritual suggests that the need for who we say we are, and more importantly, are *becoming* is enormous. Living and serving within the Congregational Way enables the ultimate mixture of responsiveness to God's leading, creativity of faith expression, and support of mutual service. The Congregational Way stands at the threshold of exciting and potentially explosive growth and change.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.  
(Hebrews 12:1-3)

#### Excursus: The World Wide Web in "Real World" Terms

To draw on a geographical metaphor, if the Internet is the information superhighway, then our individual computer is like a car. The World Wide Web is the country to which we drive, going to homes or businesses or churches (i.e., websites) in the World Wide Web that are specified by addresses. In order to get from our starting point to our destination, we type the address of our destination into our navigator (i.e., web browser) and it takes us there. Let's say that you go to a friend's home (i.e., a personal website). When you arrive at someone's home, you come into the foyer and look around. Imagine this foyer has lots of doors (these are really "doorways to other places) with labels (what Wilson called "hypertext") on them. You can choose what door you want to go through by touching the label (i.e., clicking on it with the mouse). Some of these doors go to other rooms in your friend's home (i.e., individual web pages of a website). But some of these doors might take you to your friend's church or to your friend's hair stylist or to your friend's favorite mission projects in Mexico and the Philippines. By clicking on these labels, you ask your navigator to take you and your computer to these other addresses (i.e., websites). The speed of "movement," the accessibility to all sorts of information we might otherwise not encounter, and the level of connectedness the World Wide Web facilitates are part of what makes the Web so exciting.

<sup>1</sup>George Gallup and Timothy Jones, *The Next American Spirituality* (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications, 2000), pp. 24-29

<sup>2</sup>C. Jeff Woods, *Congregational Megatrends* (NY: Alban Institute, 1996), p. 66; also Loren Meade's *Transforming Congregationals for the Future* (NY: Alban Institute, 1994), p. 85.

<sup>3</sup>Gallup and Jones, *op. cit.*, p.

<sup>4</sup>NB: Al Gore did *not* invent the Internet or the World Wide Web!

<sup>5</sup>Berbers-Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

<sup>6</sup>Gaius Glenn Atkins and Frederick L. Fagley, *History of American Congregationalism* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1942), pp. 122-134. The Unitarians and the Universalists merged in 1828.

<sup>7</sup>"Unitarian Universalist Association: Principles and Purposes," available at [www.uua.org/main.html](http://www.uua.org/main.html), maintained by The Unitarian Universalist Association.

<sup>8</sup>Berners-Lee, *op.cit.*, pp. 218, 219.

<sup>9</sup>Walter P. Wilson, *The Internet Church* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), p. 174. Wilson argues persuasively that Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the first century have access to extensive networks laid down decades before that pave the way for the growth of the Gospel. For those unfamiliar with the World Wide Web, see the attached "Excursus: The World Wide Web in 'Real World' Terms." For other explanations of the World Wide Web, please see any of the veritable army of books about the internet and the World Wide Web. Virtually all of these offer a decent explanation. For a more technical explanation, try exploring a manual on HTML, "Hyper Text Markup Language." Hereafter, I will use the term, "the Web," in place of "The World Wide Web."

<sup>10</sup>Any further basic understanding of the World Wide Web is beyond the scope of this paper.

Additional information from Tim Berners-Lee can be found at [www.w3.org/People/Berners-Lee/Weaving](http://www.w3.org/People/Berners-Lee/Weaving).

<sup>11</sup>Please note that the Internet and the World Wide Web are not synonymous. The Internet is a much broader designation that includes a number of networking and connection possibilities. The Internet began in the 1970's as a way to link several Department of Defense supercomputers. While the Internet encompasses and bears some similarities to the Web, the Web is a more manageable discussion area and has more clearly defined design principles.

<sup>12</sup>Berners-Lee, *op.cit.*, pp. 208-9.

<sup>13</sup>Four websites will be of interest to those wishing more information on the design principles of the World Wide Web. Tim Berners-Lee, "Design Principles of the World Wide Web," available at [www.w3.org/DesignIssues](http://www.w3.org/DesignIssues), maintained by the World Wide Web consortium (which seeks to guide the future of the World Wide Web). David Gibson, Jon Kleinberg and Prabhakar Raghavan, "Structural Analysis of the World Wide Web," available at [www.w3.org/1998/11/05/WC-workshop/Papers/kleinberg1.html](http://www.w3.org/1998/11/05/WC-workshop/Papers/kleinberg1.html). Brian Carpenter, "Architectural Analysis of the Web," available at [ftp.isi.edu/in-notes/rfc1958.txt](http://ftp.isi.edu/in-notes/rfc1958.txt), maintained by the Internet Architecture Board. Tim Berners-Lee and other members of the Consortium, various presentations, available at [www.w3.org/Talks](http://www.w3.org/Talks). This site includes some video and audio resources.

<sup>14</sup>See, for example, Acts 2:22-24; 1 Cor. 15:3-8, 12-29

<sup>15</sup>God is the Source and the Originator of this link. We respond to God's desire for relationship and give it a place in our lives when we choose to follow Christ.

<sup>16</sup>This would naturally lead to a comparison with the Orthodox ideas of "icon" and the ways in which "images" participate in the reality of that which they portray. A good introduction to icons is Jeannette Angell-Torosian's, "Windows on the Holy," *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, edited by Robert Webber, (Nashville, TN: Star Song Press, 1994), *Volume 4: Music and the Arts in Christian Worship*, pp. 620-623.

<sup>17</sup>One might argue this can be simplified even further, as in the prayer Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Yet not as I will, but as you will...may your will be done" (Matt. 26:39, 42)

<sup>18</sup>Good resources abound for these principles. One very accessible source is Arthur Rouner's *The Congregational Way of Life* (Milwaukee: Hammond Publishing, 1960), all of which is applicable, but the principles are summarized on pp. 29-36. Another excellent source is the pamphlet, *Principles and Practices of Congregational Churches*, by Dr. Lloyd Hall and Rev. Karl Schimpf (Milwaukee, WI:) Congregational Press, 1995.

<sup>19</sup>The words of Fawcett's lyric (Pilgrim Hymnal, #272) are particularly appropriate here:

"Before our Father's throne  
We pour our ardent prayers;  
Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one,  
Our comforts and our cares."

"We share each other's woes,  
Each other's burdens bear,  
And often for each other flows  
The sympathizing tear."

<sup>20</sup>Of course, this is according to human logic. God's Providence suggests that any church fellowship, founded and faithful to God's glory, will have the gifts it needs to answer God's call faithfully, and that as new occasions arise the require other gifts, God will draw people with these gifts into the circle of a fellowship.

<sup>21</sup>Actually both function on many more levels than these, but these are representative.

<sup>22</sup>The Web and Congregationalism also "scale" in the sense that adding or withdrawing units is a simple process. To add a network of 300 web pages to the Web is no more difficult that adding a single webpage or user; the additions will not necessitate reworking the structure of the Web. Similarly, whether we are adding one or many, large or small local congregations to our associations, including them in our circle of relationships is simple and straightforward, requiring little if any structuring of our association, even we were to add entirely new regions or incorporate another national association into the NACCC's current structure. While this quality of scalability is true of Congregationalism in some limited ways, it is

particularly valuable when applied to the Web. Perhaps additional steps towards scalability in this sense would be an asset to churches, but this is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>23</sup>See Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25.

<sup>24</sup>Berners-Lee, *op.cit.*, especially the chapters 9-13.

<sup>25</sup>Paul addresses a divisive issue in the early church – whether or not a Christian could eat food that had been sacrificed to an idol. Paul continues, “Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall. So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God.” (Romans 14:20-22a)

<sup>26</sup>The Savoy Declaration summarizes this nicely, “All saints that are united to Jesus Christ their Head, by His Spirit and Faith, although they are not made thereby one person with Him, have fellowship in His Graces, Sufferings, Death, Resurrection and Glory: and being united to one another in love, they have communion in each others gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, publique and private, as do conduct to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward Man.” Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983), pp. 396-7.

<sup>27</sup>Loren Meade, *op.cit.*, chapter, “The Role of the Judicatory,” should be required reading for any association leader.

<sup>28</sup>Romans 3:21-26; Romans 7:14-24.

<sup>29</sup>Rouner, *op.cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup>A more recent treatment of Congregational freedom may be found in “Freedom and Truth: The Congregational Way Meets the World,” *A Past with a Future: Continuing Congregationalism into the Next Millennium*, edited by Steven A. Peay, (Wauwatosa, WI: The Congregational Press, 1998), pp. 49ff., where she writes, “...freedom cannot live on its own apart from the content and substance of our faith.”

## ***Crisis of Credibility in Leadership Formation[1] Changes Needed In Theological Education***

Manfred Waldemar Kohl\*

The statement 'Theological education is at the center of Christianity - as the seminary goes, so goes the church' must be taken seriously. The theological school determines the direction of the church of the future. The professors' lectures, seminars, and textbooks are the foundation on which the leadership of our churches and Christian organizations is built. Pastors, missionaries, and evangelists put into practice what they are taught and pass on their knowledge and experience to people in their churches, mission work, or outreach ministries.

It follows, then, that the lives of church members and the ministries in which they are involved will reflect what is taught in the theological schools. The direction in which a theological school is moving, any failure to communicate basic and essential elements of the faith or of ministry, any undue emphasis on particular formations or functions of ministry will all be replicated in the ministries of the students. It is therefore essential to take a closer, in-depth look at the emphases in current theological education in order to determine whether or not future Christian leaders are receiving the best possible training for doing ministry.[2] It will also be helpful to look at some examples of programs and approaches which, I believe, are addressing the issue of making training for theological education more effective and sustainable.

I work with Overseas Council International, an organization which supports and coaches the leadership of one hundred theological schools, primarily in the non-Western world. Meeting constantly with these leaders of seminaries, colleges and universities provides me with a fairly accurate picture and understanding of the status of Christian leadership formation today. Overseas Council has just compiled a list of all theological schools, faculties, seminaries, and Bible colleges worldwide. There are more than 7,000 such institutions in existence today.[3] In spite of the existence of accreditation agencies and standards, the differences in educational levels and methods of learning in these institutions are so extreme that any attempt at comparison or categorization are futile from the outset.

In February 2000 in Nairobi, Kenya, a continent-wide consultation took place between leaders of churches and leaders of theological institutions. Similar meetings have been held recently in Kiev, Moscow, and Oradea.[4] It is quite evident from the discussions at these consultations that the theological institution and the local church are not working towards supporting each other. It cannot even be said that they exist parallel to each other. The relationship seems, rather, to be tending toward confrontation. On the one hand, one hears at these consultations statements such as 'The products turned out by our theological schools are of no use to any church.' On the other hand, theological educators express disappointment and frustration that 'the churches have no desire to be supportive partners of the theological training program.' It seems, therefore, that both theological institutions and churches are tending to live more and more in isolation from each other, to the detriment of both in terms of effectiveness. One expert has stated that 'there is no other professional organization in the world which allows its primary professional training institutions to produce graduates who are generally as functionally incompetent as the church permits her seminaries.'[5]

John Vawter describes a meeting of several hundred pastors and Christian leaders at which ministry in the nineties was being discussed. 'When the discussion turned to seminary education', he says, 'the room was electric when one panel member said, with great fervor and emotion, "Seminary education in general has only four things wrong with it: it is taught by the wrong people in the wrong place with the wrong curriculum and has the wrong oversight."'[6]

Churches send students who have a heart for ministry, an eagerness for mission, and a zeal for evangelism to be prepared and equipped, and three years later these students graduate from seminary theologically confused, having lost their commitment and often being totally unprepared for the task which they had hoped to accomplish and for which they had come to seminary to be trained. Are boards of

directors and trustees of seminaries, and accrediting agencies, evaluating the effectiveness of theological education in terms of a realistic 'outcome assessment'?

Academic education in the fields of medicine, law, and business has changed drastically over the last few decades. Theological education has remained basically the same for a century, and the newly emerging theological schools mushrooming in the non-western world, especially in countries such as Ukraine, Philippines, and Nigeria,[7] seem to be following the same direction. New beginnings, like new wine, are being confined to old wineskins.[8]

If we believe that improvement requires change and that successful leadership in ministry requires strategic planning and futuristic orientation, we must have the courage to develop new directives as we train men and women for ministry. I would like to recommend the following:

### **Changes in Subjects to Be Taught**

Most seminaries measure success by pure academic exercise, minimizing the requirements for development of spiritual maturity and ministry experience. Character formation,[9] servant leadership, and spiritual modeling are not automatic outcomes of academic excellence. Academic achievement should, at most, take second place to the development of these personal characteristics.[10]

Time and effort spent in the tedious and frustrating work of attempting to learn -- and hardly ever mastering -- Hebrew, Greek, or Latin, and of doing word studies or syntax analysis would be better devoted to courses in Christianity and culture, servant leadership, mission and discipleship, communication, and various other practical ministry aspects.

If the focus on evangelism, missions, and discipleship, with an emphasis on practical involvement in these activities, is not at the center of theological education, churches will start their own mini-seminaries for their prospective leaders instead of sending them to the established theological institutions.[11]

In the Murdock Study,[12] conducted only a few years ago, 800 individuals involved in various aspects of ministry were interviewed. These individuals came up with what they considered to be the ten essential subjects that should be taught at every theological seminary:

1. Ministry and spirituality
2. English Bible
3. Historical overview of Christianity
4. Christianity and culture
5. Evangelism and mission
6. Spiritual leadership
7. Hermeneutics
8. Theology of ministry
9. Personal growth and skill development
10. Communication

It is time for our curricula to be based on what is needed for the graduate to enter, or to continue in, his ministry, rather than on the hobbies of professors based on their own dissertations and research.

When the Murdock Study asked the 800 lay people, pastors, and seminary professors the question 'What should be the five priorities in the preparation of a pastor?' the lay people and the pastors put theological knowledge at the bottom of the list, whereas seminary professors said that it should rank at the top.

### **Changes in Missiological Emphasis**

During the debate on theological education, voices emphasizing the missiological perspective - including discipleship - were in the minority. Costas,[13] following Kähler's thesis that mission is the mother of theology, developed a model in which he placed mission at the center of God's purposes and thus made it the responsibility of all the people of God. He understands that theological education is a significant expression of mission, identifies Jesus' relationship with his disciples as the basic model it should follow, recognizes the missiological background to the major divisions of the curriculum, and affirms the informational, formational, and transformational character of all aspects of ministry training.[14] The great South African missiologist D. J. Bosch[15] writes 'Just as the church ceases to be the church if it is not missionary, theology ceases to be theology if it loses its missionary character . . . We are in need of a missiological agenda for theology rather than just a theological agenda for mission; for theology, rightly understood, has no reason to exist other than critically to accompany the missio Dei.'[16]

The very thorough work of Banks in exploring a missional alternative to current models deserves serious attention. Banks provides numerous models for including missional emphasis as the main character of theological education. At the recent International Consultation on Discipleship[17] several of the presenters stressed that theological education must focus more on missiological emphasis in order to do justice to the mandate of biblical discipleship. It is quite alarming that, according to the Murdock Study, neither lay people, pastors, or professors considered mission or discipleship to be among the top five priorities in the preparation of a pastor. Jesus taught his students / disciples to be fishers of men, and gave them the Great Commission (Mt. 28:19-20) as their plan of action.

