

THE PLAN OF UNION OF 1801:

An Ecumenical Postmortem Focusing on its Genesis

In requirements of:

**Congregational History and Polity
Congregational Foundation for Theological Studies**

Submitted to:

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Plan of Union

Regulations adopted by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, and by the General Association of the State of Connecticut (provided said Association agree to them), with a view to prevent alienation, and to promote unity and harmony in those new settlements which are composed of inhabitants from those bodies.

1. It is strictly enjoined on all their missionaries to the new settlements, to endeavour, by all proper means, to promote mutual forbearance, and a spirit of accommodation between those inhabitants of the new settlements who hold the Presbyterian, and those who hold the Congregational form of church government.

2. If in the new settlements any church of the Congregational order shall settle a minister of the Presbyterian order, that church may, if they choose, still conduct their discipline according to Congregational principles, settling their differences among themselves, or by a council mutually agreed upon for that purpose. But if any difficulty shall exist between the minister and the church, or any member of it, it shall be referred to the Presbytery to which the minister shall belong, provided both parties agree to it; if not, to a council consisting of an equal number of Presbyterians and Congregationalists, agreed upon by both parties.

3. If a Presbyterian church shall settle a minister of Congregational principles, that church may still conduct their discipline according to Presbyterian principles, excepting that if a difficulty arise between him and his church, or any member of it, the cause shall be tried by the Association to which the said minister shall belong, provided both parties agree to it, otherwise by a council, one-half Congregationalists and the other Presbyterians, mutually agreed upon by the parties.

4. If any congregation consist partly of those who hold the Congregational form of discipline, and partly of those who hold the Presbyterian form, we recommend to both parties that this be no obstruction to their uniting in one church and settling a minister; and that in this case the church choose a standing committee from the communicants of said church, whose business it shall be to call to account every member of the church who shall conduct himself inconsistently with the laws of Christianity, and to give judgement on such conduct. That if the person condemned by their judgement be a Presbyterian, he shall have liberty to appeal to the Presbytery; if he be a Congregationalist, he shall have liberty to appeal to the body of the male communicants of the church. In the former case, the determination of the Presbytery shall be final, unless the church shall consent to a farther appeal to the Synod, or to the General Assembly; and in the latter case, if the party condemned shall wish for a trial by a mutual council, the cause

shall be referred to such a council. And provided the said standing committee of any church shall depute one of themselves to attend the Presbytery, he may have the same right to sit and act in the Presbytery as a ruling elder of the Presbyterian church.

On motion,

Resolved, That an attested copy of the above plan be made by the Stated Clerk, and put into the hands of the delegates from this Assembly to the General Association, to be laid before that body for their consideration; and that if it should be approved by them, it go into immediate operation.

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Introduction

The study of ecclesiastical unions between differing denominational bodies has been one of the areas of church history that has always been fascinating to me. The dynamics involved, politically, socially, and theologically, of bringing several groups together in some type of ecumenical bond to accomplish the cause of Christ, have consistently yielded entertaining and fruitful study for this student. It is out of this basic interest that this specific paper arose.

The subject of the Plan of Union of 1801 between the Congregationalists and Presbyterians was chosen for several reasons. The first reason, and perhaps the foremost reason as well, was that the Plan directly involved my faith group, the Congregationalists, in a venture that seemed extremely ambitious, and which ended with questionable results. It was hoped that a study of this example from history would yield to us some guidelines for the future, specifically in the field of ecumenical relationships. If this Plan, to jointly send missionaries and establish churches in the West of that time, western New York, western Pennsylvania, and the Western Reserve of Ohio, did not work, why did it not work? In what manner did it fail? In what sense was it successful? If it was such an "ingenious arrangement" as it was purported to be,¹ why could it not have worked its way to the Pacific?

Perhaps of even greater interest would be an investigation of the influences that contributed to the conception and birth of the Plan of Union. How were theological differences smoothed over? What historical events preceding the Plan helped to give rise to it? It would seem that an "ecumenical postmortem" would be appropriate. That is exactly what will be attempted.

A second and more minor reason for choosing the Plan of Union of 1801 was because of my academic circumstances. Researching a subject that intimately involved both the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians, it could be supposed, would be problematical, especially in obtaining primary sources. However, this posed no problem due to the fact of having spent time in doing research at the Congregational Library in Boston this summer, and because of my ongoing academic endeavors at Princeton Theological Seminary, I am able to have access to the excellent archives of Speer Library which house Presbyterian sources unavailable in many other places.

This work from its inception, was never meant to be an entire overview of the Plan. It will not cover to a great degree of depth any one generally broad topic, such as theological aspects, polity considerations, sociological factors, or administration, but will be an effort to focus and investigate those specific aspects which, and those specific individuals who, in this author's opinion proved to be the most critical in contributing to the doing, and the undoing, of the Plan of

Union. It is my contention that an examination of the period of history preceding the Plan is practically all that is necessary to understand both sets of factors: those which gave rise to it in 1801, as well as those which led to its demise by way of Presbyterian abrogation in 1837, for these factors were in place from the very beginning.

