

Congregationalists on Churches and the Church

Articles from the Congregationalist, 1958-1996

Readings in the History and Polity of the National
Association of Congregational Christian Churches

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Rev. Dr. Arlin T. Larson, editor

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THE "CHURCH"

Congregationalism is founded on the idea that Christ called his followers into churches, particular communities of believers gathering regularly for worship and service, not into a Church, a national or international organization superior to local congregations and mediating their relationship with their Lord. The very name of the movement, Congregationalism, derives from this conviction.

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ECUMENISM

The NACCC was founded in 1955 just as the wider ecumenical movement gained full force. While "ecumenical" in the sense of openness to a wide variety of beliefs and practices, "Continuing Congregationalism" defined itself in opposition to all centralization and bureaucratization. How then can the NACCC be part of the wider Christian community?

- Gray, Henry David. "Congregational Catholicity and Ecumenical Exclusiveness." December '58
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Swanson Jr., Neil. "Report from Uppsala." October '68
World Christian Relations Commission. "A Statement of Ecumenical Intentions."
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FREE CHURCHES

Churches of the NACCC are not the only "congregational" churches. Kindred spirits are found among Unitarians, Baptists, Disciples, the Community Churches, and others stressing the autonomy of local congregations.

- Pavy, Roy. "A Free Church Movement." April '65
Bellingham, Richard. "Creative Independency." February '69
Steece, Arvel. "What Do you Mean, 'Free Church'?" June '70

ASSOCIATIONS

A Congregational church is not merely independent. Active fellowship with other churches is fundamental. The small size and geographical dispersion of the churches of the NACCC rendered the traditional local and regional fellowships problematic. Tensions also arose between churches continuing to identify with a regional association and those identifying most closely with the National Association, which has no formal connection with the regionals.

- Bohman, George. "The Place of Associations in Modern Congregationalism." May '65
Steece, Arvel. "Polity Evolution and the Future of Congregationalism." March '75
Bellingham, Richard. "Regional Fellowship: A National Concern." February '89

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Early Congregational churches were distinctive in being made up of self-conscious believers, "visible saints," not merely residents of the parish or community, and furthermore, not only believers but believers who could demonstrate proof of their conversion. Membership requirements no longer set Congregationalists apart, but new concerns have arisen.

- Bohman, George. "Safe-guarding Individual Freedom With Congregationalism." November '74
Beinke, James. "Church Members: How One Church Has Dealt with the Problem of Removing Inactive Members from Their Roles." October '88
Vanek, Noel. "Resident Aliens: Find New Direction for Christian Witness." December '96

ASPECTS OF CHURCH LIFE

- Butman, Harry. "How It [*The Congregationalist*] Started." August '62
Butman, Harry. "The Vicinage Council." March '65
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Gerhart, Louis. "The Executive Committee and its Chairmen." June '74
Gray, Henry. "Town Meeting, Church Meeting, National Meeting." November '74
Gray, Henry. "American Youth and the Christian Church: Including the Background and Development of Pilgrim Fellowship and Hope." January '76
Ream, Norman. "Ordination Services: Caricature or Holy Event?" April '86
McKendrick, Mary. "Ambassadors: Becoming a part of the CCC/NA's Effort to Serve Churches Proved a Challenge Many Were Proud to Assume." April '88

HISTORICAL ROOTS

Where do we come from? Contemporary Congregationalism finds its roots in three places. One is Jesus' promise to be present "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name." The second is symbolized by the ship Mayflower, which bridged English Separatism and colonial New England Congregationalism. Third are the struggles within the Congregational family resulting in the formation of the United Church of Christ on the one hand and the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches on the other.

- Gray, Henry David. "From Yesterday into Tomorrow." February '58
Howard, Irving. "Covenant Theology and American Thought." February '58
Gray, Henry. "The Savoy Declaration of 1658." September '58
Rouner, Arthur Jr. "A Message from Savoy." 3 part series, November 59 - January '60

Davis, Royal. "The Saybrook Platform: A Warning." October '58
 Shelly, Maynard. "The Undying Fire of the Reformation." October '67
 Stubbs, Harry. "On Recovering the Genius of Classical Congregational Church Order," 2 parts. October '68, June '69
 Abercrombie, A. Vaughn. "The People Behind the Founding of the NACCC." November '78
 Burton, Malcom. "Letter" in response to Abercrombie. Fall '79
 Bohman, George. "Four Centuries of Congregational Growth." April '85
 Bailey, Steven. "Most Important Document: American Congregationalism Based on Cambridge Platform of 1648." December '92
 Rouser, Arthur Jr. "I Saw Them in the Flesh: Hotel Fort Shelby Recollection." July '95
 Alexander, John. "Forward Through the Ages ... At the Call Divine." July '95
 Bailey, Steven. "Reclaiming the Puritans." July '95

THE MINISTRY

Congregationalism has a distinctive view of the clergy as ordinary believers delegated narrowly defined responsibilities for preaching and teaching, while sharing common concerns about such things as qualifications, training, placement, and the ordination of women.

