

BREAKING COVENANT:  
The Tensions in American Congregationalism  
That Resulted in the UCC Merger Controversy

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## Introduction

The Congregational Way of life is an often frustrating, always challenging way of responding to the Christian call to gather in church bodies that is steeped in both ambiguity and promise. From its earliest days prior to arrival on the New England shores, the Puritan and Separatist founders of the Congregational way agreed on the call from scripture to “do church” differently from the way prescribed by the Anglicans. Yet they could not agree on just how this new church should be formed. Even in its most developed state in the New World, Congregationalism continued to experience these kinds of ambiguity, which would mold and shape the movement over the next 300 years. By the mid 20th Century, they had arrived at a place and time in which the broader fellowship would be torn asunder in a struggle that nearly spelled the end of Congregationalism in America. This struggle did not come about primarily as an effort to change the face of Congregationalism, however. The controversy over the merger of the Congregational Christian and the Evangelical and Reformed churches was, for Congregationalists, the product of the historical tension between autonomy and voluntary association. This tension need not have produced that controversy nor should it present an insurmountable obstacle to continuing fellowship today.

In an effort to illustrate this tension, this paper will first examine some aspects of the history of Congregationalism, focusing on the many merger attempts made since 1620. This first focus will conclude with a look at the United Church of Christ debate. The focus will then shift to the Ecumenical Movement, which was a strong catalyst for renewed merger efforts. In this section various definitions of ecumenism will be examined as they relate to the ongoing debate. Finally, special attention will be given to the basic tenets of autonomy, voluntary association, and covenant. An attempt will be made to illustrate how our differing appropriations of these concepts have led over time to the tensions which have threatened the Congregational Way. To aid in this effort, the sociological theories of individualism and collectivism will be employed as an additional hermeneutical lens to examine these tensions.

Following these observations, some concluding remarks will be provided that outline some of the past weaknesses and offer possible correctives.

### **The History of Congregational Mergers**

The tendency toward merger throughout the history of the Congregational Way has been consistent and frequent. The earliest record of such an attempt in New England was the Plan of Union with the Presbyterians in the early 19th Century. The 1801 Plan initially came out of the joint efforts of the Connecticut Congregationalists and their Presbyterian neighbors. By 1828, their agreement had been ratified by the remaining state associations of New England. The primary purpose of the Plan was to organize joint efforts to establish and maintain new Congregational and Presbyterian churches on the frontier. These efforts, while successful at establishing churches, did not work out to the mutual satisfaction of both groups. The Plan was declared null by the Presbyterians in 1837, who were becoming increasingly concerned about the liberalizing influence of the Congregationalists, and by the Congregationalists in 1852, amid accusations that the Presbyterians had “stolen” as many as 2,000 churches away from the Congregational Way.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, this first attempt at merger was deemed a complete failure.

The next attempt at merger in Congregational history was in 1886, when union with the Free Baptist Churches was considered. History has not recorded why this union did not come to fruition. Congregational Methodists of Georgia and Alabama were the next merger attempt. Accomplished some time between 1887 and 1892<sup>2</sup> this was not in effect a true merger, but was rather a welcoming into the existing fellowship a small group of churches. Also in 1892, there was proposed a merger with the Christian Church denomination. Though this union did not succeed at the time, the proposal for organic union with the Christian Church would be brought up again in the late 1920's. It seems that 1892 was a significant year in the history of the merger attitude in Congregationalism. One of the resolutions adopted at the meeting of the National Council in Minneapolis that year reads, “that affiliation within our denomination of churches not now upon our roll should be welcomed upon the basis of common

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<sup>1</sup> Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism*, various.

<sup>2</sup> Various dates given. See Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism*, or Kohl, *Congregationalism in America*, 8.

evangelical faith, substantial Congregational polity, and free communion of Christians, without regard to forms or minor differences.”<sup>3</sup> This kind of openness, articulated on a national level, was to form the foundation for a merger consciousness that would lead to as many as 20 separate attempts at union in the first 20 years of the 20th Century (though failing to clearly define the meaning of “substantial Congregational polity” would contribute to later conflict). National Council meetings of 1904, 1907, and 1910 gave much attention to an attempt to merge with the Methodist Protestant and United Brethren denominations to form a single group called “The United Churches”. Though the merger was approved by the National Council in 1907, it later failed due to concerns over issues of the guarantee of local church autonomy. This issue, though never clearly defined at the time, was to plague future attempts as well.<sup>4</sup> Other mergers were suggested over the next decades with such groups as the Disciples of Christ, the Evangelical Church, the Unitarians, and the Universalists; all without success.

At the National Council meeting in Kansas City in 1913, the Committee on Comity, Federation, and Unity lamented these failures and reported “sometimes the best that can be done in an important movement is to wait for more favorable conditions.”<sup>5</sup> The committee further noted that “it is a remarkable fact that while no other body of churches has a more genuine desire for union, not one effort for union with another denomination ... has ever been successful.”<sup>6</sup> This lament was picked up elsewhere at that historic meeting in the address of Reverend Oliver Huckel. In his speech entitled “A Working Basis for Church Unity”, Huckel stated that “no one will be bold enough to predict the details of the movement, nor the ultimate form of the united Church of Christ. But it is surely coming.”<sup>7</sup> Nobody at that meeting fully understood the prophetic nature of Huckel’s words.

