

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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INTRODUCTION

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.

- Clinchy, Russell. "Why the Congregational Churches Should Live." November '58
Gray, Henry David. "The Constitutional Question." June '59
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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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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

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- Butman, Harry. "How It [*The Congregationalist*] Started." August '62
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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
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 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
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 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.

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FREE CHURCHES

A FREE CHURCH MOVEMENT

by Rev. Roy Gilmour Pavy, D.D.

One of the most encouraging news items of 1964 for free Church men and women was the announcement of the meeting of the World Christian Relations Commission in Milwaukee on October 12-14, with the Rev. Harry R. Butman, D.D., minister of the Congregational Church of the Messiah of Los Angeles as the Chairman. This was a meeting of the National Association World Christian Relations Commission and a delegation representing the Council of Community Churches in America for the purpose of exploring the possibilities of cooperation in pioneering a Free Church Movement in America.

I have been personally interested in such a movement for a number of years, and I rejoiced when I heard it had already been started.

As I see it, such a Free Church Movement is the logical concomitant to what is going on in American Protestantism. We are all aware, I am sure, that there is a concerted drive toward an authoritarian Church, as denominations band themselves together to set up the One Big Church. What some of us call the "American Catholic Church" drives the free Churches out of American Protestantism. According to the thinking of one-big-church leaders, the destruction of the free, independent, autonomous Churches, such as the Congregational Churches will have to be accomplished if the One Big Church is to become the powerful organization which its proponents hope it will be. So, as believers in the free Churches there should be a counter movement, a *Free Church Movement* which will bring together, not organically, but on a cooperative and fellowship basis, all those Churches in America which believe in the Free Churches.

As believers in Free Churches in a free country, we should not minimize the strength and appeal of the One-Big-Church. It has a tremen-

dous appeal to a certain type minister who is ambitious for power, position, influence and security. Many a minister is willing to sacrifice his liberty and freedom as a minister of Jesus Christ for the sense of security and for the opportunity to serve in an authoritarian Church where he has real power.

The One-Big-Church idea is being promoted by all the mass media. It seeks laymen who have become convinced that we live in a world of big power institutions. They see the big corporations such as the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, General Motors, General Electric and the United States Steel Corporation. They see big unions like the AFL-CIO, the United Automobile Workers and the United Steel Workers of America. They see a government growing so big that it is working its way into the private life of all our citizens. They see our government set up a budget of over one hundred billion dollars per year. So, they say to themselves, "Why not have one big Church? Why have all these independent Churches? Let us have one great authoritarian Church. Then this Church can speak for Protestant America with authority, as the Pope speaks for the Roman Catholic Church." Let us not ignore this appeal. The centralized "Church" is appealing to thousands, if not millions of Protestant laymen.

The real need of a *Free Church Movement* comes right at this point. This movement needs to point out, to ministers and laymen alike, that the sacrifice of liberty and freedom is too great a price to pay for the supposed benefits of the one authoritative Church. *We need to point out* that man was made to be *free*: free from ignorance; free from superstition; free from everybody and everything that would enslave the human spirit. We should point out that Jesus said "Ye shall know the truth, and

the truth shall make you free."

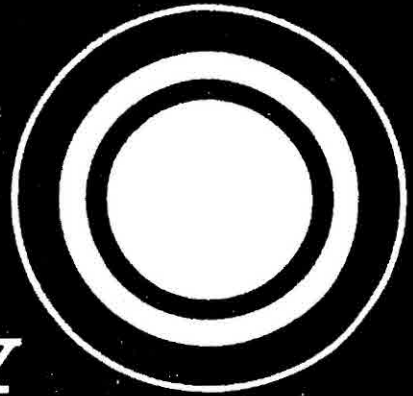
The Free Churches need to point out that the very genius of Protestantism has been and always will be its willingness to rebel against those who would attempt to dictate and control the thought and convictions of men and women in the field of religion. The origin of Congregational Churches, the Baptist Churches, the Quaker Movement, the Unitarian and Universalists Churches was in their demand that they have the right and privilege of being free and independent bodies, managing all their affairs. The creative genius of American democracy has been and still is the fact that we are a free people, living with free institutions, in a free nation.

While we are over-burdened in America with organizations of all types and kinds, it seems that the only way to promote an idea or a program is to set up an organization to promote that idea or that program. We desperately need a *Free Church Movement* in America, not five years or ten years from now, but NOW. It is long overdue. It is much later than we think. So, we welcome with enthusiasm what has been done along this line in Milwaukee in October.