Barrus, Alvan. "The Growth of the Lay Ministry." March '65
 Abercrombie, A. Vaughn. "The National Program of Pastoral Supply." March '65
 Buchman, Richard. "Pastor, People, and God." May, '65.
 Butman, Harry. "Moderator's Statement at the Ordination of John K. Tremaine." February '66
 Britton, Erwin. "A Congregationalist Ponders the Matter of Ordination and the Ministry," 2 parts. October, November '75
 Witzel, Tom. "Laity Arise." June '77
 Brown, George. "In Between Ministers," June, July '81
 Voss, B. Margaret. "Unfinished Business." October '81
 Woolsey, Mary. "A Shared Ministry--A Shared Life." October '83
 Jensen, Mark. "Looking at the Future of the Congregational Ministry." October '89

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

The NACCC does not have its own theological seminary, nor, because of its small size, is it in a position to open one. Yet it maintains a commitment to "learned ministry." How can its clergy receive the proper education? How can they learn the peculiar traditions and practices of the Congregational movement?

"Pioneering in Theological Education." November '62
 Steece, Arvel. "Continuing the Tradition of an Educated Ministry." January '65
 Ream, Norman. "Do We Need a Theological Seminary?" June '70
 Currey, Cecil. "Congregational Theological Education: The Future." May '73
 "C.F.T.S Story." October '74
 Clark, Harry. "CFTS is THE Source: The CFTS Story." February '90
 Shultz, Leslie. "Exciting Opportunity: Lay Ministry Training Program Announced." October '93

SOCIAL REFORM

Congregationalists have been in the forefront of social reform, from the establishment of democracy in the New World, to Abolition, to the Social Gospel. The NACCC, however, defined itself in opposition to the type of church-related reform which became prominent in the twentieth century. How can Congregationalists maintain their prophetic consciousness and yet avoid violating local autonomy and personal freedom of conscience?

Clinchy, Russell. "Comment and Reflection." October '65
 Ream, Norman. "A Relevant Religion." June '66
 Conn, Howard. "How Express Our Social Concern?" January '67
 Butman, Harry. "Classical Congregationalism and Social Action." March '68

Tennies, Arthur. "Church Leaders as Activists: Good or Bad?" October '71

Conn, Howard. "Christian Conscience: A Plea from Some Members Within a Congregation." October '71

Lange, William. "Washington Gladden Society: A Response to the Social Justice Debate." Summer '79

INTRODUCTION

How do the churches of the National Association of Congregational Christian churches understand themselves? In many ways they are typical of other mainline Protestant churches. A person comfortable with the worship at a Presbyterian, Methodist, Christian or United church would most likely be comfortable worshipping with Congregationalists. Congregational clergy receive their training in seminaries sponsored by many denominations. When, however, it comes to polity, church organization at the national as well as local level, Congregationalists have distinctive ideas.

It began with English observers of the Protestant Reformation, such as Robert Browne and Henry Barrows, who believed there was another step to be taken. This was a return to the type of organization envisioned by Jesus Christ and reflected in the earliest New Testament writings, especially the book of Acts and Paul's letters. These early churches were diverse, autonomous, lacking central authority, and required a high degree of commitment. To these English Reformers the shape taken by the Roman Catholic Church was more that of Caesar's empire than of Christ's kingdom. The newly formed Church of England, while independent of Rome, seemed compromised by its retention of a similar structure.

At great risk to position, property, and life, the English reformers set about to "purify" the Church of England. The more radical reformers formed unauthorized "Independent" or "Separatist" congregations. Many fled first to Holland and then to the British colonies in North America. As founders of a new society in America the Pilgrims and Puritans entered a new phase with the authority of government behind rather than against them. This new position as the established church of the New England colonies posed new challenges regarding questions of church membership, tolerance of religious diversity, and the relationship between religious and civil authority.

With the passage of an American Constitution embodying a "separation of church and state," the expansion of the frontier, and the waning of evangelical fervor, Congregationalists gradually lost the dominance they enjoyed in colonial New England. Losses were exacerbated when one wing, the Unitarians, split off to form their own denomination. Questions of denominational identity and cooperation across regions came to the fore. By the end of the nineteenth century Congregational churches had moved away from Calvinism, embraced modern ideas about science, and, while local autonomy was still affirmed, put a national structure into place.

The founders of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches (1955) reacted against what they perceived as an un-Congregational centralizing trend which would deny basic Congregational convictions about the church. A proposed merger of the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church into a "United Church of Christ" would result in a more centralized "presbyterian" system. Proponents saw it simply as a more efficient form of organization which would retain essential principles.

When the great majority went with the new United Church, the “Continuing Congregationalists” were left with redefining themselves and Congregationalism (a name which the majority, tellingly, did not retain). Many of their reflections on Congregationalism in the twentieth century are recorded in the NACCC’s *Congregationalist* magazine. This book contains a selection of those writings. They are arranged by topic, and within topics chronologically.

Congregationalists on Churches and the Church

THE “CHURCH”

WHY THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCHES SHOULD LIVE

The Rev. Russell J. Clinchy, D.D.

Forest Hills, New York

The interesting report in the *CHRISTIAN CENTURY* for August 13th, describing the meeting of the International Congregational Council at Hartford, contains statements by several speakers which need comment from those who are dedicated to the continuation of the Congregational order of church life.