In 1925, the Conference of Evangelical Protestant Churches of North America and the German General Conference were accepted into fellowship by action of the National Council. Though certainly a

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<sup>3</sup> *Manual of the Congregational Christian Churches*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism*, various.

<sup>5</sup> *Commemoration of 50th Anniv. of ... Kansas City (Meeting)*, 74.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

step forward in marking the unity of Congregationalism, it was still not the complete merger of denominations for which the body had so long been striving. This was to come shortly thereafter, however, with the second attempt at merger with the Christian Church denomination. The eventual success of this endeavor led to the first merger of two distinct faith traditions into one body. Completed in 1931, this union formed the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches (though there was much discussion of naming the new group the “United Church”). However, even this successful attempt at organic union was met with some sound opposition on the part of some Congregationalists. Their two primary arguments were that the Christian Churches were not financially solvent and that the groups were not sufficiently homogeneous. Through careful negotiation and honest communication, however, these issues were overcome. The process was aided considerably by the efforts of Wilson P. Minton, a minister of the Christian Churches, who shared financial information and introduced the 6 Cardinal Principles of the Christian Church to the Congregationalists. These principles helped to show that the concern over lack of homogeneity was unfounded. They are as follows:

1. The Lord Jesus Christ the only Head of the Church.
2. Christian our only name.
3. The Bible our rule of faith and practice.
4. Individual interpretation of the scriptures the right and duty of all.
5. Christian character the test of fellowship.
6. The union of all the followers of Christ, to the end that the world may believe.<sup>8</sup>

The newly formed General Council did not rest on this success, however, but continued its efforts at organic union with other bodies. In 1942, the General Council authorized the Commission on Inter-Church Relations to explore the possibility of organic union with the Evangelical and Reformed Church. Since its founding, this commission had focused its energies on union with denominations which professed a Congregational polity. Nevertheless, the group accepted its charge and began discussion with the presbyterially organized Evangelical and Reformed churches.<sup>9</sup> The Basis of Union which was to result from these efforts was approved by the General Synod of the Evangelical and Reformed Churches in July of 1947 and by the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches in

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<sup>8</sup> Minton, *Some Little Known Aspects of the Congregational Christian Church Merger*, 108.

<sup>9</sup> Kohl, *Congregationalism in America*, 51.

February of 1949. The plan came under immediate attack. Opponents said that it failed to guarantee the autonomy of the local churches and that merger with a church of distinctly presbyterial polity posed potentially insurmountable challenges. Numerous portions of the Basis of Union were cited as being at odds with the Congregational Way. (Note: The arguments for and against the merger are well documented. Consequently, I will refer to only a few points herein which seem pertinent to the focus of this inquiry.)

Several steps were taken in an effort to resolve these disputes, one of which was to draft a set of Interpretations which were intended to clear up points of contention. For most of the opponents, these efforts were unsatisfactory. In 1954, the Committee on Free Church Polity and Unity of the General Council submitted a report to the Council. This report included a discussion of types of union and suggested that “Covenant Union” would “acknowledge oneness in Christ without forsaking their differing polities and would seek shared experiences.”<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, the report contained no suggestion as to appropriate action by the Council should they fail to receive the required number of affirmative votes to proceed with the merger. Also, this report was never seen by the majority of people involved in the ongoing debate.

One of the most outspoken critics of the merger proposal was Malcolm Burton, a Congregational minister who wrote and/or published numerous pamphlets during the course of the debate which stated the concerns of the opponents. He was to become a co-founder of the Committee for Continuing Congregationalism. His opinion of the outcome of the UCC merger controversy can be summed up in the following quote from his book *Disorders in the Kingdom*.

This will be the story of how the Congregationalists...were talked out of their historic and previously uncompromised freedom in local, self-governing churches. Also lost was their free and happy fellowship with other like-minded churches in associations and conferences owned and operated by the churches themselves.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Peabody, “A Study of the Controversy in Congregationalism,” 305.

<sup>11</sup> Burton, *Disorders in the Kingdom: Part 1*, 1.

Despite the concerns of the merger opponents, the General Council declared in 1949 that sufficient affirmative votes had been received from the churches to proceed with the union. This action led to a few final attempts to stop the merger through legal means.

The Cadman Case is by far the best known of the court cases and the tone for this particular case was set by Marion John Bradshaw when he stated at the pretrial hearings that he believed “the churches should have voted to become a Church before attempting to unite with another Church” (source unknown). This quote points out what was perhaps the most significant difference between the two sides in the merger debate. While the history of Congregationalism showed clearly that no association of churches could act in any way that would bind the individual churches (as was clearly affirmed in the 1947 Manual of the Congregational Christian Churches<sup>12</sup>), many of the leaders in the General Council believed that the associations and General Council were also autonomous units and could thus choose for themselves to enter into union. This issue of the autonomy of associations will be examined later.

