Supplementary Readings

To be used with The Shaping of American Congregationalism

Readings in the History and Polity of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches
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Rev. Dr. Arlin T. Larson, editor
Learning about the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches is not easy. No comprehensive history has been written. Only a few of the founders remain active. No seminary offers a course tailored to it. Months or years of participation, informal contacts, and overhearing the scuttlebutt are usually required. The "Congregational History and Polity" course is designed to accelerate the learning curve by immersing the student in modern Congregationalism's traditions and practices, as well as in the more comprehensive Congregational story.

We see this as essential for seminarians seeking a firm foundation in the community they are preparing to serve. Equally important is educating the many ministers who come to Congregationalism from other traditions. Church members seeking a better understanding of their faith may also appreciate a package that brings widely scattered materials together.

The first volume, for instance, of Readings in the History and Polity of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches collects Congregational reflections of the nature of the church(es) as recorded in the Congregationalist magazine. The articles collected are neither comprehensive nor definitive; we are not even certain to what extent they are representative. What can, however, be said is that the authors are men and women active in the Association whose views the magazine's editors deemed worthy of distribution.

At the very least the readings collected inform the reader of the parameters of discussion within the NACCC. They will additionally provide an introduction to leaders of the Congregational way and hopefully some insight into this movement's peculiar contribution to the Body of Christ.

This project is in its early stages. We would appreciate your suggestions and notice of our errors and omissions.

Rev. Dr. Arlin T. Larson, editor
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To accompany
Von Rohr,
Chapter

Johnson, Edward. 1654. "Wonder-Working Providence of Sion's Savior." Catches the faith and vision underlying the Puritan migration to America.


Mather, Cotton. 1710. "Essays to do Good." Mather commends piety and good works above doctrinal conformity.


Channing, William Ellery. 1819. "Unitarian Christianity." Ordination sermon and manifesto of liberal Congregationalism


Basis of Union. 1949. The rationale and understandings presented to Congregational churches for the proposed United Church of Christ.


Committee on Free Church Polity and Unity. 1954. "Report of a Study by the Committee on Free Church Polity and Unity." Study of Congregational practices by representatives of both sides of the merger debate.
INTRODUCTION

Though of paramount importance to the sixteenth century founders of Congregationalism, and to the twentieth century founders of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, polity concerns have never constituted the sole focus of Congregationalism. Congregationalists have been deeply involved in the full range of American intellectual, cultural, social, and political life. The Supplementary Readings will engage you in this wider scope of concerns. Most are excerpted from longer works, hoping to give the flavor of the authors’ style and letting them define the issues in their own terms. Perhaps you will want to follow up with the complete version of some. The Congregational Library in Boston is available to help you find documents that are no longer in print.

These authors expressed concerns and views in ways considered exemplary or definitive by their contemporaries. It behooves us to pay attention. To understand earlier sections of the path we are now on. To gain insight into contemporary situations. Perhaps even to be wakened to issues and modes of understanding to which our ancestors were better attuned than we. Are certain actual events the will and action of God & others not? When, for example, Edward Johnson marvels at the “Wonder-working Providence of Zion’s Savior,” which he sees at work in the Puritan migration, it makes our contemporary sense of God’s working seems vague & indefinite. As mainline Protestantism is challenged by Pentecostalism and evangelicalism, the early Congregationalists’ focus on conversion and church membership again becomes relevant. Urbanism, multiculturalism, immigration? We have still not resolved the issues attended to by Josiah Strong and Washington Gladden.

Some works may feel vaguely alien, even objectionable, from a twentieth century perspective. It could be literary style. The use of “f” for “s” and “v” for “u” (and vice versa), the “thee’s” and “thou’s” of the seventeenth and eighteen centuries. Or it may be more substantive. Jonathon Edward’s “angry God.” William Ellery Channing’s debunking of traditional doctrines. Josiah Strong’s celebration of (and challenge to) the “Anglo-Saxon” race. The point, however, is not so much to judge as to understand the depth and scope of Congregational faith, and to appreciate its enormous creativity. Hopefully to let our minds be expanded by our forebears and join the dialogue with them in contemporary circumstances.
Seafonable Thoughts on the State of Religion In New-England.

