CONGREGATIONAL POLITY
ITS GROWTH IN RESPONSE TO AN UNFOLDING HISTORY

In requirements of:
Congregational History and Polity

Submitted to:
Dr. George W. Brown, Jr.
Dean, Congregational Foundation for Theological Studies
National Association of Congregational Christian Churches
P. O. Box 1620
Oak Creek, Wisconsin

Submitted by:
Lawrence H. Balleine
Introduction

Upon completing a great deal of reading in the area of Congregational history and polity, two major topics stand out in my mind: the early historical beginnings of American Congregationalism, and the continual allusion to the three elements of traditional Congregational polity -- faith, fellowship, and freedom. In relation to these topics, two significant questions arise: How have the early historical beginnings of Congregationalism influenced its polity? and how do I feel about this early history and polity as a twentieth century divinity student? In attempting to answer these questions, this paper will consist of three major sections: First, the early roots of American Congregationalism will be described, from its beginning in England to its implantation in America; second, the underlying elements of Congregational polity -- faith, fellowship, and freedom -- will be discussed in relation to Congregationalism's historical beginnings; and third, a personal view will be put forth as to how this early history and resultant polity strikes me as I prepare to enter the Christian ministry. With these introductory remarks in mind, attention shall now be directed toward arriving at a basic understanding of the early history of Congregationalism.

Clyde Manschreck feels that the Pilgrim Puritan's landing at Plymouth in 1620 was in the second phase of Puritanism. He describes the first phase, lasting from about 1550 to 1593, as
not only predominately peaceful, but as a "dynamic, vigorous phase, with Puritans seeking forms of ecclesiastical expression in keeping with their deepest convictions." However, it should be noted that at some point during the later part of the 1550-1593 time period, the Puritans became differentiated. Those Protestants who were dissatisfied with the Church of England established by Henry VIII, but who still felt that they could remain members and work from within the church to purify it from the Roman influences which remained, kept the name -- Puritans. "Most Puritans had no thought of withdrawing from the established church. They believed that it was in a sorry condition, weakened by the neglect of Scripture's explicit teaching, but it was still the chosen vessel of God." Even though this group favored a middle-of-the-road policy of reform, they were still a threat to the rule of conformity which Queen Elizabeth and her bishops were seeking. Thus, these Puritans were ridiculed and persecuted.

The other group of Puritans were known as the Separatists. It was the Separatists who took their stand outside the established church and chose to conform to what they felt to be the pattern of churches in the New Testament, rather than to the laws of a national church. They wanted to choose their own ministers, and not be forced to accept the choice of a bishop. They wanted no vestments or ritual, and desired only the prayers of people who were being led by Christ, rather than set formal prayers chanted from the Book of Common Prayer. And they declared themselves subject only to Christ and to the covenants they drew up in their independent churches.

Among the early leaders of the Separatist movement was Robert Browne. He had been a minister of the Church of England
who tried to work as a Puritan within it to purify its teachings and its life, but he soon became discouraged. So after a period of uncertainty, he separated from the church and became the leader of a group that developed the idea which later became basic to the Congregational churches. Browne felt that the church should be a congregation of free men founded after the pattern of the Apostolic Church, governing itself, not according to the laws of the state, but seeking to find rules and regulations for the congregation in the Bible. Further, "the only leadership he would acknowledge was the spirit of the living Christ. In his mind the people should be free to worship as their conscience dictated, and under such rules and regulations as best suited their purpose."4

Browne, who organized a church in Norwich in 1581, taught that the Christian Church is a body of believers in Christ, united to one another and to their Lord by a voluntary covenant. That is, "Browne conceived the church to be nothing more than a company of Christians who made a covenant with God and with one another, and who labored together for the advancement of their mutual purposes."5 Browne's significant contribution to religious thinking was that "the local church was absolutely free from all outside control, and that within the church the members were all on equal footing; and further, civil authority had no right whatever over the administration of the church nor its teachings."6 Thus, Robert Browne gives us an insight concerning the beginnings of Congregationalism.

By 1593, dissent and reaction had escalated, and the second phase of Puritanism, now consisting of both the Puritans and the Separatists, had begun. This second phase was marked by severe
repression, causing thousands of Puritans and Separatists to go to jail, emigrate from their homeland, or die at the stake, because they would not compromise their religious beliefs.\textsuperscript{7}

When the Separatists withdrew from the Church of England, they formed small congregations which met in homes or in the fields, where they hoped their meetings would not be disturbed by the officers of the law. One of these groups met at Gainsborough. The founder of this congregation (organized in 1606) was John Smyth, a graduate of Christ College in Cambridge, and a former clergyman in the Church of England. It was here that William Brewster, the postmaster at Scrooby, joined the movement.\textsuperscript{8}

Brewster had attended Peterhouse College in Cambridge. One of the ideas he acquired here was that "individuals should be free to withdraw from the established church if, within that church, they could not worship as they chose. They could even secede, or separate, as a group and set up a church of their own."\textsuperscript{9} It was this separatist idea that Brewster had acquired at Cambridge which was to have a lasting influence upon the rest of his life.