### **Changes in the Area of Field Work**

Most seminaries require that their students engage in some field work, usually on weekends or on semester breaks. Some of these activities are supervised; most are not.

In the field of medicine, the training program was changed decades ago to require every student of medicine to be involved in a mentoring program, working in a 'teaching hospital' for up to three years. The student is an integral member of the senior physician's team, visiting every hospital patient, helping to diagnose the sickness and to determine the needed treatment. They even assist in the operating theater. This same mentoring process is needed in theological education. Some theological schools have now included in their program 'teaching churches', where a student is mentored for one to two years under the tutelage of a senior pastor or a pastoral team. The student (pastor-to-be or missionary-to-be) learns his future work step by step. He learns from his mentor how to prepare a sermon, how to begin the practice of prayer and fasting, how to engage in a devotional or 'quiet' time, how to handle staff, finances, and board meetings, how to deal with both supportive and critical deacons. He sits in on counseling sessions, participates in weddings and funerals, etc. He is exposed first hand to all the positive and negative experiences he will face later in his ministry. All these mentors (senior pastors, missionaries, evangelists) are part of the faculty of the theological institution, just as are the professors who teach history, communication, or culture.

By means of this mentoring process, a student comes directly into contact with the ordinary men, women, and children to whom he will later be ministering on his own after graduation. He learns to listen to them, to understand their needs and their way of thinking, and to speak their language. In Christian ministry one has to become bilingual. We must learn to live, think, and speak in two completely different languages: the language of the Bible and the language of modern man.

A recent survey discovered that more than half of the professors of theological institutions do not belong to, nor do they attend, a local church. How then can they prepare men and women for the ministry of the

local church? It is time for us to take another look at the role model provided by our professors and teachers.[18] Academic freedom and tenure in our theological institutions can have lasting negative implications and should be thoroughly reviewed. Theological teachers, like pastors, must have clearly defined job descriptions. Their performance must be reviewed, and they must be held accountable by their board of directors or trustees. Such provisions should be made a requirement for academic accreditation for the institution.[19]

### **Changes in Organizational Structures**

Churches which continue to expect people to come to them to be ministered to will not survive. Churches that are alive, growing, and effective have developed ministries to reach people where they are. This same trend applies to the seminary. With the rapid explosion of electronic means of communication, teaching within four walls will change drastically. Extension programs and part time and evening studies in various locations must be the strategy of theological institutions of the future.

The recent unprecedented expansion in theological education by extension (TEE) around the world is clearly based on a felt need. For the church, especially in the non-western world, TEE provides essential theological tools and open doors to theological education for people previously excluded by age, educational level, social position, sex, or occupation. It establishes new relationships between training programs and the church, between teachers and students, between theory and practice, between clergy and laity. It equips more people for ministry.

(Eph 4:12)[20]

According to Tim Dearborn, director of the Seattle Association for Theological Education, '[T]heological education is best provided to part-time students who are full-time Christian servants. Training for ministry should occur in ministry, rather than before ministry. Students need the time to integrate into their lives that which they are learning.'[21]

In terms of campus location and buildings and of residence requirements for students in order to enable them to use the library and attend classes, enormous changes are in progress. For instance, today one CD Rom, available in any Christian book store, contains the works of all the church fathers, reformers, and modern missionaries -- more than 500 books. Another contains journal articles in theology over the last 50 years. On the web I have access to virtually everything written within the last few years. It can be downloaded and printed from my laptop, right in my study corner in my own home. Within a short time I will be able to have in one shoebox what is contained in a library of 50,000 volumes. Electronically transferred means of lecturing, even the ability to participate in group discussions, is already being practiced in numerous places. We will always need a home base for a theological institution, but diversity - theological education without walls - will become more and more the norm.

The board of a theological institution should encourage the leadership to develop a strategic plan which includes the following seven steps:

1. identify, clarify, and formulate the mission and purpose for the theological school
2. identify specific goals and objectives in fulfilling the mission and purpose
3. identify courses, programs, teachers, and mentors who can meet the goals and objectives
4. identify the resources necessary for implementation
5. analyze and compare resources needed to resources available
6. develop a series of one-year plans of action, with budgets
7. plan and develop a system for periodic evaluation[22]

Any theological institution that has not developed a clear institutional development concept, with a strategic plan as its outcome, will struggle to be effective; it may not even survive.

### **Changes in Dealing with Financial Resources**

A few of the established theological institutions in the west are blessed with enormous financial resources, primarily from designated bequests and endowment funds. Most theological schools and training centers around the world, however, have financial difficulties. Costs rise faster than students can procure the necessary tuition fees. Scholarships are limited and, in many cases, decreasing in number, and funding agencies, foundations, and the donor community at large are asking penetrating questions before any funding is offered. Denominational headquarters, Christian funding groups, mission agencies, etc. have more difficulty in generating funds today than in the past. Theological institutions must begin to develop their own financial resources.[23]

Although wealth and sharing are two of the major issues addressed in both the Old and New Testaments, and although Jesus spoke about giving more than about any other single issue, most theological schools do not deal with this subject and have had no course on it in their curriculum. As a result, financial giving for Christian ministry in general and for theological education in particular is still minimal in most churches. Seminars, courses, and lectures on topics such as 'Biblical Stewardship', 'Giving and Sharing', and 'Christian Fundraising' should be mandatory for every theological school. Only if the theological school and the local church begin to teach and preach with conviction that everything – all that we are and all that we have – belongs to God and not to human beings will there be sufficient resources and finances for future Christian ministry, including theological education.[24]

There are literally thousands of organizations and foundations, many of which will provide funding for theological education projects. One should therefore not rely only on the few well-known foundations which are specifically Christian. The right match, the right project, and the right timing are important. Museums, cultural programs, sport activities, environmental groups, medical research and others receive substantial financial support from foundations. It is indeed time that Christian leadership initiatives, especially theological education projects, begin to apply for funding for projects such as libraries, books and journals, computer labs, research and publication projects, staff assistance, study grants, conferences, facilities, and other needs.[25]

Fundraising includes good communication. How can a willing individual donor, business enterprise, community group, multi-national company, government agency, embassy, or foreign government representative begin to contribute to a theological school if they have never heard or seen that school mentioned in the media? Christian leadership formation is a topic which can be presented in an exciting and appealing way.

Unfortunately, several theological schools have lost many supporters because designated funds have not been used for the purpose for which they were designated.[26] Credibility that is above reproach is the most critical issue for successful fundraising.

### **Conclusion**

Theological education must always be seen as a process,[27] and only when teaching is made effective in practice will the word of God receive proper place.[28]

In my position with Overseas Council International I have the unique advantage of observing and evaluating theological schools all over the world, and I would like to share three observations regarding negative aspects which I believe must be overcome:

1. Theologians within theological institutions like to talk and debate, often with few results. It seems that action or change is to be avoided at any cost.
2. Theologians within theological institutions like to focus on the past. To plan ahead, to think futuristically, seems to be outside their comfort zone.
3. Theologians within theological institutions seem to have difficulties with issues of management, fundraising, and outcome oriented assessment.

Revival is not only the result of the working of the Holy Spirit in the past, as recorded in history. A new focus on the essentials must become reality today.

## ENDNOTES

031 Current Trends final

-----

\* Manfred Waldemar Kohl (MTh, ThD, Harvard University and American Center for Congregational Studies; DMin, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary) serves as Vice-President for International Development for Overseas Council International, an organization which assists theological schools, primarily in the non-western world. He is a founding member of the International Congregational Fellowship, served as chairperson from 1985-89. He is on the ICF executive committee and co-chairs its Theological Commission.

[1] I presented a paper on the same topic in May 2000 at the Odessa Theological Seminary, Odessa, Ukraine, as part of the "Celebration of 2000 Years of Christianity." The paper was published in the proceedings of the conference in the Russian language. A similar article appeared in the *International Congregational Journal* No. 1 (2000) under the title "Current Trends in Theological Education."

[2] The discussion began five decades ago with H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry: Reflections on the Aims of Theological Education* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950) and H. Richard Niebuhr, Daniel Day Williams, and James M. Gustafson, *The Advancement of Theological Education: The Summary Report of a Mid-Century Study* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).

A generation later, in the 1980s and early 1990s, the debate on theological education intensified. Here are some of the most significant publications: Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) and *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988); Max L. Stackhouse, *Apologia: Contextualization, Globalization, and Mission in Theological Education* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988); Joseph C. Hough, Jr., and John B. Cobb, Jr., *Christian Identity and Theological Education* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985); David H. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological about a Theological School?* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992); D.G. Hart and R. Albert Mobles, Jr. (eds.), *Theological Education in the Evangelical Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996); Thomas C. Oden, *Requiem: A Lament in Three Movements* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995); Harry L. Poe, 'The Revolution in Ministry Training', *Theological Education* 33.1 (1996), pp. 25-27; Barbara G. Wheeler and Edward Farley (eds.), *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991). For a good summary of all the material available see W. Clark Gilpin, 'Basic Issues in Theological Education: A Selected Bibliography', *Theological Education* 25 (Spring 1989), pp. 115-21.

The most recent publication is Robert Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999). In the recent issues of *Theological Education* the debate has been picked up again. The *Theological Forum* also had a series of articles in their 1999 editions entitled 'Theological Education for a New Millennium'.

[3] Jack Graves, Overseas Council International, PO Box 17368, Indianapolis, IN 46217, USA. This material can be obtained electronically on a disk, or as a hard copy.

[4] The Nairobi consultation was sponsored by the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology, Nairobi, Kenya, and the African Theological Accrediting Association.

The Euroasian Accrediting Association, in conjunction with Overseas Council International, conducted theological consultations in Kiev in 1999, in Moscow in 1997, and in Oradea in 1995. These recent consultations have addressed, as have many others in the past, the ancient question formulated by the North African Church Father Tertullian (c.160-c.220), 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?' In today's language, the question would be 'What does the training center / academic program have to do with the church?'

[5] Tim Dearborn, 'Preparing New Leaders for the Church of the Future: Transforming Theological Education through Multi-Institutional Partnerships', *Transformation* (December 1996).

[6] John Vawter, 'Seminaries: Surviving or Thriving?', *Faculty Dialogue* 23 (1995), p. 41. See also Mark Young, 'Theological Approaches to Some Perpetual Problems in Theological Education', *Christian Education Journal* (Spring 1998), pp. 75-87.

[7] 'Metro Manila has 94 bible and theological schools for its 1896 churches.' Lee Wanak, unpublished research document (Manila: Asian Theological Seminary, 1998). 'In Nigeria every year 200 new bible and theological schools are established . . . The government of Nigeria had to step in to control the founding of theological schools.' Gary Maxey, unpublished document (Owerri, Nigeria: Wesley International Theological Seminary, 1999).

[8] Mt. 9:17.

[9] For an excellent study of the Greek word *paideia* see Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961).

[10] For the debate on *paideia* versus *academia* (*Wissenschaft*) see David H. Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1993).

[11] Leith Anderson, *The Church for the Twenty-first Century* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1992); Tony Campolo, *Can Mainline Denominations Make a Comeback?* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1995).

[12] The Murdock Charitable Trust. The study was conducted in 1994.

[13] O. Costas, 'Theological Education and Mission' in C. Rene Padilla (ed.), *New Alternatives in Theological Education* (Oxford: Regnum, 1986).

[14] Banks, *Reenvisioning*, p. 132.

[15] D. J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992).

[16] Young, *Theological Approaches*, p. 85.

[17] International Consultation on Discipleship held at Eastbourne, England, September 1999.

[18] Manfred W. Kohl, 'The Role Model of a Theological Teacher' (Indianapolis: Overseas Council International, forthcoming). See also Peter Jensen, 'The Teacher as Theologian in Theological Education', *The Reformed Theological Review* (September-December 1991), pp. 81-90.

[19] Barbara E. Taylor and Malcolm L. Warford (eds.), *Good Stewardship: A Handbook for Seminary Trustees* (Washington, DC: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 1991).

[20] I am convinced that in the next generation theological education by extension (TEE) will produce far more trained ministers for the church than the traditional institutions of the past. TEE has produced an enormous quantity of excellent material. For a good survey of what is being done in the non-western world see F. Ross Kinsler (ed.), *Ministry by the People: Theological Education by Extension* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983). In *Theological Education* 36.1 (1999) are six articles related to the theme of distance education.

[21] Dearborn, *Transformation*, p. 9.

[22] Overseas Council International conducts an 'Institute of Excellence' for the leadership of theological schools and programs in a number of countries around the world. These seven steps form part of the basic requirements to be completed by every participant. (Indianapolis: Overseas Council International, 1999). See also Louis C. Vaccaro, 'The President and Planning: Management and Vision', *Courage in Mission: Presidential Leadership in the Church-related*

College (ed. Duane H. Dagley; Washington, DC: Council for Advancements and Support of Education, 1988); G. Blair Dowden, 'Presidents: Effective Fundraising Leadership', in Wesley K. Willmer (ed.), *Advancing Christian Higher Education: A Guide to Effective Resource Development* (Washington, DC: Coalition for Christian Colleges and Universities, 1996).

[23] Under the auspices of Overseas Council International, seminars on the topic of 'Biblical Stewardship and Christian Fundraising for Theological Education' were held recently for theological schools in South Africa, Ethiopia, Philippines, Argentina, and Poland. (Materials are available from Overseas Council International.)

[24] Manfred W. Kohl, 'Fund-Raising Principles for Maintaining Continuous Giving to Christian Humanitarian Ministries' (D.Min. diss., Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 1994), p. 1.

[25] Manfred W. Kohl, 'Responsible Stewardship in Theological Education: Guidelines for Resource Development in Post-Communist Countries', *Christian Education Journal* (Spring 1998), pp. 57-74.

[26] Kelly Monroe (ed.), *Finding God at Harvard: Spiritual Journeys of Thinking Christians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), pp. 357-38. See also Manfred W. Kohl, 'Motivation – Designation: Historic Glimpses into Donations and Fund-Raising for Christian Ministry', in Rodney L. Petersen and Calvin Augustine Pater (eds.), *The Contentious Triangle: Church, State, and University. A Festschrift in Honor of Professor George Hunston Williams (Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies, LI)*; Kirksville: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1999).

[27] Charles M. Wood, *An Invitation to Theological Study* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1994).

[28] Steven Peay, 'Change in the Theology and Practice of Preaching' (PhD diss., Saint Louis University, 1990), p. 349.

## **LECTURE TITLE: 'CONGREGATIONALISTS RENEWING'**

**KEYNOTE TALK GIVEN TO THE SEMINAR IN PLIMOTH, MASSACHUSETTS,  
SATURDAY 11<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2000**

**SEMINAR TITLE: 'ARE WE WHO WE SAY WE ARE?'**

By Rev. Dr. Janet Wooten, Ph. D.

This keynote talk forms a pair with the one that will be given later by my colleague and co-chair of the Theological Commission of the International Congregational Fellowship, Dr Manfred Kohl, entitled, 'Renewing Congregationalists'.

I am honoured to be speaking in the context of an American congregational seminar, particularly in the place where our forebears first set foot after fleeing religious persecution in England and Wales. Here is a common point of departure for both our traditions, when English men and women founded a settlement on American soil where they could live out the purity of their doctrine and faith in a new communal life-style.

