

**Fellowship: The Neglected Focus of the Congregational Ellipse**  
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**Abstract**

Henry Martyn Dexter offered the classic description of Congregationalism as an ellipse with two foci, the independence of the local church and those churches in fellowship with sister churches. Experience indicates, however, that the bifocal emphasis has become increasingly monofocal, with independence stressed at the expense of fellowship.

This paper examines the Biblical and Theological understanding of fellowship and what this concept implies for the Congregational Way of being Church

**Introduction**

Fellowship is one of the hallmarks of the Congregational Way. We tout “Faith, Freedom, and Fellowship.” One of the classic definitions of Congregationalism holds that it is constituted by “an ellipse with two foci” which are the “independence of the local church” and “those churches in fellowship with one another.” The record of the last fifty or so years would show something rather different. There has been an emphasis more on freedom, i.e. the independence of the local church, rather than on fellowship.

Since this situation may have arisen because we have lacked an adequate definition of fellowship, this paper endeavors to offer a definition from several different angles. It also offers some suggestions as to the implications fellowship holds for us as “the Lord’s free people.” I hasten to add that this is a work ‘in progress’ – there is more to be done.

**Fellowship: A Biblical and Theological Definition**

*Koinonia* is the word translated as ‘fellowship’ in both the *Septuagint* and the New Testament. It is defined in the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament as “fellowship,” “sharing,” “participation with or in something,” denotes a particularly close bond.<sup>1</sup> The word also denotes that concept of communion, and thus of community.

The basis of the concept of fellowship in both Testaments is the presence of God in relationship. This can best be expressed in God’s word in Exodus 3:12, “I will be with you.” The drama of the Exodus experience is fueled by the continuing presence of God to the people to whom that assurance of presence has been made. The Divine presence is the core of the covenant relationship and the ground for community.

The reality of the presence is given form in the Sinai encounter. First the covenant, the Decalogue, is offered and consented to in chapters 19 and 20 of Exodus. This action establishes the principle of Divine Law and begins to set the parameters of human governance. The emphasis here is on mutuality. As God extends God’s self in the covenant relationship so, too, should the people extend themselves in response. The way both individuals and the nation show their consent and develop the ability to call upon God is by living out the precepts of the covenant in mutual self-giving. Daniel Elazar comments:

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<sup>1</sup> See Theological Dictionary of the New Testament volume III, Gerhard Kittel, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 798.

The theme of mutuality is expressed throughout the Bible even when covenanting is not directly involved. Scripture is pervaded by the covenantal process . . . Over and over again, the Bible says of God that He responds to the cry or call of the people. God's intervention must be invoked in such a way that He will respond. His covenant partners have an especially good way to invoke Him, by calling upon Him to exercise *hesed*, the loving obligation established by the covenant which provides its dynamic dimension . . . the extension of *hesed* on the basis of mutuality which properly defines what is involved. This kind of obligation is a political obligation in the highest sense. God's response is generally described as remembering the covenant.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the freedom of the individual and the collective is assured by God's "remembering the covenant" by means of *hesed* (steadfast love).

What the Sinai experience does is demonstrate God's willingness to honor the reality of Divine Presence – "I will be with you." What this presence, expressed through covenant, does is to take a *goy* (a nation like any other any other) and transform it into an *am* (a people whose identity and very existence rest in a power greater than their own), Out of that a further transformation takes place when the *am* is constituted an *edah* (a covenanted congregation). In this act of transformation God gathers this people to God's self and bestows on them a unique identity as God's people. When they assemble they are not just a *kahal* (an assembly), they are the *kahal YHWH* (God's people). The Israeli historian Ben Zion Demur offers a description of the *edah*:

The distinctive social feature of early Israel is marked by being an *edah* (congregation). A congregation is a social entity which comes into being and develops mainly as the result of a common will and not like the family or tribe, by natural processes. Its members live in one place, but what distinguishes them is a common faith and common beliefs, a way of life, will, i.e. as in aspirations.<sup>3</sup>

The commonality, mutuality, of the *edah* is found in the covenant and in the "I will be with you" which underlies it.

As the Sinai event constituted Israel a people and marks a new stage in the Divine-human relationship, so the Christ event moves it even higher. In the Christ event humanity is invited into relationship with the Deity in a hitherto unimagined manner. Jesus takes the promise of presence and mediates it to us in his own person. In the teaching, the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus we are given a new understanding of God's will to relationship. Nowhere is this better articulated than in the writings of John, where Jesus speaks of the vine and the branches. "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing . . . As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love." (John 15: 5, 9)

What we see now is a new and deeper relationship as the covenant is renewed and broadened through Christ. The Apostle Paul will repeatedly stress the importance of life "in Christ" and argues for the believer's incorporation into Christ. In 1 Corinthians 1:9 he says that the result of preaching is a calling by the Father "into the fellowship (*koinonia*) of his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord." It will be this notion that underlies the formation of Paul's ecclesiology as "the body of Christ."