Finally, it is hoped that the reader will find this investigation, this "ecumenical postmortem" of the Plan of Union of 1801 as fascinating as it was for me. Please join me now, let us don our "lab" coats and step back in time to the very beginning of this story.

Part 1: Theological Twins?

Although the Plan of Union did not claim to organically unite the Congregational and Presbyterian Churches of the United States, it was an agreement which bound them ethically and morally to a common cause--that of providing Christian ministry to the hardy individuals who saw fit to leave their native New England and relocate in a western wilderness. This agreement was possible because it was commonly perceived in that era that the two churches were theologically similar, if not outright identical.² Butman says that the Congregationalism of the Connecticut area "was virtually indistinguishable from the Presbyterianism of that day."³ It seems obvious that the

Presbyterians and Congregationalists of New England were relating to each other in a much more amicable fashion than they had in the 1640's, to cite at least one decade. This then, begs the question: What factors had changed from that early time to the late 18th century to make the Plan suitably "acceptable" to both sides and would resurface later to cause dissention?

One of the basic theological disputes that occurred within the Puritan movement in England that drove the wedge that in effect created the separate movements of Presbyterianism and Congregationalism, was the doctrine of the Church of Christ.⁴

The Congregationalist doctrine of the Church can be found in the early work of Henry Jacob, a friend of John Robinson, and founder of the first Congregationalist Church in England that was able to be in continuous existence. Here he lays a solid theological foundation upon which others have built:

A true Visible & Ministeriall Church of Christ is a number of faithfull people joyned by their willing consent in a spirituall outward society or body politike, ordinarily comming together into one place, instituted by Christ in his New Testament, & having the power to exercise Ecclesiasticall government and all Gods other spirituall ordinances (the means of⁵ salvation) in & for it self immediatly from Christ.

The Church Visible, as can be seen by this statement, had its existence only in individual congregations. Simply put, the totality of these congregations was the Church Universal. The entity that was of prime importance for Congregationalists was the Church Visible, the Church Universal being seen as having more etherial qualities. Modern Congregationalists continue

in this vein, as evidenced by Arthur Rouner, Jr.'s statement:
"It is Christ among the two or three gathered in His Name that makes the gathered community to be the true church."⁶

This view was radically different than the Presbyterian Puritans, who saw the Church Universal as being a transcendent entity, greater even than the sum of its parts. The vision of the Universal Church was much more inclusive and cosmic in scope.

It is plain to see why the groups had split, what with having what appeared to be irreconcilable doctrines of the Church. It was to be a critical difference that never seemed to be dealt with satisfactorily. This divergent beginning was to widen as the logical consequences of the Congregationalist concept was put into practice.

There were four significant areas that developed differently for the Congregationalists as opposed to the Presbyterians as consequences of their respective views of the doctrine of the Church. These are: church membership, the role of clergy, church government, and the place of higher councils of the church. These were to cause insurmountable problems to the Plan which I will discuss later. For now, allow me to briefly examine each of these four in turn and outline the basic views of each group.

For the Congregationalists, for individuals to be admitted, it was necessary for evidence to be given, for the men usually

a verbal account of their faith to the congregation, and an evaluation of their conduct within the community be made by the congregation as to whether or not the gifts and grace of God were sufficiently present to warrant membership. The elders may recommend an individual, or aid in the evaluation, but the final decision remained in the hands of the congregation.⁷

Presbyterians, choosing to enact their Calvinism differently, held that the elect were known to God alone, as a consequence of this, the elect were the Church Universal, the Body of Christ. Admission to the church was really an admission to the Church Universal. There was reason to hope that the individual was among the elect if the person had "passed" an examination of his/her life and faith by the church elders and minister.⁸ In actuality then, admission to the local church rested in the hands of the elders and minister, even if in Presbyterian-Calvinistic theology admission was to the Church Universal.

The definition of the role of the clergy was another area of dissent. The clergy and the laity were, technically at least, equals in the Congregational schema. Certainly many Congregational pastors, such as the Mathers, or a Jonathan Edwards held much power in their congregations, yet that power was ascribed power, given by the congregations. The clergy were part of the lay brotherhood, as were the ruling elders, and existed with them as equals sharing in discerning issues

of the Kingdom.⁹

The Presbyterians differed from this in that a minister was one of the ruling elders. The ruling elders held their positions in the church by appointment of the congregation.¹⁰ They were ordained to the service of the Church Universal, and ministered on behalf of the local church. These officers ran the government of the local church in the name of the world-wide Church.