If I speak from an English context, it is to say that congregationalism can still be seen as a model for communal living, not just for congregations, but as a paradigm for human communities and therefore has a powerful political dimension. Congregationalists can renew, can renew the communities in which they live, by the application of congregational principles to ordinary life.

### **A shared tradition**

My own church, Union Chapel, in the middle of London, is proud of its piece of Plimoth Rock – a fairly sizable piece, which was given to the church in the 1870s, and is 'enshrined' in a recess set above the door by which the minister enters the church from the Vestry. The recess has a brass plaque commemorating the gift. I have seen visitors from the USA offering homage to the rock, by reaching up to touch it, and even blowing it a kiss! For the people of Union Chapel, it is a constant reminder of our link with American Congregationalists and of our common, deeply held convictions.

We are a mixed congregation both ethnically and in the denominational background of those who are in membership. Many come from hierarchical traditions like Roman Catholicism and value congregationalism as a religious system that makes sense. Here they find dignity observed without pomp and circumstance; worship of a transcendent God without conferring mystical powers on an elite; recognition of authority with no demand for unthinking obedience and of truth with no offer of blind certainty.

While some may find security in obedience and certainty, what attracts people to congregationalism is its openness to intellectual honesty and the fact that it values and honours every member's experience of God. This is evident in the church meeting, in which consensus is sought by the full participation of every member under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I wonder at the God who trusts ordinary human beings to hold such awesome responsibility for the gospel message, until I remember how the same God offers gifts and empowerment and wisdom to those same ordinary people.

In this way, the congregational system is in keeping with Jesus' own overturning of the established power structures of the world. Where the world honours the rich, the powerful, people with advantages of class or education, Jesus spoke of the first being last, and countered power struggles among his own disciples with references to servant hood, denouncing greed for power as an alien, worldly concept (Mark 10:35-45).

## A shared history

What happened in the confused and complex set of changes that formed the Reformation in Europe was, at least partly, a result of a new understanding of Scripture. The Bible was read again in the original languages, and also began to be translated into the vernacular. This made the original texts available to scholars and to the common people.

The impact of such availability cannot be over-estimated. For us, who have ready access to the Bible in a whole variety of translations, without either awe of an overriding ecclesiastical authority or fear of punishment for reading it, the concept of generations of ignorance is unimaginable. So too is the power that this conferred on those who held the keys to church teaching in their own hands. It is scarcely surprising that people who held such awesome power were unwilling to give it up, to the point of persecuting and murdering those who were brave enough to stand up to them.

There were two great consequences of this open access to scripture, which have relevance to the development of what came to be called congregationalism: freedom to speak and preach directly from scripture and with authority derived only from God's calling; and a new kind of church order, based on the local congregation, rather than coming down from a higher, national power structure.

One group of dissenters began to form congregations – gatherings – which sought to recreate the patterns of worship and leadership of the New Testament. During the trial of Henry Barrow, John Penry and John Greenwood, the testimony given by the martyrs contains the reasoning behind their so-called 'sedition'. In answer to examination on his willingness to follow the prayers laid down in the Book of Common Prayer, to keep saints days, say the creed and the Lord's Prayer, John Greenwood replied that the new congregations refused to be bound, restrained or stinted in the words they used in prayers or preaching, but would continue to be free to speak in the power of God's Spirit. This they perceived as their inalienable scriptural right.

The hymn, 'For freedom in worship' follows the trials of the martyrs as recorded in their own words<sup>81</sup>. It can be found in the book, *Peculiar Honours*, published by the Congregational Federation and Stainer & Bell in honour of the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Isaac Watts' death in 1998<sup>82</sup>. The hymn was written for the Annual Assembly four years earlier for the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Barrow, Penry and Greenwood.

### **For Freedom in worship**

*(words taken from the record of the trial of Barrow, Greenwood and Penry, as recorded by the prisoners themselves - see exhibition)*

ALL	For freedom in worship recall Henry Barrow John Greenwood, John Penry and others beside - Before High Commissioners, Lords of the Council, Archbishops and bishops, they stood to be tried
EXAMINER (side 1)	Will you confess to a true Church in England Supreme over which is the Queen's majesty With orders of Bishop, of Priest and of Deacon? A curse on your schism and vile heresy!
BARROW (side 2)	Say what you will I will freely forgive you, But no Prince on earth has that supremacy The true Church is governed by pastors and teachers,

---

<sup>81</sup> The Examinations of Henry Barrowe, Iohn Greenwood and Iohn Penrie, before the high commissioners, and Lordes of the Counsel, penned by the prisoners themselves before their deaths. Publisher, William Marshall, London 1690?

<sup>82</sup> *Peculiar Honours*, Stainer & Bell Ltd., London, 1998

And this is from Scripture and no heresy

EXAMINER  
(side 1) Do you refuse to be bound to our churches,  
To worship and honour the sacraments there,  
To go to the Parish Church, keep any Saint's day  
To follow the creed and to say the Lord's Prayer?

GREENWOOD  
(side 2) We will not be bound or restrained in our worship  
We will not be stinted in word or in prayer,  
For no written form, but the grace of God's Spirit  
Can offer the words that all true saints may share

EXAMINER  
(side 1) What office hold you, what warrant for preaching  
Or may anybody who wishes address  
Your pitiful gatherings, unlawful assemblies  
In woods where you practise seditious unrest.

PENRY  
(side 2) I preach by the calling of that congregation  
Which meets in the woods out of fear of arrest  
The Body of Christ should be free to make use of  
The gifts of its members that all may be blessed

EXAMINER  
(side 1) You will be taken from out the Fleet prison  
And dragged through the streets for all London to see  
And you will be hanged on the gallows at Tyburn  
So cursed be all traitors who die on the Tree.

ALL God give us the insight to combat suppression  
In every disguise that it wears in our day  
the courage that honours our freedom in spite of  
Traditions and systems that stand in its way.

Janet Wootton 1993

© Stainer & Bell Ltd. and Congregational Federation

Freedom of speech was demonstrated not only in the gathering of congregations with unauthorised leadership, but also in a growth of public preaching. Queen Elizabeth I understood the danger of having uncontrolled preaching by people who wished to alter the Church of England and who claimed divine authority for doing so. In particular, she suppressed, 'prophesyings' in which a number of preachers would hold a public meeting, and may spend several hours in proclamation, gathering large congregations in market places and other public spaces. One of the most revolutionary aspects of this kind of preaching was that it was not infrequently open to women as well as men.

All of this led to the authorisation of learned, 'safe' clergy in each diocese as preachers. However, itinerant preachers still claimed to preach by the authority of the congregations which called them. John Penry at his trial was asked by what authority he preached at his 'unlawful gatherings', and replied that it was the very congregation which gave him the authority. He required no authorisation from Church or State.

In Kent in the 1560s, itinerant preachers spoke to large gatherings on working days in the market places. Later this practice settled to a weekly sermon on a Saturday. By the 1580s, godly preachers had begun to settle in the Wealden parishes. In Cranbrook, a puritan curate was appointed. John Strowd was on the run from the West Country, and was one of the operators of the clandestine Puritan Press of the early 1570s. Eventually, Strowd was restricted from preaching by order of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Following the ejection of ministers in the 1660s, under the various repressive measures of the Clarendon Code, non-conformist worship and, above all, preaching became a highly dangerous activity.

Extraordinary measures were taken to protect the preacher, whose life and liberty might be endangered by his activity<sup>83</sup>. I have preached in churches whose architecture bears witness to this. High pulpits have a wide view of the surrounding countryside through large windows, so that the imminent arrival of royal troops could be forestalled by the rapid exit of the minister through a back door leading, in at least one instance, by a rocky descent to a secret harbour where a ring in the rock still shows where a boat was once tied.

The other element of congregationalism that dates to this era is church governance, based on the unit of the gathered or 'embodied' congregation. Henry Barrowe wrote, 'all the affairs of the Church belong to that body together. All the actions of the Church – as prayers, censures, sacraments, faith – be actions of them all jointly, and of every one of them severally: although the body, unto divers actions, use such members as it knoweth most fit to the same.'<sup>84</sup>

The image behind the hierarchical church, which for so long had been used to bolster up a feudal political system, was overturned. Previously, God and his angels had been seen as the apex of a triangle of power, which devolved through political and religious rulers, monarchs and their designated governors, and archbishops and their priests, all of whom held power and control over the mass of common people at the bottom of the triangle. Now, the common people were recognised as having direct access to God through penitence and the forgiveness of their sins, and by the possession of spiritual gifts through no intermediary other than Jesus Christ himself. This changed everything. Again, we who live by democratic ideals cannot imagine what it must have meant to see through the pretence which undergirded feudalism and a hierarchical priesthood.

A Unitarian writer and satirist, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, later, Anna Aikin, wrote a good deal about the unjust combination of sacred and secular power structures and the way in which religious freedom could challenge this. "The temple is the only place where human beings of every rank, and sex, and age, meet together for one common purpose, and join together in one common act . . . This is the only place, to enter which, nothing is more necessary than to be of the same species; - the only place, where man meets man not only as an equal but a brother; and where, by contemplating his duties, he may become sensible of his rights . . . It is of service to the cause of freedom, therefore, no less than to that of virtue, that there is one place where the invidious distinctions of wealth and titles are not admitted; where all are equal, not by making the low, proud, but by making the great, humble." and "Every time Social Worship is celebrated, it includes a virtual declaration of the rights of man"<sup>85</sup>

She also held out great hope for the establishment of a new order in America, to which she saw the torch of liberty being handed on from a class-ridden and religiously intolerant England. She writes, 'may you no more attempt to blend what God has made separate; but may religion and civil polity, like two necessary but opposite elements of fire and water, each in its province do service to mankind, but never again be forced into discordant union.'<sup>86</sup>

However, the journey of the pilgrims to the new world did have an influence on public life. Their theology informed the development of a different way of life and a different power structure in America. Many in England, like Barbauld, looked with longing eyes at the revolutionary spirit in the new world. For my part, a morning spent in Boston was extremely poignant. As I looked at the balcony from which the Declaration of Independence was read to the people, was I a representative of the hate and defeated English, or the heir to a common tradition which in England and early America had suffered at the hands of entrenched and established power structures?

---

<sup>83</sup> Watts *The Dissenters*, p 227-238, Tudur Jones, *Congregationalism in England*, p 63-84

<sup>84</sup> cited in *The Validity of the Congregational Ministry* by J Vernon Bartlet and J D Jones - papers read at the CUEW Assembly in 1916, published by CUEW, London.

<sup>85</sup> A Barbauld *Remarks on Mr Gilbert Wakefield's Enquiry into the Expediency and Propriety of Public or Social Worship* 1792

<sup>86</sup> A Dissenter (A. Barbauld) *Address to the Opposers of the Repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts of March 3rd 1790*

I felt more of the latter, especially since the Church of England is still established in England and still retains the trappings of power. I have recently been involved in the campaign to reform the House of Lords in favour of a properly constituted second chamber. Part of that campaign is to broaden religious representation, which is still held by the presence by right of Bishops of the Church of England. Despite the patent fact that only 10% of the English (Scottish and Welsh figures are different) population regularly attend any place of worship, and that the Church of England has the allegiance of a minority even of those, it still holds a repressive place in the government of the nation.

Isaac Watts, known sometimes as the 'father of English hymnody' was the son of a dissenter who was imprisoned for his beliefs. His hymns demonstrate the strength of congregational ecclesiology.

Jesus invites his saints  
to meet around his board:  
here pardoned sinner sit and hold  
communion with their Lord.

This holy bread and wine  
maintains our fainting breath,  
by union with our living Lord  
and interest in his death.

Our heavenly father calls  
Christ and his members one;  
we the young children of his love  
and he the first-born Son.

We are but several parts  
of the same broken bread;  
our body hath its several limbs  
but Jesus is the head.

Let all our powers be joined  
his glorious name to raise:  
pleasure and love fill every mind  
and every voice be praise.

*Isaac Watts (1674-1748)*

This hymn addresses the singing congregation as the saints of Jesus. Saints are not chosen individuals canonised after their death by a hierarchical power, but the ordinary people of God, and this is in keeping with the way Paul addresses fellow Christians in, for example, I Corinthians 1:2. But the saints are not so by human right or righteousness; rather they are defined in the very next line as 'pardoned sinners', and the rest of the hymn shows how they are called and constituted by the headship, life and death of Jesus. The hymn is also worth studying for its theology of communion.

### **Social Reform**

If every human being can find forgiveness and enter new life by the power of Jesus, there is no room for detrimental discrimination. No-one is beneath human dignity or undeserving of justice. This meant that in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, Congregationalists, at their best, were at the spearhead of social reform.

Take one issue, the abolition of slavery. We know the complexities of the situation, and some of the big names involved. A less well known story comes from what was then British Guiana, now Guyana. There, a congregational missionary, John Smith, supported a slave revolt and was condemned to death and imprisoned. From prison, he wrote heart-rending letters, describing his sense of failure. Eventually, he was reprieved, but, while the reprieve was on its way from Britain to Guyana, he died in prison. He is revered today as a major figure in the Guyanese congregational churches.

I was delighted to find, as I walked the Heritage Trail in Boston, a church which was fully involved in the social issues of the day, including the abolition of slavery. Old South Church encouraged slaves and free people to worship side by side, and gave voice to one of the earliest poets to arise from the vicious slave trade, Phyllis Wheatley. The church was active in the events which led to the Revolution, providing a public space for meetings, including the debate which led to the 'Boston Tea Party'. So radical was the position and use of this church building that the British requisitioned it and used it as a riding school, destroying much of the fixtures and fittings in the process.

Later, the church was still debating political issues. They supported freedom of speech and, when the town authorities banned two controversial speakers, the church gave them room. The speakers were an advocate of birth control and a supporter of the Ku Klux Klan. The view of the church was that everyone had the right to speak, so long as the opposite view was equally clearly and strongly put.

These are issues which confront my own congregation today. Our building is one of the largest and most useful public spaces in its area. It is used for Union meetings and other public events, at which strong views are expressed in strong language. We are in the middle of a multi-cultural community and open our building to the local Turkish – Muslim – community, not for worship, but for their own public events.

Like Old South Church, we do not always get it right, but I took great heart in finding a Boston church which had faced these issues and been open to social involvement long before my own time at Union Chapel.

This zeal for social reform can be seen in the hymn, 'Sing we the King who is coming to reign'. This was written to the tune, 'The Glory Song', which originally carried words of individual conversion. Charles Silvester Horne's words challenge the individualism of the original message with a clarion call to welcome the Kingdom and the coming King. When King Jesus comes, the whole world will change. There will be peace between the races, freedom and justice. Horne was a congregational minister whose convictions eventually led to his taking up public office.

Sing we the King who is coming to reign,  
glory to Jesus, the lamb that was slain;  
life and salvation his empire shall bring,  
joy to the nations when Jesus is King.  
*Come let us sing: praise to our King,  
Jesus our King, Jesus our King:  
this is our song who to Jesus belong:  
glory to Jesus, to Jesus our King!*

All shall then dwell in his marvellous light,  
races long severed his love shall unite;  
justice and truth from his sceptre shall spring,  
wrong shall be righted when Jesus is King.

