

The
CONGREGATIONALISTS

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The
CONGREGATIONALISTS



By
The Convert From Anglicanism
REV. DR. L. RUMBLE, M.S.C.

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The CONGREGATIONALISTS

By The Convert From Anglicanism

Rev. Dr. L. Rumble, M.S.G.

CONGREGATIONALISM began in England in the middle of the 16th century, its first supporters calling themselves "Independents," in accordance with their theory that any Christians were free to make a covenant with Christ and with one another, and thus form a Church independent of any authority outside themselves, whether civil or ecclesiastical.

It was in America that the term "Congregationalist" was first adopted, to define the inward structure of the Church rather than a merely historical position independent of "Pope or Prelate, Presbytery, Parliament, or Prince." The English Independents borrowed the name Congregationalist from the New England colonists.

Any type of organization in which the local Church is independent and self-sufficient would, of course, be congregational in policy, as opposed to Episcopal or Presbyterian Churches. In that sense, the Baptists, Disciples, and Unitarians are congregational. But the term "Congregational" has been reserved for the particular Protestant denomination to be described in this booklet. And its history should be of unique interest to all Americans, involving as it does the whole story of the "Mayflower," and the arrival of the "Pilgrim Fathers" on American soil.

THE BEGINNINGS

The Congregational tradition is inseparably united with the rise of the Puritan party within the Anglican Church.

When, in 1534, Henry VIII repudiated the hitherto acknowledged authority of the Catholic Church in favor of his own supremacy, spiritual as well as temporal, he wanted no other religious changes. He therefore resisted all efforts to introduce into England the teachings of the Protestant reformers on the Continent of Europe.

On his death, however, during the reign of the boy-king Edward VI, 1547-1553, barriers were removed, and both Calvinism and Lutheranism obtained widespread influence. This was checked by the accession of Queen Mary, 1553-1558, which brought with it the restoration of Catholicism. As a consequence of this, a great many of the clergy and laity who had sympathized with Protestantism fled abroad to Holland and France, Germany and Switzerland. When Elizabeth, 1558-1603, succeeded to the throne, these exiles returned to England more than ever affected by Calvinism and Lutheranism, as the case might be. But they found the Queen unsympathetic. She was intent on restoring the Church of England as it had been under Edward VI; and her retention of Episcopal government together with many of the old rites and ceremonies proved offensive to those who had returned from abroad.

The returned refugees felt that the reforms proposed under Elizabeth did not go far enough. To them even the Second Prayer Book of Edward VI seemed sheer "Popery." They therefore determined to exert all possible influence to "purify" both the creeds and practices of the Anglican Church as re-established by Elizabeth. Hence the name "Puritans," given to this faction within the Church of England, a faction which aimed at gaining the ascendancy and molding Anglicanism according to their own desires.

Despairing of such slow methods, however, others felt that the only thing to do was to abandon the Church of

England, and set up independent Churches according to altogether new plans and specifications. Thus arose "Independency." These Puritan Independents rejected all Calvinistic, Lutheran, and Elizabethan ideas of reforming any "existent Church." They declared all previous Churches beyond reformation, and that the "Lord's People" should withdraw altogether and form new voluntary groups bound together by their own "Covenant" to serve God, choosing their own officers, and ordaining the worthiest members by the imposition of their own hands.

The whole idea of the "Church" as formerly understood was, therefore, abrogated. The local and independent congregation was to be all that mattered.

PURITAN BACKGROUND

As we have seen, some Puritans remained in the Church of England, whilst others left it to become Independents. The latter deemed it impossible to get godly ministers by any system of episcopal licensing. What was needed, according to them, was a "gathered people" who had made a definite covenant amongst themselves to live godly lives, individually and collectively. And only from amongst their own godly members could they hope to find one capable of being commissioned to preach God's Word.

But the Puritans, whether they conformed to the Church of England or not, were all ardent followers of Calvin's teachings, other than those dealing with ecclesiastical polity, which the Presbyterians alone accepted. And Calvin's teachings did not make them very pleasant people. E. Dowden, in his book "Puritans and Anglicans," wrote, "Their cardinal error lay in a narrow conception of God as the God of righteousness alone, and not as the God of joy and beauty and intellectual light."

Also it is very difficult for human beings who believe themselves mysteriously chosen to be the saints whilst others are left as reprobates to avoid self-complacency

and intolerance of all views save their own. A. C. Benson said that the Puritans "forgot that the capacity for beauty in natural things was after all God's work as well. It escaped them that, when they cried for the Bible and nothing but the Bible, all they meant was texts which they themselves selected." And most of their texts were in support of a gloomy and repellent religion, suffering from exaggerated reactions against the abuses they thought to rectify.

Sidney Dark has recently written, "The Puritan's main occupation has been to prevent others from doing what he himself has not wanted to do. For him, with a passport to heaven in his pocket, it might be meet and right to avoid all worldly pleasures, and to spend his time in what to the unregenerate may appear an odd preparation for eternal bliss. But he has not been content to condemn himself to grim gloom; he has persistently endeavored to impose his gloomy practice on others who do not share his fantastic faith. . . . Macaulay wrote: The Puritan hated bear-baiting, not because it gave pain to the bear, but because it gave pleasure to the spectators." "The Passing of the Puritan," p. 9.

Such Puritanism is indeed passing, even as the Calvinism of which it was a legacy. But it accounted to a large extent for the grim determination of the early Independents to break away from all existing Churches in favor of a severe and other-worldly life which they themselves could not hope to maintain. And certainly not one of their descendants would go back to it today. The Puritan background to Independency is no more than a background.

ROBERT BROWNE

The first to commit to writing the new ideas of Independency as a Church polity was Robert Browne, an Anglican clergyman who had been born at Tolephorpe in 1550, during the reign of Edward VI.

Under Elizabeth, Browne had become an Anglican clergyman, but he had acquired new ideas of religion

from descriptions by some Dutch refugees of the Calvinist Reformed Churches of Holland. He became convinced that the kingdom of heaven on earth consists, not of baptized persons regardless of their subsequent conduct, but only of the worthy few who are devoted to the Word of God, and holy living. He further decided that it was useless to expect reform from any existing authorities, civil or ecclesiastical. Sincere and good people should ignore the established Church and set up their own little society, independent of all Synods and Conventions, or of any outside authority whatsoever.