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel J. Elazar Covenant and Polity in Biblical Israel volume I of The Covenant Tradition in Politics (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1998), p. 172.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Elazar, p. 178.

The believer comes to share in Christ's very life, death and resurrection and, as a consequence, is made a true participant in his body. The church, the body of Christ, actually continues the reality of the incarnation and constitutes the living presence of the living Christ in the world. Through the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist the individual is incorporated into the Body and, in turn, the community thus formed becomes a sacramental re-presentation of Christ to the world. All of this is to continue the presence of God's love uniquely expressed and lived out through Jesus the Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Hans Kung would offer a definition of church, one in which fellowship is prominent, as "A community of those who believe in Christ." He notes that the early church took the concept of the *edah* as the *kahal YHWH* and transformed it to become the *kahal of Jesus*. Since the term *kahal-ekklesia* signifies both the process of assembling and the assembled community itself, there is no community without the assembly, no church without the gathered community. He writes, "Already in the Jewish Christian paradigm the concrete gathering for worship was regarded as the manifestation, representation, indeed realization of the newly formed Jesus community."<sup>5</sup>

His explication of the nature of the *ekklesia* bears reproducing here, since it speaks to the essence of our Way of being church.

That [the gathering of the community] provides the norm once and for all: *ekklesia* originally in no way meant an abstract and remote hyper-organization of functionaries set above the concrete assembly, but in origin a community gathered at a particular place at a particular time engaged in a particular action. However, this is no isolated, self-satisfied religious association, but a community which forms a comprehensive community with others. Each **local church** fully represents the **whole church**. To it is given all that it needs in its place for human salvation: the proclamation of the gospel, baptism, the Lord's Supper, the different charisms and services. Each individual community, all its members, may understand itself as the people of God, the body of Christ, a spiritual building.<sup>6</sup>

What Kung describes is what Congregationalists believe the church to be and, ideally, try to make it real.

The basis for this fellowship is the participation in Christ which, as 2 Peter 1:4 tells us, draws us into a communion, a fellowship, a partaking in the divine nature. Following the Christ event theologians have grappled, and indeed continue to do so, with what this participation implies. Part of the precedent for the concept of fellowship is drawn from the theologies of the Trinity and the notion of a "community" within the Godhead. This concept is wonderfully expressed in the writings of the school of Saint Victor, especially in Richard of Saint Victor, and in the writings of Bonaventure, particularly his Breviloquium and The Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity. The nature and the scope of this paper do not permit more than a passing mention of these works. However, what makes them distinctive is the predication of love as the nature of God, reflecting the core motif of the Johannine corpus. Divine love is love that reaches out to another and another, because it cannot do otherwise.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For more material on this point cf. Hans Kung The Church (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), especially pages 107-150 and 203-262 and Johannes A Vandervan Ecclesiology in Context (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, pages 283-300).

<sup>5</sup> Hans Kung Christianity: Essence, Form, Future (New York: Continuum, 1996), p. 79.

<sup>6</sup> Kung, *Christianity*, p. 79, emphasizes his. Reading his description one understands why Father Kung teaches in the Protestant faculty at Tubingen.

<sup>7</sup> See also Miroslav Volf After our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) and John d. Zizioulas Being as Communion (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993) for additional perspectives on this issue. The whole notion of *divinization/entheosis* is implicit and important to this understanding of church as participation.

While not considered a theologian per se, Julian of Norwich captured the notion of God's love extended to us and drawing us into community/fellowship perhaps better than most. There is a renewed interest in her writings and a number of significant studies have appeared recently. The Australian theologian, Kerrie Hide's Gifted Origins to Graced Fulfillment: The Soteriology of Julian of Norwich gives a splendid presentation of the love of God which seeks to 'knit' itself to humanity and bring us into a 'oneing' or union.<sup>8</sup> Julian sees, as does the Bible, that all reality has its being through the love of God. God's love and goodness are expressed through God's desire to share life, share presence, to fellowship with us.

In one place in the Revelations of Divine Love Julian says, "I saw that love was his meaning." In other words, God's intention toward us, toward all of creation, was and is love. In chapter five she writes:

I saw that he was everything that is good and comfortable for us. He is our clothing which for love enwraps us, holds us, and all encloses us because of his tender love, so that he may never leave us.<sup>9</sup>

What Julian saw is simply the continued assurance of presence – the fellowship extended by God to those who come with willing and open hearts.