All shall be well in his kingdom of peace,  
freedom shall flourish and wisdom increase;  
foe shall be friend when his triumph we sing,  
sword shall be sickle when Jesus is King.

Souls shall be saved from the burden of sin;  
doubt shall not darken his witness within;  
hell hath no terrors and death hath no sting;  
love is victorious when Jesus is King.

Kingdom of Christ for thy coming we pray,  
hasten, O Father, the glorious day;  
when this new song your creation shall sing,

Satan is vanquished and Jesus is King.

*Charles Silvester Horne (1865-1914)*

### **Are we who we say we are?**

How can we be true today to this powerful tradition? I can tell you how my own congregation is seeking to live out the congregational ideal in worship and social involvement.

One of the ways we use our building is as a day centre and winter night shelter for homeless people. In collaboration with other churches in the area, we open one day a week, and one night in winter. The aim is for enough churches to be involved so that every day is covered.

So on a Sunday, we open our doors and up to 130 homeless and badly housed people come in for a hot meal, showers and fresh clothes. At face value, it looks as though we are simply supporting these people in their life-style and offering no impetus to change. For sure, we start by meeting very basic needs, but, again in collaboration with other churches, we try to offer and encourage change. We offer resettlement advice, which includes help in finding accommodation and a friendly presence when life gets difficult.

Finding someone a home is only the first step. Often the people who end up on the streets have come from institutional care, from children's homes or from the armed services, where they have never learnt the basic life-skills which they need when living alone. When the first bills come in, they may have spent all their money and may panic. They may find living in a flat too lonely and prefer the camaraderie of the streets. Often drug or alcohol habits exacerbate these problems and we can help by simply being there to talk to when things go wrong.

But we do not stop there. People are on the streets not only because of their own choices. We saw an enormous rise in street homelessness in the 1980s, years of boom and bust in house prices. We know that changes could be made in children's homes so that young people are better prepared for life. We see how difficult it is to gain access to statutory sources of help if someone doesn't have an address or access to mobility.

Now our concern for homeless people urges us to enter a campaign to make things better. London now has a mayor and soon will have its own assembly. As chair of the London churches homelessness network, I have met with the politicians who will be tackling homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse and social services in London. I do not come from a party political standpoint but as a Christian, with a group of Christians, with experience in the field.

All this is very precisely in keeping with our congregational form of Christianity. When we felt called to address the needs of the homeless people all around us in inner London, the first thing we did was to engage in two kinds of research. The second kind was to find out the scale and nature of the problem and possible solutions. The first kind of research we did was to see what the Bible said about homes and homelessness. And we were in for a surprise.

We found that settledness and the possession of a home were not the unmitigated good we thought them to be. In a Bible Study in which four of the six members were living in tied accommodation, we were delighted to read II Samuel 7, in which God responds to King David's desire to build a Temple. It turns out that God is quite happy in a tent, and that there is something about the desire to settle God down which is tantamount to controlling him! This goes with a distinct strand of Hebrew prophecy and teaching which is anti-monarchic and egalitarian and, indeed, close to the congregational view of human relationship with God.<sup>87</sup>

We found that Jesus left his settled home to take up the life of a wandering preacher and healer and, what is more, frequently called people to follow him, leaving family and home behind, and taking up with the Son of Man who has nowhere to lay his head (Matthew 8:18-22).

---

<sup>87</sup> Wootton, J, Dissent BC, Congregational Lecture, 1989

This meant that we could not take a simple paternalistic or superior attitude to homeless people. To some extent, their life-style is closer to what Jesus requires than is the settled and materialistic life-style of people who live in houses. We should allow God to challenge us through the lives and experiences of homeless people, even while we are trying to offer assistance in their need.

I wrote the hymn, 'Christians join in celebration', based on Isaiah 65:17ff, as a reflection of congregational Christian theology on the great theme of God's just reign. Here are the great themes of creation in God's image, the beginning and ending of time. The present age is characterised by corruption, debt, disease and war, which we as prophets should dare to name and shame.

But the huge scope, as with Isaiah's prophecy, is based units of a small scale. Human life is actually lived out in little communities, where basic concerns are the nurturing of children, building and living in homes, and producing food. This is where the great themes come to rest, and the mighty Kingdom of God is shown in a hundred human dreams.

Christians! Join in celebration,  
see the hope in every face,  
catch a glimpse of new creation  
even here in time and space:  
children thrive in peace, undaunted,  
work receives its fair reward,  
homes are built and crops are planted -  
Can we see this world restored?

People join in celebration  
where the truth of God is heard  
spoken out in confrontation  
with the powers that hold the world,  
tearing through the web of lying,  
naming debt, disease and war,  
through the bravest, prophesying,  
'Death and pain could be no more!'

Christians! join the celebration,  
sweeping far beyond our schemes.  
Dare to hear God's invitation  
in a hundred human dreams.  
'Break your chain-links with corruption,  
struggle free of guilt and fear,  
join the surge of hope's eruption,  
God 's great carnival is here!'

People! join in celebration,  
fan the flame from place to place,  
form a vivid constellation  
starring all the human race.  
Let God's image blaze unhindered,  
glorious in diversity.  
If our crazed abuse were ended,  
then creation might be free.

*Janet Wootton (1952 - )*  
© Stainer & Bell Ltd. and Congregational Federation

## Pilgrim Hymnal Survey Final Paper

July 31, 2000  
Cynthia Bacon

### Survey Results

This paper is the culmination of a year's worth of study on the 1958 *Pilgrim Hymnal*. Beginning a year ago, the hymnal was compared with other mainline hymnals in the areas of tunes, titles, theology, musical styles and size. Last fall, a history of the hymnal was developed. The events leading to the publication of the first *Pilgrim Hymnal* in 1912, and the commonalities between the three editions of the *Pilgrim Hymnal* of the twentieth century were explored. As a result of the first two projects, a survey was created to assess the hymnal needs and usage of today's NACCC member churches. Surveys were mailed to the four hundred and fifteen churches that made up the membership of the NACCC in March of 2000. Results were asked to be returned and completed by May 15, 2000.

After developing this survey and reading the results, it is now an interesting and challenging task to bring those results together in a somewhat cohesive unit. The most dominant question that emerges is this: Is it possible to draw conclusions from the data that has been compiled? The results seem so varied and individual that conclusions or waves of thought do not seem to exist at first glance. All that is apparent is the breadth of diversity in our churches, musically, theologically and in practice of worship. Perhaps a better question to ask is: Are there truths that emerge?

First of all, I'd like to take a look at the churches that responded to the survey. One hundred churches responded, which is nearly a 25% return rate. Since most surveys result in a 5%-10% return, this is a very high return rate. The churches that responded represent twenty six (out of thirty seven) states, and range in size from eight members to twenty two hundred members. Though the responding churches are all sizes and from all over the country, I wonder if they are representative of the whole.

In looking at the NACCC yearbook, one can see that only six of the responding churches did not contribute monetarily to the national organization in the year 1999. This would suggest that the majority of the responding churches are currently involved in the national organization to some extent.

Another source indicating involvement in the national organization is national meeting attendance. Of the one hundred churches that responded, only fifty two were in attendance at this year's meeting, held in Green Bay, Wisconsin. This could mean many things. Perhaps the churches which responded are not in the habit of attending the national meeting, but were interested in the purpose of this survey. Perhaps the churches that responded to the survey usually do attend the meeting, and were unable to attend this year for one reason or another. It is difficult to say, but whatever the reason for the low percentage of match in this area, it is clear that the responding churches wanted to voice their opinion about the use of music in their worship services.

The diversity which emerges from the compiled data is immense. In every category from which hymnal is used to expectations for music in worship, our Congregational individuality is apparent. On every subject regarding what characteristics would make an ideal hymnal and the musical factors to be considered, our broad range of experience and taste as Congregationalists rings through.

In looking at the responses, one of the most interesting pieces of data is that of hymnal usage. Twenty nine different hymnals are used by the one hundred churches that responded. Only 40% still use the 1958 *Pilgrim Hymnal*. Many stated that it was just too outdated, and that in the last 10-15 years, a new hymnal was sought out, to grow with the church in emerging musical tastes. Despite the variety of hymnals that are now used in our NACCC member churches, this 40% indicates that the *Pilgrim Hymnal* is still the most popular, even though it is not used by a majority of the churches.

The other hymnal titles which are popular with our NACCC churches are *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration*, which nineteen of our churches use, *The Living Church*, which eleven churches use, and *Hymns for the Family of God*, which nine churches use. These three hymnals make up nearly another 40% of the hymnals which are used by Congregational churches. The remaining 20% include many

hymnals which are used by only one or two churches, many of which have been purchased in the last five years, after staying with the 1958 *Pilgrim Hymnal* for nearly forty years.

Several churches have gone to publishing either their own hymnal or hymnal supplement, while still using the *Pilgrim Hymnal*. Many use the *Pilgrim Hymnal* in conjunction with their new hymnal, but some have never used or even heard of the hymnal. Also, six of the responding churches utilize the CCLI license, which enables them to reprint music from a vast selection of material.

One other area that represents the diversity of our churches is that of the “Favorite Hymns” of the church. In total, two hundred and eighty six different hymns were cited! That is an amazing number. As far as the style of the hymns that were chosen as favorites, both gospel and traditional hymns dominated the category, and amazingly, quite evenly. The top four hymns, chosen by between thirty two and forty three churches, were *Amazing Grace*, *How Great Thou Art*, *Joyful, Joyful and Holy, Holy, Holy*. Two are traditional hymns, and two are more of the gospel genre.

The hymns chosen by ten to twenty six churches were dominated by traditional hymnody, with eighteen traditional hymns and only five from the gospel area. The traditional continue to dominate in the hymns chosen by four to nine churches, but when looking at the hymns chosen by 1-3 churches only, the gospel definitely prevails. Many newer hymns are included in the last part of this list as well, with *Here I Am, Lord* and *On Eagle's Wings* included. They are neither traditional or gospel, but form a new genre all their own that is making its mark on the hymnody scene in this country and around the world.

Another factor that emerges in looking at the hymns favored by today's Congregational churches is how hymns are categorized. I am used to defining the hymns included in the 1958 *Pilgrim Hymnal* as “traditional”. To me, “gospel” songs are another entity entirely, comprised of songs made popular in the revivals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These “gospel” songs were designed to bring the people into the faith and help them to feel a personal, emotional connection with the Christian faith. The so called “traditional” hymns of the *Pilgrim Hymnal* were written to enhance and deepen the experience of a faith that was already expressed and present.

The purpose of the two types is distinctive, and yet today, our terminology more accurately reflects what we have been raised with and not musical style and theological purpose. Over and over, I found that churches requesting more “gospel” music considered themselves “traditionalists” in terms of hymnody. To these churches, it seems that the term “traditional” refers to the songs and hymns that they grew up with in their local church. Once again, our individuality as autonomous churches is apparent. Not only is our terminology different, but our practice is as well.

Though our diversity has been highlighted up to this point, there are some places of continuity that need to be noted. In the section on Musical Factors, three strong needs are easy to note from the survey results. The comfort of the key for singing is a strong need noted by all churches surveyed. The words “medium” and “low” were used repeatedly when describing a comfortable range for singing. Churches that noted actual pitches that were comfortable for their congregations to sing consistently named c to e as the highest notes that would be easiest for their churches. Only one church extended the range to f.

Another musical factor that emerged strongly from this section of the survey was the need for a variety of music in a hymnal. Traditional, praise and contemporary Christian music were the strongest categories, with over eighty percent of the churches responding positively to these categories. Just as in the “favorite hymns” question, our churches choose almost equally the traditional and the gospel, or contemporary/praise genre. Folk and ethnic music were popular as well, and were seen as necessary by between one third and one half of the churches that responded. Our churches want a large variety of music, that reflects not only the current times, but our Congregational history and tradition.

Thirdly, the need for musical “extras”, such as descants, introits, responses and benedictions, was positively responded to in this part of the survey. Between one third and one half of surveys expressed a need for these musical “extras”. Only one or two responded negatively to each of the categories, and the

rest were blank responses. This would indicate that to the churches that chose to respond to this question, these “extras” are very important.

Another category of the survey that resulted in strong opinions was the need for revision in the Topical Index. Comments in this area were strongly focused on the need for a “specific”, “detailed” and more “complete” topical index. A “total revision” was seen as what was needed by one church. Other needs by many were for a scriptural index, plus seasonal/special service categories and categories related to the church year and/or the lectionary. Some responses did name specific categories that should be added to the topical index, but overall, the responses indicated that a complete overhaul was needed in this area of the *Pilgrim Hymnal*.

Comments on language were also an interesting area of the survey, which exposed some intense opinions. Seventy seven churches responded to this question, with twenty eight expressing comfort with traditional language or things as they are in the current hymnal. But the remainder of the churches responded strongly with the need for inclusive language, or a combination of traditional and inclusive. There is great concern for the responsible use of language among our churches. Poetic, musical and historic integrity and accuracy are important to the responders. Accuracy in theological meaning, while being creative in the use of “God language” and inclusive in the use of “people language” is necessary as well to the churches who responded. This category, almost as much as the list of “favorite hymns”, represents the need in our churches for connections to both the past and the present, while looking toward the future. The strong opinions shared here are the face of emerging Congregationalism.

Ultimately, the real question is: Do the NACCC member churches desire a new edition of the *Pilgrim Hymnal*? This question was asked, and the results were very interesting. Thirty six of the churches did not respond one way or the other. Eighteen answered with a vehement “no”. Nine churches would be interested at some point in time, but not at the present, and thirty seven of the churches responded affirmatively. Though the results on the surface would indicate that the need for a new hymnal is not wanted by a majority of the churches, I consider the response a strong affirmative.

To me, the only thing to look at here is the strong negative responses. Since only eighteen responded negatively, I do not consider it an indication of lack of interest in a new hymnal. Many of the churches that responded negatively were those who had never used the *Pilgrim Hymnal*, and therefore had no experience with it whatsoever. It is not in their tradition, so why would they welcome a new edition?

The affirmative responses seemed to indicate from their comments that they value the tradition of a uniquely “Congregational” hymnal. A hymnal is a unifying force in any group of churches, whether it is a denomination or an association of free churches. The Faith, Freedom and Fellowship that marks the Congregational Way can only be enhanced by a common hymnal among our churches, and over one third of the responding churches value the unity and growth that a new edition of the *Pilgrim Hymnal* would mean.

The results cited in this first section of this paper on the results of the hymnal survey tell us so much about who we are as Congregationalists today. We are a diverse people who value the role of music in worship. We care what the music has to say in worship, and what it means theologically and historically. We want the music to reflect our faith and our times accurately, and help us to define ourselves for the twenty first century.

The next section of this paper will make suggestions regarding possible avenues of action in the possibility of creating a version of the *Pilgrim Hymnal* that will be representative of Congregationalism today, while responding to the diversity and concerns found in the survey results.

Moving Ahead

In moving ahead with the results of this survey, many questions come to mind. How can we accurately represent the many varied tastes in music, theology and worship now present in the NACCC member churches, while keeping a foot in our tradition of literary and musical quality represented in the three editions of the *Pilgrim Hymnal* from the last century? What kind of a hymnal can we create that will represent Congregationalism 2000 USA, while at the same time provide a comprehensive picture of historical Congregationalism? Can we learn to embrace and celebrate the diversity that is now present in Congregationalism, looking on it as a result of the ecumenism from the last two centuries? And finally, what tools can we use to promote understanding and use of a new hymnal, with all of its possibilities, as a uniting force in the NACCC?