I write as one who transferred from the Presbyterian to the Congregational ministry in 1923, but not because I denied the validity of the Christian witness of Presbyterianism. No one could do that. I did so because I sought a greater measure of freedom for my mind and spirit which I believed could better be found in the Congregational Way of freedom from ecclesiastical authority. The experience of these years brought such opportunity and content, as I know it has for hundreds of others who made the spiritual pilgrimage, that I believe I must continue in it and help to keep its witness alive in the world in fellowship with those who will also continue to feel the same way.

The report stated that the addresses presented at that meeting contained these statements: that autonomous churches, associated freely for fellowship but uncontrolled by any ecclesiastical direction, are inadequate to meet the need of the world or to make ethical decisions; that Congregationalists face directly the possibility that they should die so that the greater Church may live; that freedom to obey Christ may, in certain times and places, mean presbyterial or episcopal forms of church government; that the leaders of the Congregational Churches are now engaged in a struggle to bring into being a United Church of Christ despite the rear-guard attacks of a small group of purists and literalists.

These statements, and others like them, looking toward the gradual creation of a United Protestant Church are made by men of the highest personal integrity and Christian conscience. I honor the devotion with which they hold their views. However, I happen to be one, among many others, who disagrees with the thesis upon which these statements are founded, and especially to the plans they propose for the disappearance of the Congregational witness of the fellowship of individual members and individual churches, and the replacement of this witness by the creation of an ecclesiastical organization of a United Church.

Other Churches Do Not Plan To Die

I disagree, first of all, because I see no need for the advocacy of the death of the Congregational order of church life, or of a transfer of it into one of the other church orders, when there is not the slightest suggestion that either of those should also perish, and when there is no indication that either of them intends to do so.

On the first Sunday of July, I attended the great and spectacular service of worship of the Lambeth Conference in St. Paul's Cathedral in London. This was the gathering of 313 bishops from all the churches of the Episcopal (Anglican) communion across the world under the invitation of the mother church, the Church of England. It was a tremendous and moving expression of devotion, majesty and power. While there I did not hear the bells of the Cathedral tolling for the death of the episcopal order of

church life. I hope no one ever will.

Last May, two of the branches of the Presbyterian Churches of America joined their corporate bodies into a new United Presbyterian Church, with the confidence that the third branch would soon enter that union to complete Presbyterian unity and power. The report of that event was not phrased as an announcement to be published among the death notices.

During the same month, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, to my mind the greatest member of the Presbyterian family, refused to ratify a report suggesting union with the Church of England which would include the acceptance of the place and rule of bishops in the Presbyterian order. I know many of the Scottish ministry and lay people personally and I am sure that they do not desire the dissolution of that Church which has infused into the life of Scotland so much of its integrity and character. Who is there who would desire the end of Presbyterian history and witness?

In the light of this reality, why should the leaders of the third valid order, the Congregational, implore its members to desire and work for the death of its vital and creative witness, or to submerge it into the continued pattern of one of the other two. Any individual member or church may transfer from one to another of the orders freely. But why should they demand that the other members of their order be forced to follow them through compulsion?

The Distinctive Witness of Congregationalism

But the great reason why the concept of the Congregational Way should not die or be absorbed into the organization of an entirely different system rests in the positive declaration of its merit and its creative spirit.

Its genius lies not in a claim to be an ecclesiastical legislature and judicatory which can encompass all minority expressions of the spirit of God, with power to maintain and develop this organization until it rolls onward to the day when it has become all-embracing enough to make all Christians submit to its direction and authority under The One Great Church of Christ. There is one branch of Christianity which makes such a claim, and it is enough.

The Congregational Way is the opposite of that. It takes Christ's words that where two or three are gathered together in His name, He is to be found in the midst of them, to be a valid definition of a Church of Christ. Here will be found what may be best defined by the concept of the presence of "The Inner Light" which is a mystical appreciation — the light which proceeds from the presence of Christ, a Christ Who surmounts all names and creeds and organizations. Each group, therefore, is a church, and, in the sense that truth is that which is ultimate, is a "true church."

But to be a "true" church in that sense, no one church can possess power which would allow it to extend its authority, or the authority of a group of churches, over another. It is amenable to no ecclesiastical judicatory.

To such disciples Christ gave one rule — "And this is my commandment, that ye love one another," not alone in the inadequate definition of that word as it is used in our modern language, but in the depth of all that Christ

poured into the concept. Because they are brought together in that bond of love, the members have been implored by the Apostle to be "kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven us."

These words are the charter for service to each other and to all the needs of mankind, but the motivation and the action of such service must always flow from the freedom of the spirit under the concept of the admonition, "freely ye have received, freely give".

Diversity of mind and spirit and interpretation is the cardinal principle of freedom, and so in this fellowship of the Congregational Way there will be found those who would define themselves as fundamentalists, orthodox, unitarian, universalist, evangelical and liberal. This is inevitable for there is no organization in the fellowship which may claim power to refuse ordination or installation to any minister, or membership in a church to any seeker, because one may classify himself in any one of these categories. That was decided once and for all in Congregationalism in 1854 by the failure of the attempt of the ministry of Connecticut to excommunicate Horace Bushnell for what they called his "heresy". Those who now seek truth in their time, as Horace Bushnell did in his, now may find in the Congregational Fellowship a spiritual home.

There are no universal creeds, forms of worship, or manuals of discipline, for diversities of spirit are not only expected but welcomed as the necessary ingredient of the manifestation of the creative spirit of God within the life of man.