A Treatise in five Parts

By Charles Chauncy. D. D.

Pastor of the firft Church of Christ in Boston

Boston, Printed by Rogers and Fowle, for Samuel Eliot in Cornhill, 1743.

I. Faithfully pointing out the Things of a bad and dangerous tendency, in the late, and prefent, religious Appearance, in the Land.
II. Representing the Obligations which lie upon the Pastors of These Churches in particular, and upon All in general, to ufs their Endeavours to fupprefs prevailing Diforders; with the Great Danger of a Neglect in so important a Matter.
III. Opening, in many Infances, wherein the Discouragers of Irregularities have Injuriously treated.
IV. Shewing what ought to be Corrected, or Avoided, in testifying againft the evil Things of the prefent Day.
V. Directing our Thot’s, more poftivitively, to what may be judged the Best Expeidents, to promote pure and undefiled Religion in these Times.

With a Preface

Giving an Account of the Antinomians, Familians and Libertines, who infected these Churches, above an hundred Years ago: Very needful for these Days; the Like Spirit and Errors, prevailing now as did then.

The whole being intended, and calculated, to serve the Intereft of Christ’s Kingdom.

The Preface

If the following Treatife is, in any tolerable Meafure, adapted to serve the Ends of Religion, by guarding People againft the Errors in Doctrine, and Diforders in Practice, which have, of late, obtained in many Parts of the Land, there can be no need of an Apology for its Publication: If it is not, the usual Excufes upon such an Occasion are well known: and I may claim the Benefit of them, in common with others.
Instead of saying any Thing upon this Head, I shall look back to the first Times of this Country, when there was the Prevalence of an erroneous, enthusiastic Spirit, beyond what has been known from the Day 'till the late Appearance, in some Places, in New England: And I rather chuse to infer here some brief Account of the religious State of Affairs in those Days, because of its furpifying Agreement, in many Instances, with what has happened in these Times; which, if duly attended to, will not only prepare the Reader for what he may meet with in the following Sheets, but powerfully tend to undeceive him, if he has entertain'd a good Opinion of such Things as have, once already, raised Disturbances in the Country, to the Grief of our first Fathers, who may safely be rank'd among the most pious and valuable Men, who have yet lived in it.

Not many Years after the Settlement of our Progenitors in this Land, some, who, through an Excess of Heat in their Imaginations, had been betrayed into various unfounded and dangerous Opinions, came over to them from England. They had not been here long, before they freely vented their Notions among the People, Multitudes of whom, both Men and Women, Church members and others, were soon led aside, to the Hindrance of the Gospel, and throwing those Churches into great Confusion.

My purpose is to show definitely, through briefly,

What those Opinions were,

How they spread so fast, and prevailed so suddenly.

How they did rage and reign, when they had once gotten Head.

How they fell and were ruined, when they were at highest. §

As for the Opinions:---They were such as these: viz.

1. He that hath the Seal of the Spirit may certainly judge of any Person, where he be elected or no.
2. Such as fee any Grace of God in themelves, before they have the Affurance of God’s Love fealed to them, are not be received Members of Churches.
3. The due Search and Knowledge of the Holy Scripture, is not a safe and sure Way of finding Christ.
4. There is a Testimony of the SPIRIT, and Voice to the soul, merely immediate, without any Respect to, or Concurrence with the Word.
5. The Seal of the Spirit is limited only to the immediate Witnesfs of the Spirit; and doth never witnesfs to any Work of Grace, or to any Conclusion by a Syllogifm.
6. No Minifter can teach one that is anointed by the Spirit of Christ, more than he knows already unlefs it be in fome Circumstances.
7. No Minifter can be an Instrument to convey more of Christ unto another, than he by his own Experience hath come up to.
8. A Man is not effectually converted, ’till he hath full Affurance.
9. A Man cannot evidence his Justification by his Sanctification, but he must needs build upon his Sanctification, and truth to it.
10. The immediate Revelation of my good Estate, without any Respect to the Scriptures, is as clear to me as the Voice of GOD from Heaven to Paul.
11. It is a Fundamental and Soul-damning Error, to make Sanctification an Evidence of Justification.
12. The Spirit giveth such full and clear Evidence of my good Estate, that I have no Need to be tried by the Fruits of Sanctification: This were to light a Candle to the Sun.
13. Sanctification is so far from evidencing a good Estate, that it darkens it rather; and a man may more clearly fee CHRIST when he feeeth no Sanctification, than when he doth: The darker my Sanctification is, the brighter is my Justification.
14. If a Member of a Church be unsatisfied with any Thing in the Church, if he exprefs his Offence, whether he hath ufed all Means to convince the Church or no, he may depart.

