

The Problem of Authority in
The Congregational Ministry

In Fulfillment of Requirements
of C.F.T.S.

Submitted by
Phil Jackson

OUTLINE

I. The Question of Authority in American Congregationalism in its first Century.

A. Historical Polity.

B. Relationship of Religion and Culture.

C. Attempt to Historically Develop a General Theory of Authority in the Congregational Ministry.

II. To take Issue of Contemporary Congregational Ministerial Authority in the Light of the Historical Study.

SECTION I

In this section of this paper, we will determine from a study of major documents on church order and of major individuals in American Congregationalism in its first century, whether theological and social authority are brought together in the covenant. We will also attempt to understand the shifts in authority, both social and theological.

Some modern Congregationalists erroneously assume that the churches in America did not have doctrinal tests for church membership. We must remember that the concentration on piety and doctrine of the church was possible only because there was agreement with the Presbyterians in England on all the major areas of Christian doctrine. The Cambridge Platform presupposes the Westminster Confession in all parts except those relating to church order. The test for church membership was not simply concurrence in the particular polity, but "knowledge of the principles of religion, and . . . experience in the ways of grace, and . . . and godly conversion amongst men."¹ This meant adherence to orthodox doctrine.

The drive toward an explicit definition of church order came from several sources. First of all there was the English background.

¹J. Cotton, Way of the Churches in Hanbury, Historical Memorials, Vol. II, p. 566, London, The Congregational Union, 1841.

The thin line that distinguishes the non-Separatist Puritans from the Separatists is an important one. The non-Separatists assert that the Anglican Church is not a false church, but for them the substance of the Church of England is pure. Their desire was not to start anew, but to actualize the potential that was the true church within the established church.

The second source of the drive to define church order was the threat of the left-wing sects. In America the antinomian threat came early from Roger Williams and from Anne Hutchinson. To have order in the religious and civil life of the country the basis of authority, had to be more concrete than the working of the spirit.

A third source was the pressure from the churches to the right of Congregational polity. The Puritan leaders in England who were Presbyterian were alarmed at the direction in which the New England Puritans were moving. Their nine questions, their thirty-two questions, and the criticisms of John Ball required strong arguments in support of the young New England system.

I believe a fourth source, the importance of which cannot be measured, is the social context of American Congregationalism. "The very fact that within ten years of the founding of the Bay Colony the first pressures toward the Half-way Covenant were under way indicates that the churches were aware of and sensitive to the desires of the vast population that could only meet the knowledge and conduct tests."² The drive of the conservatives, especially the

²H.M. Dexter, The Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years, New York: Scribners, 1880.

Mathers, toward Presbyterian polity, was perhaps motivated by a desire to control the churches and colony as long as possible.

Writings on polity flourished during the 1640's. Prior to an analysis of the bases of authority as outlined in the Platform, we shall look at the writings of some of the more prominent divines, John Davenport, John Cotton, Richard Mather, and Thomas Hooker. Following this survey, we shall analyze the Cambridge Platform itself. Also, we will briefly look at two reactions, that of Jonathan Edwards, and that of John Wise. The former initiates a new movement of orthodoxy; the latter issues in American Unitarianism.

John Davenport answered the English Puritan Presbyterians in two treatises. In answer to John Paget, Davenport asserts,

that the power of the churches is confined . . . to their own proper matters, (and) that there is not any spiritual church power, by the institution of Christ subjected.³

Davenport defines the church in terms of Aristotelian causes: the efficient cause is Christ; the material cause is men called by Christ; the formal cause of the church is the covenant. Christ gives power to particular visible churches. The authority for this belief is Scripture and sound reason. A well ordered church has officers. One congregation can commune with another, but there is no subjection of one church to another in ecclesiastical authority.