Participation in worship and service is extended joyfully to members of all other Christian, and non-Christian expressions of faith in God, even as our participation in theirs is anticipated as a similar blessing. Beyond and above our characteristic forms and expressions and interpretations, the sacramental altars present to all freely the inexpressible meanings of man's longing for "the means of grace and the hope of glory". Surely this is the picture we see as we think of the meaning of The Church Universal.

The same principle holds true regarding social relations, and was recognized as a fundamental Congregational principle by the Board of Review in 1954. It is that among Congregationalists will be found liberals and conservatives—and many variations of these—in the areas of social and political thinking. Each individual will choose his or her area of thought and action, and may become members of commissions or councils or

fellowships to study the problems in these areas. But no one of these groups, no matter whether they be of the left, the center, or the right position, may presume to equate its particular premises or conclusions with Congregationalism, or to speak in its name. Only upon this basis can there be freedom of personal conviction and absence of conformity.

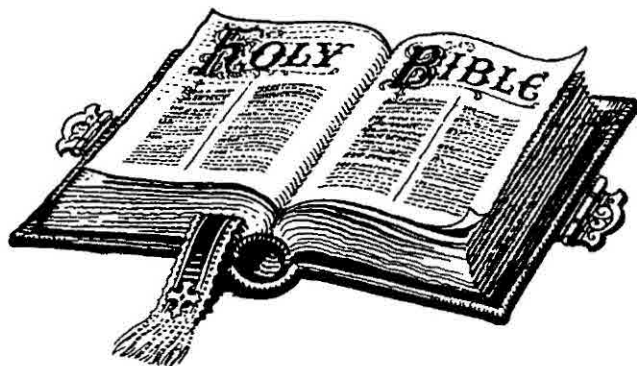
Diversity is a psychological fact as well as a religious one. There can no more be "One Church" than there can be "One School" of Art, or Literature, or Philosophy, or Science. The very idea that artists or writers or philosophers or scientists could possibly be gathered into one school of thought and expression is so preposterous that it can only be met with a smile. And surely that is most true of religion. In Congregationalism this is accepted as a psychological and a religious understanding.

This is not the basis for a waterized, lowest-common-denominator expression of the Christian faith and practice. Bushnell preached the truth as God gave him to see the truth, and by so doing opened windows upon vast new horizons which so many of us now see and live by. But he expected others to have the same fervor to seek the truth, and to give the same devotion to whatever they might find. His travail made it possible for each Congregationalist to form his own statement of faith and to practice his religion in freedom; conscious that if "all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and malice be put away from us" we shall be able to live together as heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ.

All this is the reason why many of us—and the number is constantly growing—are resolved that this vital expression of Christian experience shall continue to live as part of the whole Christian experience.

The freedom for each Congregational church and member to make a decision either to enter the United Church of Christ or to continue in the present fellowship still remains a valid prerogative unimpaired by any action yet taken by the General Council.

Those of us whose churches are now members of the National Association welcome a decision of churches to join with us. We understand completely that each Congregational church now has the right and the privilege of deciding to become a member of any other denomination, including the United Church of Christ, but we also know that the same right extends to those who wish to remain Congregational. To them the doors of the continuing Congregational fellowship are open. The spirit of the Pilgrims, the Puritans, and the Independents is still alive. It will continue to live in the world.



THE CONSTITUTIONAL QUESTION

Some Tests

From the New Testament

Dr. Henry David Gray, Hartford, Connecticut

Constitution (Webster's Unabridged)

1. An authoritative ordinance, regulation, or enactment; especially . . . one affecting ecclesiastical doctrines or discipline.
2. The fundamental organic law or principles of government . . . embodied in written documents; also, a written instrument embodying such organic law, and laying down fundamental rules and principles for the conduct of affairs.

Soon we shall be asked to consider a "constitution" for the "United Church of Christ". BEFORE that document is presented to us we do well to consider prayerfully and thoughtfully the basic principles of Church life in the New Testament. Our Congregational forefathers believed they were "completing the Reformation" when they applied to Church "polity" the principles which they found in the New Testament. And if it be said that "We do not live in the first century," let us add that neither did our Congregational forefathers live in the first century. Furthermore, the revelation of God in our Lord Jesus Christ is normative for men of all centuries who sincerely call themselves Christians.

What then are the tests from the New Testament?

Face to Face

First and above all else, the New Testament calls us to worship and serve God as He makes Himself known in Jesus Christ. Test any proposed constitution by this norm. Does it follow the Scriptures by putting aside anything and everything which presumes to *tell men what to believe*? Does it trust wholly to God's making Himself known to men *directly and personally*? Does it put barriers between men and their Maker, in creed or in aught else? Does it call men to repent and believe the gospel face to face with God, each responsible to Him and to Him alone? Does it ask us to serve an organization or does it invite us to serve God?

Institution or Inspiration?

Second, the New Testament bears witness to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of persons and Churches. Does the constitution lay claim to institutional authority, or does it trust in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in persons and Churches individually? Does it indicate that individual persons and Churches cannot be trusted to find and follow the leading of God's Spirit? (For example, does it set up standard procedures

which would give authority concerning worship, the ministry, education, or any part of the Church's work to committees, boards, or other bodies outside the particular Church?) Does it put its trust in organizational efficiency, size, and power, or does it show trust in the Spirit-awakened zeal and love of the responsible Christian man in the responsible fellowship of the particular Church?