He went to Norwich in 1580, where he began to preach these ideas, attracting a numerous congregation. His followers, who became known as the "Brownists," bound themselves by a religious "Covenant" to keep God's Laws under the Headship of Christ, and to refuse all "ungodly company with wicked persons."

Before a year was out, however, Robert Browne was thrown into prison for his denunciations of episcopacy and of the established Elizabethan Church. On his release, he went in 1582 with some followers to Middelberg, Holland, there to set up a community according to his new principles. At Middelberg, he wrote his book on "Reformation Without Tarrying For Any"; and a second book on "Free Christians," in which he set forth his doctrine on "Congregational Independence."

Browne maintained that every true Christian is a spiritual person, with duties of king, priest, and prophet, to be exercised under the headship of Christ. The Church was a body of such believers, united by a voluntary covenant. All members of the Church had equal rights to all privileges and functions, though some should be appointed by the congregation as ministers. But ecclesiastical authority consists only in Christ's supremacy over local Churches, each member individually interpreting the Bible under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Local congregations must be absolutely independent, no other body on earth having any authority over them whatsoever. It would be good, however, for the different local congregations to be linked with each other in

mutual fellowship, and to seek counsel of others should difficulties arise.

Such were the leading features of Browne's teachings, as opposed to episcopacy and presbyterianism.

Unfortunately for the cause, Browne himself was a man of unstable character, violent and headstrong, and liable to many moral weaknesses. Within two years, his community at Middelberg had been broken up by internal dissensions. In 1584, he abandoned the enterprise, and went to Scotland, where the Presbyterians imprisoned him. On his release from gaol, he returned to England, renounced his teaching on independency, and in 1591 was re-instated as an Anglican clergyman. For the remaining 42 years of his life he was Rector of a Church of England parish, during which time he published a vindication of his changed views. He died, still a beneficed Anglican clergyman, in 1633.

ENGLISH SEPARATISTS

Although Robert Browne had returned to the Church of England, repudiating his doctrine on the Church, his principles did not fade out of existence. The Puritans, who were rapidly increasing in numbers, continued to maintain them. It is true that many of these Puritans remained in the Church of England; either on principle, because they strongly disapproved of tendencies towards schism; or through timidity, fearing the penalties imposed by Elizabeth to enforce uniformity of religion. But these continued to protest from within the Anglican Church against surviving Catholic doctrines and practices.

Others amongst the Puritans, however, refused to accept the Elizabethan Settlement. They addressed a memorandum to the Queen on the duty of separation from the Anglican Church "until the superstitions and commandments of men be set aside, and the purity and truth of the Apostolic Church be restored according to the Book of the Lord." They had no doubt that they

had right ideas of what the Apostolic Church was like, undismayed by all the contradictions amongst themselves! For these "Separatist Puritans" by no means agreed as to what the nature of the Independent Churches should be. The majority of them formed Churches modeled on Genevan Calvinism and Scotch Presbyterianism.

But others followed Brownist principles, declaring Popery, Prelacy, and Presbyterianism to be merely three forms of the one great apostacy, and insisting that the true Church consists of individual groups of holy people under self-management, and entirely independent of any wider control. This meant "Congregationalism" strictly so-called, though the term had not yet been adopted.

In 1592, the Separatists, John Greenwood and Henry Barrowe, set up the first Church of this kind in London, the members electing Francis Johnson as their minister. But in 1593 both Greenwood and Barrowe were executed owing to the rigor of Whitgift, Archbishop of Canterbury; and Francis Johnson was banished from the kingdom for life. But "Separatism" was not so easily extinguished. There were at least twenty thousand supporters of the movement in England at the time, forming some dozens of small congregations in various parts of the country.

POST-ELIZABETHAN TIMES

Elizabeth died in 1603. But her policy was continued by James I (1603-1625), and by Charles I (1625-1649). The Separatists, however, steadily grew in numbers, despite bitter persecution.

One congregation of particular interest, as we shall see later, was that at Scrooby, in Nottinghamshire. There, William Brewster and John Robinson had built up a society of Independents, of which Brewster was the "Ruling Elder," and Robinson the "Minister." In 1608, this group was forced to flee the country to Amsterdam, and thence to Leydon, in Holland, where they

lived according to "congregational" principles for about twelve years.

Meantime, in England, the Independents, whether on "Presbyterian" lines, or "Congregational" lines, continued to increase in strength. Finally they secured control of Parliament, and sent both Charles I and Archbishop Laud of Canterbury to the block. These leaders of State and Church having been got rid of, the Commonwealth Period succeeded, under Oliver Cromwell's Protectorship, and lasted for eleven years.

This meant the virtual establishment of Independency as the national religion. It did not mean the vindication of democratic liberty, whether politically or religiously. Cromwell was a Calvinist, convinced that he was acting in accordance with the Divine Will, whatever he did. And he proved to be as tyrannical and intolerant as the Stuart kings he had supplanted. It has been claimed that the principle of "free and voluntary Churches" was permanently established during the Cromwellian period. But it was not freedom all round. It was freedom for the Independents, not for Catholics and Anglicans. And the great opportunities for the growth of Independency under Cromwell led to the emergence of over 200 different varieties of small Protestant sects. Free and unorganized conventicles were springing up everywhere in England, and religious anarchy prevailed.

In the midst of such chaos, news came from America of the newly-formed Puritan Churches there. People began to ask about the "New England Way"; and both the system there, and its name, "Congregationalism," were introduced into England. Congregationalist ministers occupied a large proportion of the parish churches, and the Church of England as by Law established seemed doomed.

However, the Restoration of the Stuarts with the return of Charles II and the re-establishing of the Church of England in 1660 forced all Independents, Presbyterians, Baptists, Congregationalists and others into non-conformity once more, a status they have retained to this present day.

“MAYFLOWER PILGRIMS”

It was the Scrooby community, exiled from England to Holland in 1608, which became the connecting link between English and American Congregationalism.