In his answer to nine questions by some English clergy, Davenport makes a distinction between spiritual communion and church communion. The latter is a sociological phenomenon. The members

³J. Davenport, The Power of Congregational Churches Asserted and Vindicated, 1672 (written 1641). Reproduced in part and summarized in Hanbury, p. 63.

of any church might be admitted to the Lord's Supper, but in matters of censure, election of officers, and the like, only members of the particular church were allowed a voice. It is made imperative that every Christian own a church covenant. Davenport's conception of the necessity of church communion for all who are in spiritual communion, and his conception of the role of the congregation suggests that the church covenant is the link between the theological and social authorities and binds the two together. Most of his writings display a rationally organized society.

Davenport further defines the authority of the minister. Ordination is to a particular church; however this practice was soon modified, and installation came to replace a second ordination so ministers could move from one church to another. A minister may preach and pray in another church, since these are acts by his gifts. He cannot, however, perform any act of authority and power to any congregation other than his own.

The large amount of common interpretation of church order in the works of John Cotton and John Davenport shows the wide acceptance of the basic principles of polity. Cotton wrote three major treatises on church order in the 1640's. The one-to-one correspondence between spiritual and social realities is seen in Cotton's The Constitution of a Particular Visible Church:

Government of the church is in Christ our Head, Kingly or regal; but in the church, stewardly and ministerial; in both of them, spiritual and heavenly; . . . as being ordained, not by the wisdom and power of this world, but of Christ; and administered not . . . by earthly weapons, but by the Word and the Sacraments and other spiritual ordinances; working upon the souls of men by the spirit; aiming not at worldly peace, wealth, and honor, but at the righteousness of faith, peace of conscience, and joy in the Holy Ghost.⁴

⁴J. Cotton, Way of The Churches of Christ in New England, 1645. Reproduced in Hanbury, p. 260.

The power of the church is from Christ. This included the power to choose officers and members. To Cotton the church participates in the same spiritual and heavenly power that is Christ's. The church is the historical and sociological form of Christ's Lordship. The polity cannot be understood apart from the theology.

In his treatises Cotton sets forth the mind of Christ in regard to his church in a highly organized and rational manner. He is an example of the trend toward vesting more authority in the synods and associations. This does not violate congregational autonomy, for Christ has given authority immediately to particular churches. The introduction to Keys of the Kingdom summarizes the duties of such a synod as follows:

That it is an ordinance of Christ, unto whom Christ hath, . . . in relation to rectifying mal-administrations and healing dissensions in particular congregations, and the like cares, . . . committed a due and just measure of power suited and proportioned to those ends, and furnished them not only with ability to give counsel and advice, but, further, with a ministerial power and authority to determine, declare, and enjoin such things as may tend to the reducing such congregations to right order and peace.⁵

The synods can make decisions in doctrinal issues, but cannot excommunicate either a congregation or any member of it. All formal acts of censure are to be by local churches. Here is developing a check upon the authority of a congregation, though it is more persuasive than formal.

Within the congregation any gifted brother might use his God-given talents for the edification of the church; however, the elders determine who is gifted and that person is subject to the teaching elder. For the elders the power is authority and for the people it is a privilege. But a balanced "Church-Act" does not take place

⁵Ibid., p. 261.

without the consent and concurrence of both.

Cotton proof-tests all of his delineations of power from the New Testament. This indicates that the Scriptures act as an objective norm for church order. The power of a congregation includes the authority to choose its officers; to send forth its elders; to except some from church membership; to commune with other churches by participation, recommendation, consultation, contribution, and propagation and multiplication of churches.

The elders, to be both 'servants' . . . and rulers of the church, may both of them stand well together; for their 'rule' is not lordly, as if they ruled of themselves, or from themselves; but stewardly and ministerial, as ruling the church from Christ, and also from their call; and withal ruling the church for Christ; and the church, even for their spiritual everlasting good.⁶

Thus the elders are responsible in their ruling to the authority of Christ, yet they are to rule the church for Christ. Sovereign power is Christ's and the authority of the congregation is "ministerial." The liberty of a church is not derived from the existence of a synod or from other churches, it is received immediately from Christ.