In a word, is the prime principle of the constitution trust in organization or trust in God?

The New Testament Church

Third, the New Testament portrays the Church as the covenanted fellowship of those who dare to be followers of Jesus Christ, gathered into particular Churches in each community, believing themselves to be one in fellowship with all people who shared their common allegiance to Christ as Lord.

In the New Testament the word "Church" always means either the particular Church in a given community, or else the universal fellowship of all Christ's followers past, present, and future.

Does the constitution use the word "Church" in the way in which the word is used in the New Testament? Or are we told that the New Testament usage is not suitable for our day? Does the constitution accept the Scriptural principle that "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them"? Or does it "recognize" a "Church" only by organizational rules by claim of churchly authority?

Is the constitution as inclusive as the gospel? Is it widely inclusive enough to welcome our Quaker brethren as fellow-Christians? Or does it set up sacramental standards which would exclude them?

Peace and Purity

Fourth, the New Testament calls men to repentance and faith. Jesus said to a forgiven person, "Go and sin no more". Paul urged the Corinthians to guard the peace and purity of life in their Church. Does the constitution provide "national" standards for Church membership? Or does it completely omit all reference to Church membership, thereby clearly recognizing that Church membership is a personal relationship to God and a covenant relationship to a particular Church? Does the constitution provide any judicial system? (whether optional or required is not of significance in relation to Biblical principle). Does the constitution provide any means by

which responsibility for the peace and purity of the particular Church can be passed off to any other body? Or does it prohibit such reference to "higher bodies" in recognition of the inescapable responsibility to God Himself which is central in Scripture and in Congregational usage?

Advice and Counsel or . . . ?

Fifth, the New Testament portrays the counselling together of Churches to seek the mind of Christ and give advice in time of need. Does the constitution provide for mere "congregations" which shall support the program of denomination as a whole, on the pretext that the denomination is THE CHURCH? Or does it provide for Churches which shall meet together for advice and counsel? Does the constitution provide for control over the Churches by the General Synod, Conferences, or other bodies? Does the constitution indicate that "counsel" really means "requirements"? Or does it explicitly declare that "counsel" has as much weight as it has worth, no less and no more?

"Congregation" or Church?

Sixth, the New Testament provides many examples of a sisterly relationship between Churches, but no instance of the authority of one Church (even Jerusalem) over other Churches. Does the constitution provide for a name true to the New Testament principle of sisterly relationship of Churches? Or does it indicate an idea like that which obtains in some church bodies wherein the "congregation" is simply a "unit" of the national organization?

Committee-Controlled or God-Directed?

Seventh, the New Testament tells us that Churches, individually, ordained leaders, and that the members themselves took part in the "laying on of hands". Does the constitution claim for the General Synod, Conference or any other body any authority to ordain, license, call dismiss, install, recognize, or otherwise oversee the pastor-Church relationship? Or does it faithfully follow the New Testament principle that this precious relationship is the inalienable choice of a pastor and a people acting under the direct guidance of God, sought in prayer and exercised only in response to His leading? Does the constitution suggest a distrust of the principle of Spirit-directed pastor-Church relationships, claiming that the guidance of the committee (General Synod, Conference or other body) is more to be depended upon than the guidance of God in Church meeting?

Wider Bodies As Agencies

Eighth, the New Testament Churches appear to have been gathered in each particular community by spontaneous groups or by selfless leaders, and the subsequent association of the Churches with each other appears to have taken place in the same way. Does the constitution recognize the wider bodies of Christian fellowship which the Churches have created as agencies for wider work as the Churches commission them to do, or does it undertake to organize the Churches geographically?

The Word Made Flesh

Ninth, the New Testament proclaims the Word made flesh as the Word of God which shall redeem the world. Does the constitution acknowledge the Living Word as the ultimate authority, the Word made flesh today by the inward illumination of the Spirit of God at work in the heart of each individual Christian, and in the meeting of each individual Church of Christ? Or does it indicate that our confidence is to be put in a super-church?

Lay Ministry

Tenth, the New Testament bears ample testimony to the ministry of those who were not ordained. Is the matter of lay ministry in the Churches recognized as an inevitable consequence of New Testament Christianity? Or does the constitution tend to limit the ministry to the "clergy"?

Faith, Freedom, Fellowship OR . . . ?

Finally, the New Testament sets forth principles of faith, life, and work; it is the record of what God did through men responsive to His call. Is the constitution a simple, straightforward statement of Christian principles which calls us to unite in diversity, to adventure for Christ? Or does it cramp and confine the free Spirit of God in Christ's Churches?

ARE WE STILL PROTESTANTS?

Dr. John Joseph Stoudt, Norristown, Pennsylvania

Must the institutional church stand between man and God or can man approach his God directly?

The proposals lately made by church leaders for the creation of a "Reformed and Catholic" church which, they suggest, should be fashioned by organic union of Protestant groups, put into sharp focus an old question: are we still Protestant?