Some would assert that the Church existed without officers entirely, as did the Congregationalist, Thomas Hooker.¹¹ But others, like Samuel Rutherford, firm Presbyterians, maintained that individuals are ordained to the ministry of the Church Universal.¹² Rutherford, no doubt came against the Congregational ideal of the ordination of ministers and ruling elders to serve only the local Church.¹³

Another severe problem which arose over the differing doctrines of the Church, which caused great problems even in England between the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists, was the power given to higher councils of the Church. This is important to consider especially in view of the Plan of Union of 1801 had its origin between to higher councils--the General Association of Connecticut and the General assembly of the Presbyterian Church. It will be seen from what follows that naturally, for the Congregationalist, a council, or association of churches is not qualitatively superior to the local church,

but is merely quantitatively superior and functions only in the role of advisor. However, for the Presbyterian, the local church must be subject to the discipline of the Church Universal and has no option to go it alone.

Many of the books and pamphlets published in England from 1640-1660, concerned the joint issues of church doctrine and government.¹⁴ These often reflected the bitter disputes between Presbyterians and Congregationalists, and originated from the difference on the doctrine of the Church. John Cotton's Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven (1644),¹⁵ and Way of the Churches of Christ in New England (1645),¹⁶ as well as Richard Mather's Church Government and Church Covenant Discussed.... (1643),¹⁷ were all published during this time. For the Presbyterians, Due Right of Presbytery emerged in 1644,¹⁸ which elicited an important response from Thomas Hooker in Survey of the Sum of Church Discipline (1648). The Westminster Assembly (1643-45), and the move by Parliament to give Presbyterianism dominance in England in 1643, generated a period in which heated exchanges between the two groups would be commonplace.¹⁸ At this point, several notable quotations will adequately demonstrate this debate. A Congregationalist view from the writings of Richard Mather:

By entering into Covenant with God, a people come to be the Lord's people, that is to say, his Church. . . It is not habitation in the same Towne that distinguishes Churches, and Churchmembers from other men, but their mutuall agreement and combination and joynning themselves together in an holy Covenant with God.

The Presbyterian response from Samuel Rutherford:

. . . a company of believers professing the truth and meeting in one place every Lord's day for the worshipping of God,²⁰ is not the visible church endued with ministerial power.

Rutherford also adds this emphatic statement, "The keys of the kingdom of Heaven are not committed to the church of believers destitute of elders."²¹

Finally, a statement from Thomas Hooker represents a strongly Congregationalist doctrine of the Church:

That then which gives the formality of these Churches (Congregationalist) we are now to inquire: and the conclusion we maintain is this, Mutual covenanting and confoederating of the Saints in the fellowship of the faith according to the order of the gospel is that²² which gives constitution and being to a visible church.

The Cambridge Platform of 1648 defined in a seminal way what American Congregationalism was to be. The Platform clearly defines the doctrine of the Church in this way:

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 pullick worship of God, & the mutuall edification one of another, in the Fellowship of the Lord Jesus.²³

From the very beginning in England, having such differing doctrines of the Church, with the resultant variations of polity, it seems nothing less than a miracle that these two warring factions of Protestantism were able to reconcile, albeit briefly, to enact the Plan of Union of 1801. Having outlined this major obstacle to cooperation, let us now proceed to an exploration

of how this doctrine was modified, or perhaps more accurately, swept aside, to allow the Plan of Union to come into existence.

Part 2: What Happened?

The active role of Connecticut Congregationalism in modifying hard-line New England Congregationalism, typified by the Massachusetts Association, cannot be underemphasized. The affinity of Connecticut Congregationalists for Presbyterianism is a well-known tale. Perhaps the best example of this affinity is the Saybrook Platform of 1708. It substantially compromised the Cambridge Platform of 1648 by creating a quasi-Presbyterian superstructure of county consociations to oversee, discipline, and enforce doctrine in the local churches.²⁴ Also formed were ministerial associations to supervise the ordination process, and a strong General Association of ministers to take charge of state-wide church affairs.²⁵ The Saybrook Platform would prove to be a tremendous influence upon Connecticut Congregationalism for over a century.

Perhaps with an even greater influence upon Connecticut Congregationalism was the Great Awakening of 1740-41. In part, this was because of the Awakenings impact upon the Saybrook Platform. The Platform came under fire when old methods of Christian evangelism came into question. In the conflict that ensued, which produced schisms and separations especially in

eastern Connecticut, the Saybrook Platform worked to the advantage of the conservatives.²⁶ In general, the Great Awakening had the affect of producing a feeling of sympathy, if not unity, among the Congregationalists in the western Connecticut region, with the Presbyterians of the Middle Colonies. The gap was widening between the Connecticut Congregationalists and their more independently minded Massachusetts brethren. The new emphasis was not upon theology, or church polity, but upon the work of missions, and of experiential piety.²⁷

In a wider context, the Great Awakening tended to unite previously irreconcilable groups in two ways. The movement crossed denominational lines by emphasizing conversion and regeneration as the basis and ground for true fellowship.²⁸

Ahlstrom illustrates:

Whitefield, Tennent, and Edwards--Anglican, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist--felt themselves to be of one mind in their great undertaking.²⁹

Marsden also views this "evangelical zeal to rescue the frontiers from infidelity" as strengthening interdenominational ties, especially those between the Connecticut Congregationalists and the Presbyterians.³⁰

A second way the Great Awakening created unity was not merely interdenominational, but "intercolonial."³¹ This was one factor that united the colonists from Maine to the South, and it was unique in that it was perceived as being a unity

created by God and not humanity.