To summarize this work of Cotton, one sees the beginning of the extension of the authority of the consociation of churches. When a congregation cannot settle its own problems, then a synod has the power to judge, and its decision can be imposed upon the churches. This trend ends in the Saybrook Platform, where the consociations become standing church councils. In Cotton we have the beginnings.

⁶Ibid., p. 266.

Cotton's Way of the Churches of Christ is concerned with the delineation of the division of authority within the congregation. Ruling elders are not laymen, but are on equal status as the teaching and preaching elders. The local lay elders can ordain. Deacons are not to be ordained and are to be simply the collectors of the funds that are brought to them. A church is to look for fit officers from among its members, though it is to elect and ordain only those who have been called by Christ. In order to form a congregation there have to be enough members for the officers, and at least three more. When a church is too large it is to issue into another congregation.

Just as there is a definite objectified procedure for the calling of the officers, so there is for deciding on church members. Elders are to test candidates as to their knowledge, experience, and conduct. In determining who are the visible saints by calling the congregation is to be charitable so as to receive the weak in faith. Also, church censure is to take place only in cases of known offenses that cannot be healed.

What is presented is a mixed government in the church: Christ is the monarch, the congregation is a democracy, and the eldership is the aristocracy. "What is found good in any civil government, is in church government, and what is found evil is by wisdom of Christ, safely avoided and prevented."⁷

One sees the manner in which the various authorities check one another within the church. The bretheren and the elders check each other, and both are subject to the authority of the Lordship of Christ, as rationally defined in the Scriptures.

⁷Ibid., p. 274.

In the writings of Mather and Hooker, I shall indicate only points of divergence from Cotton and Davenport. Mather makes a point that a synod should have the power to command as well as give advice. He also indicates that the practice in New England was to omit women and children from actions of the church in such matters as ordination and excommunication. The simple rational definition of ordination is indicated by Mather:

Election is something essential, and so consequently more than imposition of hands, which is but a rite, or ceremony, which may be absent and yet a man have all the essentials of a minister notwithstanding.⁸

Hooker's Survey is the most extensive treatment of polity in the decade. Polity is defined as the "skill of ordering the affairs of Christ's House, according to the pattern of his Word."⁹ The visible church is a result of the relationship between believers when by consent through the covenant they govern themselves by the prescriptions of Christ. The covenant is the form of the church, and has both internal and external aspects.

The whole of these previous works is almost completely systematized in the Cambridge Platform. The synod at Cambridge accepted the Westminster Confession as "very holy, orthodox, and judicious in all matters of faith."¹⁰ This indicates that

⁸R. Mather, Reply to Mr. Rutherford, 1647, Hanbury, p. 179.

⁹T. Hooker, Survey of the Sum of Church Discipline, 1648, in Hanbury, p. 267.

¹⁰A Platform of Church Discipline, 1649, in Walker, p. 197.

Congregationalism accepts orthodoxy in doctrine, and that its church order is a facet of its orthodox theology. I shall confine myself to only parts of the Platform in order to indicate the bases of authority as defined in the Platform. The first chapter indicates the scriptural authority and the second chapter sets a Congregational Church in the context of a Catholic Church.

A Congregational Church, is by the institution of Christ, a part of the Militant-Visible-Church, consisting of a company of Saints by calling, united into one body, by a holy covenant, for the public worship of God, and the mutual edification one of another, in the fellowship of the Lord Jesus.¹¹

The form of the visible church is the church covenant, a mutual covenant of people with God. Church power is supreme in Christ, ministerial power is in apostles, prophets, and evangelists, and should be ordinary in every Congregational Church. Ordinary church power includes the power of office in the eldership and the power of privilege in the brotherhood.

Both pastor and teacher are church officers. Pastors are to attend to exhortation and administer a word of wisdom. Teachers are to attend to doctrine and administer a word of knowledge. Either of them are to administer the seals of the covenant and execute censures. Deacons are to be blameless men who are to keep the church funds. The instituting of these officers is the work of God, of Christ, and of the Holy Ghost. Office power is limited to the church to which the man is called.