William Brewster (1560-1644), of Scrooby, Nottinghamshire, had started a “gathered community of elect souls” which met for worship in his own house. He was their “Ruling Elder,” whilst John Robinson (1576-1625) was chosen as minister of the new group. Robinson had been ordained as a Church of England clergyman, but had been suspended for non-conformity in 1603.

In 1608 this community went to Holland to form the first definite Church on Congregational lines at Leydon. But the economic struggle proved too severe. After twelve years it had become abundantly clear that there was no future ahead of them in the country of their adoption, and that to go elsewhere was imperative. But they could not go back to England without conforming to Anglicanism, or being punished as rebels against the State Church. They therefore turned to America.

In 1619, Brewster secured a patent from the Virginia Company for a grant of land in the Colonies. Robinson organized a group of 102 emigrants, though he himself did not go with them, remaining in Holland to die at Leydon in 1625. “Elder Brewster” accompanied the migrants as leader, the expedition setting sail from Holland in the “Mayflower,” and arriving off the American coast on December 20, 1620. They landed at Plymouth, near Cape Cod, and at once commenced founding their colony under the guidance of Brewster. Religiously, he remained their teacher and preacher during those earliest years although, owing to his lack of ordination he did not administer the Lord’s Supper. Congregational principles had not yet arrived at the stage of affirming all believers to be capable of all functions in the Church.

AMERICAN DEVELOPMENTS

The 102 Pilgrims who had landed at Plymouth in 1620 now felt free to worship God in their own way, without any interference from the detested authority of Papal hierarchy, Anglican episcopacy, or Presbyterian polity. But difficulties soon arose with the flood of immigrants from English and Dutch ports. The persecution of non-conformists in England by Charles I and Archbishop Laud resulted in a Puritan exodus, over 22,000 additional Colonists arriving in New England between 1620 and 1640.

Most of the newcomers, who settled at Massachusetts Bay, were Presbyterian Independents and Puritan Anglicans, the latter easily outnumbering the former. These last had found Archbishop Laud too much of a ritualist, and hoped to establish a purified Church of England for themselves in their new home. But, before long, practically all had drifted to the Presbyterian system. They had no bishops, and soon adopted the principle that every congregation has the right to choose and ordain its own ministers. This broke with the entire doctrine and practice of episcopal succession as maintained in England; and the new principle was carried so far that, on July 20th, 1629, Francis Higginson and Samuel Skelton, who had both been ordained as clergymen of the Church of England, were re-ordained at Salem, Massachusetts, by a congregational laying on of hands.

The merging of the Colonists led to a struggle between the Presbyterian ideas of the Puritans at Massachusetts Bay and the Independent ideas of the Plymouth groups. The result was a compromise called the "New England Way," or the "Congregational Way," which seems the first official use of the latter term; one adopted later, as we have seen, by the Independents in England itself. Every local Church was to maintain its independence as opposed to domination by any "Presbytery," though bound to a consultative relationship with other neighboring Churches.

This new "Congregational Church" soon became the State-established Church of Massachusetts, and later of the greater part of New England, enjoying the support of the State both legally and financially. It was a strange inconsistency that the Independents from England who so objected there to a State-established Church, should have introduced similar conditions in the Colonies!

The results were not happy. Ministers naturally became persons of inordinate political power, dictating the policy of the State in severe and intolerant ways. The New England Puritans may have rejoiced in their freedom to develop a Church without "Pope or Prelate, Presbytery or Prince," but a tyranny of another kind was substituted for the authority that had been repudiated. Nathaniel Hawthorne describes, in "The Scarlet Letter," the Puritans' grim enjoyment of the public punishment of evildoers," of those who dared to dissent from the Gospel as preached by the ministers, and to resist their efforts to fasten the yoke of Puritanism on the necks of the American people. So Puritan harshness prevailed, and the persecuted had but escaped from England to become persecutors in the Colonies. Willard L. Sperry, himself a Congregationalist, and Dean of the Divinity School in Harvard University, writes, "Once they had vindicated their own religious liberties, they failed to accord to others the toleration which they had sought and failed to get in England. Having become a Church, they harried the Sects. Truculent individual non-conformists were driven out, chief among them a famous and mildly psychopathic lady named Anne Hutchinson, and that much too independent-minded gentleman, Roger Williams. These exiles became the founders of Rhode Island. Baptists in general suffered disabilities, if not expulsion. There was no place for Roman Catholics. In particular the Quakers received the sternest treatment, and it is no comfort to any son of those forbears to remember that four Quakers were duly hanged on Boston Common." "Religion in America," pp. 33-34.

Congregationalism maintained its priority in the New England States until the middle of the 19th century.

Final separation of Church and State in Massachusetts came in the year 1833, owing to the driftage of so many Congregationalists from orthodox Trinitarian teaching to Unitarianism. Orthodox Congregationalists objected to paying taxes to support Churches in which the Divinity of Christ was openly denied. In the litigation that followed, the Unitarians became a distinct denomination from the Congregationalists, retaining ecclesiastical properties where they were in the majority. Orthodox minorities had to build new churches for themselves. Hence in New England one finds in many places a "First Congregational Church—Unitarian," and a "Second Congregational Church—Trinitarian."

With disestablishment, and the rapid growth of the Western States, Congregationalism began to fail in proportionate numbers, though its Puritanism had had an abiding influence on American life, of which the "Prohibition Experiment" was one of its more recent manifestations.

CHURCH ORDER

When we turn to a study of the constitution of Congregationalism, we find a system which is poles apart from the Episcopal and Presbyterian bodies. These latter insist on a corporate sense, their many local Churches constituting the Episcopal or the Presbyterian Church, as the case may be. But Congregationalism is individual and local in outlook. Many Congregationalists are at pains to deny this, insisting that the Congregationalist does think in terms of the universal body of Christians, and not merely of his own local group. But such views are due to a modern development not in accordance with original teachings.

For the most authentic original teaching of Congregationalism we must turn to the "Savoy Declaration." In 1658, towards the end of his regime in England, Oliver Cromwell permitted a Synod of the Independents or Congregationalists to meet, and to frame the "Savoy Declaration" of the faith and order of their Churches. This Savoy Declaration provided the basic Charter to

which Congregationalists have appealed for over 200 years; and it expressly rejected all ideas of the organic unity of their Churches.