§This is the method of Mr. T. Welde (One of the first Preachers in our Roxberry) in his Preface to the Story of the Antinomians &c in New England; whose Language alfo I have thought fit chiefly to ufe. The Words distinguifh’d by inverted Commas are always his; unlefs where I give Notice to the contrary.
15. If a Man think he may edify better in another Congregation, than in his own, that 
is ground enough to depart ordinarily from Word, Seals, Fastings, Feastings, and 
all Administrations in his own Church, notwithstanding the Offence of the Church 
often manifested to him for so doing.
16. Where Faith is held forth by the Ministry, as the Condition of the Covenant of 
Grace on Man's Part, as also evidencing Justification by Sanctification, and the 
Activity of Faith, in that Church there is not sufficient Bread.*

These are a few of the Errors, with which many began to be infected; I say a few, because 
their whole Number amounted to upwards of four score. I should willingly have prevented 
the Reader, with a Lift of them all; but, not having Room, choose to confine myself to 
those only which might be thought to bear a resemblance to the unsafe Tenets of the 
present Day. The rest may be seen in the Book, entitled, The Story of the Rife, &c, of 
Anitnomianism, &c, in New-England. And let me add, the Account there given of these 
Errors may be depended on; for having had Opportunity to compare it with an ancient 
Manuscript Copy of the Proceedings of the Synod, in 1637, I find it to be a very exact 
Catalogue of the Opinions condemned by that Assembly of Churches.†

*These Opinions, however absurd, were yet, many of them, strongly pleaded for, as of 
vaft Importance: Hence, among the Reasons given for the meeting of the Synod, in 1637, 
to consider of these Matters, this is one, because the Opinionists “pretended such a New-
Light as condemned all the Churches, as in a way of Damnation; and the Difference to be 
in Fundamental Points, even as wide as between Heaven and Hell: And hence it was 
conceived, that all the Churches should consider of this Matter, that if it were a Truth, it 
should be universally embraced; but if it were an Error or Hereby it might be univerfally 
uppreffed, fo far as such a Meeting could reach.” Manuscript Copy of the Proceedings 
of the Synod, in 1637, Page 3.
Part I.

Particularly pointing out the Things of a bad and dangerous Tendency, in the late religious Apperance in New-England.

There is not a Man, in the Country, in the sober Exercise of his Understanding, but will acknowledge, that the late religious Stir has been attended with many Irregularities and Disorders. These, some are pleased to call, Imprudences, human Frailties, accidental Effects only, such as much be expected, considering the Remains of Corruption in good Men, even among those in whom a remarkable Work of Grace is carrying on: Others are in the Opinion, they make a main Part of the Appearance that has been so much talk'd of, and have arisen unavoidably, in the natural Course of Things, from the Means and Instruments of this Appearance; and that it could not reasonably be suppos'd, it ought have been otherwise.

I shall particularly shw what these bad and dangerous Things are; making such Remarks (as I go along) as may be thought needful to fet Matters in a just and true Light.

Among the bad Things attending this Work, I shall first mention Itinerant Preaching.

This had its Rife (at least in these Parts) from Mr. Whitefield; though I could never fee, I own, upon what Warrant, either from Scripture or Reason, he went about Preaching from one Province and Parish to another, where the Gospel was already preach'd, and by Persons as well qualified for the Work, as he can pretend to be. I charitably hope, his Design herein was good: But might it not have been leavened with some undefinable Mixture? Might he not, at first, take up this Practice from a mistaken Thought of some extraordinary Mission from God? Or, from the undue influence of two high Opinions of his own Gifts and Graces? And when he had got into this Way, might he not be too much encouraged to go on in it; from the popular Applause, every where, so liberally
heaped on him? If he had not been under too strong a Bias from something or other of
this Nature, why so fond of preaching always himself, to the Exclusion, not of his
Brethren only, but his Fathers, in Grace and Gifts and Learning, as well as Age? And
why so ostentatious and assuming as to alarm so many Towns, by proclaiming his
Intentions, in the public Prints, to preach such a Day in such a Parish, the next Day in
such a one, and so on, as he past through the Country; and all this, without the
Knowledge, either of Pastors or People in most Places? What others may think of such a
Conduct I know not; but to me, it never appeared the most indubitable Expression of that
Modesty, Humility, and preferring others in Love, which the Scriptures recommend as
what will adorn the Minister’s, as well as the Christian’s Character.