Christ is reaffirmed to be head, king of the church. The believers have "subordinate church-power under Christ."¹² The body

¹¹ Ibid., p. 201.

¹² Ibid., p. 202.

of the church has power to choose its officers, and admit and remove members, including elders. Officers are to be rulers who rule with God and they are not to be refuted without sufficient and weighty cause. The officers are to be duly paid, all who are taught the Word are to aid in this; this includes non-member inhabitants.

It is necessary to seek to give trends and the general patterns of authority that are shifting in the development of the Half-Way Covenant. One sees the Scripture remains the explicit norm of the new position, just as it was normative for the more rigid position. There is a conscious attempt to maintain the theological patterns while changing the sociological. The change hinges on the definition of who is worthy to own the covenant. When the covenant is extended even half-way, the ground is laid for further changes in the sociological church. We see here the breakdown of the authority of the elders to determine who is a visible saint and who is not. The ministerial authority granted the church by Christ becomes less certain of itself, and thus breaks down the rigid pattern. In Solomon Stoddard this trend becomes explicit and arrives at its radical conclusion. Stoddard concludes that "the arbitrariness of the covenant is not reasonable, and no one can really determine who is a saint. Thus all should strive to be the best that they can and all who so wish should own the covenant."¹³ Stoddard even asserted that the church covenant was not Biblical.

In the Stoddardean position we see a breakdown of the earlier theological authority as well as the sociological authority.

¹³P. Miller, "Solomon Stoddard, 1643-1729," Harvard Theological Review 34: 278.

The rational authority defined for the functioning of church polity has given way in part. The norms created are no longer valid in the eyes of the third and fourth generations.

Jonathan Edwards rejects both the Half-Way Covenant and Stoddardeanism. He returns in part to the older patterns, but the basis of authority is increasingly that of religious experience. To properly describe this would involve a study of the Great Awakening. Edwards was the precursor of a religious movement which issued a breakdown of corporate discipline in the churches because experience becomes more important than doctrine. This in turn leads to a certain anomie in contemporary Congregational polity.

We saw in John Cotton's work and in part in the Cambridge Platform, the tendency toward greater concentration of authority in the synods and consociations. The breakdown of piety led to a great concern on the part of the divines for some reform. The tensions in the Bay Colony increased between conservatives and the innovators. The conservatives, led by the Mathers, Increase, and Cotton, were interested in a religious strengthening of the colony through the church lines of the Cambridge Platform. The liberals went ahead to found the Brattle Church in 1697. Benjamin Colman, pastor of this church, by 1704 however, was cooperating with the conservatives and moderates to revive church discipline.

Part of the Proposals of 1705 were incorporated into the Saybrook Platform. These proposals, however, were never adopted in Massachusetts. This movement indicated an effort by conservative clergy to gain authority to impose greater church discipline on the churches. One might interpret this as a situation in which the norms of polity are determined by the perceived needs of the culture at the moment. The theology of these ministers was orthodox, and they intended to maintain orthodoxy even though it required changes

in polity.

John Wise led the opposition to these Presbyterian proposals.¹⁴ He espoused the cause of the congregational powers as outlined by John Cotton and Davenport. The theological authority for this power change came not from a ministerial power from Christ, but from the natural law and the reasonableness of man. This is government not by covenant with God, but by contract among men. Christ has set democracy as the means of church government.

Wise was in favor of reinstating the office of ruling elder which had by this time gone out of use. He suggested that the churches find "neglected and capable men"¹⁵ for this job. Church officers like civil officers are to rule by "plain and settled principles,"¹⁶ and not by fancy. For his position on polity he does not claim scriptural authority, but rather right reason. Wise is afraid of clericalism and believes they should not determine whether a man is a fit candidate for the ministry. On Standing Councils, Wise says that lay members might become tools for the clergy, and there is no Biblical basis for them. He argues that all the good a council could do is already provided for in their present church order.

It is obvious that Wise wishes to retain Congregational polity as it is defined in the mid-seventeenth century, but for radically different theological reasons. The theological authority has

¹⁴J. Wise, Vindication, p. 44.