When Brewster settled down in Scrooby, he became active in spreading the ideas of reform in church and government. At this time, Scrooby was one of the most important towns on the road leading from London to York and the north. Brewster lived in the manor house, and in one of the many rooms of this building, the Separatists gathered for worship and fellowship. To these meetings came William Bradford, and later John Robinson, who became their pastor. Robinson too, had spent some time in
Cambridge as a student at Corpus Christi College, and had also been a clergyman in the Church of England for a number of years.  

The authorities looked upon these meetings, first in Gainsborough and then at Scrooby, as contrary to law and order, and sought to break them up and prevent future gatherings. Thus, it was not long until conditions became so unbearable that the Separatists decided to leave England and find a place where they could worship God in the way they desired. In 1608, the Gainsborough congregation and Pastor Smyth went to Holland. At about the same time, after several of their members had been imprisoned, the Scrooby church decided to move, as the Gainsborough church had, to the comparative freedom of Holland. "Holland, long oppressed by Spain and the Roman Catholic Church, had finally succeeded in liberating itself. There, more than in any other spot, religious freedom was allowed." 

Thus, in 1608, a scattered congregation of Separatists under the pastoral leadership of John Robinson found asylum in Amsterdam. There they met many persons of like persuasion who had also fled from England to seek religious toleration. But within a year the newcomers were on the move again, this time to Leyden, where Robinson and his congregation decided to stay. For nearly a dozen years, the Pilgrims, as these Separatists came to be called, lived in Holland. William Warren Sweet points out that, "There they failed to prosper economically as they had hoped, and there seemed to be no prospect of bettering their condition." Soon the members of the church at Leyden became disturbed because their children were beginning to take on Dutch ways and language, and were forgetting their English ways and language. In addition, few had known anything but husbandry in
England; so in the commercial bustle of Holland, the refugees became homesick for the green farms of England. Thus, the people did not feel at home in Holland and when they heard reports of colonization in America, their interests turned in that direction. Once again, they wished to have a land of their own — one where they could worship freely.

Accordingly in July 1620, the Pilgrims departed for Southampton, from where they journeyed to America. The majority of the congregation remained behind, among them John Robinson, hoping to join the first settlers at a later date. Then on August 5, 1620, two vessels set sail from Southampton — the sixty ton "Speedwell" which had been purchased by the Pilgrims from the proceeds of the sale of their Leyden property, and the sturdy, square-rigged, double-decked, and slow-sailing hundred and eighty ton "Mayflower." After two starts, the smaller of the two ships was found entirely unseaworthy and it was regretfully decided that she must be left behind and that the "Mayflower" was to go on alone with as many colonists as could be crowded into her. Finally, after a stormy voyage, the "Mayflower" reached the American coast in November.

Among those aboard the ship, discontentment and near mutiny had already appeared. Thus, the Pilgrim leaders fully realized that if their religious integrity was to be preserved, they must keep control of the affairs of the colony once it had been established. The Mayflower Compact, based on the Scrooby Church Covenant and drawn up before the Pilgrims left the "Mayflower," was the immediate result of this realization.

The Pilgrims had been brought to the tip of Cape Cod, hundreds of miles north of their intended and chartered location.
Thus, the most immediate problem facing the colonists was their legal position in New England, since their patent provided for settlement in Virginia. After a period of uncertainty, they decided to land at Plymouth, and did so on December 21, 1620, despite their legal position. Fortunately for them, they were able to obtain a patent from the New England Company relatively soon after landing.  

One of the first duties of the colonists was to establish their church. For several years the Pilgrims were without a minister, since it was thought best that their pastor, John Robinson, should remain at Leyden with the major portion of the congregation. During these years, the Pilgrims were led in worship by William Brewster, the ruling elder. Brewster had been advised by Robinson not to administer the sacraments, but preached frequently and with notable effectiveness. He is described as being a "well-educated and devout man, who, to the satisfaction of his congregation, avoided lengthy homiletical discourses and involved prayers."  