The original judgment of the court found that the General Council had “no power or authority, on behalf of or in the name” of the churches to proceed with merger and that it could not legislate that privilege for itself.<sup>13</sup> Upon appeal, however, the original decision was overturned. The court declared that the individual churches, including Cadman, had no interest in the assets of the General Council or any of the various societies (an assertion made by the defendant) as the funds currently controlled by those groups were given as gifts. The court also indicated that it had no jurisdiction in ecclesiastical matters and that the actions of the General Council did not violate the terms of its constitution. The fight to stop the merger had failed and the union was officially consummated at a joint meeting of the two groups in Ohio in 1957. The subsequent meetings culminated in 1961 in the official incorporation of the United Church of Christ. The greater percentage of the Congregational churches voted to join the new denomination, with a number abstaining from any vote and about 300 choosing to join the newly-founded National Association of Congregational Christian Churches.

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<sup>12</sup> *Manual of the Congregational Christian Churches*, 27.

<sup>13</sup> *Cadman Memorial Church vs. Helen Kenyon...*, Part 1, Sect. 292.

## **The Ecumenical Movement as Catalyst for Change**

The primary focus of the Ecumenical Movement, which began in the late 19th century and continues to today, was in healing the fractures that existed within the churches of Christ in the world. Debate over the movement has centered around whether these fractures should be healed through attempts at unity or union. Problems have arisen when the definitions of these two terms get confused. The strongest proponents of merger believed that the way to bring about a truly united church was through the organic union of separate bodies. This move to organic union, as a response to the ecumenical movement, was widespread within many denominations. For them the existence of numerous denominations within Christendom was a sin against God. Dr. Charles Layton Morrison, former editor of the *Christian Century*, expressed this view clearly in terms particularly relevant to this analysis when he stated, “Congregationalism is the ultimate sectarianism...it is in Congregationalism, which makes a sect of every local church, that we have an unambiguous disclosure of the essential Protestant heresy.”<sup>14</sup>

Even back in John Cotton’s time there were arguments favoring unity in the form of organic union. Thomas Edwards wrote in 1644 that “different forms of churches and church government in one state must needs lay a foundation of strife and division therein. It is the admitting of a seed of perpetual division.”<sup>15</sup> Later ecumenical thought would continue favoring organic union. *The Concise Theological Dictionary* of 1968 defined ecumenism as “a collective name for all efforts of various persuasions so as to give effect to Christ’s will that all who believe in him shall form one church.”<sup>16</sup> This and other definitions of its kind arise from a specific interpretation of the scripture passage John 17:20-21. Jesus prays for his disciples, “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.” (NRSV) The *Declaration of the Unity of the Church* that came out of the 1871 Oberlin meeting of the new National Council of Congregational Churches quite conspicuously used the words “that all be one.”<sup>17</sup> This ecumenical spirit

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<sup>14</sup> Burton, *Destiny for Congregationalism*, 121.

<sup>15</sup> Polishook, *Roger Williams, John Cotton and Religious Freedom...*, various.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted by Ruddle, *Unity in Multiplicity*, 14.



was reiterated at the Minneapolis meeting in 1892 with the call for “a Federation without authority, of all bodies of Christian churches.”<sup>18</sup> These words appear again in the text of the Basis of Union.

By the time of the 1913 meeting in Kansas City, the push for organic union as a response to ecumenism was already strong. The Committee on Comity, Federation, and Unity made a very strong statement of its view of ecumenism in its report. It read:

[I]t is much to be hoped that negotiations may be resumed looking towards Congregationalism taking its proper part in the reducing, by corporate union, the too large number of denominations; but since our last session the conditions have not been favorable. Other denominations, Presbyterian and Methodist, have been active in this Christian service, and have enlarged their number; we have lagged behind, and have not gained our proper relative enlargement.”<sup>19</sup>

This approach to ecumenism was an obvious theme at the Kansas City meeting. The address by Reverend Huckel, previously referenced, defines the three possible approaches to unity.

The first method has been called by the one word *submission*, -- *the unconditional surrender of all communions to one communion*. This is the perfectly simple method proposed by our brethren of the Latin Church, who are willing for our absorption into them on their own terms. The second method is *confederation*, -- *a general agreement to work together*, each communion preserving its identity, its right, and its traditions, but counseling together, without authority, on the general interest of the church. This is merely *modus vivendi*, the union of a bundle of sticks. It has form and convenience, but it is unstable. It is not vital or dynamic. The third method is the one to which the wisest prophets are turning, -- *consolidation, an organic unity on terms of perfect equality with the preservation of whatever is worth while in the history and individuality of each communion*..<sup>20</sup>

The National Council and later General Council seem to have taken Huckel’s suggestions to heart. It is unity via consolidation which they continued to seek from that point on.

Coming from a reformed tradition, Congregationalists attempted to ground this view of ecumenism in its history. Appeal has even been made to Calvin as an apostle of ecumenicity.<sup>21</sup> At best

<sup>17</sup> Kohl, *Congregationalism in America*, 45.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> *Commemoration of 50th Anniv. of ... Kansas City (Meeting)*, 73.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 60-61.

<sup>21</sup> J. H. Kromminga, “Calvin and Ecumenicity,” in Gamble, *Calvin’s Ecclesiology: Sacraments & Deacons*, 37.

we can say that John Calvin was rather ambiguous on the subject. In the 4th volume of his *Institutes* he states that churches which contain all or some of the basic tenets of the faith are in substantial unity.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately he does not define which tenets are the minimum required for common belief, nor does he indicate what “substantial unity” means in practice. An obvious problem arises, of course, with any effort to ask Calvin to speak on the issue of ecumenism as we understand it in our century. Even the commentators of his work choose to define the word “unity” in differing ways. Without having him here today, there is no way for us truly to determine Calvin’s belief on this critical issue.