And what became of his little Flock all this while? This Gentleman (if I don’t mistake)
expresses a very contemptuous Thought to Non-Residents and Pluralists, when he makes
that Remark in one of his Journals†, “The Towns through Connecticut, and the Province
of the Massachusetts-Bay——are well-peopled.———Every five or ten miles you have a
Meeting-House, and I believe there is no such Thing as a Pluralist or Non-Resident-
Minister in both Provinces.” And what is the mighty Difference (so far as a particular
Flock is concerned in its Pastor’s Labours) between and Itinerant Preacher, absent from
his Charge seven Eights of his Time, and a Non-Resident-Minister? Or, between a
Pluralist and one that acts as though all the Parishes in a Country were his proper Cure?
‘Tis true, your Non-Residents and Pluralists have their worldly
Encouragements: And some are in the Opinion, it hasn’t been to Mr. Whitefield’s

Difadvantage, on temporal Accounts, that he has traveled about the World in the Quality of an Itinerant Preacher. He has certainly made large Collections: And if, in the doing of this, he had a Fellow-Feeling with the Orphans, 'tis no more than might be expected. No one could, I believe, besides himself, can tell the Amount of the Presents, he received in this Town, as well as in other places, for his own proper Use.

The next Gentleman that practisefed upon this new Method was Mr. Gilbert Tennent, who came in the Middle of Winter, from New-Brunswick (A Journey of more than 300 Miles) to Boston, "to water the Seed fown by Mr. Whitefield;" the Ministers in the Town, though a considerable Body, being thought insufficent for that Purpofe. I shall not think it amifs to infer here Part of an expostulatory Letter sent to him, after he had been preaching among us for fome Time. "Pray, Sir, (fays the Writer*) let me put it to your Confcience; was not the Reafon of your traveling fo many hundred Miles to preach the Gofpel, in this Place, founded on the Insufficiency of the Ministers here for their Office? Why travel fo far, in fuch a rigorous Season, to preach the Gofpel, if the Gofpel was really preach'd by the Ministers here? Did you not fear†, "that notwithstanding they pretend to water what Mr. Whitefield, by the Spirit, had planted, had set up a Lecture, and the like, they would build with untempered Mortar, would build Wood, Hay, Stubble, &c?" Had you not fome Sufpicion that, either they had not a true Knowledge of the Doctrines of Grace, or if they had, that it was only a Head Knowledge, that they were not converted, and of Confcquence not likely to be made Instruments of much good? If this be the natural Confufion to be put upon your coming hither, can you think, you are in

*See the Boston Poft Boy, Numb. 53. †Seward’s Journal
the Way of your Duty? Can you think, the bringing the standing Ministry of a Place into Contempt, the Way to promote the Interest of Religion, and the Salvation of Souls? But perhaps, you did not think, nor would have any Body else think, quite so hardly of the Ministers here? Perhaps, you only thought, that if they did a little Good, you might do a great Deal more. Is not this approaching too near to Vanity? Is it not thinking more highly of your self than you ought? Is it not contrary to the Scripture Rule of preferring others in love?” The Answer to this Letter I never look’d upon as satisfactory: And I have the more Reason to think, there was a Propriety in these Questions, as I now know what Opinion Mr. Whitefield entertain’d of the Generality of the Ministers in Town. I shall only say, I have had personal Conversation with one, who join’d in the Prayers previous to this Journey to Boston.