A summary of its doctrine is as follows. The Lord calls the elect individually but commands them to associate for mutual edification and public worship. Each local association is the "Church" in the full sense of the term, and not subject to any outside jurisdiction. The officers of the Church, pastors, teachers, elders, and deacons, are chosen by votes of members, and set apart solemnly in fasting and prayer, with imposition of hands by the elders of the congregation. The essence of the call to the ministry consists in election by the members of the Church. A Synod of associated "Churches" may be consulted in graver matters, but such a Synod can offer advice only, and in no way can have authority to command or enforce.

Such was the teaching of the Savoy Declaration, insisting on the complete independence of each local congregation. But such lack of corporate organization and authority left Congregationalism an easy prey to the inroads of rationalism and infidelity. As we have already seen, many Churches lapsed into Unitarianism, and today, since each Church has its own statement of belief, its own covenant between its members, and its own order of public worship, there is no consistency, and differences are becoming more and more noticeable. A Congregationalist from one locality could quite well feel altogether lost in a Congregationalist Church elsewhere.

Congregationalists, therefore, are tending to modify their principles of "democracy" and "individualism" in religion, and to secure more uniformity by setting up central organizations, stopping short of granting actual authority to denominational headquarters. Congregational Unions have been formed, both on a State basis, and a National basis, which most Churches join, though none is compelled to do so.

In England, a "Congregational Union of England and Wales" was formed in 1833. But its tendency has been

ever towards the assumption of greater authority in practice, modifying the independence of local congregations. In 1871, this English Union, to put a halt to divergencies and disintegration, issued a "Declaration of the Faith, Church Order, and Discipline of the Congregational or Independent Dissenters"; and it provided for annual meetings under a President, to be elected annually. Obviously, the move is in the direction of a Presbyterianism which the earlier Congregationalists rejected with an almost invincible repugnance! In 1919, nine "Moderators" were appointed in England and Wales to regulate the calling of ministers and supervise the affairs of the various Churches in the appointed areas.

American Congregationalism has always been of a more organic character than in England. Theoretically, it insists still that each local congregation is completely independent. But in practice, no local Church is recognized as "Congregationalist" unless received into fellowship by the Churches of its district. Nor may any minister be appointed without the approval of the clerical "Association," to which ministers must belong. In America also, therefore, there is a "Congregational Union" which decides what Churches it will support, and what ministers it will recognize. Congregationalism has largely changed its tone. And the idea of each local congregation being a totally independent voluntary association of believers is giving way to the idea that it should be but the local embodiment of the "One Church of Christ"—the position that has ever been maintained by the Catholic Church!

This tendency of Congregationalism has naturally given rise to tensions among its adherents which seem to defy solution. To the individualist, any move towards organization with authority entrusted to a central group seems to do violence to each individual's conscience, forbidding him to exercise his own judgment in religious matters. This aspect was well expressed by Ralph P. Coleman, Jr., in a letter to "Time" magazine, October 4, 1948. Writing in reference to the "World Council of Churches," which had just been held at Amsterdam,

he said, "The main goal of the Council seems to be a United Protestant Church. But is not a United Protestant Church a very contradiction of the basic cornerstone of Protestantism, which permits individual rather than Church interpretation of the Bible? Would not a single United Protestant Church represent a kind of Protestant Catholicism, something which would subject and subordinate the individual to the Church for the sake of organizational unity? Is not disunity, at least theologically, the very heart of Protestantism?"

There speaks the true "Independent" or "Congregationalist." But the majority of his fellow Protestants are beginning to realize that this original position was based on mistaken principles. What the outcome of this conflict will be, no one can predict; but the likelihood is that Congregationalism will eventually cease to be, in anything like its original significance.

THE MINISTRY

As regards the ministry, Congregationalists began with the accepted Protestant doctrine that no special priesthood exists in the Church, but that all believers have equal powers and privileges. It is true that they distinguished between lay pastors in charge of some Churches, and ministers who had been ordained. But ordination, generally by imposition of hands, but sometimes by merely giving "the right hand of fellowship," was merely the recognition of the inward call of God inspiring a candidate to volunteer for ministerial work.

The belief is growing, however, that this very recognition gives a new authority, without which it would be presumption to say the least to fulfill the duties of a minister. Yet even those who admit such special authority deny that it is due to any inherent power imparted to the one ordained. They declare it to be and to remain the power of the ordaining Church. Thus Bernard L. Manning, a Congregationalist layman, speaking to the people of a local Church on the occasion of the ordination of its minister, said, "Make no mistake about

it. No bishop, no archbishop, no pope can do more for your minister than you have done tonight. You have conferred on him all that the Holy Catholic Church can confer! Christ's own commission: Feed My lambs: Feed My sheep." "A Layman in the Ministry," p. 154. Later he wrote, "Congregationalists so emphatically regard both the preaching and the administration as acts of the Church that the absence of a minister does not make either impossible." "Towards Reunion," p. 57.

It is difficult to know whether Mr. Manning believed that ordination among Congregationalists gives as much as episcopal ordination, or whether he thought episcopal ordination gives as little as that of Congregationalism. And the matter is not made clearer by the fact that, whilst the selection and appointment of a minister are within the competence of a local Church, it has become the almost unbroken custom for ministers and elders from neighboring Churches to be called in as assistants, in association with the ordaining Church.

One thing is certain. All Congregationalists deny the existence of priestly powers transmitted by an Apostolic Succession of Bishops. Ordination in the Congregational sense of the word, is admission to an office, not really to an order; and it is in no sense a Sacrament. The essence of the rite is the feeling within himself by the candidate of a "Divine Call," and the external sanction of his persuasion by the congregation which accepts him. The laying on of hands is no more than the recognition of the fact that the local Church has decided that the candidate may be its minister. It does not bestow any spiritual power, but acknowledges the choice made by the members. And as the local congregation chooses its minister, so also it may dismiss him. In practice, this dependence on the good will of the congregation tends to breed undue subservience on the minister's part to its more influential members, and to enkindle a longing in the Congregational clergy for greater security of tenure.