Having examined the belief of the proponents of the UCC merger in ecumenism as organic union, it is important to look at the beliefs of those who opposed the merger. Their’s was a different view of ecumenism, more closely related to the *confederation* which Huckel so quickly dismissed (see above). Malcolm Burton spoke out clearly on the issue of ecumenism in his early merger pamphlets. “There has never been an ecumenical creed which universally held within its lines the vitality of differing Christians,” he said, and “there has never been an ecumenical church which contained within one mold the organizational power of living Christians.”<sup>23</sup> In the same pamphlet, Burton gives the following argument against organic union:

To build an authoritative, organic union of churches might give us a hierarchy with power to speak out; but it would not convert the free and divergent wills of men to a genuine concord of opinion. It would simply mean the application of fascist methods of organization in order to cover up and stamp out all vagaries of free opinion. All the arguments for organic union, as over against union on a federative principle, stem from this desire for more power and authority. They ask for a single church government capable of enforcing its decrees.<sup>24</sup>

There are a host of other voices which may serve to illustrate the breadth of the debate over time and in varying faith traditions. Shailer Mathews, at one time the president of the American Baptist Convention, is quoted as saying, “The Christian spirit must be institutionalized if it is to prevail in the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Burton, *Early Merger Pamphlets*, 86-88.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 85.

age of institutions.”<sup>25</sup> This is a clear reference to the need for a unified Protestant voice which alone would have the power to make a difference in the world. Baron Friedrich von Huegel, noted Catholic lay theologian, held a view of ecumenism that was quite different from the others encountered in this analysis. While allowing that there was some degree of truth inherent to the Protestant faith traditions, von Huegel betrayed an obvious bias that was consistent with the Catholic Church’s early ecumenical endeavors. He stated that the Roman Church looked on it as their responsibility to gather in the severed parts of the Christian community. This is primarily because they believed that the Catholic Church was the true representation of the Christian Church while the Protestants were immature in their faith (yet still saved). Ecumenicity for von Huegel was about *unity* (namely the Catholic Church) *assimilating multiplicity* (referring to the Protestant faith traditions).<sup>26</sup> It should be noted, of course, that this representation of the approach toward ecumenism by the Catholic Church is no longer commonly held today.

### **Autonomy, Voluntary Association, and Covenant**

A Congregational polity, though it has been defined in different ways, is for the purposes of this analysis the careful and prayerful interaction of those concepts listed above; namely autonomy, voluntary association, and covenant. Congregational polity has variously been called “genius” and “weak” by its proponents over time. At its best it has been considered nothing less than God’s one chosen method of church structure. Yet this polity was charged with contributing to the failure of the first attempt at union ever made by American Congregationalists. It was the “feeling in New England that the polity of Congregationalism was less qualified than that of Presbyterianism for establishing and ordering churches in the unruly West. Congregational polity was for stable communities rather than for those still being formed on a yet un-disciplined frontier.”<sup>27</sup> They seem to have forgotten that Congregationalism was planted in New England in situations that were at least as “un-disciplined” as those found on the frontier.

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<sup>25</sup> Harrison, *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition*, 45.

<sup>26</sup> Ruddle, *Unity in Multiplicity*, 220.

<sup>27</sup> Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism*, 264.

Of course the Congregational polity evolved over time and there were some aspects of this way of structuring the faith community which did not survive that evolution. This can be seen in the gradual setting aside of biases regarding other faith traditions, the severing of ties between church and state, and in the level of authority given to the leaders of the churches. Regardless of these gradual changes in polity no single factor has impacted the molding of the Congregational Way more than the inconsistent definition and application of the concepts of autonomy, voluntary association, and covenant.

Autonomy has often been defined as “the degree to which a group...functions independently of other groups...and occupies an independent position in society.”<sup>28</sup> If this is an accurate working definition for autonomy, then any engagement with others could violate that sense of isolation and independence, leading to conflict. In fact, from its earliest days Congregationalism has denied the accuracy of the term “independent” in describing its beliefs and practices. The Cambridge Platform itself states “The term Independent, we approve not”<sup>29</sup> Despite all this, however, Congregational churches throughout our history have tended to follow this definition of autonomy. In Malcolm Burton’s anti-merger pamphlets, he recognized that the issue of autonomy was central to the debate. Burton pointed to the fact that nobody was clearly defining autonomy and that this had been a consistent problem for Congregationalists. He proposed that there was a difference in the classic approach of the churches, which he referred to as *inviolable autonomy* and that proposed by the Basis of Union, which he referred to as *limited autonomy*.<sup>30</sup> While this distinction was helpful, Burton had in effect done just what he said was the problem all along. He failed to clearly define the word *autonomy* and focused instead on defining the modifiers that he used. The result is further ambiguity.

