

Heb 13:7 Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation.

I. CONGREGATIONALISM DEFINED¹

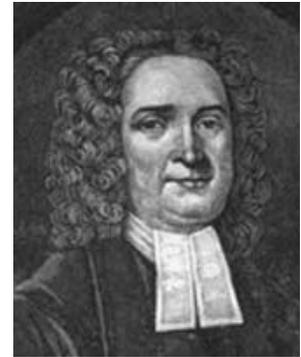
- A. The Congregational church is named for its form of government
- B. “Congregationalism is the theory that every local church is a full realization in miniature, of the entire Church of Jesus Christ; and, the Church while on earth, besides the local Church, can only be invisible and ideal.”
- C. “While other theories may insist on the truth of the first precept, the second of Congregationalism gives the entire theory a unique character among plans of church government.”
 - 1. “There is no other reference than the local congregation, for the "visible church" in Congregationalism.”
 - 2. The connection of all Christians is also asserted.”
- D. This results in the extreme limitation of authority (i.e. a local church only).
- E. Although "congregational rule" may seem to suggest that pure democracy reigns in congregational churches, this is usually not really the case.
 - 1. It is granted that God has given the government of the church into the hands of an ordained ministry
 - 2. It is a system of checks and balances, which constrains the authority of the minister, the lay officers, and the members.
- F. The boundaries of the powers of the ministers and church officers are set by clear and constant reminders of the freedoms guaranteed by the Gospel to the laity, and to every person.
- G. “Congregationalism provides no safety net for an ungodly people, and therefore envisions ideally that none but truly converted Christians will be members of the church.”
 - 1. God is the safety net
 - 2. This statement assumes that men must police themselves
- H. Congregational theory strictly forbids ministers from ruling their local churches by themselves (i.e. autonomously).
 - 1. Not only does the minister serve by the approval of the congregation, but in addition committees must be elected, consisting of lay officers and the pastor.
 - 2. It is a contradiction of the congregational principle, if a minister makes decisions concerning the congregation without the vote of these other officers.
 - 3. The other officers may be called "the board of deacons", "the board of elders" or "the session" (borrowing Presbyterian terminology), or even "the vestry" (borrowing the Anglican term) — it is not their label that is important to the theory, but rather their lay status and their equal vote together with the pastor, in deciding the issues of the church.
 - 4. While other forms of church government are more likely to define "tyranny" as "the imposition of unjust rule", a congregationalist church would more likely define tyranny as "transgression of liberty" or equivalently, "rule by one man".
 - 5. The reason for insisting upon Congregationalism, besides the belief that it is the Biblical and primitive pattern of Church government, is to prevent any transgression of liberty by those in authority.
 - 6. To a congregationalist, no abuse of authority is worse than the concentration of all decisive power in the hands of one ruling body, or one person.

¹ Section taken from <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Congregationalism>

7. Following this sentiment, Congregationalism has evolved over time to include even more participation of the congregation, more kinds of lay committees to whom various tasks are apportioned, and more decisions subject to the vote of the entire membership. Consequently, with the onset of the Enlightenment, congregationalist churches easily adopted and contributed to the Enlightenment ideal of the Individual, against which there has simultaneously been a continuous revolt as it is perceived to have eroded legitimate congregationalist principles of authority and connectionalism.

II. HISTORY OF CONGREGATIONALISM

- A. Congregationalism was a “radical wing” of the Puritan movement
- B. It has been alleged that it rose out of Separatism in the days of Queen Elizabeth
- C. One source says, “The early Separatists in England during the 1600s felt they had to “separate” themselves out of the Church of England. Merging with the Puritans, they became the Congregationalist churches now in America².”
- D. There are difficulties identifying such a specific beginning³, because given its distinguishing commitment to the complete autonomy of the local congregation,
 1. Congregationalism is more easily identified as a movement rather than a single denomination.
 2. The idea that each distinct congregation fully constitutes the visible Church can be traced to John Wyclif and the Lollard movement which followed after Wyclif was removed from teaching authority in the Roman Catholic Church.
 3. The early Congregationalists shared with Anabaptist theology the ideal of a pure church, which made adult conversion experience important for full membership in the church, unlike other Reformed churches.
 4. As such, the Congregationalists were a reciprocal influence on the Baptists, differing from them in that they counted the children of believers in some sense members of the church unlike the Baptists, because of baptism.
- E. “Congregationalists are the Pilgrims of Plymouth Rock, and the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which were organized in union by the Cambridge Platform in 1648.”
- F. Congregationalists that settled in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, had John Cotton as their most influential leader beginning in 1633.
 1. Cotton's writings persuaded the Calvinist theologian John Owen (church leader) to separate from the Presbyterian church
 2. After this he became very influential in the development of Congregationalist theology and ideas of church government.
- G. Jonathan Edwards, considered by some to be the most important theologian ever produced in America, was a Congregationalist.



John Cotton

Beginning in the sixteenth century with small groups of radical Protestants seeking to "purify" the newly formed Church of England, Congregationalism spread to Holland and then to the American colonies where it became the dominant church of New England. For many years Congregational churches and ministers were at the forefront of American religious and cultural life. This heritage is continued in contemporary times by the churches of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, for whom this course is primarily designed.