I would like to see this fellowship include on a cooperative and voluntary basis *all* Protestant Churches which believe in a free Church independent government. This should include conservative and liberal Churches. We should not allow theological differences to separate us. We should band ourselves together into a national, even into an international organization, to promote the Free Churches, to fight vigorously, although with a Christian spirit, every attempt in America, or in the world, to exalt the One Great Authoritative Church.

The true representatives of American Protestantism are the Free Churches. ■

CREATIVE INDEPENDENCY



by Richard V. Bellingham

(About the author. Mr. Bellingham is the associate minister at the First Congregational Church of Royal Oak, Michigan.)

So often we read in Congregational literature of the balancing of freedom and responsibility as if each must counter and qualify the excesses of the other. This is an unfortunate dichotomy that offers us only the swing of the pendulum between rebellion and submission. At least it cuts the nerve of enthusiasm for either of these alternatives. I contend that freedom and responsibility are *equivalent*, not competitive, to each other. True freedom = responsibility; true responsibility is impossible without

freedom. One cannot be responsible unless one is free to make his own decisions (and risk his own mistakes). He is not truly free unless he bears the consequences of his own actions. Here is where modern "permissiveness" goes awry. It is not permissiveness as such that creates the problem, but the protection from the consequences of his actions that indulgent parents, and an affluent society, offers an erring adolescent today. In our sense of the word the person who was independent and self supporting at 12 years was a freer spirit than the indulged but financially dependent teenager of today. Responsibility is not *necessarily* the yielding to the paternal and protective wisdom of superiors. It is self reliance.

It is more than coincidence that the Congregational renaissance of the 1850's occurred during the Abolitionist movement. Congregationalists during the first half of the 19th Century were content to be indifferent toward matters of polity until the national uniformity of the Presbyterians (and their consequent temporizing on the issue of slavery) frustrated the local initiative and efforts toward reform among many dually affiliated churches of Ohio, Michigan, Indiana and Illinois. The dead hand of a connectional system compromised social awareness. Local independence was the necessary condition for creative initiative and social responsibility. Through the years since most innovations in worship, Christian education, theol

ogy and social awareness have been pioneered by the local church in a polity that permitted individual experimentation without having to wait for the formal sanction of a cautious, monolithic organization. Worthwhile innovations won their way on their own merits, not by decree from above. Unwise innovations were discovered before being inflicted on an entire fellowship.

Today, ironically, those who espouse union into a more connec-tional system do so on the premise that the congregationally organized denomination is too rigid to meet the challenge of new conditions, and its polity inappropriate to the more controlled society of the present day. On the contrary I am a Congregationalist precisely because I feel we need more than ever in our highly organized (necessarily so, I fear) governmental and economic structures a vehicle of spiritual individuality and dissent. But I'm afraid we've too often justified the contention of the centralists that congregationalism is too hamstrung to address itself to the present or future. This should not be! The excuse for freedom is imagination and responsibility. We should be the freest of all people to imagine and explore. Our obstacle is not our polity, but the tyranny of consensus, complacency, and personal inertia. Congregationalism when it is true to its spirit is the most adventurous and daring of polities. It is the polity most disposed to receive the "light and truth the Lord hath yet to break forth from his word."

There are many in our fellowship who would divorce social concern from the religious context. Yet those who are most vehemently opposed to what they regard as the slightest suggestion of a statement on social issues in a regional or national assemblage of Congregationalists take their political and economic stance, certainly in part, from their theological position and their doctrine of the church. And they are highly vocal about it. Should the reformists in our fellowship be any more hesitant to ex-

press themselves in such gatherings than the conservatives? No more than anyone else do I like *instructions* on social, political and economic issues from a patronizing hierarchy or committee of "experts." But does that mean we can't *talk* about these issues, remind ourselves and others that there *are* problems which require the *attention* of Christian conscience and principles, and have a presentation of varying viewpoints for discussion in the programs of our assemblies, local *and* regional? What is the classical Congregational meeting but a lively exchange of opposing viewpoints within a framework of mutual acceptance? In the 17th century English Congregationalist John Milton wrote: "And though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so truth be in the field, we do injuriously by licensing and prohibiting to misdoubt her strength. Let her and falsehood grapple; who ever knew truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter." Congregationalism is a confident, trusting polity, not a fearful, insecure one. Even in as controversial an issue as the Vietnamese conflict, do we not *all* hope for an end of bloodshed and terror, and the opportunity of Vietnamese self determination; and can't we say so publicly, as much as we differ on how to bring it about?