The word *autonomy* comes from classical Greek: “*autos*, self; and *nomos*, portion, custom pattern, law from *nemein*, to allot. It means, fundamentally, self-governance.”<sup>31</sup> This term came into usage within the theological arena chiefly through the work of Immanuel Kant in the 1780’s.

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<sup>28</sup> Harrison, *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition*, 27.

<sup>29</sup> *Cambridge Platform*, Chapter II, Section 4.

<sup>30</sup> Burton, *Early Merger Pamphlets*, 159.

<sup>31</sup> Freeman, “AUTONOMY: An Interpretation,” 19.

Kant...opposed the association of autonomy with any form of rampant individualism or libertinism. Autonomy is fundamentally freedom for, not merely freedom from. It is the highest level of personal responsibility, not irresponsibility. To be sure, it entails a kind of freedom from the rule of others, but this is not a freedom to ignore what others ... have to say; it is freedom to listen, evaluate, decide, and act for oneself through the highest exercise of rationality....For lack of a confident characterization of autonomy in positive terms, the negative definition has often ruled the day.<sup>32</sup>

This quote clearly identifies the misconceptions surrounding autonomy that have plagued the Congregational Way since its inception. Only a careful reexamination of each faith community's embodiment of this concept will help to bring about a more positive embracing of true autonomy in the churches of the Congregational Way.

The Cambridge Platform states that “a Congregational-church, is by the institution of Christ a part of the Militant-visible-church, consisting of a company of Saints by calling, united into one body, by a holy covenant, for the public worship of God, & the mutual edification one of another, in the Fellowship of the Lord Jesus.”<sup>33</sup> While being a good description of the individual gathered community, this definition also hints at the broader fellowship enjoyed by Congregational churches. Each church is “a part of the Militant-visible-church”, the sum total of all communities of faith in the world who call on Christ as their Source. It says nothing about each church being independent or seeking to guard itself from any outside influence. This definition draws heavily from *The Marrow of Theology* by William Ames, who traced his treatment of the subject back to John Calvin.

As indicated above, the Congregational Way has been built on an understanding of the churches as autonomous, yet part of a greater body. It was the clear intent of the founders that individual churches should engage in both fellowship and mutual support, so that the feelings of independency which they had denounced would not become the norm for the churches. Stewart Newman, in his book on free church ecclesiology, gives a helpful description of the difficulty of individualism in the free church. He writes:

Admittedly, any system of faith-orientation which places great premium on responsible individualism in matters religious has within it the seed of independence and poses the possibility of dissent. The free church movement is

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> *Cambridge Platform*, Chapter II, Section 6.

peculiarly vulnerable at this point. It had its rise in a vigorous protest against a coercive authoritarianism which, by a system of external pressures, bound people together in church life. Free churchmen who were freed to choose their own way acknowledge that in any cooperative endeavor it is solely the strength of their agreements which bind them together. Where they disagree, therefore, these disagreements become consequential, whether they be weighty or trivial. Free churchism is not an unbridled individualism. It is based, instead, on a level of mature self-discipline which is calculated to furnish a trustworthy fellowship.<sup>34</sup>

This last quote mirrors well the words of that respected patriarch of the Way, Harry Butman, when he said, “Congregationalism seeks to conclude the quest for community by the achievement of fellowship, rather than by the use of power.”<sup>35</sup> The real question for Congregationalists has always been “what does this fellowship look like?” The answer must be more than the gathering together in friendly camaraderie of like-minded people of faith. Though this aspect of fellowship is important, there is more to voluntary association than the achievement of this one goal. It is the calling together of the individual churches into bodies designed for something more than mere fellowship; bodies which may be called councils, associations, synods, conferences, etc. The purpose of such gatherings may be for counsel on spiritual matters, welcoming of new churches or clergy, discussion of matters of concern to an individual church, or a host of other reasons.

The chief concern arising from the calling of this type of gathering, however, is that they could develop over time into the kinds of denominational hierarchical entities from which the Congregationalists originally fled. One of the basic tenets of the Cambridge Platform is that “there is no greater Church than a congregation.”<sup>36</sup> Yet the colonists understood the need for the churches to gather together from time to time to resolve important issues amongst themselves. “Although Churches be distinct, & therefore may not be confounded one with another: & equal, & therefore have not dominion one over another: yet all the churches ought to preserve Church-communion one with another, because they are all united unto Christ. ... The communion of Churches is exercised sundry ways.” The text goes on to list these numerous ways of communing, including *mutual care* for one another’s welfare, *consultation* - when one church desires the wise counsel of the others, *admonition* - in the event that an

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<sup>34</sup> Newman, *A Free Church Perspective*, 94-95.

<sup>35</sup> Kohl, *Congregationalism in America*, 53.