But advantages or disadvantages in the system are quite secondary to the vital question as to whether the

doctrine of the ministry as held by Congregationalists is sound in itself. This subject I have discussed in a companion booklet entitled "The Presbyterians," obtainable from the publishers of this pamphlet. All that I have said there of the Presbyterian ministry would equally apply to that of the Congregationalists. In neither case can the doctrines held be reconciled with what is recorded in the New Testament.

TEACHINGS

Congregationalists have always tended to regard faith, not as belief in any set of revealed truths, but as a personally experienced trust in God, and a will to serve Him in accordance with their Puritan traditions. As a consequence of this, no authoritative doctrinal statement binding upon all Congregationalists can be given.

In the beginning of Independency, the teachings of John Calvin were taken for granted. All Independents were practically Calvinists in everything except matters of form and government. It is true that some of the Independents wanted Presbyterian control as opposed to the episcopal control of the Church of England. But the majority wanted no control, whether presbyterian or episcopal, but the complete independence of each congregation. None, however, felt any need of insistence on doctrinal beliefs. Calvin's theology was accepted by all.

Congregational Independents, therefore, made the "Covenant" with God and with one another rather than any set "Creed" the basis of membership in their Churches; and their "Covenant" was short and simple.

"We covenant with the Lord and one with another; and do bind ourselves in the presence of God, to walk together in all His ways, according as He is pleased to reveal Himself unto us in His blessed Word of Truth."

But what was God's "blessed Word of Truth"? It was impossible to escape some effort to define it. The Westminster Assembly had tried to do so in 1643. At that Assembly there were present with the Anglicans and Presbyterians, five Congregational ministers and ten

Congregational laymen. But the Anglicans abandoned the Assembly when the Presbyterians and Congregationalists condemned episcopacy. Then the Congregationalists, whilst agreeing with the Presbyterians in affirming the doctrinal teachings of Calvin, objected to the demand for government of the Churches by a constitutional "Presbytery."

When, therefore, in the Commonwealth Period, under Oliver Cromwell, the Congregationalists were in the ascendancy, they met at the Savoy Palace in London, and issued in 1658 a "Declaration of the Faith and Order owned and practiced in the Congregational Churches in England." This Declaration revised and added to the Westminster Confession, affirming still more strongly Calvinistic doctrines in general, and predestination in particular, but insisted on their principle of absolute freedom for local congregations.

But belief in the truths of Calvin's doctrinal teachings was soon undermined to a great extent. In 1739 John Wesley began his historic mission, preaching repentance and conversion, and declaring salvation possible for all men of goodwill. He utterly rejected Calvin's theory of election and predestination. And every Protestant body in England was profoundly influenced by Wesley's teachings, including the Congregationalists. So, in his "History of Congregationalism," p. 588, Dr. Dale writes, "The old Calvinistic phrases and Calvinistic definitions were still on the lips of the Independents when George III died (1820), but in the spirit and tendency of their theology they were Calvinists no longer."

Naturally the question soon arose again as to what the Congregationalists were to hold. And the "Congregational Union of England and Wales," as soon as it was formed in 1832, felt it necessary to issue a "Declaration of Faith, Church Order, and Discipline." But the force of this Declaration was nullified by the statement that it really obliged nobody! The Union described its utterance as a summary of what is "commonly believed," and said that it was not to be regarded as a test of mem-

bership. Such tests, declared the Union, degenerate into "Confessions, Exactions, and Impositions of Faith."

One wonders why they should have taken the trouble to publish a Declaration to which no one had to subscribe! In his book, "The Reading of the Bible," p. 90, Sir Frederic Kenyon rightly says, "Formularization is the protective bark of the tree, necessary because the truth has enemies, or mistaken friends, whose errors must be warded off." But what if the "authorities" say of their decisions, "We cannot guarantee this to be the truth; and if you are hostile to it, or in friendly disagreement with it, you are free to regard our views as erroneous rather than your own"? One can only conclude that, according to the Congregationalists, it does not matter in the least what one believes, and that Congregationalism as such is indifferent to objective truth.

In practice this certainly seems to be the case. In his article, "Congregationalists," in the "Christian Year Book" for 1947, John Marsh writes, "The theological basis of the Congregational or Independent polity is the Trinitarian conception of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and the majority of Congregationalists adhere at least implicitly to that doctrine. But there are some whose doctrine of the Person of Christ falls short of the Historical Christian Faith. While the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's supper are generally observed, there are Congregationalists who maintain that the acceptance of them should not be a condition of membership in the Church."

As a matter of fact, Congregationalists may believe and practice almost anything they wish; and incredible variations prevail. For years, Dr. Orchard remained in charge of the Congregational "King's Weigh House" in London, teaching scarcely disguised Catholicism, and observing forms of worship obviously based on Roman rites. The only authority he needed was the assent of his congregation. Other Congregationalists could but content themselves with repudiating all such beliefs and practices, making sure that totally different ideas pre-

vailed in their own local Churches. But they could not deny to the "King's Weigh House" an equal claim to be truly representative of "Congregationalism."

NEW ENGLAND THEOLOGY

When the Puritans arrived in the American colonies, from 1620 onwards, they brought with them the religious tenets of Calvin. Their main complaint had been against what they regarded as oppressive forces of ecclesiastical authority; and their first concern in the new world was the setting up of independent and self-managing Churches. They did not dream of doubting the Calvinist doctrines, uniformly held by Presbyterians and Congregationalists alike.

When, then, in London, the Westminster Assembly of 1643 published its "Confession of Faith," both Presbyterians and Congregationalists in America accepted it as a doctrinal basis, though they differed, as their representatives in England, on the question of polity.

But the Independents, having attained to power in England under Oliver Cromwell, now began to seek advice from the Congregationalists in the Colonies, asking questions about the "New England Way" of doing things. An American Declaration of principles seemed necessary, if precise information was to be made available. Moreover, in the Colonies themselves, the rise of the Baptist and Presbyterian Churches demanded a local definition of the Congregational position.

In 1648, therefore, the Massachusetts Congregationalists drew up the "Cambridge Platform." This Declaration re-affirmed the doctrinal teachings of the "Westminster Confession." There was nothing new in that for England. But the "Cambridge Platform" also laid down what have been called the "abiding principles of Congregationalism."