National Association churches are few in number, and have been put on the defensive by the efforts of ecumenicists to draw them into a corporate united church. True they cannot drop their guard against *external* attack. But too long this defensive psychology has crippled imagination and creative daring within. As solidly committed as our fellowship is to the Congregational Way, as free as it now is of subverters from it, and with many more constitutional checks (like the Referendum Council) against such subversion than Congregationalism has *ever* had, let us drop our inhibitions and prove once again that local independency is the fountainhead of creative, courageous imagination. □

In certain quarters one hears and reads much about our time as the age of "post-literate" man. To some it would appear that as man leaves the age of print, he also departs the era of definition. Once the stability of meaning is lost, the human imagination atrophies and ideas are destroyed. Man may then be manipulated more effectively by a computerized technology. Some persons will ask, "What has this to do with the free churches?"

In the not too distant past the phrase, "free church," meant generally either a church where the settings were without charge and open to all, or a church not established or under state control. In America the former definition never had frequent currency and the latter meaning if used at all was generally questioned on the grounds of validity because by the middle of the nineteenth century all state churches were dis-established in the United States of America.

So for several generations in recent American life the phrase, "free church", has been anomalous. The term has in American usage different connotations from those it enjoys in European speech. All denominations could claim in America that they were free churches and the designation was seldom used. Several denominations found a place for the word "free" in their names. So there exist The Evangelical Free Church, The Free Methodist Church, and The Lutheran Free Church.

Under the safeguards of the first amendment to the United States Constitution, religious pluralism flourished. Little attention was paid to labels and the idea of the free church was taken for granted until the advent of the era of organic community. The opponents of the great church have tended to reassert free church ideas. Yet even movement have paid lip service to free church idea. Some representatives of the United Church of Christ to the Consultation on Church Union have assumed occasionally the role of spokesmen for

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the free church viewpoint since some of their spiritual ancestors were Congregationalists. On the current religious scene "free church" is used in several contexts and senses. The average reader or listener must have contextual awareness to understand the phrase when he sees or hears it.

Free Church versus State Church

In an earlier time common usage saw "free church" describing that religious institution composed of a gathered company of believers covenanted together with simple polity often existing in defiance of a state church. Churches in the tradition of the Radical Reformation, the Pilgrims in seventeenth century England and Holland, and the Separates or Strict Congregationalists in eighteenth century Connecticut could be cited as examples. More generally one could describe ecclesiastical organizations existing outside of the control of the state church in any number of countries recognizing an established church. By this latter and broader definition a free church has no distinctive polity and may be of congregational, presbyterian or episcopal type.

Free Church versus Hierarchical Church

When "free church" is used in discussion of church organization it is assumed to include any groups functioning through congregational polity as distinguished from the more connectional forms of the Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopalian and Roman Catholic varieties. Thus, NA Congregational Christians consider themselves free churchmen vis a vis their brothers who elected to join the United Church of Christ with its avowed connectionalism and national unitary church structure although some of the latter might deny the contention that they were no longer free churchmen.

Free Church versus Dogmatic Church

Occasionally "free church" is a synonym for non-creedal church. In this context free churchmen stand opposed to Baptists, Fundamentalists, Lutherans and other groups which require subscription to a particular credal formulation, theolog-

ical interpretation, or sacramental mode. The consultations on the nature and future of the free churches and the emerging Conference for Free Churches appear from discussions and reports to define "free church" in this sense.

Free Church equals Believers Church

Some students think of the free church in relation to the Believers Church groups in what was for long incorrectly labeled "the Anabaptists" and which is more recently and more correctly designated the Radical Reformation with latter day descendants in the Amish and Brethren groups. This definition finds expression in the Center for Free Church and Reformation Studies at the Chicago Theological Seminary and in such semi-occasional gatherings as the 1967 Conference on the Believers Church held in Louisville, Kentucky.

Free Church equals Underground Church or Liberated Church

More recently the disenchanting alumni and refugees from the institutional church of our time in both Roman Catholic and Protestant forms have developed an underground church movement of small groups gathering in houses for study and worship. They frequently refer to their groups as the liberated church and consider themselves part of the free church movement. When a recent meeting of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in America considered the free church movement, these people were the objects of their interest and concern. *Renewal* magazine is another center of interest in and information about free church in this context.