<sup>36</sup> *Cambridge Platform*, Chapter III, Section 5.

offense in a church must be pointed out by the other churches in fellowship and a course of action suggested, *participation* - by which members of different churches are welcomed at the others and may share pastoral leadership as the need arises, *recommendation* - to handle transfers of membership, and to provide general relief and succor to one another.<sup>37</sup> The intent of these gatherings was that “decisions” of the group were simply recommendations, that they were in no way binding on the local church body. Initially, these groups were to be called as needed for a specific purpose and then disbanded. (There were no permanent associations established until the Congregational churches of Connecticut took that step in 1708 with the passing of the Saybrook Platform.) The Cambridge Platform refers to gatherings of churches at length, as shown in the following excerpts:

Synods orderly assembled, & rightly proceeding according to the pattern, Acts. 15. we acknowledge as the ordinance of Christ: & though not absolutely necessary to the being, yet many times, through the iniquity of men, & perverseness of times, necessary to the wellbeing of churches, for the establishment of truth, & peace therein. ... It belongeth unto Synods & counsels, to debate & determine controversies of faith, & cases of conscience; to clear from the word holy directions for the holy worship of God, & good government of the church; to bear witness against mal-administrations & Corruption in doctrine or manners in any particular Church, & to give directions for the reformation thereof; Not to exercise Church-censures in way of discipline, nor any other act of church-authority or jurisdiction.<sup>38</sup>

Initially, these gatherings were called by the magistrate and, though voluntary, carried with them the weight of both civil and ecclesiastical authority. By the early 18th century, however, Congregational union as prescribed by law and enforced by government authority was no longer possible due to the separation of church and state in the new republic.<sup>39</sup> This called for a change in the approach to voluntary association. It was at about this time that state conferences of churches began to be formed, which supplied the framework for this voluntary union in many areas. By the mid 19th century, however, the dispersion of churches over wider areas of the country led to the beginnings of interest in a national organization of Congregational churches. The establishment of the National Council in 1871

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., Chapter XV, various Sections.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., Chapter XVI, beginning with Section 1.

<sup>39</sup> Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, 525.

marked another stage in the evolution of voluntary association in the Congregational Way. It is the way in which the various conferences, associations, and the national body evolved over time that led to another of the primary debates of the merger controversy.

By the mid-twentieth century, the meaning of association had evolved so that for many these groups had acquired an identity of their own distinct from their member churches. They had become “autonomous”. The Basis of Union called for fully autonomous associations and synod. This was in part due to the belief that these bodies were not simply democratic in nature, but that they were in fact representative organizations which had the authority to act on behalf of the member bodies. Much discussion ensued, with many pointing to documents from the history of the tradition as proof for either argument. The Moderator’s comments at the 1948 General Council meeting affirmed the democratic, *not representative* nature of the associations and council. It seems, though, that many of these arguments were based on an honest interpretation of the history and intent of Congregationalism rather than on common practice. For example, at the time of the merger most of the delegates to the General Council meeting were appointed by the various associations as their representatives, not by the individual churches. Is it any wonder, then, that the proponents of the merger with the Evangelical and Reformed Church believed that the General Council had every right to enter into union with another body? It was never asserted, of course, that every church in the fellowship was automatically bound by these actions. After all, the General Council was believed to be autonomous in the same way that the individual churches were. This issue of whether associations, conferences, synods, and the like are autonomous entities is one of the chief differences between the polities of the NACCC and the UCC churches today, with the former sticking to the classic model that states that “the only Church is the congregation” and the latter believing that any gathering of believers, whether in a congregation or an association meeting, constitutes Church.

Having dealt with the ways in which church bodies may be structured, and the varying interpretations that can lead to conflict regarding those structures, it remains to examine how these individual entities are held together. In the Congregational Way, we refer to this bond as covenant. Our



tradition draws heavily on the work of Ames in the way covenant is treated in the classic model. His was a federal theology, from the Latin word *foedus*, which also means covenant.<sup>40</sup> Ames wrote:

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. This bond is covenant, expressed or implicit, by which believers bind themselves individually to perform all those duties toward God and toward one another which relate to the purpose of the church and its edification. ... 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>41</sup>

It may well be asked, “How can an appropriate balance be reached between autonomy and covenant?”

There may be covenantal aspects at the very heart of true autonomy. Donald Freeman writes,

Autonomy has often been interpreted to mean ‘independence’ -- not simply non-dependence, but atomistic separateness -- and thus, to authorize a ‘lone ranger’ style of personal and church life. But the either/or of dependence/separateness is a false dichotomy. Mutuality, for instance, is neither; indeed it has been argued that only persons and social units with a fairly clear sense of who they are -- autonomy! -- have what it takes to own covenants and maintain mutuality. Only such a sense of self and other can allow for both interpenetration and respect of boundaries at the same time.<sup>42</sup>

This covenantal autonomy dissipates the tension that exists between it and association. Covenant, then, is not optional for Congregational churches. It is as much a part of the heritage as that treasured autonomy which is so often called upon yet seldom understood. Davida Crabtree wrote “to reduce...covenantal unity to an option is to misunderstand both scripture and history.”<sup>43</sup> Covenant in the Congregational Way is both duty and joyous gift.

In an effort to better understand the relationship between individual rights of churches and the choice to form voluntary associations of churches, it is helpful to review the sociological research of *individual and collective behavior*. Many of these studies focus on the tensions that can arise when the

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<sup>40</sup> Peay, “We Covenant With the Lord,” 5

<sup>41</sup> Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 180.

<sup>42</sup> Freeman, “AUTONOMY: An Interpretation,” 20.