¹⁵J. Wise, The Churches, p. 19.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 19.

changed for the same polity. This is a foretaste of the contemporary situation in which attempts are made to maintain the polity for sentimental or secular reasons. One frequently hears from the lips of ministers and church executives that the glory of Congregational polity is its democracy. Natural law and right reason replace the Lordship of Christ and the delegated church power to visible saints as the theological and human bases of authority.

Section II

The sociological historical survey is a backdrop in which one can observe the more contemporary scene. I shall confine this section to generalizations and questions which emerge out of current times against the seventeenth century structure.

It is clear that unlike the early period, there is no widely accepted theological basis in which Congregational churches are now functioning. Today theology and polity have been dissociated. If the Lordship of Christ is acknowledged, it is not explicated rationally in terms of a confession of faith that gives it meaningful and normative content. Whereas the Bible served as the objectified norm for faith, it does not function as such today even if it is claimed to be the norm. Certainly Scripture is not normative in the sense that it was for Cotton, Hooker, and Davenport. Whereas covenant theology was the theological basis of church order, at the present time there is no school of theology held throughout Congregationalism which supports doctrine of the church and the polity. Is Congregational church order the expression of contemporary interpretations of Christian faith in the

current cultural situation? Where church covenants have not fallen into disuse, they are divorced from the inner meaning that they carried in the seventeenth century. Is the covenant relationship with God an adequate theology for our time? The doctrine of the church has changed so that one gets the impression that Congregationalism means normless individualism for many ministers and people. This interpretation is not historical, nor is it theologically or sociologically feasible. Can the understanding of a covenanted community under the authority of Christ be revitalized in contemporary Congregational life? Where once elected visible sainthood was the basis of church membership, the standards are now so very vaguely defined. Is a renewed congregational discipline possible without more explicit and tighter standards of admission?

Where the seventeenth century churches believed they had theological authority for being congregations, contemporary Congregationalists are probably not certain what the basis of their self-rule is. I will venture to say that this uncertainty is general among clergy as well as among lay people. The role of the minister was once rationally defined on the basis of the Scriptures, now the role of the minister in contemporary Congregational life is ambiguous if not confused. There are no longer accepted rationally defined norms that govern the relationships of pastor and people. Currently although the ministry is still considered a function of the congregation, the transcendent norm is not always understood either by congregation or by minister. Have both theological and moral disciplines now dissolved? Can Congregational church order be truly maintained without this discipline?

Discrepancy between theory and practice in the seventeenth century was not uncommon in the realm of polity. However, there were attempts to bring the two together through either revision of theory or reform of practice. Currently the discrepancy between theory and practice exists without attempts either to reform practices or to revise theory.

Against these questions and generalizations, I would like to present a brief set of statements. This section of the paper ceases to be qualified and is in short a personal critical response for contemporary world.

If this body is to know the mind of Christ, it must discipline itself in worship and study. It must relate the mind of Christ as shown in the Bible and the history of faith to contemporary problems. The church as a religious community is a communion of common faith and love. Love at this level involves and demands a basic respect for persons, a respect that is not broken with differences of opinion on secondary issues. The existence of this community of faith and love is the basis of the expressions of rational knowledge on particular issues. Given a congregational base of common faith and love, the institutional structures and functions are social expressions within the context in which the church is witnessing. Thus there is a basis for polity changes; the community witnessing in one situation might best use one polity, in another situation a variation of this polity. The institutional structures should not violate the community of trust in sovereign God. The structures are to express this community. Within Congregational church order as it now exists, the primary problem of authority is at the level of the local congregation. The potential power of

Congregational church order is also its potential weakness. It is perhaps its present weakness.

The so-called prophetic authority is safe-guarded by the assertion of the Lordship of Christ over the church. This means that no majority decision speaks the mind of Christ by virtue of being a majority decision. Also, the minister is not the minister of the church, but rather he is the minister of Christ to the people. This gives him transcendent authority and responsibility.

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