Communion, sharing, participation, fellowship all denote and operationally define the experience of God's self-disclosure and our response to it. What does this mean for those who are trying to live out this fellowship within the context of the Congregational Way?

### **Fellowship: Toward a Congregational Definition**

Harry Butman observed that, "It is a singular thing that fellowship, though highly extolled, is never defined in classical Congregational literature."<sup>10</sup> Dr. Butman then proceeds to offer such a definition, "Simply and positively expressed, *the fellowship of the Churches is a free relation of affection*"<sup>11</sup> It is a definition that has served us well, but also needs to be contextualized. While it is true that there are no succinct definitions in the classical literature of our Way, it is, nevertheless, abundantly clear that fellowship has been operationally defined. What follows are four operational definitions of fellowship from classical Congregational literature.

The *Cambridge Platform* takes up the 'comunion of Churches one with another' in chapter fifteen. The framers of the *Platform* first note the necessity and the boundaries of church communion:

Although Churches be distinct, & therefore may not be confounded with one another: & equall, & therefore have not dominion one over another: yet all the churches ought to preserve *Church-communion* one with another, because they are all united unto Christ, not only as a mysticall, but as a politicall head; whence is derived a *communion* suitable thereunto.<sup>12</sup>

The Framers then articulate, with some elaboration which we will not reproduce here, six ways that Churches are to maintain communion:

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<sup>8</sup> See Kerrie Hide Gifted Origins to Graced Fulfillment: The Soteriology of Julian of Norwich (Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 2001) note particularly chapter 3, "Oneing through the Trinity."

<sup>9</sup> John-Julian, OJN, trans. A Lesson in Love: The Revelations of Julian of Norwich (New York: Writers' Club press, 2003), p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> Harry Butman The Lord's Free People (Milwaukee: Congregational Press, nd), p. 99.

<sup>11</sup> Butman, p. 100 emphasizes his.

<sup>12</sup> Williston Walker Creeeds and Platforms of Congregationalism (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1969), pp. 229-30.

- 1) By way of mutual care.
- 2) By way of consultation.
- 3) By way of admonition.
- 4) By way of participation.
- 5) By way of recommendation.
- 6) By way of need – to minister relief.<sup>13</sup>

A possible seventh way is also offered by the sending out of members to gather a new church. Each of these means operationally defines the nature, the boundaries, and the tasks incumbent upon fellowship.

Henry Martyn Dexter, who offered the definition of Congregationalism as “an ellipse with two foci,” also offers an extended series of examples of how this “duty and fraternity and co-working of such churches” had been experienced up the time of his writings. In the “Things More Clearly Seen” section at the close of Congregationalism As Seen in the Literature of the Last Three Hundred Years Dexter makes this observation:

But to be Congregational a church *must* believe and practice these two fundamental principles: it must be a body segregated by mutual covenant from all vital relations with other church entities; and so, under Christ, acquiring separate and complete existence, it must hold itself not merely in amicable – that it must live in toward *all* the good – but in fraternal relations with kindred organisms. When the former is true, it is an Independent; when the latter also is true, it is a Congregational Church.<sup>14</sup>

So, a truly Congregational church, is one that is living fellowship with other churches walking the Congregational Way.

Congregational theologian A. Hastings Ross devotes an entire chapter of his The Church-Kingdom: Lectures on Congregationalism to the issue of church fellowship. Ross’ text is significant, since it appears to be the first attempt at understanding Congregationalism as more than just a system of polity. Ross undertakes to demonstrate that Congregationalism is a discrete approach to ecclesiology and does an excellent job of laying out and demonstrating this approach to “being church.”

He argues that it is important to consider church fellowship because it derives from the most basic element of Christian fellowship – a notion that he notes is common to all polities. Like Dexter, Ross offers an operational definition of fellowship:

The definition of church fellowship may be derived from that of Christian fellowship. One article of the Apostles’ Creed defines the church to be “the communion of saints,” the fellowship of believers. This is its chief visible manifestation, first in local churches; then in associations of churches. We may, therefore, define church fellowship to be the communion of churches. As saints in local churches have “mutual association on equal and friendly terms,” so churches have mutual association one with another on equal and friendly terms, which constitutes church fellowship. As saints hold fellowship for their mutual edification in worship, cooperation in labors, and sanctification in spirit, so churches hold fellowship for the same purposes.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Walker, p. 230-32.