The Plymouth Colonists had been too poor to pay for their transportation to America, and they were unable to meet the expense of maintaining themselves while building the colony. They were therefore forced into partnerships with London merchants. They had almost constant tension with this group, because the merchants were primarily interested in profits and wanted only to send over active young men who would make good fishermen and fur gatherers, while the colonists were anxious to bring over the remaining Leyden Pilgrims and above everything else, desired to maintain their congregational institutions.  

The height of the colonists' dissatisfaction with the London
merchants was reached in 1624 when they sent out Lohn Lyford as the Pilgrim's minister. Supposedly, Lyford was a Church of England clergyman who had professed an interest in Puritan principles. However, it was soon discovered that Lyford was in a plan to create a rival colony and church. To the Pilgrims, this was treason against the principles which had brought them to the New World, and there was nothing to be done but to bring the traitor to trial. The result was that he was expelled from the colony. 18

After the colony had rejected Lyford as their minister, steps were soon taken to terminate the partnership with the London merchants. According to the terms of the new settlement, the colony was to pay the merchants 1,800 pounds and also assume the 600 pound indebtedness due to the merchant company's creditors. 19

As soon as the colonists gained complete possession, they made plans to bring over the remainder of their friends in Leyden. This was done within the next few years. But John Robinson, their pastor, was never to come to the New World; he would die in Holland in 1626. "Nevertheless, his was undoubtedly the most potent influence in shaping the ideas and ideals of the first body of Puritans to establish a colony on American soil." 20

Conditions in the Plymouth Colony under the governorship of William Bradford slowly improved after 1624. Though the colonists never became wealthy, exports of lumber, corn, and furs brought relative prosperity. And "through trading contracts with the Indians, the colonists even gained the opportunity to evangelize and instruct the friendlier and more docile natives." 21

Also, the arrival of Ralph Smyth in 1629, a Separatist minister,
was heralded by those colonists who held to the congregational ways of thought --

His presence offered encouragement to the Separatist element which was finding it ever more difficult to hold the colony to its religious foundation, and with Governor Bradford, was bemoaning the fact that "So many wicked persons and profane people should so quickly come over." 22

By 1630, the permanence of the Pilgrim Colony seemed assured. In that year there were three hundred inhabitants at Plymouth. The heart and center of the Pilgrim Colony at Plymouth was their church. Here, they were free to carry out the type of church government in which they believed, and to worship according to their consciences. To them, to gain this was a sufficient reward for all the untold suffering through which they had come. Thus, the Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock became the first Congregationalists to reach the New World. With the successful establishment of their colony at Plymouth, the way was now clear for the great migration which was to bring some twenty thousand Puritans to America before 1640.

Having sketched the early history of American Congregationalism, attention will now be focused upon the three underlying elements of Congregational polity -- faith, fellowship, and freedom -- and their relationship to Congregationalism's early history.

It has long been held that faith and fellowship, together with freedom, are the distinctive and basic principles of Congregational polity. These three principles were first articulated in the Cambridge Platform of 1648 and have been carried forth into the present. Dealing with these principles, the Platform states that the Church derives its life from its faith in God, as He is revealed in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit to its members; that
the people of the churches form a single fellowship in Christ, however many their congregation may be; and that the people of the churches are a free people, subject only to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{24}

Basic to this three-fold approach to polity is the central "Congregational Idea" developed by William Brewster in the late 16th. century and re-emphasized by Harry Butman over 370 years later—

That a group of Christians, because Christ is in their midst, can be gathered, by the free acceptance of a covenant, into a Church capable of worship and walk which is agreeable to God's word and pleasing in his sight, without the sanction, control, or blessing of civil authorities or ecclesiastical hierarchies.\textsuperscript{25}

Gazing back again to the founding years of American Congregationalism, these three elements of polity are already quite visible. One example of the Pilgrim's faith can be gained by reviewing the "Mayflower" story. Many have felt the living conditions on this voyage were nearly unbearable. "They were confined to a smelly, crowded hold or equally crowded, tossing deck; limited as to food and drink, with no comfort and no privacy for thirteen storm-tossed weeks."\textsuperscript{26} In addition, not all those aboard the "Mayflower" were Separatists. Thus, they suffered the sneers of their unreligious companions and crew, along with the uncertainties of an abandoned course at sea. But in spite of the pangs of cold, hunger, sickness, fright, weakness, etc. encountered during their trans-Atlantic journey, they remained sure in their faith. Similar examples of their enduring faith can be noted during their persecution in England, their sojourn in Holland, and throughout their initial rough years in America.
Fellowship was indeed a second important concern during the early days of Congregationalism. The fellowship of the churches, described as the great centripetal force of Congregationalism, may have begun to operate in full swing during the Separatists' stay in Holland. Here, the Amsterdam brethren often asked those in Leyden for advice concerning their multiple difficulties. Correspondence, visitations, and consultations began to occur among the members of these two groups. In addition, the Leyden congregation "received into their communion members of the Dutch and French Reformed Churches, and offered to do the same with Scotch Presbyterians." Also, a great sense of community evolved among the Leyden Pilgrims because "much of the congregation lived as a compact enclave in little houses built in the hof in the rear of the big house Robinson had bought for himself." Thus, the Congregationalism of the Pilgrims in Holland began to exhibit a mark which was to become permanent in the system.