Jonathan Edwards, widely regarded as one of the major forces behind the Great Awakening, contributed to the genesis of the Plan of Union by changing the theological climate of his day. His move to the presidency of Princeton symbolizes this cooperation between Protestant groups in the new spirit of evangelicalism. The Edwardean movement continued in the same vein by stressing practical aspects over theoretical ideals. It is significant that most of the Edwardeans, be they Congregationalists or Presbyterians, were pastors, not theorists. Foremost among their priorities were the need for repentance, and the call to lead a self-sacrificing Christian life. With this focus on individualism, and a self-sacrificing ideal, at the expense of a strict doctrine of the Church, the theological background was substantially changed.³²

A pivotal figure in the development of the Plan of Union was Edward's son, Jonathan Edwards, Jr. Following the premature death of both of his parents, young Jonathan became deeply involved in Presbyterianism. He attended the Presbyterian College of New Jersey and there was exposed to the Presbyterian form of New Light doctrine. Following this, he briefly studied under Joseph Bellamy, a disciple of his father's.³³ He received a call to the Congregationalist church at White Haven, Connecticut, and was quickly recognized as a leader in the New Divinity. Two men who were students of Edwards' figured

prominently in the development of the Plan of Union: Timothy Dwight and Jedediah Morse.³⁴

An important incident in the 1760's acted to further bring the Presbyterians and Congregationalists closer together, due to a common "enemy."³⁵ The common "enemy" was the Anglican church, which was seeking to establish an American bishopric. From 1767 to 1776, an annual meeting was held between the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists to endeavor to forestall the installation of an American bishop.³⁶

The records of that joint committee reveal that on May 29, 1766, Elihu Spencer, the Presbyterian moderator, in correspondence to the General Association of Connecticut, sent an invitation, ". . . to a general consultation about such things as may have a hopeful tendency to promote and defend the common cause of religion against the attacks of its various enemies."³⁷ Of course, "various enemies" amounted to anyone advocating the American bishopric.

In November of that same year (1766) the first meeting was held in Elizabethtown, New Jersey, only one week following the a regular meeting of the Anglican convention, in that same town. It seems that there was a concerted effort on the part of the delegates to avoid any unification overtones. By-laws were written up along these lines and the overall purpose of the Convention was expressly defined:

. . . the general design of this Convention be to gain information of the public state of this united cause

and interest; to collect accounts relating thereto; to unite our endeavors and counsels for the spreading of the Gospel and preserving the religious liberties of our Churches; to diffuse harmony and keep up a correspondence throughout this united body and with our friends abroad; to recommend, cultivate, and preserve loyalty and allegiance to the King's Majesty, and also to address the King of the King's ministers from time to time with assurances of the unshaken loyalty of the pastors comprehended in this union and the churches under their care, and to vindicate them if unjustly aspersed.³⁸

It is noteworthy that after swearing allegiance to the King of England, and meeting for a period of almost ten years, that this General Convention of Delegates from Presbyterian and Congregational churches in New York, Connecticut, and Philadelphia, never made any official resolutions on this topic. No formal actions were taken, no sanctions given. Fear of retaliation from England would seem to be an adequate explanation, as it probably would not be accurate to label the delegates as slackers, for these were people of education and achievement. What is important for the purposes of this study is that this group did meet together, Congregationalist, and Presbyterian, in an official capacity, united against a common "enemy." It is somewhat ironic that the Presbyterians who had tenaciously fought against the establishment of an American bishopric prior to the war, later would pay little attention to the consecration of three American Episcopal bishops.³⁹

Another set of factors, occurring after 1789, which directly influenced the development of the Plan of Union, had the primary and immediate affect of bonding the two groups

together.

Following 1789, there arose a period of unprecedented national consciousness and the American churches in general, and especially the mainline Presbyterian and Congregational churches, found themselves deeply entrenched in it.⁴⁰ Most importantly for our purposes, this was also a period which fostered the growth of interdenominational cooperation as evidenced by the tremendous number of religious societies that came into existence. These societies had, as their leadership, individuals who were geographically diverse, yet chiefly from Congregationalist or Presbyterian backgrounds.⁴¹ Here again we have Congregationalists and Presbyterians working shoulder-to-shoulder for a common cause.