<sup>14</sup> Henry Martyn Dexter Congregationalism as Seen in the Literature of the Last Three Hundred Years (Harper and Brothers, 1880), p. 696.

<sup>15</sup> A. Hastings Ross The Church-Kingdom: Lectures on Congregationalism (Boston: Congregational Sunday School and Publication Society: 1887), p. 264.

What is noteworthy about Ross' definition is its emphasis upon communion, both between the covenanted saints and then among their covenant communities. In this he underscores and echoes the thought of the Framers of the *Cambridge Platform*.

George Boynton offered what is, perhaps, the most provocative and far-reaching definition of both Congregationalism and of fellowship. In his *The Congregational Way: A Handbook of Congregational Principles and Practices* he opined that there is only one true focus to Congregationalism – fellowship. He said, “we are disposed to consider that congregationalism is a more perfect form of church organization than can be symbolized by an ellipse, and to regard fellowship as its one central principle.”<sup>16</sup> Fellowship, he says, is the core of the Congregational Way because it is the coming together of those who are mutually independent. The independence, or better still autonomy, is implied because of the relationship of the believer and then of the communities of believers to Christ.

Boynton notes that the church is the fellowship of believers uniting in a covenant relationship. “The basis of this union,” he writes, “is a purpose to live lives founded on Christian principles, for which the need of regeneration and the aid of the Holy Spirit is realized.”<sup>17</sup> Here he echoes an underlying assumption of Congregationalism – that a church is, in the words of the *Cambridge Platform*, “made up of saints by calling.” The ability to live out the fellowship, it appears, is predicated on the individual's relationship to God in Christ. The common ground of that relationship is then what enables them to freely enter into a covenant union and thus to become a true community, a living church.

Boynton is in line with all of the writers we've examined in his point that what we've described is a church. What makes it a Congregational church is when reaches out to a larger fellowship than itself. He says, “It is complete, but lacks the strength and the comfort of companionship.” He describes how the early New England Churches found themselves in the same situation and began to move toward fellowship among themselves. “In their weakness and isolation and in the emergencies of their condition, they felt the need for fellowship. They sought it, enjoyed it, and thus developed from independent into Congregational churches. So Congregationalism springs from and is the fellowship of independent churches.”<sup>18</sup>

He then observes that “fellowship takes the place of government.” What holds the churches together are not rules, regulations, and the threat of punishment. Rather, those in fellowship enter into agreements, develop and observe understandings and try to live through within them. When such is not the case, “those who do not keep the agreements violate the conditions of fellowship and ultimately destroy it.” The only real form of discipline he offers is the withdrawal of fellowship or the withholding of it. These are the only means by which an association of freely gathered believers can exercise discipline.<sup>19</sup>

It should now be evident that while Dr. Butman's definition is appropriate, the essence of fellowship within the Congregational context is better described or experienced than merely defined. If a more precise definition is necessary, with all due respect to Dr. Butman, I would offer the following:

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<sup>16</sup> George Boynton *The Congregational Way: A Handbook of Congregational Principles and Practices* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1903), p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Boynton, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Boynton, p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> Boynton, p. 11.

Fellowship is the participation or sharing of individual believers in the formation of a community and then of such communities one with another for mutual edification and the accomplishment of various tasks to promote the common good.

While this definition may lack Dr. Butman's elegance of expression, it does seem to more accurately encompass the actual structure and the working-out of fellowship within the Congregational context.

### **Fellowship: Implications for Life Together on the Congregational Way**

If the one focus, or principle, of Congregationalism is fellowship, then it implies a certain approach to the other foci or principles that undergird it. As Boynton reminded us, we are able to enter into fellowship one with another because we are already free. As Jesus tells us in John, chapter 8, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free." (John 8:31-32) Paul echoes this in Galatians when he says, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1) The one who is living in this freedom has already entered into relationship within the people of God. What God has done freely toward us we are to enter into and extend in equal manner.

The freely gathered covenant community then becomes the basic unit of fellowship. Members of that community enter into it and then are called to exercise a freedom in responsibility to one another. The gathered community, then exercises the function of a collective episcopate, if you will, providing oversight for one another seeking not to control, but to build one another up in love. It is unfortunate that over the years since the merger controversy that we have allowed our desire for freedom drag us into a slavery of sorts, which keeps us from entering into the fellowship our Way requires of us. That slavery is to freedom, 'radical independency' if you will, at the price of fellowship.