² <http://www.unityinchrist.com/history/IntroChurchHistory.htm>

³ <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Congregationalist-Church>

- H. The history of Congregationalist churches in the United States is closely intertwined with that of the Presbyterian church, especially in New England where Congregationalist influence spilled over into the Presbyterian church.
- I. The first colleges and universities in America, including Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, Williams, Bowdoin, Middlebury and Amherst, all were founded by the Congregationalists.
- J. Without higher courts to ensure doctrinal uniformity among the congregations, Congregationalists have been more diverse than other Reformed churches.
- K. Despite the efforts of Calvinists to maintain the dominance of their system, the Congregationalist churches, especially in New England, gradually gave way to the influences of Arminianism, Unitarianism, and transcendentalism.
- L. Thus the Congregationalist churches were at the same time the first example of the American theocratic ideal and also the seed-bed from which American liberal religion and society arose.

III. THE PURITANS ⁴

- A. The Puritans were a people who sought to live worship; life and worship were synonymous.
- B. The Bible was said to be at the very center of their lives
 - 1. J. I. Packer has noted, "In the Puritan's communion with God, as Jesus Christ was central, so Holy Scripture was supreme. "
 - 2. "By Scripture, as God's Word of instruction about divine human relationships, they sought to live..."
- C. Puritanism began as a movement of "divers Godly and learned" people "which stood for and desire the Reformation of our church in discipline and ceremonies according to the pure Word of God and the law of the land."
- D. Puritans sought to purify the church of its "idolatries" that centered on man, and restore a Biblically-based worship that centered on God.
- E. They were not a particular denomination, but, much like Evangelicals, were "a scattered presence in a broad expanse of affiliations." So Puritans, and their efforts to purify worship, touched many denominations.
- F. English Puritanism viewed worship as fundamentally a prophetic act.
- G. The mediation of grace was through the Word of Christ spoken by the minister in the Spirit of Christ to the people of Christ (see Romans 10).
 - 1. This was in direct contrast to the Anglican view of worship that was fundamentally a priestly act, whereby the mediation of grace came through the acts of the priest.
 - 2. "To the Puritan mind the priestly element in worship rested on the two great truths of Christ's perpetual High Priesthood and the consequent priesthood of all believers."
 - 3. Thus, in public worship, the Puritan exalted the Word of God as central.
- H. They believed it necessary to prepare the heart for the hearing of God's Word.
 - 1. Puritan pastor Jeremiah Burroughs wrote, "First, when you come to hear the Word, if you would sanctify God's name, you must possess your souls with what it is you are going to hear. That is, what you are going to hear is the [very] Word of God."
 - 2. Puritans savored the Word as it was preached to them. Burrough's taught that we are not only to hear God's Word, but to love and delight in it (Psalm 1:2). And lastly, to hide the Word in our hearts and preserve it in our minds. We are to put into practice that which we have heard, and pray that Satan would not snatch God's word from our hearts (Psalm 119:11).
- I. The Puritan's did not believe in ornate, lavish church buildings.

⁴ <http://www.fretboardfellowship.com/pages/article01.html>

- J. They did not believe in trained choirs singing virtuostic polyphony.
- K. They did not believe that the beauty of worship came from anything we did. The beauty of worship came from the glory of God, alone, shining through the believer. That was where the attraction to worship was found, not in any external value-free decorations, but in the very heart of the believer.
- L. The Puritan believed that the church was not a building, but persons. Puritans "knew nothing of sacred buildings: the 'Church' was the people in the building and the sanctity rested in the saints, not in the place of meeting."
 - 1. This is not to think that the Puritan believed the quality of worship to be peripheral.
 - 2. He was dedicated to excellence, for everything was done as unto God.

IV. CONGREGATIONAL DOCTRINE (HARD TO FIND)

- A. It is hard to find anything concrete about congregational doctrine because there are so many autonomous sources. The Natioanal Association of Congregational Churches publishes some loose doctrinal guidelines.
- B. The congregational church is so liberal today that they have very little interest in doctrine. One source said that they have no particular stand on the deity of Christ or His virgin birth.
 - 1. Their web site says, "We do not accept any formal statement of faith as binding upon all members of our Churches. This is not because we think creeds do not matter, but because we think sincerity of conviction requires full opportunity for intellectual freedom and personal experience."
 - 2. It continues, "The bond of our Christian unity and the fundamental requirement for membership in a Congregational Christian Church are sincere Christian conviction and honest desire to live in fellowship with others as a follower of Jesus Christ."
- C. NACCC says the Congregational Church recognizes both infant and adult baptism⁵
 - 1. In infant baptism, the Christian family commits itself to the nurture of their child and the Church accepts responsibility for the provision of Christian nurture for the child.
 - 2. By the sacrament God's Presence is made known. Remember, sacraments are not magic and do not ensure safety or salvation in and of themselves.
 - 3. In Infant Baptism, the commitment is on the part of the family and the church. There is no binding obligation on the part of the baptized child, but the hope is that when the child reaches the years of discretion, the child will affirm the baptism through profession of his or her own faith, symbolized by rebaptism (not required) or church membership.
- D. The Lord's supper is also known to be a memorial rather than a "means of grace."
- E. There are no priests in this church (or any other according to the Bible)
- F. There is an emphasis on "unity and cooperation" across denominational lines
- G. One statement emphasized six points of doctrine⁶
 - 1. Christ as the only head of the church
 - 2. The Bible as sufficient rule of faith and practice
 - 3. Christian character as the only measure of membership
 - 4. A right individual interpretation of scripture as a way of life
 - 5. "Christian," the name taken as worth of the followers of Christ
 - 6. Unity, Christians working together to save the world
- H. CONGREGATIONAL CHURCHES ARE LIBERAL CHURCHES – they take a very poor stand on doctrine, when they take any stand at all.

⁵ http://www.naccc.org/Resources/Handbooks/Rockland/Rockland_Hdbk_Pg_3.htm

⁶ Frank S. Meade, *Handbook of Denominations*, Abingdon Press, 1956, p. 77.