An indication of how genuine was this rise of ecumenicity can be had from reading a section from the preface to the initial draft of the Directory for Public Worship of 1787:

At the same time, the Presbyterian Church maintains a high respect for the other Protestant Churches of the Country, though several of them differ from her in some forms of government and Modes of worship: particularly for the regular Congregational Churches to the eastward; for the Associate, Low Dutch, and German reformed Churches; and for the Lutheran and Episcopal Churches.⁴²

This rising mood of ecumenicity, in both faith groups, opened wide the door that made the Plan of Union possible.

In my study of the period immediately preceding the adoption of the Plan of Union, the labors of four prominent individuals, two Congregationalists, two Presbyterians, kept emerging in

the research. Not to mention something about their efforts would be to do a disservice to them and this investigative study. Not only that, but these four represent the arrival of interdenominational statesmen on the American church history scene, as prior to this time most clergy worked within their denominational boundaries and seldom worked or were respected outside of their own faith groups. These four de-emphasized individual church polity and fellowship, and helped to refocus their churches toward accomplishing a ministry they saw to be one of the entire Body of Christ. The two Congregationalists are Timothy Dwight and Jonathan Edwards, Jr. The two Presbyterians are John Rodgers and Alexander McWhorter.

Let it be said without reserve that Timothy Dwight was a man who longed for church unity. He had a vision for the unity of the Church in the Millenium which "in the full and perfect sense, will begin at a period not far from the year 2000."⁴³ He called for the Church Universal to corporately strive for its unity and perfection found in the Millenium:

. . . when there shall not be a tyrant nor a slave,
not a jail nor a gibbet, not a dram-shop nor a brothel,
not a lie nor a theft, ⁴⁴from the rising of the sun to the
going down of the same.

Dwight, besides his call for unity, also stressed evangelism and experiential piety, having been a student of Jonathan Edwards, Jr. He fought against Deism, and by doing so demonstrated his concern for the Church Universal. He was well thought of, not only by his fellow New England

Congregationalists, but also by his friends across the nation who were Presbyterians.⁴⁵ Some of whom he had, no doubt, contacted during his tour of the frontier area of New York in 1799. It was largely through the efforts of Dwight that the General Association of Connecticut and the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church began to send delegates to each other's meetings.⁴⁶ This degree of affiliation had not existed since before the war. If unity among Calvinists were at all possible, it would seem that Timothy Dwight was the person who could do it.

Jonathan Edwards, Jr., was also an individual dedicated to church unity. His sermons and writings are packed with this theme. One sermon that illustrates this is: "Sermon on Christian Unity from Corinthians."⁴⁷ The sermon, in essence says Christians need to be united in one mind in two critical areas: 1.) articles of faith; 2.) Our aims and ends. He also says that in our efforts to promote religion, ". . .there must be mutual condescension."⁴⁸ There should be no high-handed denominationalism. More will be made later of his direct contributions to the Plan.

John Rodgers was well known for his catholicity. He held a place on the committee which framed the Plan of Union, and was a part of other negotiations for unifying which the Presbyterians pursued, like those with the Reformed Dutch Synods in 1798.⁴⁹ He is given credit for originating the motion to

allow Congregationalist delegates at the Assembly the right to vote, and had been involved with the Congregationalists in their joint effort to delay the installation of an American Anglican bishopric (1766-75).⁵⁰ In 1774, Rodgers toured New York state to assess the need for mission work. In 1789, he was elected moderator of the General Assembly and helped to solidly establish that body. Rodgers sent President Stiles of Yale a proposal seeking a unity of spirit and prayers for the revival of religion. An indication of the success of these efforts of goodwill on behalf of ecumenicity can be seen from the fact that at this time Nassau Hall and Edinburgh conferred honorary degrees on the Presidents of Yale and Harvard.⁵¹ Rodgers' tolerance, liberality, and ultimate suitability to be an integral part of the Plan is evidenced by this quote:

. . . on one occasion, when he was urged by some of the officers of his church to preach against what they regarded the errors of a particular sect, and to warn his people against them by name, he utterly refused, saying, 'Brethren, you must excuse me. I cannot reconcile it with my sense either of polity or of duty to oppose these people from the pulpit, otherwise than by preaching the truth plainly and faithfully. I believe them to be in error; but let us out-preach them, out-pray them, and out-live them, and we need not fear.'⁵²

Alexander McWhorter, a chaplain in the Revolution, and present with Washington at the crossing of the Delaware, worked side-by-side with Rodgers on many occasions. Along with Rodgers, he was on the 1798 committee for union, and the framing committee of the Plan of Union of 1801.⁵³ He was very influential within

his own Presbyterian circles, as he, again like Rodgers, was prominent in establishing the Confession of Faith and the constitution of the Presbyterian Church.