I'd like to begin by speaking about the establishment of the hymnal committee, since they will be the individuals who are working together to answer the above-mentioned questions. The first thing that I would like to recommend regarding the committee is that it not be too large. Choosing the correct number of people to accomplish this task will not be easy, but it is crucial to the success of the project. Communication is vital to the committee, and since the Association is not large-less than 450 churches-we do not need to make the committee overly large to have a comprehensive representation of the member churches. Many hymnal committees contain fifteen to twenty people, and for our purposes, I believe that is too large. We are starting with a great deal of information at hand, collected directly from the churches in the form of the survey results. Also, communication will be easier if the committee is not too large. I would suggest a committee of approximately twelve people. A committee of this size should be able to represent the churches well, communicate easily and move at a fairly rapid pace, since coordinating schedules will not be as difficult as it would be with a larger group.

A second, and equally important consideration, is balance in the committee between musicians and theologians. A good musical and theological balance is needed if a hymnal is to be user-friendly and of high quality. People from various backgrounds are needed in order to fulfill the many tasks on the committee. Musicians can check sources for keys, arrangements, descants, etc. Theologians can be extremely helpful in creating the topical and scriptural indices. Both musicians and theologians have wonderful experience with choosing music for worship, and have a good grasp on how hymnals function in various settings.

Another consideration for balance is that of theological perspective and musical taste. Since so many of the churches expressed a strong need for the inclusion of a vast array of musical styles in the hymnal, these varying tastes need to be represented on the committee. Without the perspectives of the survey results represented, the committee will have a very difficult time meeting the needs expressed in the compiled data.

Other considerations for the establishment of the hymnal committee are geographical and experience with the Association. If ownership of this hymnal is one of the goals of the committee, people from throughout the country should be represented on the committee. Also, both newcomers and lifers in the Association would help the committee to bridge the gap between historical and current Congregationalism.

When the committee is created, I strongly suggest that the first order of business should be that they establish criteria for the hymns that they will choose. In looking at the *Pilgrim Hymnal*, literary and musical quality was always a priority. Also, ecumenism played a large part in the selection of hymns in past hymnals. These two criteria must now be brought into the current century, welcoming the new, while maintaining the integrity of the former. This will be the most difficult task of all for the committee, whose every hymn selection will be determined by the criteria that are set. How can we include such a vast variety of musical styles, while maintaining the high standards of the past? What are our (Congregational) standards, and by what factors will the committee judge each piece of music? Not only will the criteria be difficult to establish, but the coming together of the differing tastes and experiences on the committee will be a challenge. Once the criteria are set, not all members of the committee will interpret them the same way. We all hear music differently, and we all experience worship in our own way. These will be the discussions that will make the new hymnal-twelve people hearing one piece of music with individual sets of ears and hearts for faith. The discussions held on establishing the

criteria for hymnal choice will determine the tone for all the discussions that will follow. If open and respectful communication is established early in the process, the committee will learn to work well together. That way, their personal differences, which are purposely represented on the committee (theology, music, etc.) will enhance and not hinder the work at hand.

I believe that the biggest battle that this hymnal committee will face is the tension between traditional and contemporary music. How can criteria be established that will be applicable to these two types of music, who are seemingly in such opposition? And yet, the survey results clearly state, that more praise songs and contemporary songs and hymns need to be included if the hymnal is to meet the needs of the churches. With a committee from varying backgrounds, this particular process should not be as difficult as it would otherwise be, but the very nature of it indicates difficulty.

But I believe that this seemingly impossible task is not only possible, but can serve as a tool to make a new *Pilgrim Hymnal* an accurate representation of the churches in the NACCC. The same criteria can be used, if the criteria are interpreted and discussed to unite understanding. Musical quality is not simply a matter of taste, but there are musical factors that can be addressed. The same is true of poetry and theology. A balance can be found between scriptural and doctrinal accuracy and Christian experience which so many of our churches are striving for through new forms of music. I'm sure that some give and take will be necessary, but when a balance of musical and theological factors in the hymnal is the goal, compromises are necessary.

As you can see from the following proposed schedule for the hymnal committee, balance is a priority. Not only styles of music must be an issue, but the needs of the church year, special occasions, and religious expression, as stated by NACCC churches in the survey results, must be a consideration as well. At each step of the way, the balance must be checked and rechecked.

I have broken the selection of hymns into three sections. The first group would be selected from the 1958 *Pilgrim Hymnal*. The committee could use the list of hymns from the survey results as a starting place, and then add others they consider to be essentials, or "keepers". The second group would come from the list of "favorites" in the survey results, and from other hymnals and new hymn sources. Looking at the data from the summer of 1999 and other new hymnals, plus the vast source of hymnals currently being utilized by our member churches should assist in this second task. Thirdly, ethnic music, and hymns for special services and occasions would be addressed. This was also an indicated need of the churches who responded to the survey.

With each step of this process, the hymns that are chosen can be assessed for key, musical arrangement and language. Suggestions can be brought back to the table at each meeting, and decisions reached. When the musical factors are agreed upon, each group of hymns can be made print ready, thus speeding up the process. Throughout the process, balance in all areas is checked. As always, there is flexibility for additions and changes in the proposed schedule.

Within this process, the other consideration is how to reflect historical Congregationalism and the current practice of the NACCC member churches. This aspect of the balance equation is an interesting one. Not many answered the question on hymns that they would consider to be "Congregational" and yet, those who did answer certainly made a statement. At the top of the list are *We Gather Together* and *O Beautiful for Spacious Skies*. Isaac Watts and other Congregational authors, such as Gladden, Fosdick and Ray are noted in the comments, as well as the need for some new hymns that would be written expressly for this purpose. It was even suggested that the winners of the NACCC hymn writing competition be included. Ecumenism is also mentioned as crucial in this area of the hymnal, which some commenting churches defined as the section that would most help with the definition of our Congregational identity.

With the reflection and promotion of Congregational identity in mind, both historical and modern, education and promotion are of utmost importance. The committee should take the time to develop opportunities to introduce the hymnal to the member churches. Workshops at the National Meeting, plus

at fall CFTS seminars and future convocations are a natural place for some of this education and promotion to occur.

These workshops should include opportunities for the churches to learn new hymns and songs, plus see the opportunities for use of the musical "extras" and the Psalter. So many comments in the survey indicate that anything that is considered new or different was also perceived as extremely difficult by many of our churches. Workshops addressing this issue would not only alleviate the misconception that what is new is difficult, but would provide an example of how to introduce new worship practices in a positive and productive manner. The desired result would be the wide-spread use of the hymnal, plus the hymnal being used to its most effective degree.

It is also important that the workshops be available to clergy and laity alike. The ease in which a new hymnal is introduced relies heavily on the comfort level of those who have seen it. If the committee is available to answer questions and share their excitement and ownership of the hymnal with those who will be using it, that ease will be increased. Also, the committee can then address directly how the committee followed the suggestions and needs stated in the survey results that the churches themselves completed, thus creating an atmosphere of fellowship, saying that this new hymnal is "ours". The opinions of the Congregational churches formed the new hymnal into what it is.

In this paper, I have only begun to scratch the surface of the survey results. There is so much more detail and depth to this project, but I believe that that is work for the committee. I hope that the information compiled and relayed here will be useful to the committee upon its establishment, and to the churches of the NACCC. Both our current diversity and our history can work together to create a hymnal that represents where we have been, where we are and where we are going as Congregationalists.

Proposed Hymnal Committee Schedule:

Meeting 1-Winter 2000-2001

Day 1	Morning:	Discuss survey results Discussions on language, format, styles of music, indexes, musical factors, special needs and new hymnal interest Come to conclusions on criteria for hymns to be included
	Afternoon:	Discuss results of Favorite Hymns section-differing styles represented, balance of styles Discuss results of Hymns used from Pilgrim Hymnal section
	Evening:	Come to conclusions regarding Hymns used in Pilgrim Hymnal Discuss keys, arrangements, descants, instrumentations
Day 2	Morning:	Look at Pilgrim Hymnal-hymns not on list that should be kept Discuss keys, arrangements, descants, instrumentations
	Afternoon:	Look at entire list and discuss theological, seasonal, musical and topical balance Look at language of hymns chosen so far  Assign committee members hymns and duties (arrangements, keys, language, etc.) from this list Assign committee members hymnals to look through for new hymn additions Assign committee members to work on scriptural and topical index

Meeting 2-Spring 2001



Afternoon: Map out promotional and educational plan  
Assign groups for each item in plan

Continue proofing hymns that have been made print ready. Send new hymns and service music to be made print ready. Add new hymns to topical and scriptural indexes. Assign committee members to work on other indexes and lists. Continue working in educational and promotional groups.

#### Meeting 5-Spring 2002 (Minister's Convocation?)

Day 1

Morning: Review all proofing so far

Afternoon: Look at hymnal organization-decide on format  
Review indexes so far

Evening: Share progress on educational and promotional plan  
Continue planning for National Meeting

WE say WE have an Educated Clergy. Do WE?  
By Janet Bell Garber, Ph.D.

Forty years ago, Arthur Rouner wrote about the Congregational tradition, that ministers "must come from the churches [and].. A man comes to be a minister also from being called by God... There is yet another way too, that a man comes to be a minister in the churches of our Way: He is educated. This is not always true in every denomination. In some churches the call is enough. Not so in the Congregational Way. The call is important -- yea, it is the very touch of the divine upon any man's work. But education is needed."<sup>1</sup>

To say we have an educated clergy is in addition to our saying that we are persons - and churches - of Faith, Freedom, and Fellowship. And we do have an educated clergy, but that education constantly needs re-evaluation and up-dating. I wish to ask, how up-to-date are our ministers' educations in science?

First, I shall point out that the Congregational ideals of Faith, Freedom, and Fellowship, are also the requirements for science.

Our Faith is in Jesus Christ as our Teacher, our Lord, our God - the same yesterday, today, and forever, and in our own covenants with Him.

Our Freedom is to govern ourselves in our Churches, free from all 'central' earthly authority.

Our Fellowship is within our Churches and among fellow Churches, a fellowship which helps us to maintain both our Faith and our Freedom.

Scientists too are persons of Faith, Freedom, and Fellowship. Scientists must have Faith in the regularities of nature - in the daily round of our spinning planet, in the yearly round of the Earth about the Sun and the regular procession of the planets. Scientists must have Faith in the replicability of their experiments and observations, which form the bases for everything from modern medicine to automobile design.

And scientists must have Freedom, to design their own experiments and to believe their own results and to trust their observations. Scientists in the early Scientific Revolution rejected the authority of Aristotle and other 'Ancients' over their science, just as early Congregationalists in England and in her American colonies rejected central authority over their Church governance and their interpretations of the Bible as to that governance.

Both Christians and scientists even today must sometimes fight for their freedom. Christians right now are being persecuted in many areas of Asia. In Stalinist Russia geneticists lost their freedom to believe in their own experimental results, as Lysenko ruled under Stalin and Khrushchev that according to Soviet Socialist agriculture, genes do not exist, that instead characteristics of plants and animals acquired from the environment could be transmitted to offspring, that good fertilizer and faithful toil would lead to heritable improvements in crops. And there are those even in Europe and in the United States today who would undermine scientists' faith in their discoveries and the faith of the rest of us in science.

Finally, science can succeed only in an atmosphere of Fellowship. A scientist working in isolation is likened to a Frankenstein, or to H.G. Wells' Dr. Moreau. Scientists must have opportunities to share their ideas, the results of their experiments, and their observations of nature. They need to converse with one another. And they need to publish their results so that other scientists can check them out, and then proceed to the next step.

It is time, as one historian of science has written, that we ought "to revise the popular belief that science and religion are inevitably at odds."<sup>2</sup> They are not; they cannot be at odds, unless one or both of them is in error, and we cannot solve the problem by ignoring science and hoping it will go away, by going to live in the country, or in a "1900s House," without electricity, running water, or gas.

Science and Christianity have not always been at odds; in fact, modern science owes its existence to Christianity. It has often been asked, "Why was science as we think of it today first practiced in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe and England?" One answer is that the scientific enterprise was closely bound up with the spirit of Puritanism. A large proportion of Puritans and Separatists were involved with scientific pursuits. The emphasis on the antiauthoritarian doctrine of the 'priesthood of all believers' spilled over to the scientific sphere, and led to a rejection of the scholarly authority of the 'Ancients' when it conflicted with scientific experience.<sup>3</sup>

Seventeenth century Congregationalists were contemporaries of William Harvey, who discovered the circulation of the blood, of Robert Boyle, who experimented with air and discovered the 'laws' governing gas volume and pressure, of Galileo, who insisted that the Church could not decree that the Sun moved around the Earth, and of Francis Bacon who urged that ordinary persons could be trusted to make scientific observations.

John Winthrop, Jr., kept up with advances in chemistry and medicine, was a charter member of the Royal Society of London scientists, and brought a telescope with him when he came from England, which he gave to Harvard. There was little opportunity in the colonies to pursue science, but Winthrop believed that an intellectual ought to learn what he could about the nature of things. Cotton Mather (1663-1728), Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) and other Americans read Isaac Newton's works, and attempted both experiment and theorizing about the Physical Universe and about life on Earth. Cotton Mather was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1713, collected curiosities to send to London, and devoured all the latest books he could lay his hands on, particularly those concerning 'natural philosophy,' or science. He understood that the new physics dethroned Aristotle, and rejoiced both in being able to explain the laws of motion and gravity and in being unable any more than Newton to explain gravity itself - thus reserving it to the Will of the Creator.<sup>4</sup> In 1721 Mather was instrumental in introducing smallpox inoculation, a technique which preceded vaccination, and which either succeeded 100% or utterly failed. He aroused great antagonism, but convinced one doctor, who attempted it successfully. Ironically, Jonathan Edwards died of that disease after being inoculated just as he was to take the Presidency of Princeton. Education in science was important to the Colonists. Many Christians regarded their engagement with the scientific enterprise as part of their "spiritual calling,"<sup>5</sup> and Thomas Hollis was persuaded to endow a chair of natural philosophy at Harvard in 1723.

Newton's writings were not considered heretical; he himself regarded his work as a defense of the Christian faith.<sup>6</sup> Newton practiced what is known as "natural theology," also known to natural philosophers since at least the Middle Ages as reading the "Book of Nature," and considered by some as important as reading the Bible. In contrast with revealed theology, natural theology concerns the knowledge of God that is said to be available from contemplation of the natural world. It rests upon the conviction that certain truths about the Creator can be deduced from evidences of his design in nature. It was most influential in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,<sup>7</sup> but almost as popular in the nineteenth. The English botanist John Ray (1627-1705) was one of its early proponents, and the naturalist Gilbert White (of Selborne, 1720-93) one of the most famous.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the scientific world was set on its ear by the introduction of the idea of evolution of life. The idea actually had a very long history in the Western tradition, stretching back at least to the time of the Greeks. But in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, belief in the brief existence of the earth prevented many from seriously believing in the possibility of evolution. Geologists including Charles Lyell (1797-1875) began to dispel that disbelief in the 1830s, and the new ideas seeped into the churches. It may surprise some to learn that evangelicals who were also scientists had remarkably little difficulty in adjusting their theology to the idea of a lengthy earth history.<sup>8</sup> Two examples will suffice.