From our freedom to be a gathered people there comes next what Conrad Wright has termed the "covenant community of covenant communities," which makes up the adelphity, or sisterly relation of the churches. Familiarly, this is the 'vicinage' and its instrument of fellowship is the ecclesiastical council. This instrument allows the sister churches to express their communion as outlined in the *Cambridge Platform's* six ways. This most basic tool of our Way should be the means, as pointed out in the Polity and Unity Report, for the recognition of churches, as well as for ordinations, installations and the giving of advice and counsel.<sup>20</sup>

It is important for us to remember that this means of fellowship doesn't serve as a juridical device. Rather, it is how we can gather and know who we are in each place and understand each other's needs. As the old hymn goes, "We share each other's woes/Each other's burdens bear/And often for each other flows/The sympathizing tear." This cannot happen if we do not open our doors – whether of our hearts or of our meeting houses – to one another in fellowship.

The associations, state, regional and national, are also instruments of fellowship which, like the vicinage, are neglected to our mutual detriment. Congregationalists are not – or at least ought not – to be 'lone rangers.' The concept of 'radical independency' has never been a mark of the Congregational Way. If our focus is fellowship and its basis is the love of God expressed in Christ then we must be continually reaching out to encompass a greater perspective. This does not at all detract from our independence/autonomy. As P. T. Forsyth said:

But all our best independence is a dependent thing. It is created by a grace whose great form was self-sacrifice. It draws its right and food from the liberty with which Christ created a whole

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Congregationalism: The Church Local and Universal The Polity and Unity Report edited and with an introduction by Steven A. Peay and Lloyd M. Hall, Jr. (Oak Creek: Congregational Press, 2001). P. 25.

church's freedom. Our local Churches are but microcosms of that large world. Therefore, it is a relative autonomy; it is not absolute. It is relative to that suzerain autonomy of the Holy Spirit which it is there to serve, not vaguely but in His one household of faith and fellowship.<sup>21</sup>

Our entering into fellowship through the means of association is a guarantor of our continuing to walk the way of true freedom.

Several years ago four ministers of our fellowship undertook to write a piece in response to a crisis being faced by one of our regional associations. "Congregational Christian Churches: In the Matter of Fellowship" addressed some of what we have discussed thus far. At one point the authors wrote:

The American expression of the congregational Way has witnessed to the expression of fellowship of the Churches through synods, councils, and associations. What we have done, except in isolated instances of the past fifty years, is fail to express that fellowship in meaningful ways. When the relationship of the Churches has been regarded as incidental or meaningless, Churches have fallen away, clergy have exploited and been exploited, the body of Christ has been stained. Where Churches have recognized their mutual responsibility there has been a strengthening of the Way and of the witness to Christ.<sup>22</sup>

Our Way does not, indeed cannot, depend upon institutional structure. It rests upon this "free relation of affection," "this participation of believers in community" that is fellowship. As with our faith itself so must it be with fellowship – it depends upon, it assumes, people of good will responding to the love of God.

Our Way is tenuous as a result, but it also is exciting and alive – if we permit it to be by our willingness to enter fully into fellowship. What this implies is first, allowing perfect love to cast our fear. The fear that someone might seek to control or usurp or force us to think or to behave in a particular manner can keep us from fully entering into fellowship. Second, it implies that fellowship become a priority to churches and to their ministers. It implies that we do not hold back from offering assistance or being present, even if it is less than convenient for us. Third, it implies that we will open ourselves to the leading of the Spirit to develop new ways, new tools, new expressions of fellowship, both with sister churches and in a broad, truly ecumenical fashion. Fourth, it implies that we will seek the common good by undertaking common tasks: healthy churches reaching to their sister churches experiencing difficulty and the leadership of our associations looking to accomplish more than to plan an "exciting annual meeting." Finally, it implies that we will let the Way work. The English Congregational theologian Albert Peel said something that has stayed with me since the first time I read it.

Some clever person once declared that the only thing that could be said against Congregationalism was that it didn't work. Of course, it doesn't work, if Congregationalists don't try to work it or don't believe in it, but are always hankering after safety and security. But when there were those who did believe in it, it worked; when there were those who took Christ's words at their face value and acted on them it worked and worked mightily.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> P.T. Forsyth Reunion quoted in "Congregational Christian Churches: In the Matter of Fellowship" a paper by Lloyd M. Hall, Jr., Douglas Lobb, Steven A. Peay, and Karl Schimpf (unpublished), p. 3.

<sup>22</sup>"Congregational Christian Churches," p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Albert Peel Inevitable Congregationalism (London: Independent Press, 1937), p. 115.



The freedom to fellowship, the freedom of fellowship, to be one with the living God and joined with each other in love and service is our heritage and our destiny. It will be ours only if we are willing to make it work. Fellowship only happens if we make it so.