The "Cambridge Platform" may be summarized as follows:

- (1) The Word of God is to be regarded as the final authority for all Congregationalists.

- (2) Each local Church is a self-sufficient organization, subject to no outside authority.
- (3) Each local Church, however, should cherish bonds of friendship and fellowship with neighboring Churches, and seek counsel of them in more serious matters.
- (4) The basis of the local Church is the "Covenant" between the members.
- (5) The ministry is but representative of the members, and answerable to them for the way in which ministerial duties are fulfilled.

It was with this exposition to guide them that the Congregationalists in England produced the "Savoy Declaration" of 1658 above mentioned (page 20), a Declaration which the Massachusetts Congregationalists adopted in turn, and made official for themselves in 1680.

In 1708, the Congregationalists of Connecticut issued the "Saybrook Platform," in which they also adopted the Savoy Declaration, which for long remained authoritative in the Colonies, as far as anything can be called definite and authoritative for those whose fundamental principle seems to be the rejection of everything savoring of authority.

THE GREAT AWAKENING

During the first hundred years in the new world, the Congregationalists had remained fairly orthodox in the Calvinistic teachings they had brought with them from England and Holland. But "godly discipline" had not fared so well. Fervor had declined, and spiritual laxity had become very widespread. But the revivalism set on foot by John Wesley in England had its counterpart in the "Great Awakening" simultaneously originated in America by Jonathan Edwards.

Jonathan Edwards was born in Connecticut in 1703, and at 24 years of age had been ordained as a Congregational minister of Northampton, Massachusetts, in 1727.

From the very beginning he preached against the "Half-Way Covenant," which seemed to him the main source of corruption in the Church. In Massachusetts at that time Congregationalism was the State-established religion. And only those could vote or hold office who were Church members. But to be a Church member one had to produce proof of having experienced "conversion," an experience of which great numbers were wholly unaware. These unregenerate ones demanded a due share in the civil privileges of the community; and to meet this demand the New England Churches introduced a compromise known as the "Half-Way Covenant." The unregenerate, who could not profess to have experienced any spiritual change, were admitted as partial members of the Church provided they publicly "covenanted" to attend and support the Church, though they could take no part in the administration of Church affairs, nor participate in the Lord's Supper. By means of this nominal membership, such adherents were enabled to vote politically, but Jonathan Edwards denounced the whole system as bringing discredit on the Church. He campaigned for a Church of regenerate members only; and, if he did not succeed in abolishing the system, he did succeed in awakening the sense of actual conversion in many.

In 1740, George Whitefield, the Methodist preacher who had been Wesley's companion in England, came to Massachusetts, and fanned the flames of the revivalist movement into a conflagration. A wave of fervor swept the country. Out of the 300,000 then in the Colonies, 25,000 were "converted"; and the moral standards of the community were lifted.

Controversies, however, followed. The new interest in religion led to the debating, expounding, and alteration of Calvinism by a succession of theologians, including Jonathan Edwards himself. He was probably the greatest of them; but, if he breathed new life into Calvinism, he considerably modified it; whilst others who came after him still further mitigated its severity, emphasizing the love of God and the power of man to

respond to divine grace. So distinct was the new type of doctrine that it was called by a special name, that of "The New England Theology." But it was the beginning of a movement away from strict Calvinism which could not be stopped, and which went on relentlessly and progressively towards liberalism, and a widespread loss of belief in all supernatural and revealed religion.

This was almost inevitable. No definite doctrines can be safeguarded by a Church which expressly rejects any such thing as an obligation to subscribe to a Creed. And Congregationalism, of its very nature, both excludes the possibility of authoritative teaching, and grants complete freedom to all members to adopt whatever views they prefer.

"According to the polity of Congregationalism," writes Prof. Willard L. Sperry, "which was the pattern of life in the New England Colonies, any group of like-minded and professed believers have the right to organize themselves into a Church, which is in matters of both faith and practice a law to itself." "Religion in America," p. 9. But who could define what the "professed believer" had to believe? And what guarantee could there be that they would remain "like-minded"? As a matter of fact, they did not. The doctrines of the Trinity and of the Divinity of Christ were soon being freely repudiated. In 1805, a Unitarian was appointed Professor of Divinity at Harvard University, a very stronghold of Congregationalism. In 1815, Unitarians had so invaded Congregational Churches that they got a court decision granting them possession of their properties. In Boston, out of fourteen Congregational Churches, all but two became Unitarian, and Christian no longer in any orthodox sense of the word.

Liberalizing tendencies were spreading in all directions. Congregationalism had founded three theological seminaries, Andover, Yale, and the Hartford School. None of these escaped the contagion. The Andover Seminary published in 1884 a series of papers on "Progressive Orthodoxy" in the "Andover Review." These papers ad-

vocated Modernism within the framework of Calvinistic orthodoxy. But, significantly, the writers later dropped the term "Orthodoxy," as they moved from their baseline of Calvinism. They were to be just "Progressive."

The result of these changes is that the doctrines with which Congregationalism began are becoming more and more dissolved in a new outlook of sheer rationalism and naturalism. And J. Gresham Machen does not hesitate to say, in his book, "Christianity and Liberalism," that the liberal theologian, after abandoning one Christian doctrine after another, will find himself in the end with a vague natural religion so entirely different from Christianity as to belong to another category altogether!

NEED OF DOGMA

Congregationalists refuse to be bound by Creeds. They have a horror of dogma. And the driftage to Unitarianism, Liberalism, and complete unbelief has been proportionately more noticeable among them than among others. But what else can be expected in a system which refuses to support officially any definite teaching?

"There are those," writes Sir Frederic Kenyon, "who denounce 'dogma,' and say that they can only believe in an undogmatic religion. They are apparently unconscious that they are talking nonsense. 'Dogma' means formulated belief. It is just as much 'dogma' to say 'I believe in a God,' or indeed to say, 'I do not believe in a God,' as it is to say, 'I believe in the propositions of the Nicene Creed.' To say, 'I believe in religion without dogma' is to say 'I believe, but I don't believe in anything in particular.'" "The Reading of the Bible," p. 91.