Another example of fellowship can be seen in connection with the immigration of Puritans who exited from the Old to the New England between 1628 and 1640--

Sharing of common interests and opposition to similar pressures, the irresistible growth of a deep fellowship and mutual belonging to a pioneering land and a burgeoning native culture, the formation and forceful impact of a new and independent spirit -- the American -- the course of years and the current of history with time combined the closely related religious bodies into one mighty denomination -- American Congregationalism.

In addition to the faith and fellowship aspects, freedom has been a most important element of Congregationalism ever since its conception. A founding principle of our forefather Separatists was that the church was to be free from rule by the state. "They believed that if every church is a gathering of Christians then
Christ himself is their guide and governor, and that therefore they have the right of self-government, that they may be free to follow him."\textsuperscript{30}

This same idea is put forth a little later by the Pilgrims in the \textit{Mayflower Compact}. The Pilgrims' concern for preserving their particular type of church polity, which they believed was the only kind sanctioned by the Bible, is quite obvious by the development of this \textit{Compact}. It is one of the most famous documents of American history, and it remained the basis of the Plymouth government until 1691, when the colony was united with Massachusetts. The \textit{Compact} has been described as "the first example of a voluntary legal agreement for equality, laying a sound foundation for local self-government."\textsuperscript{31}

Yet another example of early Congregationalism's concern for freedom can be noted by observing the Plymouth Colony. It is felt that the ideals of this colony, worked out slowly and peacefully, were the cornerstone of the structure which gave us our free state, free schools, and free social and political life.\textsuperscript{32}

Thus, it can easily be seen that Congregationalism's early history and basic principles of polity are very much related. The question now arises as to how this early history and related polity affects me as a twentieth century divinity student preparing to enter the Christian ministry.

At this point it is important to state that Congregationalists today are still "a body of believers in Christ who have made a covenant with God and with one another to walk in all His ways, known and to be made known to us, as He is pleased to reveal them to us."\textsuperscript{33} In other words, Congregationalists profess to be members of a free fellowship -- free to follow the dictates of
conscience under the leadership of Christ. It should also be noted that Congregationalists do not subscribe to a particular creed nor permit the Church to speak for them. By the same token, while many are in fellowship with sister churches in the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, this Association may not act or speak for them. Rather, the National Association is convinced that particular churches will determine their own response to the Gospel; and that differing circumstances will warrant diverse expressions of the Way. Thus, I readily acknowledge that the three long-standing principles of Congregational polity — faith, fellowship, and freedom — are still viable and very much a part of present day Congregationalism.

Howard Conn has said that while those banded together in the voluntary, free fellowship of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches glory in the record of their Pilgrim Fathers, they stand on the conviction that this form of church government is eminently able to meet the challenges of our time, and yet respect the freedom which belongs to men and women as individuals. I am convinced if Congregationalism is to continually meet today's challenges, we must be Pilgrims — twentieth century Pilgrims — continually encouraging the freedom of others and, like the early Pilgrims who came to settle our New England shore, constantly looking forward in faith to some new adventure, responding to the call to faith under the direction of God. Further, we should be ever aware not to let our Congregational history and polity become a prison, or a platform of legalism from which we mount assaults on those who threaten or do not agree with us; or use our tradition as a means of only justifying ourselves, rather than letting it free us to new possibilities. For if we
can continue to be Pilgrims, I am certain our freedom can be a vital, living principle, calling us out of isolation into community; to be with others, to be of service with others; and calling us not to independence, but to actually lending strength and support to one another. But I feel if this is to continually evolve, a catalytic element must be incorporated into the polity of Congregationalism. The element I am arguing for is creativity — an element which frequently evolves as a result of freedom or is made possible through freedom.

God is believed to be a creator who continually creates in history, in nature, and in revelation of Himself. God's continuing essence, therefore, is His creativity. It is also believed that God made man in His own image. If this is so, I would argue that creativity is indeed a significant ingredient of man.

Michel Vallon feels that throughout its over 350 year history, American Congregationalism has often shown a "vigorous, generative spirit of creativity -- in Church, in Missions, and in Social Concern. It has given to this country the fundamental principles of its constitution and in many other respects its formative principles of everyday life."