Mr. Tennant tarried in Town a great Part of the Winter; in all which Time, he never express’d a Desire (so far as I can learn) of being affixed by any one of the Ministers: But seem’d as fond, as Mr. Whitefield before him, of preaching every Day himself; and did so, willingly taking from the other Ministers even their own Turns in the stated Lectures: And if, by their Submission to him herein, they fell in the Opinion of the People, who can wonder at it? It would indeed have been a Wonder, if they had not. For either the Circumstances of the Town were such as to require Preaching every Day in the Week, or if they were not: If they were not, why did they encourage such a Practice? If they werez, I don’t see how they answer it to GOD, their own Consciences, or their People, to fit till, and let one Man have the sole Trouble of that which was the proper Business of their Office. Such a Conduct as this naturally taught people to look upon them as idle
Shepherds: And if this was the Reflection, some cast upon them, it was no other than might be expected.

Mr. Tennent went from Boston to Piscataqua in the Path of Mr. Whitefield; and, in some Places, appear'd very forward in tendering his Service to preach, though he knew it was not (as to Time) agreeable to the Ministers. Upon his Return home, he preach'd in most, if not all the Towns as he past along: And if, in all the Parishes, he had the Consent of the Pastors, it was, I am ready to think, by Constraint. They might give into it to prevent Difficulties among their People; not that they approved this Manner of Conduct, the Contraction of which seemed to be, that upon him lay the Care of all the Churches.

From this Time, the Method of Itinerant Preaching became common. Many, in various Parts of the Land, took upon them to visit the Churches' preaching from Place to Place, wherever they went: Sometimes, contrary to the known Judgment of the settled Ministers; and in Opposition to them; and sometimes, where their Consent was only a Matter of Necessity to keep Peace among their People. Sometimes, they have come into Parishes of their own Accord; and sometimes, by Application made to them from a few disaffected Persons. Sometimes, in order to get the Liberty of the Meeting-House, they have us'd mean and indirect Arts; and sometimes, when they not get into it, they have gone into private Houses or gathered Assemblies in the Fields. Nay, Lay-Exhorters, Men of no Capacity, nor Learning; yea, some of them of a fufigious Character for their Virtue. (not to say any Thing worse [two pages of text missing])

It was his, not their's: This is the Conduct the Apostle points out: And he has an ill Opinion of it. or he would not have rank'd it with some of the greatest Crimes.
It was, in my Opinion, far from being exemplary in Mr. Whitefield, his taking so little Care of his own Flock. When he went from these Parts to Georgia, notwithstanding his frequent Prayers for them, and Expreffions of a more than ordinary Love to them, and longing after their Salvation, he was no longer than Part of two Days at Savannah; nor did he preach there more than two Sermons, if we may believe his own Account.† It appears strange, he should allow his own Charge so small a Share of his Labours, as he was so lavish of them elsewhere! And 'tis observable, as soon as he had left Georgia, and arrived at Charles-Town in Carolina, his Journal again appears with pompous Accounts of his Preachings. He writes, Sunday, Jan. 4. “Preach’d twice this Day, and expounded to large Auditories.” And, Saturday, Jan 10. “Preach’d twice every Day this week, and expounded frequently in the Evening.”* If this is watching for Souls, I mean, the Souls of our particular Charge, as those that must give an Account; it is not a Matter of so much Difficulty as I always imagined.

And as to others, who are so forward in going into other Parishes, to preach there perpetually, I can’t learn that they do more among their own People, than those who make no such Excursions? Nay, they have, some of them, greatly neglected their own, from a Zeal to take Care of other Minifter’s People: And they have been complained of on this Head, and fallen under publick Censure.

One of the Charges exhibited by Mr. D-----t’s People against him, and laid before a Council of Ministers, Oct. 7, 1742, was. “His leaving his Congregation, at several Times, for a great while together, at his Will and Pleasure, without Leave or Consent of

the Church, or Society:" Upon which, the Council gave it as their Judgment. "We think that his Congregation have just Caufe to complain of his leaving them, at several Times, for fo long a Space as he had done, without their Consent: Whereby he has not only left them destitute of Gospel Ordinances; but has been too unmindful of the Obligation he lies under, by his pastoral Relation, to them who are his peculiar Charge."