The difference between the Roman and Protestant forms of Christianity lies in the question whether the organization or the experience comes first. Romans assert that the Church — with capital "C" — mediates the experience while Protestants believe that given the experience the church follows. Romans assert that their church, directly deriving from the keys which the Lord gave to Peter, mediates grace through its sacramental and institutional life and that there can be no grace without this church. Protestants, both Lutheran and Calvinist, assert that we first experience grace, become conscious of having been justified by faith, and that from this experience, when shared, the fellowship of Christians comes. Thus Romans assert the essentiality of the organic institution while Protestants believe — or, at least, once believed — that the church is a voluntary society of those who are conscious of having experienced grace.

This distinction has deep implications in the fields of ethics, doctrine and the devotional life as well as in the practical implications of our religious faith.

Furthermore, under the pervasive impact of Ritschlian theology — and no one theologian seems to have had greater practical influence on modern American religious thought — our leaders seem to have become convinced that there can be no Christian faith apart from conscious connection with the organic institution. The key passage in Ritschl is this: "We are able to know and understand God, sin, conversion, eternal life, in the Christian sense, only so far as we consciously and intentionally reckon ourselves members of the community which Christ has founded." While this passage, when taken in its context, is still Protestant in spirit, it has none the less opened the floodgates for a new spirit to emerge, one which is very much in evidence — that spirit which would reduce Christian life to ecclesiastical politics. For when we "consciously and intentionally" reckon ourselves part of the community which Christ has founded, and when this is set up as

the criterion for our full membership in Christ's Body, then, sadly, we have reduced the Christian religion to churchmanship. Instead of a gathering of believers we have created an association of ecumenical engineers.

So, in all seriousness we have to raise the old question again: are we still Protestant? We must pose to the leaders of the great American denominations which still think they are Protestant because they are not within the Roman fellowship, whether they are, *in spirit*, in the tradition of the Reformers? Do they still think that the individual believer knows God's grace first, and then, with others like him, forms a fellowship of those who have shared God's grace? Or, do they believe, in consequence of Ritschlian theology, that there can be no grace except that which comes through and from an institutional church? Or, to put it simply, must the institutional church stand between man and God or can man approach his God directly? This is the issue which separates Roman from Protestant.

Perhaps we stand on the threshold of a new reformation? Perhaps we have come to see the emergence of the great monolithic, centralized religious corporation for which policies are determined by a Board of Directors who then hand them down to the local clergy to peddle to the man in the pew? Perhaps the great protest has died?

But there are still some Christians in this land for whom no ecclesiastical Board of Directors can speak. There are those lonely souls who know from first hand experience that their Redeemer lives.

These Christians do not oppose the increase of the area where the love of God is known, nor do they oppose the ecumenical movement. But they do believe, and that with fervency, that God comes to man without benefit of clergy, that no top-heavy institution of busy ecclesiastics can stand between them and the gracious, saving love of God.

Are we still Protestant? Church leaders may have followed the logic of John Henry Newman without following him back to the bosom of Rome; but there are still those who do believe that the fellowship of believers is founded on the one rock — the Jesus Christ of their hearts.

(Reprinted by permission, from THE MINISTERS' QUARTERLY, Summer, 1961.)

The Congregational churches are those planted on this continent by the Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620 and those gathered by their spiritual descendants.

In 1931 these churches were merged in fellowship with a branch of the Christian Churches; hence, Congregational Christian. In the middle 1950's many of the Congregational Christian churches merged with the Evangelical and Reformed Church to form the United Church of Christ. Some three hundred churches declined to enter this newly-formed denomination and thereupon formed the National As-

sociation of Congregational Christian Churches.

The preponderance of the theological thrust of the Congregational churches has been, through the years, in the direction of liberal theology. However, the theological position of any given individual Church depends on the proclivities of that Church. To say the least, there is no unanimity in theological position among these churches.

Congregational Christian churches are entirely independent and autonomous churches that are yet bound together in fellowship. The individual Church adopts its own covenant and a creed if it so

wishes. Again, the preponderant thrust has been in the direction of devising a covenant but not a creedal statement. Each Church calls its own Minister or Pastor and selects its own benevolences which each supports to whatever extent the individual Churches wish.

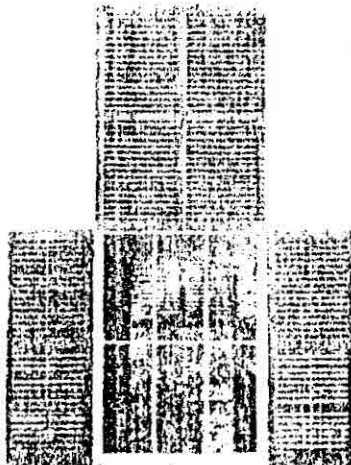
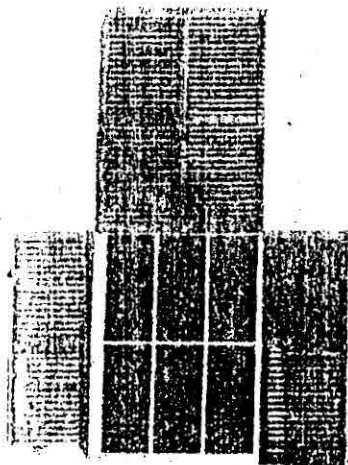
The Congregational Churches of the United States, by delegates in National Council assembled, in Kansas City in 1913 adopted a statement of faith that is known as the Kansas City Statement of 1913. It reads:

"We believe in God, the Father, infinite in wisdom, goodness, and love; and in Jesus Christ, His Son, our Lord and Saviour, who for us and our salvation lived and died and rose again and liveth evermore; and in the Holy Spirit, who taketh the things of Christ and revealeth them to us, renewing, comforting, and inspiring the souls of men. We are united in striving to know the will of God as taught in the Holy Scriptures, and in our purpose to walk in the ways of the Lord, made known or to be made known to us. We hold it to be the mission of the Church of Christ to proclaim the gospel to all mankind, exalting the worship of the one true God, and laboring for the progress of knowledge, the promotion of justice, the reign of peace, and the realization of human brotherhood. Depending, as did our fathers, upon the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth, we work and pray for the transformation of the world into the kingdom of God; and we look with faith for the triumph of righteousness and the life everlasting.

If the inquirer be interested, he then seeks out a local Congregational Christian Church, asks to be acquainted with its Covenant and its requirements for membership. If he wishes to accept the Covenant and to meet any other requirements for membership, he then requests membership in the Church, addressing this request to the proper officer of the Church, usually the Pastor.

□

WHAT IS A CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH?



Congregationalism

Continued from page 7

on civil behavior. Most of our decisions, for instance, should be made by consensus rather than voting. We must emphasize our common bonds and heritage rather than differences of the moment. Diversity of theological perspective should be accepted as a positive condition, rather than the opportunity for one view to prevail over another.

The Congregational Way in its contemporary garb has acquired a new and unpredicted role in religion and society. It has become one of the few institutions in our society that is conciliatory in perspective, rather than adversarial.

* * * * *

The Congregational Way should recognize that a church based on love rather than ecclesiastical authority must spread its word more by poetry than by television. Our faith is subtle, personal, not collective or photogenic. While we reject historical determinism in its various guises, we must acknowledge, if not accept, much of the world we live in. We cannot commission another *Mayflower* and escape to a New World, desirable as that may seem at times.

* * * * *

Was the merger controversy an arcane bit of historical trivia? Or, was it really a conflict over the most fundamental issues? I have concluded that the latter position is correct. It was a debate over fundamentals.

* * * * *

We Congregationalists are the loyal remnant, the keepers of the covenant.

* * * We have re-discovered the basis of our faith and the basis of our worldview. We should prepare ourselves now for the challenge of taking our message and our example to others.

We are surrounded by hostile forces emanating from the secular world. We cannot keep up with fashion, indeed a church should not be fashionable. We seek order, understanding, and love in a world in which disorder, misunderstanding, and hate are the prime motivating forces.

We must not base our goals as a covenant community on a utopian assessment of human nature. Sin and



"Each of us has a mission . . ."

evil have always been, and will always be, present in history. In large part, our presence is our message. Our national Congregational conclave seeks to make decisions in a way that heals rather than wounds. We accept that the integrity of our culture and the processes by which its values are transmitted from one generation to the next are more important than any

momentary policy objectively righteously obtained.

The Congregational Way is boldly committed to an enlightenment interpretation of history. We reject the idea that "history marches" of its own volition or that we are merely human props in a global morality play. Our fates have not been predetermined by a mechanistic and amoral theory of history. For us, history is ours to make largely as we will. We are responsible today, at this very meeting, for the future of our Way and its culture.

John Winthrop, in a sermon delivered aboard the *Arbella* before disembarking on Massachusetts soil in 1630, spoke to our condition today: "For we must consider that we shall be a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so if we shall deal falsely with our God in His work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world."

The beauty of the Congregational Way is that for each generation a precious opportunity is offered. We are all citizens of the "city upon the hill." Whether this city will flourish or wither will be decided by this generation in a thousand places and in a thousand ways. Each of us has a mission and responsibility to prove to others that free men and women can make a better society on earth bound together by love and conciliation. Let us, therefore, get on with our task without tarrying for any.

A Message to the Churches

A statement concerning our tradition and our beliefs:

The bed-rock principles of Congregationalism are the autonomy of the local church, the right of private judgment in matters of Bible and belief, and the fellowship of the churches.

Congregational polity adheres to the historic covenant of Salem, 1629, that our churches be gathered communities in which persons voluntarily join in fellowship to support one another in their purpose to walk in the ways of the Lord. Because Congregationalism is an open fellowship allowing for diversity of interpretation of Scripture and doctrine we cherish the affection which binds together persons of differing viewpoints within the ways of mutual tolerance and respect.

The undersigned former Moderators of the NACCC, meeting in Sun City, Ariz., February 14-17, 1985, unanimously recommend to our churches the above statement expressing our Congregational principles and purpose.

We recognize that apart from the above statement there is diversity of theological belief on the part of the ministry and laity within our churches. This has been evident throughout our history, yet we continue to be one fellowship. Our diversity has sometimes been our strength and often our weakness, but we pray and trust that a spirit of mutual tolerance and Christian affection will always keep us in the unity of the spirit and bonds of peace.

We believe that the principles cited above must continually be emphasized and thereby the Good News of Jesus and His Way may be proclaimed in our churches through a positive program of Christian allegiance and service.

We urge all churches and their pastors to inspire and motivate their people to significant Christian life with dignified and meaningful worship services, to develop thoughtful and mature Christian education programs, to promote a loving, open, understanding fellowship among the members and to urge individual implementation of personal faith by service to others in the spirit of Christ.