Presently, there is a desire for a regeneration of creativity among prominent clergymen of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. Harry Butman, a noted Congregational minister from a Los Angeles area church states:

Our outlook and program should be warmed and brightened with the fire of imagination. We are achingly dull in most of our thinking and doing. We cower like a wet sock when confronted with an unconventional idea. We're trying to play it much too safe. We're drab sparrows in a world of fierce eagles and flashing peacocks. We tailor our programs to the least common denominator of prudence. We're afraid to offend anyone, particularly if our offense threatens to lose us up to $1.85 from
outraged supporters. 39

In addition, many churches of the National Association have become involved in a variety of creative programs. A few examples include: 1. A suburban Minneapolis church offering a free university for those who cannot afford the high cost of education leading to a degree, but who still desire to become involved in the academic process; 2. A suburban Detroit church placing the following ad in ten greater Detroit area newspapers: "Senior Minister of large, liberal, well-established Protestant church in Southfield offers free counseling as a community service. Please telephone his secretary, EL 2-6954, for an appointment;" 40 and 3. A church in downtown Tacoma, Washington starting a Food Bank because of a high unemployment rate which recently struck the city. These three examples note ways in which individual local churches are responding creatively to issues of immediate interest facing their respective communities. Then too, there are groups within particular congregations who find it necessary to make statements concerning social issues. Such is the case in the following example:

Our consciences would witness to our grave concern over the tragic damage to society which we see resulting from American participation in the Southeast Asian War. As members of the Plymouth Congregational Church of Minneapolis, which by policy does not take group stands on social issues, we as individuals find our Christian motivation prompting us to urge upon our government the following steps: To terminate the Vietnam conflict... To end the military draft... To curb the power of the Pentagon... To work for world peace through world law, world communication, and world trade... To re-order American priorities at home. 41

Here, the Congregational principle of individual freedom of expression is being used to respond creatively to an issue of worldwide interest.
Even at the National Association level, continuing Congregationalists are attempting to deal with a multitude of issues in profoundly creative ways. Their program of theological education is one example:

Since the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches is a fellowship of voluntary, independent and autonomous local churches... it is not possible or practical for them to presently form a theological seminary which would reflect all the various theological and social viewpoints which are present in these churches... The Congregational Foundation for Theological Studies, therefore, was conceived as a means of training theological students in an atmosphere friendly to historical Congregational principles. It offers a unique opportunity and adventure to young men and women who want something original and stimulating in theological education.42

Thus, this means of theological education must be acknowledged as a creative attempt to deal with an important task -- the task of providing an educated ministry to member churches of the National Association.

I tend to be quite enthusiastic about nearly all forms of creativity exemplified at any level of the association -- individual member, local congregation, or National Association -- because this creativity always seems to be rooted in a greatly respected historical principle, freedom.

In the preceding pages, a sketch of the early historical development of American Congregationalism, a discussion of Congregationalism's resultant traditional polity, and a personal view of this polity in which a desire for the addition of the element of creativity, have been presented. As one who will probably soon become a clergyman in the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, I am proud of the historic past of American Congregationalism. I do not, however, want this
concern for history to become the dominant consideration in my ministry. Rather, I desire to take freedom — a most significant element which has developed out of this Congregational history — and use it in creative ways to meet the needs and express the faith of the local congregation in relation to contemporary society. If I am able to do this, I feel confident that I will be able to share in the optimism concerning the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches that has already been expressed by many of the established clergymen of the Association—

American Congregationalism is not dead; far from it. Uncharted horizons await us. We are at the beginning of a new era of growth and expansion. We will find better ways to draw men and women together to God. For we are open-minded Christians, understanding in our hearts, flexible in our attitudes without ever surrendering the fundamental beliefs about the Scriptures, and the nature, purpose, and meaning of God's revelation in Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{43}
List of Footnotes


3 Ibid., p. 64.


5 Olmstead, p. 64.


7 Manschreck, pp. 7-8.

8 Fagley, The Congregational Churches, pp. 6-7.


14 Ibid., p. 78.

15 Ibid.

16 Olmstead, p. 67.

17 Ibid.

18 Sweet, Religion in Colonial America, p. 80.

19 Olmstead, p. 67.

20 Sweet, Religion in Colonial America, p. 80.

21 Olmstead, p. 67.

22 Ibid.


26 Berkaw, p. 10.


31 Berkaw, p. 10.


34 Ibid.


38 Ibid., p. 19

39 Butman, p. 9.


43 Vallon, p. 7.
List of Works Cited