Bondage in the Free Church

Within the free church there is both negative and positive bondage. The former is weakness and the latter is strength. Negatively the free church must ever be on guard against falling into bondage to a religious primitivism which idolizes the practice and polity of the early church. The present is no less dangerous than the past to the free church, for the cultural patterns of the present often beguile the free

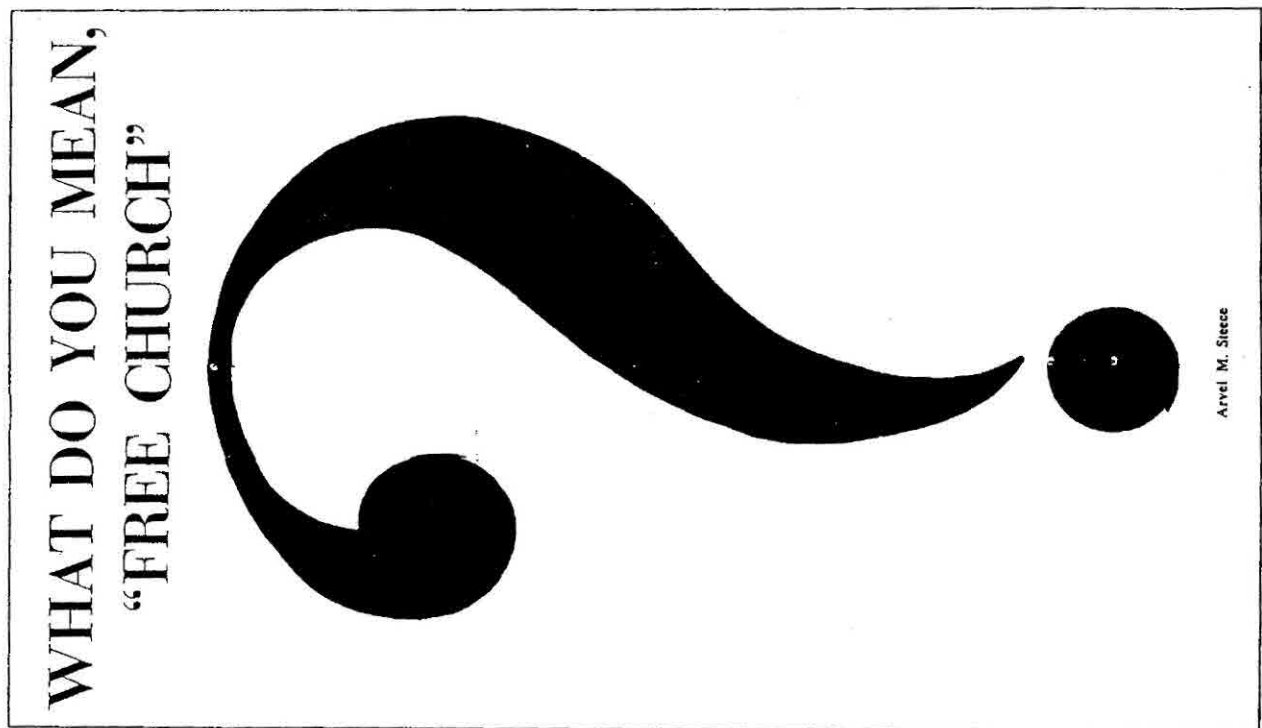
church in every generation. Cultural accommodation that destroys the distinctive witness of the Christian gospel must be avoided. The safeguard is positive bondage to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Paradoxically this bondage issues in true freedom. "So long as you are my disciples, you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free". Discipleship is prior to knowledge. Knowledge is antecedent to truth. Truth is the guarantor of freedom.

What is our opportunity

In view of this variety of interest in the free church it is not surprising that the average layman or pastor may be confused or puzzled when he reads about free churches in the mass media.

Since many readers and more participants in some of the groups and movements appearing in the current and continuing religious reformation are historically unaware of the many facets of the Protestant Reformation, they do not see the similarities to the past in the present radical ventures.

Those of us who stand in the Pilgrim-Puritan tradition of responsible religious freedom have a real missionary opportunity to share our insights with these seekers. Our effectiveness will be commensurate with our willingness and ability to forego self-aggrandizement. Provided of course, we have a genuine appreciation for and understanding of our heritage. It is imperative that we have a dynamic dedication to the making of our understanding of the free church idea viable and relevant today. An openness to change is necessary. A critical evaluation of proposals for change is also needed. If we are merely worshipping at ancestral shrines in our devotion to the free church idea, we will have nothing to say to contemporary seekers. If our concern for the free church idea is based upon a sound foundation of classical Christian faith which sees the free church as the best means of securing commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and nurturing disciples in the Christian Way of Life, then we may indeed have something to offer to the seekers and satisfaction for the spiritual hunger of contemporary men. □



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