<sup>43</sup> Crabtree, “The Vocation of Autonomy,” 60.

two disparate behaviors are combined in an organizational setting. These differences are particularly evident in multicultural settings. Simply stated, individualist behavior is that which manifests itself in a greater concern for self than for community. It is primarily a Western phenomenon, with the strongest individualistic culture found in the United States. Studies have shown that individualists who feel independent and self-reliant are less apt to engage in cooperative behavior. Collectivists, on the other hand, have a diminished sense of self in the face of the greater need of the community.

What becomes clear when researching this topic is that sociologists have tended to approach individualism and collectivism as being polar opposites. Many have gone so far as to say that individualism must be superseded by collectivism.<sup>44</sup> Daniel Walker Howe writes, “concentration upon the polarities of individual and community creates a false sense of opposition. In the last analysis, what is crucial to the maintenance of civility in a free society is not the subordination of the individual to the community, but that individuality should be expressed in a responsible and disciplined manner.”<sup>45</sup>

Why, then, has there been so much time spent contrasting these behaviors? The answer is that tensions arise in cultures and in situations in which both types of behaviors are required. In a highly individualistic culture, such as that found in the U.S., there is a fear that entering into collective or communal behavior will lead either to a loss of identity<sup>46</sup> or that the individual would be separated from their own power and the power would be transferred to the collective.<sup>47</sup> In either case, individuality would seem to be challenged.

Unfortunately, the bulk of research done by sociologists has focused on the intercultural differences between people who have grown up in primarily individualistic or collectivistic cultures. Little has been done to examine the impact on small groups (i.e. churches) with an individualist attitude which find themselves called to join in collectives with other like groups (i.e. associations). Yet it is not a great stretch to use the information gathered from the available research and apply it to this current

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<sup>44</sup> Muller, *Democratic Collectivism*, various.

<sup>45</sup> Howe, “The Individual and the Community in Early America,” ?.

<sup>46</sup> Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church*, 58.

<sup>47</sup> O’Neil, *Modes of Individualism and Collectivism*, 15.

study. Similarities abound. The most obvious are that individual churches seem to raise the identical concerns expressed by individuals when entering into collective behaviors, namely those fears about loss of identity and loss of power (or self determination). These are perhaps valid concerns, after all Congregationalism was founded on the belief that each church was whole and sufficient under God. What must be remembered, however, is that the founders also realized the importance of *interdependence* among the churches. They were drawn together in a hostile environment, one that was political in nature in Old England and physical in nature in the New World.

The most helpful information that may be appropriated from sociologists is that which affirms that indeed individual and collective behavior can have a peaceful and healthy coexistence. It is interesting that churches which regularly teach their members the need for interdependence within their own communities do not recognize the need for interdependence between communities of faith. What seems to be required is a greater level of trust. If the associations of the Congregational Way are truly set up to respect and uphold the autonomy of the local church, then each church (and indeed each member) must trust that no other church (nor individual) in the collective will attempt to rob them of their individuality or their power for self determination. The task for member churches is to build trusting spirit filled fellowship by merging the two kinds of behavior.

### **Conclusion**

It has been shown above that the history of the Congregational Way in the United States is rich with examples of how the evolving tradition has dealt with the important issues of autonomy, voluntary association, and covenant. Many and serious have been the debates over the appropriate interpretation of these key concepts. These debates culminated in the conflict over the merger with the Evangelical and Reformed Church. The result was a break-up of the Congregational fellowship that was even more significant than that which occurred at the time of the Unitarian departure. It is the story of how the lack of consistent interpretation and appropriation of key concepts within a faith tradition can lead to what may be perceived as irreconcilable differences.

The first focus of this endeavor was on the long history of merger in the Congregational way. In addition to an obvious interest in collaborating with other Christian faith traditions, this merger history

may also point to a basic dissatisfaction with or uncertainty regarding the validity of the Congregational polity. Frequently throughout its history, this polity has been considered by people within the tradition as weak or ineffectual. Even at the point of the UCC merger debate, it seems to have been the feeling of some of our leaders that the old methods of living out Congregationalism must make way for new. It is the assertion of this analysis, however, that the weakness of Congregationalism lies not in its basic structure but rather in the inconsistent embodiment of that structure in the churches and associations of our Way. Tensions which arose between autonomy and voluntary association easily led to conflict in the absence of a uniform interpretation of how the concepts were to be appropriated. Added to this is the fact that, due to its democratic nature, *Congregationalism is just plain hard work*. People get a little tired of all the group decision-making and begin to feel that there must be something wrong with the model. It is not surprising, then, between this “it shouldn’t be this hard” attitude and the obvious tensions in the model that Congregationalists would become dissatisfied with our polity and become open to change.

It was this environment of dissatisfaction that allowed the ecumenical movement to become such a catalyst for change. Springing originally from a desire by Congregational churches to engage with other faith groups in joint efforts, the ecumenical zeal continued to grow as time went on. It was well in place by the time of the forming of the first National Council in 1871 and was the primary focus of the 1913 meeting in Kansas City. There was a major source of conflict brewing within this ecumenical spirit, however, for there were differing understandings of how the call to ecumenism must be answered. One voice, that which would later oppose the merger with the Evangelical and Reformed Church, believed that the call of ecumenism was to federated unity. This would ensure that the unique gifts of the individual faith traditions would be preserved. The other voice was that which believed the call to ecumenism to be a call to organic union, the chief goal of which was the eventual demise of Protestant denominationalism. This was by far the stronger voice and it was primarily this group which was to propose the mergers of the late 19th to the mid 20th centuries. Given the sense of dissatisfaction in the merits of Congregational polity, is it any wonder that more people tended to adopt an organic union approach to ecumenism?