Another of the Itinerants was complain’d of, by a considerable Number of his People; and one of the Articles they objected to him, before an Ecclesiastical Council, convened, June 15. 1742, was, "We are uneasy with his wandering from Town to Town, to the great Disturbance of Towns and Churches, and neglecting his own Church at Home." Upon which, the Council came into the following Refult, "It appears to us, that the Rev. Mr. ---- hath been too ready to wander from Town to Town, and invade the Bishoprick and Office of his Brethren, and administer Occasion to Disturbance in several Places (and we fear) to the Neglect of his faithful Discharge of his Duty, among his own Flock, and to give too much Encouragement to Lay-Persons exhorting publicly; All of which, are so contrary to the Laws of Christ and his Gospel, as upon no Pretence to be countenanced." I could mention some other Instances in this Kind: But these shall suffice for the present.

And what is the Language of this going into other Men’s Parishes? Is it not obviously this? The settled Pastors are Men, not qualified for their Office, or not faithful in the Execution of it; They are either unfit to take the Care of Souls, or grofsly negligent in doing their Duty to them: Or, the Language may be, we are Men of greater Gifts, superior Holiness, more Acceptableness to God; or have been in an extraordinary Manner fent by him. Some of the Itinerants, "tis evident, have traveled about the Country
preaching, under the full Perswafion of an immediate Call from God: And as to most of them, it may be feared, the grand Excitement, at the Bottom, has been, an overfond Opinion of themselves, and an unchristian one of their Brethren. It has therefore been their Practice, too commonly, not only to boast of their own superior Goodness, wherever they have gone; but to inflame suspicions against the fixed Pastors, if not to preach against them, and pray for them, as poor, carnal, unconverted Men: Nay, meer Candidates for the Ministry; yea, illiterate Exhorters, raw, weak young Men, or Lads, have too frequently taken upon them, openly to judge and cenfure their Ministers; as I shall have Occaffion, afterwards, to shew at large.

Moreover, what is the Tendency of this Practice, but Confusion and Disorder? If one Pastor may neglect his own People to take Care of others, who are already taken Care of; and, it may be much better than he can take care of them: I say, if one Pastor may do thus, why not another, and another still, and so on, till there is no such Thing as Church Order in the Land? One Minister has the fame Right to into other Men’s Parishes as another; and may vindicate his Conduct upon the same Principles: And if this should become the general Practice, what might be expected, as the Effect, but an entire Diffolution of our Church State? This Itinerant Preaching, it is my firm Perswafion, naturally tends to it in the Course of Things; yea, and the Principles, upon which it is supported, will disband all the Churches in the World; and make the Relation, between Pastors and People, a mere Nothing, a Sound without Meaning.

It will not be thought a needless Disgaffion to infert here, the Sentiments of the First Fathers of this Country, upon this Point of Order in the Churches. This justly lay with great Weight upon their Minds: For it is indeed the Strength as well as Beauty of the
Creation. Next to Faith, they esteemed Order, a Matter of Necessity to the Well-Being of thefe Churches. And to this it was owing, that they held a Synod at Cambridge, Anno 1648, confituting of all the Churches of the Massachusetts-Province, by their Elders and Meffengers; when they agreed upon that Rule of Church Order, commonly called, our Platform of Church-Discipline. Here it is declared as their united Judgment, † "That Elders are appointed to feed, not all flocks, but the particular Flock over which the Holy Ghost hath made them Overseers; and that Flock they must attend, even the whole Flock: And one Congregation being as much as any ordinary Elder can attend, therefore there is no greater Church than a Congregation, which may ordinarily meet in one Place."

And again, * "Church Officers are Officers to one Church, even that particular over which the Holy Ghost hath made them Overseers; inofmuch as Elders are commanded to Feed, not all Flocks, but that Flock which is committed to their Faith and Truth, and dependeth on them: Nor can constant Residence at one Congregation be neceffary for a Minifter, no, nor yet lawful, if he be not a Minifter to one Congregation only, but to the Church universal; because he may not attend one Part only of the Church to which he is a Minifter, but is called to attend unto all the Flock."

And 'tis observable, though they allow of a Communion of Churches, yet is only in such Caffes, and under such Limitations, as may conflit, with the Rights both of Particular Churches and their Pastors; yea, and with the Duties too they mutually owe to each other.