It is important when discussing the factors that led to the adoption of the Plan, to not downplay the willingness, and indeed, anxiousness, of the Congregationalists for such a union. Samuel Baird, however, makes the case that the initial phases were the result of Presbyterian effort, in 1791. He proposes that the General Assembly began correspondence to the Congregational churches, and received immediate response from the General Association of Connecticut.⁵⁴ The plan called for each party to send three delegates to attend the sessions of the other, with a right to address each question brought before the body, but without the right to vote. It was concerning these delegates, it will be recalled, that John Rodgers proposed that they be given the right to vote in 1794. The following indicates the degree of readiness of the Congregationalists for cooperation, if not outright union with the Presbyterians. On February 5, 1799, fifteen ministers of the Hartford North Association united in this statement:

This Association gives information to all whom it may concern, that the Constitution of the Churches in the State of Connecticut, founded on the common usage, and the confession of faith, heads of agreement, and articles of church discipline, adopted at the earliest period of the Settlement of the State, is not Congregational, but contains the essentials of the church of Scotland, or Presbyterian Church in America, particularly as it gives decisive power to Ecclesiastical Councils; and a Consociation consisting of Ministers and Messengers or

a lay representation from the churches is possessed of substantially the same authority as a Presbytery. The judgements, decisions, and censures in our Churches and in the Presbyterian are mutually deemed valid. The Churches, therefore, of Connecticut at large and in our districts in particular, are not now and never were from the earliest period of our settlement, Congregational Churches, according to the ideas and forms of Church order contained in the book of discipline called the Cambridge Platform; there are, however, scattered over the State, perhaps ten or twelve churches which are properly called Congregational, agreeable to the rules of Church discipline in the book above mentioned. Sometimes indeed the associated churches of Connecticut are⁵⁵ loosely and vaguely, tho improperly, termed Congregational.

This "Congregationalism" seems to be opposite of the Congregationalism of a Mather or a Hooker, who may have indeed, rolled over in their graves had they read such a statement. I find myself wondering why these ministers did not simply leave the Congregationalist Church for the Presbyterian, instead of trying to take their churches with them. But such was the spirit of the times, of ecumenism, of unity at the expense of church polity or "constricting" doctrines like that of the Congregationalist doctrine of the Church as espoused by the Cambridge Platform.

All that has been discussed as shaping and setting the stage for the Plan, does not as yet represent an entire and complete outline. This outline is devoid of a discussion of a very powerful, yet silent witness: the American frontier. If it can be said that the frontier shaped and molded American history and stimulated unity among its people, certainly the same can be said that the frontier did the same for the

Congregationalists and Presbyterians who ventured into it. It must be remembered that the Plan of Union was drafted because of the perceived need of those hearty individualists going west from New England for the life of the church in their new settlements. Both the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians responded quickly by providing ministers and missionaries. In 1792, the General Association of Connecticut began formally to collect monies for missions to the west.⁵⁶ In 1798, the General association organized itself into a missionary society. The General Assembly established its first standing committee on missions in 1801, despite having been active in missionary efforts prior to that time. The Assembly of 1801 indicated their awareness of the problem on the frontier by this statement on missionary work:

The new settlements on our frontiers appear very desirous to have the Gospel preached among them, and our missionaries who have visited them, do not appear to have labored without success. Good impressions have not unfrequently been made, and churches are rapidly forming, which will soon need settled pastors.

It is no great mystery why these two groups, similar, yet having important differences, bound themselves together to face the common task of evangelism.

The last major section of this paper will deal with several points that have provided entertaining debate material for historians, who remain divided on them. These two points are:

Who first proposed the Plan of Union?

In what ecclesiastical body did it originate?

The debate revolves around whether John Blair Smith of Union College proposed the Plan, or did Jonathan Edwards, Jr.? Also up for debate is the question of whether the General Assembly drafted the Plan first, or did the General Association of Connecticut? This section was the most entertaining to research as it was both captivating and revealing in the best sense of a mystery novel. I have chosen the title for this section accordingly.

Part 3: Who did it?

What has come to be known as the "Smith-Nott Episode" is held to be historically correct according to Sweet,⁵⁸ Gillett,⁵⁹ and Baird.⁶⁰

John Blair Smith was the President of Union College in Schenectady, New York in 1795. Union College itself, was founded as a cooperative venture between the Presbyterians and the Dutch Reformed, so it is fitting that Smith, a long time advocate of interdenominational teamwork on the frontier, be given the job. Smith, however, was only in that capacity as President for four years saying, "I prefer being Pastor of a Congregation before being a President of a college."⁶¹

The story goes that soon after Smith's inauguration as President of Union, a young man stopped on his way west and stayed for a short period of time. His name was Eliphalet Nott,

a Congregationalist missionary. During the stay, Smith impressed upon young Nott the importance of cooperation between the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians, especially in the west. Nott, who claims his training had been in "Orthodox Congregationalism" and that his sympathies were with it, along with his opinions of church government, writes this in April of 1857, concerning the events of the summer of 1795:

In passing through Schenectady, I stopped over night at a public house opposite the Academy building, then occupied by the College, and learned that there was to be a prayer meeting or a lecture there that evening. I felt it my duty to attend it and was solicited to preach by Dr. Smith, then president of Union College, who, after sermon, invited me to his house to spend the night. He inquired concerning my views, and objects, and theater of action. Having told him, he said to me, -- "The Orthodox Churches of New England hold substantially the same faith as the Presbyterian, of which the Shorter Catechism is the common symbol. Now this being the case, is it wise, is it Christian, to divide the sparse population holding the same faith, already scattered, and to be hereafter scattered, over this vast new territory, into two distinct ecclesiastical organizations, and thus prevent each from enjoying the means of grace which both might sooner enjoy but for such division? Would it not be better for the entire Church that these two divisions should make mutual concessions, and thus effect a common organization on an accommodation plan, with a view to meet the condition of communities so situated?"