Hugh Miller (1802-56), a quarryman and stone mason from the Scottish highlands, was a brilliant geologist and paleontologist, a 'fierce' Presbyterian and devout evangelical. Miller collected fossils for ten years, then published his accounts in *The Old Red Sandstone* (1841), which went through 26 editions.

Miller made discoveries on the frontiers of geological knowledge "which impressed him with a profound sense of history, of the earth stretching back eons into the mists of primeval time."<sup>9</sup>

In the United States, Congregationalist Edward Hitchcock (1793-1864), the professionally respected principal of Deerfield Academy, began studying for the ministry at Yale, where he was influenced by Benjamin Silliman, head of the school of science. Silliman inflamed Hitchcock's passion for both geology and theology. In 1821 he took up pastoral duties in Conway, Massachusetts, and began to inventory the geology and mineralogy of the Connecticut River. In 1825 he was offered the professorship of chemistry and natural history at Amherst College, where he stayed for the rest of his life, teaching geology and natural theology. He directed the first geological survey of Massachusetts in the 1830s, became first chairman of the Association of American Geologists, and later headed the State survey of Vermont. Hitchcock taught that we should "be satisfied with general principles, without attempting to find something in Scriptures corresponding to all the details of science."<sup>10</sup>

These and more geological reports set the stage in North America for the idea of the evolution of life. The fossil record, as Miller and others plainly showed, revealed a progression in animal and plant life in both size and complexity of life forms.

The first 'modern' proponent of evolution was not Charles Darwin, but an eighteenth century French philosopher, Pierre Maupertuis (1698-1759). The notion circulated among the French salons, not making much of a stir, until in 1809 the theory of another Frenchman, Jean-Batiste Lamarck, of how evolution could occur (sort of by 'wishing') reached English ears. A Scotsman named Robert Chambers took it up and wrote a small book on it, *The Vestiges of Creation*, published in 1844. *The Vestiges* became the talk of both England and America, and was widely denounced.

Darwin had by then written a statement of his own ideas on how evolutionary change in living beings might take place - namely, via natural selection - and had hidden it under the stairs in his house. Thirteen years later [1857], he wrote a letter expounding his theory to an American, the Harvard botanist Asa Gray, and in 1858 made it public - with the identical theory framed by Alfred Russel Wallace - at a meeting of the Linnaean Society, then published it to the world a year later in *The Origin of Species*. Wallace was pursuing his science in the Far East, and had communicated his idea by mail. So although Darwin did not invent the concept of evolution by natural selection, he was at hand in England, and is often blamed - or credited - for it. This is because many persons, although they did not necessarily reject evolution, resisted the concept of natural selection. It was a logical theory, but its implications for the role of chance were unacceptable to many, and no educated person could avoid the controversy over the idea after 1859.

Four of the most prominent scientists in the United States in the nineteenth century were Congregationalists, and evangelical Christians, and did not avoid the controversy. All four supported belief in evolution, and Darwin's theory of natural selection as the explanation of how evolution works. They were Asa Gray (1810-1888), botanist at Harvard, James Dwight Dana (1813-1895), mineralogist, geologist and zoologist at Yale, George Frederick Wright (1838-1921), minister and geologist at Oberlin, and John Thomas Gulick (1832-1923), missionary and zoologist in Hawaii and Japan.

Asa Gray (1810-1888), who championed Darwin's cause in America, took on one of the most influential naturalists in America at the time - Louis Agassiz, a Harvard colleague who vitriolically scorned Darwin's theory.<sup>11</sup> Agassiz, raised in Switzerland, came to Harvard in 1848 to teach zoology. He "infused German idealism with religious sentiment," But "both philosophically and scientifically, Agassiz was quite unprepared for Darwin's thunderbolt in 1859. The idea of the transmutation of species was totally contrary to his tenacious belief in the fixity of species." He became "the leading opponent of Darwin not just in America but in the world." He believed that every race of mankind had been specifically created by God for particular geographical zones, and used his belief as a 'scientific' defense of slavery.<sup>12</sup> In 1860, Gray held a series of debates with Agassiz on evolution.

Harvard professor of botany Asa Gray was the leading American botanist in the late 1850s, and enjoyed a worldwide reputation. He began a career in medicine, but abandoned it for botany in 1831.

Gray, at first a Presbyterian, was dissatisfied with "harshly predestinarian versions of the Reformed tradition," and suspicious of German idealism and Transcendentalism. He was attracted not to the Unitarianism at Harvard, but to Congregationalism, and joined Park Street Church in Boston. Like Darwin, whom Gray met through Joseph Hooker at Kew gardens in London, Gray maintained a thorough empiricist approach to science.

Gray held that since the Bible was not a scientific textbook, there was no need for "reconciliation." But he saw a moral value in Darwin's book, which upheld the single origin of all humans, and supported Gray's opposition to slavery.

Gray was disturbed by Darwin's seeming atheism in *The Origin of Species*. Darwin said to Gray that he never intended to write "atheistically," but he was so profoundly disturbed by the misery in the world, he could not see evidence of design in the details, only in the general laws of nature.<sup>13</sup>

George Frederick Wright, a Congregationalist who was both evangelical and intellectually sophisticated, attended Oberlin College in 1850s, where he was impressed by the Oberlin emphases on personal faith, humanitarianism, and abolitionism. After graduating in 1859, Wright entered the seminary at Oberlin. On graduation from seminary he married, took his bride to his first pastorate in Vermont, where he read Darwin and Lyell, and wrote his first scholarly article defending the inductive method of reasoning. Wright spent his spare time geologizing near the Green Mountains, where he became interested in glaciations.

In 1871 he accepted a call to the First Christian Church in Andover; at Andover he read Asa Gray's papers on Darwinism.

Wright began writing for the journal *Bibliotheca Sacra* (the main organ of Congregationalist evangelism), and became its editor in 1883, a position in which he continued for nearly 40 years. He wrote articles for *Bibliotheca Sacra* on Calvinism and Darwinism, in which he saw parallels between predestination and chance, and between the fall from grace and extinctions.<sup>14</sup> At Andover, Wright continued his geological studies, and eventually mapped the extent of the last glacier over the northern United States.

In 1881 Wright was offered the professorship of New Testament language and literature at Oberlin. Then in 1892 he was appointed to the Oberlin chair of Harmony of Science and Revelation, where he continued to show that science had "never found a home outside the nurturing influences of Christianity."

Although a thoroughgoing Darwinist, Wright opposed the vogue of Spencerianism and other extrapolations beyond Darwin's own writings.<sup>15</sup> He and Asa Gray learned that they were kindred spirits. For the duration of Wright's Andover Pastorate they worked together, and remained fast friends thereafter until Gray's death, Wright even editing a volume of Gray's papers on evolution.<sup>16</sup>

James Dwight Dana attended Yale's Silliman School of Science, and at age 21 wrote his *System of Mineralogy*, (1837, current edition still in use). He earned a post as scientist on the United States (Wilkes) expedition of 1838-1842 in the Pacific, and on returning wrote the reports on Zoophytes, Crustacea, and Geology, which established him as the United States' foremost geologist, and some said as America's foremost scientist. In 1856 Dana became Silliman professor of Natural History at Yale. Devoted to the natural theology tradition, Dana argued that science had thrown new light on the Bible, and that there could be no conflict between God's words and God's works.

When Darwin, with whom Dana had corresponded since about 1850, first told Dana his theory, Dana could not accept the idea of evolution, but eventually the scientific evidence won over his mind, and he acknowledged in the second edition of his *Manual of Geology*, that evolution had occurred, and from then on taught evolution in his classes at Yale.<sup>17</sup>

You are all aware of the dramatic beginnings of American Congregational foreign missionary efforts in 1806 under a haystack near Williams College.<sup>18</sup> John Thomas Gulick (1832-1923) was a missionary and member of a Congregational missionary family on Hawaii when he embarked on his own Darwinian experimental program, studying the evolution of land snails in Hawaii. He wrote to Darwin, who praised his work and encouraged him.

Gulick was educated at Williams College and Union Theological Seminary and served as a missionary in Japan and China. His older brother, Halsey, was also a missionary who introduced John to science and natural theology; they both saw the natural world as an expression of God's will. Gulick published some of his evolutionary theory in religious periodicals, and some in a book published by Oberlin College, where he spent five years after retiring from missionary work, 1899-1905, and before returning to Hawaii to live for the remainder of his life.

Gulick wrote that the relation between man and God remains unchanged "whether his creation was carried through many successive stages of long duration, or was completed in one brief moment." He rejected Calvinistic fatalism, arguing that evolution is due to spontaneous change in organisms, which he related to the idea of free will. In 1878 and 1879 Gulick lectured on biological evolution at Doshisha University in Kyoto, a Christian school sponsored by the Congregationalist mission, where introduction to Western scientific thought was especially taught.<sup>19</sup>

There were many more scientists with evangelical leanings, including even a few Methodists and Presbyterians. The Princeton theological tradition, for instance, was one of union between natural history and natural theology, upheld by a succession of professors. One was James McCosh, Scottish Presbyterian, who left a pastorate in Scotland to occupy the chair of metaphysics at Queen's College at Belfast, and later became president of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton) in 1868, serving until 1888. McCosh defended evolution, holding that it was useless to tell young naturalists that there was no truth in the theory of evolution.<sup>20</sup>

And there were Congregationalist seminarians who supported Darwinian evolution, including William G.T. Shedd, who taught at Union Theological Seminary 1869-1894, where he attempted to integrate reason and revelation, and to reinvigorate Calvinism. Shedd used evolutionary theory to interpret history, teaching the idea of progressive development of the world under the guiding hand of providence.<sup>21</sup> One historian has written that while Unitarians were receptive to evolution, "Congregationalists [were] the most influential in interpreting and propagating" evolutionary theory.<sup>22</sup> No doubt it had something to do with the education of Congregationalists.

Later in the century, when Darwin wanted to accumulate evidence in favor of his theory that emotions are expressed in similar ways by animals as well as humans, and by 'primitive' as well as civilized men, he recruited persons living in the Pacific - in Australia, in New Zealand, in Borneo, etc., to observe facial expressions and compare aborigines with European settlers. Six of the twenty-one persons who responded to his queries were missionaries. Nine other missionaries, in Australia, New Zealand, and Hawaii, gave replies to Darwin's queries concerning various aspects of his research.

The London Missionary Society was founded in 1795 by Congregationalists, Anglicans, Presbyterians and Wesleyans to promote missions to the heathen. The first 29 missionaries sailed to Tahiti in 1796. The missionaries were free to choose whatever Church government they held right. The Society, which still carries on extensive work in Asia, the Pacific Islands, and Africa, has been maintained almost exclusively by Congregationalists.<sup>23</sup>

Many of the early missionaries were educated at dissenting academies, which were rivals of the Universities. (Dissenters from Anglicanism were not allowed to attend Oxford or Cambridge until 1870.) The students were given academic educations, not just in religion but also in languages, history, and sciences, including geology and natural history. Once stationed in the Pacific, they made collections of fossils and natural history specimens, and published them in *Missionary Sketches* as well as other periodicals. Often the language used suggested acceptance of evolution, or some kind of gradual development of animal species. Nonconformist missionaries had a philosophical outlook geared to

scientific change, to biblical scholarship and criticism. Their distrust of the Anglican establishment influenced them to accept Darwinism partly in opposition to the conservative Anglicans. The nonconformist clergy were receptive to the intellectual challenges of contemporary science. They saw no conflict between the earth's being millions of years old and the Mosaic history. They readily cooperated with visiting scientists in the Pacific, including Charles Darwin in 1835-6.

Missionaries themselves took the initiative in scientific collecting and publishing, in scientific journals as well as missionary magazines, and sent specimens back to England for museums at Oxford and for Kew gardens. More than 200 articles were published by British missionaries in the Pacific in scientific journals between 1868 and 1900, and more than 130 between 1901 and 1930, in addition to their scientific articles in religious periodicals. Most Protestant missionaries of all denominations who served in the Pacific were sympathetic to scientific pursuits and after publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* they played key roles in extending contemporary knowledge of the natural world.

After publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, evangelicals in the Pacific continued to be in the forefront of scientific advance, in contrast to Anglicans or biblical literalists, both of whom resisted Darwin's ideas. By the late nineteenth century, when science finally began to be taught in the universities, Anglican missionaries in the Pacific who were university educated also participated in scientific studies, particularly ethnography and anthropology.

The twentieth century saw the advent of creationism, of anti-science, and of 'creation science.' It began, perhaps, with *The Fundamentals*, a 12-volume series of articles, published 1910-1915. It was interdenominational and theologically conservative; three million copies were distributed to every pastor, missionary, theological student, YMCA & YWCA secretary in the English-speaking world. Contributors included George Frederick Wright and others who defended evolution and argued for the harmony of science and scripture, and also some relatively unknown authors who lacked scientific education and who attacked evolution.

Creationism gained ground as the Princeton Theological Review gradually became alienated from Darwinian evolution, and printed articles by persons who were not even faculty members.

Then Missouri synod Lutherans, pre-millennialism groups such as Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses, who preached a literal reading of biblical prophecy and the first chapter of Genesis, came on the scene. What they needed to gain attention and to promote their cause was a public spectacle, and they got it in the Scopes trial of 1925, which still reverberates with 'fundamentalists.'<sup>24</sup>

And what about today? Do we today require Congregational ministers to have a thorough education in science? Do we in Congregational Churches have faith in our own observations? in what we can see with our own eyes? Two years ago at this time, Arvel Steece reminded us that we must commit our mental abilities to the love of God, and that "the intellectual pursuit may well be through science to God." He also reminded us that "we are a Biblical people open to new truth and light from out the Word"<sup>25</sup>

Finally I return to Arthur Rouner. "One of the proudest traditions of the Congregational Way in America is its tradition of an educated ministry," he writes. "There was a time in early New England when the minister was often the only educated person in the community... This is no longer true. And yet how much more important now, with college graduates, and a host of intelligent, well-read folk in our congregations, that our ministers be educated, and well-educated.