Does not experience show that hosts of people who have adopted the attitude of believing only in undogmatic religion have found in the end that they have no religion in which to believe? It has been said that, if you have no dogma, you can never have heresy. That is true, but only in the sense that one can escape the charge

of disloyalty to anybody by acknowledging loyalty to nobody!

Mr. Bernard L. Manning adopts this line of defense in "Towards Reunion," p. 72. In praise of Congregationalist "liberty of opinion" he says, "Congregationalists maintain that, as a matter of simple history, there has been less schism and less disunity among them than among most Christians."

Now, superficially, that is true. The "World Almanac" lists twenty conflicting Baptist Churches, almost the same number of conflicting Methodist Churches, and many divisions also of Presbyterian Churches. No such divisions are listed under Congregationalism. But the very denial by Congregationalism that there is any need of organic unity, and their doctrine that every local Church must be independent of others, is the acceptance of "schism" as a principle. Every individual Congregationalist Church is in a "state of schism," or of division from all other Congregational Churches. Furthermore, there is far more disunity among Congregationalists in matters of belief than elsewhere. They simply "agree to differ," where others feel bound in conscience to insist on some definite convictions to the exclusion of destructive denials. These others feel called upon to defend what they believe, where Congregationalism holds that it does not matter what you believe. Nominally, on their own standards—or lack of standards—Congregationalists escape charges of schism and heresy among themselves. But why should people call themselves anything else when the name already possessed by the local Church is elastic enough to cover all conceivable beliefs and practices, however diverse?

Meantime, in response to the enquiry "What are Congregationalists expected to believe?" there is no answer that is not altogether too vague and general to be of any real help to the seeker of definite Christian truth. Was the teaching of Christ so fearfully indefinite? Surely in this very lack of definite teaching we find one of the reasons why Congregationalism has failed to expand proportionately to other Churches which have main-

tained positive doctrinal standards. Congregationalists had the initial advantage. They were amongst the first in America, with all before them. But the Calvinism they brought with them failed to grip even themselves. They drifted from it, and have nothing to hold to, or to offer to others, in its place. Is it surprising that world figures for Congregationalism, after three and a half centuries of existence, are, according to the "Christian Year Book" for 1947, but 2,495,000 communicant members, of whom 1,140,824 belong to the United States of America?

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

It is good sometimes to look back over the path by which we have come, to stand once more at the cross-roads where the track we are on branched off from the beaten way, and to ask ourselves what has come of our departure from it. In the thoughts of many who have done so the note of wistfulness is unmistakable.

In his Introduction to "Catholics and Nonconformists," by Vincent McNabb, O.P., Dr. Nathaniel Micklem, Congregationalist Principal of Mansfield College, Oxford, says, "I never think of Protestantism but as a reformation of the abiding Church. There were, in fact, two reformations, the Protestant and the Tridentine. The fact is, that when the much needed reformations came, the involved schism seems to us now almost sheer disaster. The great medieval Church of the West is the Mother of us all."

Those words of a Congregationalist of such standing as Dr. Micklem are significant of the new spirit growing amongst both Protestants and Catholics in their approach to problems confronting all Christians. There is a steadily increasing realization that the divisions of Christendom are certainly a violation of Our Lord's intentions. He simply could not have intended those who profess to accept Him as their Divine Teacher, and to love Him as their Divine Friend and Savior, to be at variance in their religious beliefs, and unable to unite in worship as one family.

But if, as Dr. Micklem rightly says, the Catholic Church of the centuries is the Great Mother of us all, how is it that all no longer profess to be her children? At the Protestant reformation, multitudes separated from her, and proceeded promptly to separate from one another. Yet, if such divisions were unjustifiable, in no case is it necessary to declare the seceding bodies the only guilty parties. There were provocations, established abuses, and guilty delay in any serious efforts to remedy such abuses. The Catholic Church, so true and good in itself, was not well served by its own officials. Amongst them there were only too many who were wanton, avaricious, self-indulgent, slothful, and tyrannical. But, even supposing we grant that, although these were not justifying reasons, they at least afforded excuses for each withdrawal of a sect in the time and circumstances when it took place, times and circumstances have changed. And divisions are proving a weakness against inroads of unbelief, and a source of untold confusion both at home and in the mission fields.

There are few thoughtful Christians who do not feel the necessity of reconsidering the whole position, and asking whether the first Protestant reformers were right, not in seeking reform, but in the means they adopted in order to bring it about.

A WRONG PRINCIPLE

The earliest would-be reformers naturally turned to the New Testament to see what the Church was like in Apostolic days. And they found a simplicity there which seemed very unlike the developed organization of the Church as it appeared in their own times. The mistaken thought came to them that they should try to restore an exact copy of the primitive Church. But they failed to study the New Testament with anything like sufficient care.

They were working on a wrong principle. They took it for granted that any developments in the organization of the Church in post-Apostolic times were necessarily

of merely human devising, and therefore departures from the will of Christ, rather than the growth and fulfilment of His principles under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Of course there were developments. If the Church was a living, growing thing, it could not but develop. That is not the problem. What we have to ask is whether the subsequent growth was true to type, and fully in accordance with the kind of Church whose initial stage only is described in the New Testament.

Congregationalism itself, as we have seen in this booklet, has developed in very many ways during the three and a half centuries of its existence. No one could be a Congregationalist today who objected to development on principle. And if the development of Congregationalism during the past centuries affords no difficulty, why should the development of the Church during the first three centuries be repudiated?

On the other hand, the development of Congregationalism has not been true even to its own "type." Change after change has been away from the principles of Calvin on which it first professed to be based, whilst the development of the Church during the first three centuries of its existence involved no such departure from Apostolic principles, as we shall see in a moment.

It was a mistaken idea, also, on the part of the Protestant reformers, that they should recover and reproduce an exact model of the primitive Church. Even if they succeeded in doing so, as they did not, their Church would not do for a world so totally different from the world of Apostolic times. It would be as incongruous and unsuitable as a man of sixty insisting on wearing the suit of clothes made for him when he was six!

THE PRIMITIVE CHURCH

But did the "Independents," the first Congregationalists, really understand the New Testament? The truth is that, with their strong desire for a simple Church organization, they read their own wishes into the New Testament, ignoring its evidences of order and authori-

ty. No one can find in the New Testament any trace of "independent" Churches. Local Churches, in original Christianity as described in the Acts of the Apostles, were not separate and self-managing, but organically united by common government.