The arguments employed by Dr. Smith were deemed conclusive by me, gave a new direction to my efforts, and led, through the influence of other Congregationalists whom I induced to co-operate, to the formation of those numerous Presbyterian churches on this "accommodation plan," of which, though the plan has been abandoned, the fruits remain to the present day.⁶²

It makes one wonder as to how many times this story has been told by Eliphalet Nott through the years. Yet, an oft told story does not make it historically accurate. R. H. Nichols

discredits this story as being the original thrust behind the Plan of Union. Nichols thinks that the episode was exaggerated as to its impact on history.⁶³ Nott wrote the account sixty-two years following the incident, which does not aid its validation.

There are several other problems. First, there is no record that I was able to discover, to support his claim influencing other Congregationalists. There is also no direct evidence to indicate Nott had anything to do with the negotiations of the Plan of Union. Gillett seems to enlarge the account. He claims that the Smith-Nott Episode "led. . . to the formation of numerous Presbyterian churches on the accommodation plan, and, finally, the Plan of Union."⁶⁴ Nichols points out that there were no such Presbyterian churches. There is precious little, if anything, that indicates the Plan of Union was conceived by Smith and put into action by Nott.

The preponderance of evidence, in this case, must go with Jonathan Edwards, the younger, as the conceiver of the Plan. Sweet diminishes the role of Edwards and makes him merely to be the one who carries out the wishes of Smith through Nott by formally introducing the Plan.⁶⁵ Walker disagrees with Sweet and says, "There is every reason to believe that the originator of the discussion was the younger Jonathan Edwards."⁶⁶ Edwards was perfect for this role, having been a representative in both groups, and a representative of the interests in the west.⁶⁷

He served as president of Union College from 1799 till 1801 at the time of his death. As such, he was in an ideal position to view the western expansion. Atkins and Fagley call him the ideal "liaison officer."⁶⁸

Perhaps we should recall Edwards' Presbyterian leanings.

Jonathan Edwards, Sr. had told the Presbyterians that he could sign their creed and thought their polity was superior. The older Edwards was a leader of the Great Awakening, a movement which stressed conversion over church polity. As a natural consequence of these influences in his childhood, young Jonathan grew up to be the son of his father. Also, he had been raised for a time in a household which had been buffeted by the bantering and bickering of Congregationalists while his father pastored in Northampton.⁶⁹ While this is not the place for a psychological autopsy of Jonathan Edwards, Jr., these early influences may help explain his unique suitability to be the promulgator of the Plan of Union. The second part of this section, concerning the question of the body which originated the Plan, reveals more about the role of Edwards the younger..

There is much confusion over the exact origin of the Plan. A Presbyterian, G. N. Judd, in 1852, wrote emphatically, "Let it be borne in mind that this plan (the 1801 Plan of Union) originated (Judd's italics) with the Presbyterians and was by their General assembly proposed to the General Association of Connecticut. . . ."⁷⁰ This is supported by an earlier writing

of Zebulon Crocker, a Congregationalist, in 1838. He states that it was indeed, Edwards, the younger, who originated the Plan, but that it officially originated from the General Assembly of 1801.⁷¹ A fellow Presbyterian of Judd's, Isaac Brown, harshly criticizes him for his error. Judd's error occurs, according to Brown, because of his apparent reliance upon the Assembly Digest as his source, instead of the evidently more reliable minutes of the Assembly for 1800 and 1801. These clearly indicate the Congregational origin of the solicitation for the Plan of Union.⁷²

At the General Association of Connecticut meeting of 1801, held in Norfolk, we see plain evidence of the first movement toward the Plan. The question was raised by a Presbyterian delegate to the meeting, one Jonathan Edwards, Jr., as to the permanent adjustment of relations between Congregationalists and Presbyterians on the frontier.⁷³ After a deliberation, it was determined that this should be pursued by way of committee. The committee was composed of the following individuals: Jonathan Edwards, Jr., then president of Union College and delegate from the General Assembly to the Association; Nathan Williams of Tolland, whom some evidence indicates acted as chairman; Nathan Strong of Hartford; Jonathan Freeman, another Presbyterian delegate, like Edwards. It is worthy of mention that Williams and Strong served on the Connecticut Missionary Society.⁷⁴

The following day, the committee, who's official name was the "Committee on the friendly intercourse of Missionaries," submitted their report, which said:

The Revs. Messrs. John Smalley (of New Britain), Levi Hart (of Griswold), and Samual Blatchford (of Bridgeport), are hereby appointed a Committee of this General Association, to confer with a committee to be appointed by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, if they see fit to appoint such a committee, to consider the measures proper to be adopted both by this Association and said Assembly, to prevent alienation, to promote harmony and to establish, as far as possible, an uniform system of Church government, between those habitants of the new Settlements, who are attached to the Presbyterian form of church government, and those who are attached to the Congregational form: and to make report to this Association. Any two of the said committee are hereby empowered to act.