We are convinced that the Congregational Christian Churches have a promising future that could see substantial growth in numbers and influence by the end of this century. In order to achieve this growth and realize our full potential, we feel it extremely important

On February 14-18, thirteen former moderators of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches met in Sun City, Ariz. to discuss the long range problems, needs, and possible plans for the Association. Regrets and suggestions were received from all who were unable to attend. The group met as an ad hoc sub-committee of the Executive Committee which is concerned about the NACCC in the year 2000 and after. In preparation, each board, commission, committee, and staff member had been asked to think about the needs over the long range. Dr. Appelquist and Mr. Frenz attended as consultants and Dr. Boring was also there as a former moderator. Discussions were lengthy and vigorous. A full report was given to the early March meeting of the Executive Committee.

Herewith is printed a concluding statement for the churches which reflects some of the general thinking which the group desired to present at once for careful reading. Hopefully, it may be a challenge to all who read it.

Dr. George V. Bohman,
chairman

Dr. John Alexander,
secretary for the meeting

to continue our traditional emphasis on a learned and dedicated ministry. Therefore, all necessary steps should be taken to recruit the highest quality young people for this calling and encourage them to obtain the best possible undergraduate and theological training.

We urge our member churches to be thoughtful and circumspect in their choice of ministerial leadership in order that they may preserve our high reputation for integrity. Though we look to ministers and lay officers for leadership, we remind the churches that the seat of authority lies with the congregation in meeting assembled, acting in the spirit of Christ.

We urge our pastors and churches to inform and instruct their members (especially new members) on the principles and responsibilities of the Christian faith, the obligations of church membership and the history and usages of the Congregational Way.

We believe the time is near when the N.A. needs to consider a professional and dynamic public relations program which will broadcast to our own churches and to the public at large, the nature of our free, positive, committed and unique fellowship.

We further believe it to be necessary to consider larger financ-

ing, additional staffing and a more adequate building in Oak Creek in order to properly serve our present churches and those we hope will unite with our fellowship in the next decade and a half.

We reaffirm our obligation and commitment to deepen and extend our fellowship, our goodwill and our desire for essential Christian unity on both national and international levels.

The Congregational Way was first walked in America by the Pilgrims, and we are the custodians of the Pilgrim heritage. Yet while we cherish that heritage, we do not worship a noble past. Congregationalism is a living and growing thing, like a tree with deep roots, a strong trunk, and branches that bud, blossom, and bear fruit. Our prayer is that Congregationalism, planted by the rivers of the living water of the Spirit, may bring forth good fruit in this season, and through all the long tomorrows.

Signed: John Alexander, Richard Bower,
Harry Butman, George Bohman, Marian Luenberger,
Howard Conn, Raymond Waser, Helen Jo Berkaw,
Norman Ream, Walter Boring, Erwin Britton,
Donald Brownell, Paul Miller

What Congregationalism Means To Me

by George V. Bohman

The Editor's request for a brief statement which would answer the perennial questions, "Why am I a Congregationalist?" and "What does it mean to me?" arrived as I was perusing drafts of the dialog being prepared for the annual meeting by Robert Morris and Harry Butman and just as our church's by-laws committee began to explore possible changes in our covenant. These sent me again to the major Congregational histories and documents.

Now, as I type a final draft of my statement, I read the thrilling product of Butman's early morning pen that appears in the spring *Congregationalist*. Let me turn our attention inward to what I believe is the very heart of the answer to the questions. In an earlier article, I noted that the leaders of continuing Congregationalism stopped short of an answer to the query, "Why should an individual member, not involved in denominational structure, find it worthwhile to be a Congregationalist?" In their writings, our leaders seem content to emphasize the free, autonomous church itself.

Because each member of a church is asked to accept a *covenant* as the basis of fellowship,

the covenant is usually a brief, non-credal commitment of members to work together as a Christian church. Ideally, Atkins and Fagley thought the covenant pledged "cooperation and fellowship" for a "definite purpose, not because of peculiarities of belief." However, they recognized that some churches have at times included various amounts of theology and doctrine. More recently, Arthur Rouner, Jr. stressed the non-credal basis of the covenant, calling it a commitment to fellowship which implied an "agreement between man and God" not unlike the Old Testament concept. Historians point out that a reason for brief, non-credal statements during the first century of our churches might be that most ministers and members substantially concurred in long, Calvinist creeds. However, the Salem covenant, written probably in 1629 but certainly by 1636, by which the members "bynd ourselves in the presence of God, to walke together in all his waies, according as he is pleased to reveale himself unto us in his Blessed word of truth," when read with Pastor Robinson's earlier injunction to the departing Pilgrims that "if God should reveal anything to us by any other instrument of his (than Christ), to be ready to receive it . . . (and that) the Lord had more truth and light to break forth out of his holy word," suggest strongly that both Puritans and Separatists reserved large areas for continuing, independent pursuit of truth by their covenanted flocks.

If we accept Williston Walker's judgment that the covenant still in use by First Church, Plymouth is essentially the wording adopted at Scrooby and Leyden, then from its earliest years Robinson's church subscribed to a most open covenant. After careful consideration, the church at Royal Oak in January, 1977 adopted the Plymouth covenant as the wording best adapted