Finally, special attention was given to three major concepts which have molded and which continue to frame the polity of our tradition. It has been asserted here that the ongoing tension between autonomy and voluntary association (as understood within the context of covenant) has been at the root of much of the conflict in Congregationalism throughout our history. The lack of consistent interpretation and appropriation of these concepts by our the churches and associations historically calling themselves Congregational has led directly to the fractures we have experienced in the past. It is the author's assertion, that Congregationalism will continue to experience the same conflicts in the future if we do not make a concerted effort, as a united fellowship, in establishing some sense of uniformity in the way that we live out the core principles which have been examined in this study. A brief look at theories of collectivism versus individualism showed that sociologists are also aware of the tensions that arise between individual and collective behaviors. It was proposed that the two need not be mutually exclusive. In the final analysis, this study has determined that though tensions exist between the individuality of autonomous churches and the collectivity of voluntary association, ways may be found to blend the two into a healthy and trusting fellowship.

### **Postscript**

One of the difficulties encountered in an exploration such as this is that even in relating historical fact, one cannot help but to extrapolate, to draw biased conclusions, to in fact present personal opinion as much as data. It is my intention to provide the bulk of my own most obvious conjecture in one place, hence this postscript.

I am first and foremost a Christian. I am also, to use the words of the Reverend Dr. Steven Peay, a "convinced Congregationalist." I call myself this because it is within Congregationalism that I find the best way that I know of for gathering churches. The National Association of Congregational Christian Churches is, for me, the best expression of how a local faith community should be gathered and how it should engage in fellowship with other communities. It should be no surprise, then, that I tend to fall on the side of the opponents of the UCC merger regarding the interpretation of Congregationalism. I must approach my analysis of that situation as I understand it in the context of the broader history of the tradition with a blend of humility and awe. I take on the task not so much because I am convinced of the

quality of my scholarly effort as that I believe so firmly in the need for dialogue regarding these kinds of issues. Let me, then, proceed to make a few final remarks. If I have drawn conclusions which are at variance with those of the reader, so much the better! For in the ongoing debate over these and other issues lies the future vitality and continued spiritual growth of the Congregational Way of life.

The history of Congregationalism in the United States is also the history of the conflict that arises when a body does not adequately define/redefine itself and examine its core beliefs on an ongoing basis. The tension resulting from the inadequate interpretation and appropriation of the key concepts of autonomy, voluntary association, and covenant led over time to changes in the perceived polity of Congregationalism. These perceived changes, though not consistent with the true nature of the tradition, nevertheless led directly to the merger controversy examined herein. One of the keys to laying to rest the negative feelings about the merger and to moving on as a body is to acknowledge that the entity proposed in the Basis of Union (which would later become the United Church of Christ) was not that different from the structure of the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches which was in existence at that time. The move to the UCC organization was, in fact, the logical conclusion of the events that came before it. The metamorphosis from Congregationalism to the United Church of Christ did not simply occur during the 1940's and 50's. It had its roots at least a hundred years before that.

Having made that statement, however, I would be quick to add that for those of us who choose to call ourselves Congregationalist, the basic premises upon which the new organization was founded were flawed. Had there been enough voices in our fellowship calling for a rethinking of our direction; a rediscovery of those key concepts properly defined, perhaps the outcome would have been different. As it was, it seems to me that the proponents of the UCC merger did not turn their backs on Congregationalism. They carried it out to what they believed was its logical conclusion based on the direction it had been taking over time. What they were guilty of was *breaking covenant*, for they flatly refused to continue the debate on the important issues raised by those opposing the union. When members of a freely associating body refuse to engage in dialogue with other members, they break a primary rule of covenant - to work together in honesty and sincerity, listening and responding with respect and love, and searching from a solution that serves everyone's needs. This was the result of their actions. It simply became more expedient for them to move forward with their plan and to disregard the

voice of dissent. The fault that can be placed on those calling themselves Continuing Congregationalists should be obvious. They had allowed a treasured tradition to change over time so that it was no longer what it was intended to be. By the time of the merger controversy, only a minority of those in the fellowship were willing to accept a different organization than what the merger promised. That minority has as its ongoing task the responsibility of reaffirming their core principles - covenant, autonomy and voluntary association. Chiefly, that means that we must communicate the key concepts to our churches and associations and we must always have dialogue with each other, even when it is not expedient to do so. To that end, I must applaud the recent symposium held in Wauwatosa regarding the future of Congregationalism. It is exactly the kind of exercise in free speech and fellowship that will ensure the continuing vitality of our covenantal relationships.

The final outcome of the conflict examined herein was the forming of two new entities; the United Church of Christ (which though it is a legitimate heir of the name Congregational chooses not to use the name for the sake of its interpretation of unity) and the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, which unashamedly lifts up the name Congregational as an appropriate, relevant, and spirit-filled expression of that faith which binds us all together. In the end, it is our faith in Christ and not human organizational constructs that ensures the inevitable truth, that we **will** “all be one.”

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