"There is so much more one needs to know to be an intelligent man today: literature and art, world affairs and science, humanities and history. The mind can scarcely encompass the knowledge of today. By comparison, it seems little enough that ministers of Christ have four years of hard study in the liberal arts and sciences before attempting their three years of seminary."<sup>26</sup>

Notes

1. Arthur A. Rouner, Jr., *The Congregational Way of Life*, Prentice Hall, 1960 pp.152-3.
2. David N. Livingstone, *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders: the Encounter between Evangelical Theology and Evolutionary Thought*, Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987. p. x.
3. David N. Livingstone, op. cit., p.2.
4. Perry Miller, *The New England Mind, from Colony to Province*, 1967, Harvard University Press, pp.438-442.
5. David Livingstone, op. cit., p. 51.
6. Ahlstrom, Sidney, *A Religious History of the American People*, 1975, 2 vols., Doubleday & Co., Garden City, vol.1, p. 428.
7. David Livingstone, op. cit., p. 3.
8. David Livingstone, op. cit., p.27.
9. David Livingstone, op. cit., p. 9.
10. David Livingstone, op. cit., pp.16-19.
11. David Livingstone, op. cit., p.xi.
12. David Livingstone, op. cit., pp. 58-9.
13. David Livingstone, Op. cit., pp.60-64.
14. Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Darwin in America: the Intellectual Response, 1865-1912*, W. H. Freeman & Co., San Francisco, 1976, pp. 28-9.
15. Herbert Spencer coined the phrase "survival of the fittest" and promulgated his own sociological version of evolution.
16. James R. Moore, *The Post-Darwinian Controversies: a Study of the Protestant struggle to come to terms with Darwin in Great Britain and America, 1870-1900*, Cambridge University Press, 1979, pp. 269-298.
17. David Livingstone, op. cit., pp.71-75.
18. Harry R. Butman, *The Lord's Free People*, Swannet Press, Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, 1968, pp. 49-50; Manfred W. Kohl, *Congregationalism in America*, the Congregational Press, Oak Creek, Wisconsin, 1977, pp. 36-37.
19. Ron Amundson, "John T. Gulick and the Active Organism," in MacLeod and Rehbock, eds, *Darwin's Laboratory; Evolutionary Theory and Natural History in the Pacific*, Honolulu, U. of Hawaii Press, 1994, pp. 110-139.
20. David Livingstone, op. cit., pp. 109-111.
21. David Livingstone, op. cit., p. 123.
22. James R. Moore, op. cit., p.11.
23. Niel Gunson, "British Missionaries and Their Contribution to Science"

# **RENEWING CONGREGATIONALISTS**

KEYNOTE ADDRESS  
CONGREGATIONAL SYMPOSIUM 2000  
PLYMOUTH, MASSACHUSETTS  
NOVEMBER 11, 2000  
DR. MANFRED W. KOHL \*

Let me begin with three basic statements which I will illustrate with three personal experiences:

**1. See as God sees; do as God says.**

2. Without a clear vision, without a strategic plan, without a focused commitment and determination -- failure is reality.

**3. There is no improvement without change -- change must start at the top.**

As a brief introduction, let me explain where I am coming from. I am a Congregationalist, and I believe in the Congregational Way. In the same breath I must add that denominationalism, with all its political maneuvering for survival, is for me a waste of time and energy. In my extensive travel around the world, I have encountered many Congregationalists who have lost the fire and yet put a great deal of effort into keeping together the ashes of their yesterdays – a sad, indeed fatal, exercise. I have also met Congregationalists whose “Great Commission” values serve as foundation blocks for the building of God’s Kingdom for today, in whom the flames of jubilant life vibrate through their entire being and their ministry and spread into their congregations and into wider movements. I belong to the latter group of Congregationalists, and I wish to clearly distance myself from the former. Congregationalists (not Congregationalism) need to make a new beginning, putting first things first again, experiencing a revival, focusing on the essentials.

**1. See As God Sees; Do As God Says**

This is a simple but powerful statement based on the presupposition that there is a living and loving God as demonstrated in Holy Scripture; that Jesus Christ is a historical reality, who died and rose for us; and that the Holy Spirit is real and guides us daily.

To see as God sees requires that we focus on the divine attributes. God dislikes all forms of evil, even if culturally approved or accepted by society, and kingdom values reject all manifestations of the sinful nature described in Galatians 5:19-21. The Creator has always had a loving eye for his creation, even more so after the incomprehensible act of redemption. He sees mankind – all of us – with eyes of love and compassion and is ready to bless us with forgiving grace and lasting peace. We too must see people – all people – with such eyes of love and compassion. The same applies not only to people but also to our local environment and to the natural resources of our entire planet. We continue to destroy God’s creation because we do not have the eyes of the loving Creator. That must change.

To do as God says requires knowing the divine instructions and being willing to obey. Phrases such as “Forgive and forget,” “Share with those in need,” “Regard others as higher than yourself,” “Practice servant leadership,” “Seek unity,” “Demonstrate your faith,” “Practice what you preach” – to list only a few – will never become reality if we are not prepared to put them into practice. Theological debate and philosophical explanations must come to an end. We must do what God says.

***Experience in Africa:***

---

\* Manfred Waldemar Kohl (MTh, ThD, Harvard University and American Center for Congregational Studies; DMin, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary) serves as Vice-President for International Development for Overseas Council International, an organization which assists theological schools, primarily in the non-western world. He served as minister at the First Congregational Church in Middleboro, Massachusetts, and as moderator of the International Congregational Fellowship. He is presently a member of the executive committee of the ICF and co-chair of its theological commission.

*A few years ago I was asked to coordinate and direct a major film production for European national television about the devastating drought situation in Africa. We began in Accra, the capital of Ghana, the West African country formerly known as "the Gold Coast." We interviewed on film a number of missionaries, priests, and pastors from the various churches and parachurch organizations.*

*Early in the morning of the last day of filming, we visited the Roman Catholic headquarters to film and interview, but there seemed to be no one there. I felt quite disappointed, because I wanted to have a statement from the Catholic sisters and brothers, who were doing an exceptional job of alleviating human suffering in that area. Just as we were about to leave the premises again, I heard noises in the basement where, on investigation, I found an old African man in the kitchen preparing breakfast for himself. He greeted me with a broad smile and invited me to join him in the meal that he was in the midst of preparing. It was quite obvious that that man had no gift either for cooking or for cleanliness. I assumed that he was a helper in the maintenance of the property. However, he served me with a big smile, treating me with dignity = probably, I thought, because of my white skin. As I enjoyed the wonderful fellowship with this old man, I remembered that the entire film crew – six people – was waiting outside for action. Attempting to redeem something of our lost opportunity, I asked the old fellow if he would be willing to answer some questions to be recorded on camera, assuring him that I would ask very simple questions which would require only brief and simple answers. The filming went very well, and after half an hour the entire interview was over. In parting, I asked the man's name so that he could be included in the credits. Since it was a name with seventeen letters and impossible to pronounce, I asked for his job title as an alternative. He smiled, and said simply, "I am the Archbishop of Cape Coast, West Africa."*

*That was undoubtedly one of the most embarrassing moments of my entire life! Suddenly I remembered that I had in fact seen his name before; he was the African advisor to the Vatican, the author of many theological textbooks, etc., etc. – indeed, one of the greatest Catholic theologians of Africa.*

This was a demonstration of servant leadership. Here was a man who practiced what God wanted him to do. (Mark 10:43)

## **2. Without a Clear Vision, Without a Strategic Plan, Without a Focused Commitment and Determination -- Failure Is Reality.**

In terms of Christian ministry, most pastors and Christian leaders have a passion for the past; some have a concern for the present, but few care about or plan for the future. In my teaching seminars on leadership formation around the world, I am constantly amazed at how little our leaders care about tomorrow and how inadequately they are prepared to make strategic plans. Without a clear vision our future will be faced with and determined by chaos, ineffectiveness, or fear. A clearly formulated vision for our personal lives, our families, our ministries, our churches and institutions is essential, and such a vision is the basis for a well-defined strategic plan. It would be very helpful if, for instance, Christian leaders would learn from the secular business world how to transfer vision into plans and actions. Every evangelist should take a course from the Coca-Cola Company, and every pastor working with children and youth should take lessons from the strategic marketing departments of MacDonald's and MTV. These companies indeed know how to transfer dreams into plans, plans into actions, and actions into results.

One lesson we can learn from our Congregational fathers and mothers is their focused commitment and determination. They never gave up, even in the most devastating circumstances. No wonder they accomplished so much! Congregationalists can be proud of all their achievements. I believe that since the time of Jesus, when the concept of the fellowship of believers (the congregation) came into existence, few events have done more to shape society than the Mayflower Compact and the events of 1620.

In my present position I focus on helping Christian leaders to spend quality time in formulating a

vision which goes beyond a simple dream. This is followed by preparing a vision statement and a mission statement which lead into a strategic plan, which in turn translates into a plan of action with objectives and goals that have to be reviewed and evaluated on a regular basis.

***Experience in the former Soviet Union:***

*Last month I went to Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, part of the former Soviet Union. For eighty years communism made all kinds of Christian worship and ministry very difficult. Christians were severely persecuted. After Glasnost / Perestroika and the fall of the Berlin wall, new possibilities opened up for Christians. In Kiev, a church founded a theological seminary from nothing. After much prayer, fasting, and planning on the part of the leadership, it was decided to get rid of all the traditions and ballast of past theological education and to develop a clear vision for the church and for the country. The vision and mission statements included how best to impact every section of society, including the business community, the academic sector, the parliament, and government employees.*

*Their plan covers a defined period of three years and is reviewed and adjusted every year. The overall results have been overwhelming. The leadership learned how to delegate authority and how to focus on outcome-oriented effectiveness. The entire leadership is eager to learn and to improve. For instance, when I spoke last May to more than 350 pastors at a conference in Kiev, I mentioned that the media (print and electronic) should have been invited. We must plan to reach beyond our church walls to the millions in the country who have not heard about the Christian message of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Two months later, on my next visit to Kiev, the president of the school and I were interviewed by national television. This resulted in a four-minute segment on the evening news which was seen by approximately 35 million people. The daily newspapers are also beginning to report on what the seminary and the churches are doing throughout the country. Members of the older generation, who so often suffered in prison camps for their faith, are encouraging the new generation to make their dreams a reality, not hindered by obstacles or excuses. (Acts 2:17b)*

**3. There Is No Improvement without Change -- Change Must Start at the Top**

Keeping the “status quo” seems often to be seen as sanctification, and holding on to tradition for tradition’s sake as something special and even holy. Many of our churches are barely surviving; others exist solely from bequests made decades or even centuries ago. I believe it is time that our entire ministry, our forms of worship, our singing and preaching, and our theological education and leadership structure reflect more of today’s needs – the needs of the people to whom we are called to minister. Only then will our congregations come alive again, renew their faith, commit themselves to outreach programs and expansion, and be willing to give sacrificially.

We have to learn that today’s people think more with their emotions, and hear more with their eyes. We need to understand that for them matters of faith can only become reality if seen to be demonstrated in the lives of their leaders. People want to see that what we say is identical with what we do.

We also can not expect people just to come to our church buildings, as beautiful as they may be. The time has come when we have to go where the people are, and we must change our entire ministry based on the question “Can it be done better? More effectively? With more lasting fruit?”

We have to be willing and ready to get rid of some of our traditions, and to seek more innovative and creative ways to do effective ministry. Remember: every tradition once began as an innovation!

**Experience in Palestine:**

*Last week, while thinking about and preparing this speech, I visited the Holy Land (Israel and Palestine). In Bethlehem I was asked to speak at the theological school located only a few yards from the Israeli check point with all its violence, shooting, and stone throwing. It was in Bethlehem that the Prince of Peace was born, and where shepherds received the angelic proclamation*

*"Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased." (Luke 2:14)*

*I also traveled through the Jordan valley, the place where John the Baptist preached and baptized. John followed tradition, and he broke with tradition. He took the ritual of purification out of the Temple and into the wilderness, and broadened its scope; never before had baptism been made available to everyone - rich and poor, men and women alike. He emphasized not the old ritual of sacrifice, but a new commitment to obedience and repentance, and with this change he began a revolution. This was devastating to the top leadership, since change is always difficult at the top level. As a fisherman at the Sea of Galilee said to me, "The fish in the market usually starts to smell at the head," and a housewife said, "When I clean the stairways I always start at the very top." (Jeremiah 7:5ff.)*

Congregationalists of the past were known for their creativity and innovating spirit. This very spirit is the hallmark of the entire Congregational movement and it has always begun with the leadership at the top.

In the 1980's Dr. Edwin Orr of the School of World Mission in Pasadena, CA, called historians and theologians from around the world to gather each year for a symposium in Oxford, England. The purpose was to investigate the great revival movements throughout history. I was privileged to participate in these symposia, presenting a paper each year on revival in Congregationalism, in Pietism and in other European movements in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Everyone participating at these conferences was surprised to discover that every major revival, every major new beginning, started with the leadership, the theologians, and the pastors.

We are here as leaders of our movement of Congregationalism; if we want to see a new beginning, new life, new excitement, and lasting results, the process has to begin with us. Let us be what we say we are. Let us see as God sees and do as God says, and begin the process of change today.

035M RENEWING CONGREGATIONALISTS 1100

# **“ARE WE WHO WE SAY WE ARE?”**

**Rev. Dr. Leo D. Christian**  
**Ephesians 4:1-15**

## **INTRODUCTION**

It has been our honor and privilege to host this Symposium and it is my privilege to speak to you at this closing session. I trust this will be profitable to you. May the Lord bless each of you for participating and your congregations as they have freed you to be here for this event.

My all time favorite play is “Fiddler on the Roof.” The play opens with the usual chaos in the village square. It is fast moving and ever changing with many plots and scenarios developing. The first act closes with a monologue from Tevia, trying to bring some sense to the happenings around him. He says, (let me paraphrase part of this) we know who we are, and what God expects of us. If this were not so, we would be crazy, “Like a Fiddler on the Roof.”

I want to propose somewhat the same to us as we live in a world that might seem to be chaotic. We need to know, who we are, and what God expects of us. It has been said, “that in the formation of every organization, are the seeds of desegregation.” Thus the question I have to propose to us this morning is the same one we have been considering together these past few days. “Are We Who We Say We Are?”

I’m not going to preach an exposition or exegesis of our text. I simply want to build upon some biblical principles. As Leaders of this glorious Church of Christ, I want us to look at three things.

First, The Purpose of The Church – Mission God has called us to.

Second, The Pattern in The Church - Life cycle of a Congregation

Third, The Practice for The Church - Practical things we can do to remain salt and light

## **FIRST, THE PUROSE OF THE CHURCH**

In our American society, the fast food restaurants have become a standard for many of us. Now after a gourmet meal, one might snub their nose at them, but when you are hungry and in a hurry they seem pretty good. Let’s pretend that it is one of those times. You’re working hard and it’s past noon. At first you thought you would skip lunch. Instead you decided that since you deserve a break today that you would hop in the car, swing through the drive through and, grab a quick lunch to bring back to the office. You pull up to the window and you order a cheeseburger, fries and a diet coke. (diet coke compensates for the fries.) Well, barely missing a beat you are on your way back to the office. As you leave the driveway you are ever so thankful for whom ever it was that invented this concept.

Driving back, the aroma is a little overwhelming, so you decide that you will munch on a few of those fries. Oh no! This one does not have any salt, so you take another. The same thing, it is bland. You begin thinking they must be training someone new and they forgot to put the salt on the fries. You now have a crisis; you are faced with having to eat this whole bag of fires with no salt. Have you ever noticed that when there is no salt on the fries even the cheeseburger tastes flat and the diet coke loses its ability to wash anything down? You are disappointed and your whole lunch is ruined. Probably your whole afternoon will be ruined too. It is interesting that a little thing like salt can influence our lives.

All kidding aside, sometimes people come into our churches expecting us to be savory and we are not. What is the biblical mission of the Church? This is important especially if we are going to be who we say we are. I want us to note five elements of the purpose of the church as they are found in the epistle of St. Paul to the Ephesians.