Thus A. C. Headlam, a Protestant authority who devoted deep research to this subject, says, "It is claimed with some insistence by certain writers that the early Church was Congregational. There is no trace of evidence for the idea that the whole had been built up from the contemplation or amalgamation of separate units. The local Church, although it had a congregational element, was not Congregational. It was not a unit out of which the Church was built, but the local representative of the one Church, which was prior both in life and idea as an organized society." "The Doctrine of the Church and Reunion," p. 89.

Nor is there any evidence in Scripture of a "democratic" Church, with government "of the people, by the people, and for the people." The Church was essentially a Divine Institution, with authority from God. Not the will of the people, but the Will of God, manifested through the rulers of the Church, was to be the source of guidance. Thus the Council of Jerusalem spoke with authority, and decided on what terms Gentiles could be admitted to the Church wherever it might be established. All ordinations are by the Apostles, or by those themselves ordained by the Apostles. St. Paul "appointed" Timothy and Titus to churches he himself had established; there was no "call" from the congregations in the places to which St. Paul appointed them. And St. Paul appointed them to "rule," and to rule with a divinely received authority, not as authorized by the congregation to act in its name.

NEGLECT OF AUTHORITY

And to what has abolition of authority led? If each may order his beliefs and practice according to his own idea of what Christianity implies, will there not be as

many opinions as there are individuals, leading to a complete loss of confidence in the possibility of arriving at any objective truth at all? We have seen how, again and again, in Congregational history, liberalism in theology has led first to Unitarianism, denying the doctrine of the Trinity, and of the Divinity of Christ. From there, in innumerable cases, it has gone much farther. Many have gone on to deny the truth of the Bible, substituting subjective religious experience for supernatural revelation. And from there, liberal opinion has only too often gone on to depersonalize God, making Him but a blind "World-Force." The sense of sin has been lost. And the idea has been abandoned that man needs redemption in any sense of the word which can be called Christian.

Writing of his own Presbyterian Church, Dr. J. Gresham Machen says that the difference between Presbyterianism and Catholicism is trifling compared to the abyss between Orthodox Presbyterians and Liberal Presbyterian ministers; for "naturalistic liberalism is not Christianity at all." "Christianity and Liberalism," p. 52. That many Congregationalists are beginning to share similar views is evident from the words of one of their best-known leaders, the Rev. Dr. P. T. Forsyth. Writing on "Authority in Religion," he declares without hesitation that no form of religion can live in modern society unless it has a Theology. No Christian Church can endure unlimited latitude in belief. We are compelled, he says, to ask what part of the traditional Creed is permanent; and he expresses anxiety as to what is to save Protestantism from a blind subjectivity, which tends of its very nature to progressive disintegration and ultimate dissolution.

CONCLUSION

In 1931, Dr. W. E. Orchard, then Congregational minister of the King's Weigh House, London, wrote in "Why I Am Not a Catholic," p. 216, "I am under no delusion that the Reformation reformed the Church, or that the Elizabethan Settlement settled anything. The

'establishment' of the Church of England has only resulted in a separation from itself of many of its most earnest members. The fissiparous tendency that has manifested itself in Protestantism, on whatever basis it has tried to build, the general doctrinal confusion of the Church of England, and the debilitating vagueness consequent upon the rejection of all doctrinal authority which now afflicts Nonconformity, all speak for themselves. Meantime the Roman Church persists, and is perhaps the only Church that is making a real advance, both in numbers and prestige. Nevertheless, this is not the whole story."

Dr. Orchard then proceeds to list the difficulties, theological and historical, which still prevented him from exchanging his Congregationalism for Catholicism. He admitted that his position required the acceptance of the idea that the Church of Christ had become outwardly divided, despite the fact that the New Testament clearly taught that it ought not to be, and that Christ had prayed that it should not be. But, for the time being, he persuaded himself that the possibility of such a disaster was not excluded.

Within two years, however, he had solved his remaining difficulties, and had published the story of his conversion to the Catholic Church in his book "From Faith to Faith." There he tells us how he had come to realize "that heresy, even when it contains some truth, as it generally does, emphasizes this to the exclusion or neglect of other truths equally vital, consequently disintegrates the whole system of Christian truth, eventually undermines its very foundations, and carries with it great danger, not only to religion, but to all thought, liberty, and progress." p. 181.

Yet even after he had become convinced that the fulness of truth was to be found only in the Catholic Church, still he hesitated. He felt held back by the thought that had come to so many before him. Would it not be better to remain where he was, helping others to see what he saw, and thus work for a later and greater movement towards Catholic reunion?

But then another thought came to him, that of "the motto that started and sanctioned Congregationalism," Robert Browne's "Reformation Without Tarrying for Any." Browne had refused to remain in the Church of England with the Puritan faction, hoping thus to mold Anglicanism in a more Protestant direction. Despairing of such a slow process, he deemed it his duty to break with the existing Church of England at once, and follow his own conscience. Must not, then, "Reunion Without Tarrying for Any" be a far greater obligation for one who saw that Anglicanism and Congregationalism and all forms of Protestantism had been a mistake from the very beginning, and had moved along mistaken lines ever since? Once it had dawned upon a man that a return was necessary to that great Mother Church of Christian civilization which should never have been forsaken, was not he obliged to submit to that Church, whatever others might choose to do?

So Dr. Orchard felt constrained to become a Catholic himself, according to the individual and personal convictions that had become his.

Other Congregationalists have followed his example, and have found for themselves the certainty, the profound devotional experience, and the new inspiration to the highest ideals of Christian living, which the Catholic Faith enkindles within the souls of all who have received the grace to make it part of their lives.

Surely the reading, and the re-reading, of this little book will give some indication of why they turned their thoughts in such a direction. Does it not suggest a similar study of that Catholic Faith, with fervent prayers that, if indeed its claims are justified, one might not still be left without it? For then, to be left without it, would be to lack what cannot but be the most precious of God's gifts to mankind, the religion of Christ Our Lord, in all the fulness of its truth and beauty and goodness.

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