### **To Glorify God - Ephesians 1:5, 6,12,14,18**

I’ve listed this as being of first importance. The Westminster Confession states that, “The chief end of man is to Glorify God.” Our Congregational Fathers of both the Savoy and Cambridge Platforms, held the preeminence of this truth as irrevocable.

Unless the dreams of the past and the visions of the future are in line with this purpose, the church will never be salty. When dreams are deferred, people lose hope, and where there is no vision, the people perish. The dreams and the visions of the church must be first and foremost dedicated to the glory of God. If they are not, there will be the potential for misunderstanding, division and strife. All we need to do is study the church at Corinth to see this principle enacted. The driving force in being who we say we are, must be the (Sola Gloria) Glory of God! The next element of the church's purpose is found in the need to edify the saints.

### **Edify the Saints - Ephesians 4:11-16**

This involves sound doctrine. So let us look a little more pragmatically at this. By nature, the body inherently cares for itself. If you contact a virus, the body automatically goes into action. One of the responsibilities of leadership is to develop the church functionally unto the work of ministry. It is here that the Holy Spirit, using sound teaching, builds up the Church.

There are three tools that God has given us to equip the saints. First, He gave us His Spirit to abide inside us. Second, He gave us His Word to guide us. Lastly, He gives us His people to be beside us. This is so we might "strive together for the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace." If we are going to be who we say we are, we will need to utilize the Holy Spirit's ministry through His Word to His People. The next element of the church's purpose is found in its character. It is called to set a standard of purity.

### **Set a Standard for Purity - Ephesians 5:26, 27**

What a great picture of how the Lord wants His bride. Paul also told the Roman believers that he would present them as chaste virgins to the Lord at His coming. Purity is an area of Church life that is in serious disarray. This is a good time to call the church unto holiness.

During the days of Paul, the culture was saturated with moral decadence, yet Paul never hesitated to call the Church unto holiness.

If we are going to be who we say we are, the church will need to set the standard for holiness. We should not be confused as the world is. Unfortunately many today (even leaders in the church) call good evil and evil good.

Purity involves "Positional Holiness." This is how God sees us in Christ. It also involves "Practical Holiness," which is how man sees our lives. I love a phrase that Dr. Warren Wiersbe said, "What God blesses is great likeness to Jesus." Could this be one reason the Church is not attractive to this generation? Is it because they see nothing different in us than in the world in which they live? We appear to have nothing to offer them. Like Lot, our lifestyle seems to be a mockery. Whatever happened to the clarion call of those who have gone on before us to be the light to the world and a city that is placed upon the hill? Another element of the church's purpose is to reach those outside the faith with the message of Christ.

### **Reach the Lost for Christ - Ephesians 4:11**

Each of the Gospels and the book of Acts hold forth the commission that we are to go forth with the Gospel. This is not merely a concept but it is to be a way of life. If we are going to be who we say we are, this must be our conviction. Dr. D. James Kennedy says in his book, "Evangelism Explosion," if the Pastor is not involved evangelism probably will not happen. The Scriptures proclaim, "How blessed are the feet of those who bring good news." The fifth element of the Church's purpose is to be a restorer of the knowledge of good and evil.

### **Restore a Knowledge of Good and Evil**

I am in no way suggesting that the world will not get better until we usher in the Kingdom. What I am saying is that where the church is planted it has always bettered the community and the world. The church brings men out of darkness into the Light. In essence, we the church are "Agents of Cultural Change." Schools, missions, hospitals, science, have been the legacy of the church as a result of the changed hearts of mankind. Where sin abounds, grace much more abound, thus in a sense we are called to be a restraint upon evil.

If we are going to be who we say we are, we need to understand the social governmental elements of the church. Too many of us Congregationalists have a problem leading the church, because we have never studied its nature. Let's go a little more into the observable pattern in the life of any local church or association of churches.

## **SECOND, THE PATTERN IN THE CHURCH**

The Church, like all organizations, seems to follow a cycle of life. As Solomon reminds us, "there is nothing new under the sun." History repeats itself, and it has been said that the only thing we learn from history is that man does not learn from history. Since we know the purpose of the Church let's quickly look at the pattern we seem to follow.

### **The Dream**

This is where all Churches and movements begin. In Scrobie England, in a little Post office, there was born from faith a dream to purify the Church by following the New Testament patterns. It spread to Plymouth, then the Bay Colony and into Exeter, New Hampshire. What enabled them to do what was humanly impossible? The Dream. A little congregation was gathered in Augusta, Georgia in 1845. On the corner-stone of their building they inscribed these words, "Men, who see the invisible, hear the inaudible, believe the incredible and think the unthinkable."

The famed American preacher, Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse was once visited in his church by a former professor. Professor Dick Wilson. At the end of the sermon Dr. Wilson walked up to Barnhouse and said, "I come to hear those I train and I look for one thing. Do they preach a Big God or a little god?"

One hundred and two souls packed themselves onto a tiny ship, the Mayflower, and it was through this dream that American Congregationalism began.

### **The Organizational Structure**

From our dreams comes a clear understanding of our mission. We write the By-laws and policy with the goal of doing a thing decently and in order to the glory of God. We move from the basis of our structure outward with a positive focus.

### **The Positive Ministry**

Our motivation is to be for something. Our tradition was for the revitalization of God's principles in the life of His church. Sometimes groups start because they are against something. They usually fail.

The early ministry of a church or association involves purity, edification, and evangelism. We have a positive aspect. This then prompts us to have a focus beyond ourselves.

### **The Outward Concern**

The "Go" in the Great Commission is the reality, as we go to reach beyond ourselves. This is the pivotal point of all churches or organizations. It is here where we rise or fall. Sometimes in growth, we become complacent. The changes around sometimes cause us to retreat or gravitate to what is familiar. The first thing that happens when we lose a concern that is beyond ourselves is we lose our vision for the future.

### **The Loss of Vision**

This does not happen all at once. It happens over time. For 19 years I was involved in church planting and revitalization and I found the pattern always true. Most congregations were at one time vibrant, but somewhere in the process, the dreams of the past and the vision of the future were circumvented. I remember one church I served where we were experiencing great numerical growth and a man said, "I won't let this church go over 250, or I'll be gone." Well, he did leave. Robert Schuler wrote in his book, "Move Ahead with Possibility Thinking," that congregations have mentalities. Some have a hundred-member mentality while others have a five-hundred member mentality. Too often we not only never rise beyond our vision, we begin to look backwards while getting there. I often tease my parents about this subject. Their dream was always to move to Cape Cod. Well one day my dad found a way to make that possible. It was only a few years after that my dad said, "I don't know why all these people are coming down to our Cape." So I asked him, "Dad would you like them to close the bridge?" He thought that would be a good solution. When we lose our vision we develop an inward focus.

### **The Inward Focus**

In Acts six, we read of the contention over the daily administering of food. The Apostles were wise, and they did not get trapped in such an inward focus. The inner workings of the congregation are important, but they can never replace the Spirit filled life. It is the Holy Spirit who keeps our focus beyond ourselves.

In 1620 the Pilgrims landed on the Plymouth shore. With great vision and courage they came to this wilderness to settle a land. In the first year they established a town. In the second year, they elected a Town Council. In the third year, the government proposed building a road 5 miles west into the wilderness. However, in the fourth year, a group of people in town tried to impeach the Town Council because they thought that building a road into the forest was a waste of public funds.

Somehow this little group began to lose their vision. They were once able to see across an ocean, but now they were finding it difficult to look five miles into the wilderness. When we develop an inward focus our ministry then takes on a maintenance mindset.

### **The Maintaining Ministry**

We see this illustrated in the life of Moses in Exodus eighteen. Moses was running a maintenance ministry. He was overwhelmed and the people were discouraged. His Father-in-law, Jethro, came and told him that it was not good. Then Jethro helped Moses to develop an outreach ministry and to multiply his efforts.

Maintenance Ministries stop outreach and cause a lose of mission. I used to call a group of people in one Church I served the Pillars of the church. By that I meant that they had been holding the church up for a long time. When buildings and budgets become more important than heaven and hell and the souls of those who go there we are running a maintenance ministry. Maintenance ministries always take up a negative emphasis.

### **The Negative Emphasis**

The focus is on what we are against or what it is that we don't need. This is where conflict occurs. We exist to protect and we use words like "me" and "mine" rather than "God's." We become characterized by fear! We know as the Scripture states that a "Fear of man always brings a snare," and that "fear has torment." When a church or association is paralyzed by fear, it looks, at times, more like a cult than the Church of the Living God.

The Joy is sapped out of the congregation and replaced by suspicion, evil speaking and questioning everyone's motives. Foolish to think that this can happen to me!

### **The Questioning Congregations**

The members begin to ask why we do what we do. When there is no purpose, no mission, people slip away. This always leads to blame shifting.

### **The Polarization of Groups & Individuals**

Sometimes it is seen in the dividing of the generations. The dreams and visions are not in line with each other. More important, they are not in line with God. The deacons blame the pastor and the pastor blames the deacons. The result is sadness and despair in the congregation. The Joy of the Lord is nowhere to be found. The churches that were once so alive seem to be struggling for their very existence.

### **The Loss of the Joy of the Lord**

Unhappiness is like a cancer in the body of Christ! A sense of uselessness prevails. Forsaken biblical mandates and replaced with the strategies of the world. Prayer meetings become almost non-existent. The weapons of our warfare become carnal, rather than might and power for the pulling down of the stronghold that stands against the Church. These are the dreams of our own making and ends in the ultimate disintegration of the congregation. I mentioned to our congregation that the difference between a rut and a grave is only the depth.

### **The Death of a Movement or Congregation**

My experience in revitalizing churches in rural America and as an acting Executive Secretary of the Connecticut Congregational Fellowship led me to see this principle more often than I wanted to. One church that seats 500 had a day when three services had to be held. The Governor of the State attended, and Lincoln often attended when in the north. The attendance in the past years has been forty to sixty adults. Now it is a remnant of days gone by. I often remind myself of a statement I once heard and I take it very seriously. "In the formation of every organization are the seeds of disintegration."

If we are going to be the kind of association of churches we say we are and move forward, then we will need to know where our churches are at. The good news is this cycle can be broken and reversed at any stage in the process. Through the Lord Jesus Christ who has promised to build His church, we can do all things. So, are we who we say we are? If not, how can we be? Let's look for a few more minutes on the practice of the church.

### **THIRD, THE PRACTICE OF THE CHURCH**

I want to try to remind us of three things we can do to continue growth or correct a problem if it exists.

#### **1<sup>st</sup>, Back to The Basics**

How many of you remember the old television series "F-Troop?" Do you remember the Indian tribe's name? It was the "Hecowees." In one episode the chief of the Hecowees was asked from whom they got their name. He said, "We traveled over hill and valley and over hill and valley and over more hill and valley. We did this for many moons. Finally one day they come after this long journey someone said where the 'heck are we!' " If you asked most people sitting in the pews what it means to be a Congregationalist, about all they could tell you is that they get to vote on things.

A friend of mine, Bill, upon graduating from high school began to look for employment. This was about the time of the invention of pink rolled insulation. Bill being an enthusiastic personable young man was hired as a salesman. Since that was then a small industry, the company's president did all the training. Bill's sales the very first month went higher than anyone else in the company and they continued to grow each month thereafter. Bill was very impressed with himself and savored his sales ability. He began to add to the presentation and color it up a bit.

As the months went on Bill's sales began to drop until he could not even make his quota. The President of the company asked Bill what was happening. Bill was totally confused. Bill was working harder than ever but producing less. The President said, "Give me your presentation." So Bill gave him a demonstration. The President asked Bill, "When did you change the presentation I gave you?" Bill said, "I thought the presentation needed a little more color and that I could add a few things to it." The President told Bill to forget his new and improved version and to just get back to the basics and the product would sell itself. Bill did just that and it was not long before Bill was at the top of the sales charts again.

Could it be that we need to go back to the basics, go back to our roots, go back to the Rock? Have we lost our mission or, worse have we traded it in for the new and improved version? I do not think that we need to be culturally relevant, and I will speak about that in a moment. Like the church at Laodicea, could we have lost our first love, and do we need to repent and do the first works?

Next, if we are going to be who we say we are then we are going to have to be culturally relevant and have a generational appreciation.

#### **Cultural & Generational Appreciation**

All through the scriptures God calls us to be thankful people. "In everything give thanks for this is the will of God for you who are in Christ Jesus. For God inhabits the praises of his people."

All in all, God wills and does of His good pleasure to accomplish His purpose in His Church and it is all to the praise of His glory. God's sovereign acts will stand. We need to learn to appreciate and accept valid differences in the body. A sense of open mindedness to cultural and generational needs must prevail. Too often we selfishly fight about the color of the carpet. In the early church there was a man who became known as Julian the Apostate. He wrote, "I have not seen wild animals fight like the Church."

Remember: It is His church. We are simply co laborers together with the Lord. Although we can't live in the past, we can learn from it. Remember it is His church and we are to follow His directives. For, it is "In Him and for Him and through Him that all things exist. It is in him that we live and move and have our very being."

I remember when I was founding Pastor at Talbot Church. It grew very quickly. At one deacon's meeting we realized that we were a young church, void of old people. So they held a prayer time to ask God to send us some older people so that we would have their wisdom. God did. But first as a Church we needed to ask some questions. Like, if my parents were to come here what would they like? Then we made some generational adjustments

If we are going to be who we say we are we will not only need to go back to the basics, we will also need to truly appreciate the different cultural backgrounds and generations of our people.

We need to ask God to give us a love for the dreams of the past and a passion for the visions of the future. Many years ago Spain inscribed on her coin the picture of the Pillars of Hercules that stood on either side of the straits of Gibraltar, the extreme boundary of her empire, with only unexplored ocean beyond. On the scroll over them was written "Ne Plus Ultra." "Nothing beyond." However, when Columbus discovered America, Spain struck the negative and left the inscription, "Plus Ultra." "More beyond."

Years ago Walt Disney bought a piece of land in the middle of nowhere and decided to build an amusement park. At that time it was not popular. People thought he was so foolish. Years later across the continent in some of the swamps of Florida Mr. Disney decided to do it again. Well before the project was finished Walt Disney died. It was remarked to the then CEO that it would have been wonderful if Walt could have seen this. To this he replied, "He did, why you think it's here?"

### **CONCLUSION**

An American shoe company decided to sell their products in Africa. The first salesman was there for about six months when he requested to be brought home. He said, "It will never work here, the people don't wear shoes." So the company, in one last try, sent another young man, who one month later wrote back asking for order after order. He wrote with his order, "this is great, everyone here needs shoes!"

If we are going to be who we say we are then we will need to understand the "Purpose of the Church" and the mission God has called us to. We will need to understand the "Patterns of the Church," the "Life Cycle of a Congregation," and we will need to Understand the "Practice of the Church," and some practical things that we can do to remain salt and light.

### **ARE WE WHO WE SAY WE ARE?**

As those of old with a forward thrust, dare brave the restless sea.  
With vigilance and purity, captured by integrity.

Time passed by, the battled raged through never ending change. Founded in the truths of God,  
enabled by His power.

Forward now like them of old to face our future bold.  
Sustained by faith and kept by grace until the Covenant fulfilled

The question still remains as then, is our mission clear?  
Are we who we say we are? Integrity until the end.