Resolved that a copy of the foregoing paragraph be transmitted to the said General Assembly, and that they be respectfully requested by the Moderator of this ⁹⁵ Association to concur in the measure now proposed.

This proposition came before the General Assembly at the 1801 meeting. The minutes of that meeting record the Presbyterian recognition of the Congregational initiative:

A communication was read from the General Association of the State of Connecticut appointing a committee to confer with a committee of the Presbyterian Church to consider the measures proper to be adopted by the General Association and the General Assembly, for establishing an uniform system of church government between the inhabitants of the new settlements, who are attached to the Presbyterian form of ⁷⁸ government and those who prefer the Congregational form.

The "communication" in line one of this quote, was a letter from the chair of the Committee on the friendly intercourse of Missionaries, Nathan Williams. This letter mirrored the report of that committee to the Association, being practically verbatim.

The General Assembly concurred with the Association and appointed a committee, which, of course, included Edwards. The purpose of this committee was to draw up a formal proposal that each body could then act upon. Similar to the previous committee of the Association (which also included Edwards), the group was ready the next day with their proposal. Following a period of unheated deliberation, it was approved by the General Assembly on May 29.⁷⁷

Finally, the Plan, whose conception rested with the Congregationalists, was brought back in its official form from the General Assembly meeting, and put before the General Association of Connecticut meeting in June of 1801, in Lynchfield, where it was, of course, approved.

Conclusion

The Plan of Union of 1801 did not last very long, officially only 36 years as it was abrogated by the "Old School" Presbyterians in 1837. For whatever it was worth, the "New School" Presbyterians recognized it until 1852, when it was finally denounced by the Congregationalists.⁷⁸ What then, can be said of the Plan of Union of 1801?

It is estimated that more than two thousand churches that were Congregational in "origin and usage" were transformed by the Plan into Presbyterian churches.⁷⁹ Perhaps it can truly

be said, along with Edward A. Lawrence that, "They have milked our Congregational cows, but have made nothing but Presbyterian butter and cheese."⁸⁰ Walker tends to agree with Lawrence on this point saying, "It would have been better had it never been made."⁸¹

It may well have benefited the Congregationalists to have done it alone, without the teamwork of the Presbyterians, for the end result indicates that far more churches ended up Presbyterian than Congregational. A fact which may have been due to the dynamics of the wildness of the frontier, and the possibility of the new settlements seeking a "stronger" and more "stable" polity and connectedness for their churches, in light of all the other uncertainties that they needed to face.

In performing this "ecumenical postmortem," as limited as it is, I have come to tremendously respect the efforts of those individuals who brought this Plan about. I do not necessarily agree with their methodology, however I do respect their motives, each only wanting to insure that the new settlers had the best spiritual care that the two groups could provide through this Union.

Despite the differences over the doctrine of the Church, and the consequent split in polity, and how that was manifested in various aspects from church membership to the role of higher councils, the two groups forged a union with very little dissent, both votes being overwhelmingly for the Plan. This was due,

only in part because of the work of those individuals who voted in 1801. Of greater influence were the factors which led up to that time. The Saybrook Platform of 1708, and its modification of the Cambridge Platform, along with the influence of Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening of the 1740's, loomed large in the background of the staging of the Plan. The joint effort to forestall the establishment of an Anglican bishopric in the mid 18th century marked the beginning of cooperative ventures between the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians. Following this, the national rise of ecumenicity added further impetus to this feeling of cooperation. During the period immediately preceding the framing of the Plan, the efforts of Jonathan Edwards, Jr., Timothy Dwight, John Rodgers, and Alexander McWhorter, contributed directly to the socio-theological background that helped make the Plan acceptable to both groups. The rapidity of its framing and lack of dissent during of the Plan's adoption is astounding. William S. Kennedy in 1856, writes of the mood of those times:

Never was (an) article framed in a more catholic spirit, or more perfectly adapted to promote Christian charity, and union, between the people of God who happen to be thrown together in a forming society. . . .⁸²

However altruistic the mood of the those times were, it was to change within a brief period of time following the Plan's adoption. Many criticisms were concentrated on the hot potato of the doctrine of the Church, with both sides accusing the other of being in error.

Perhaps, in the final analysis, if there is to be a lesson learned from the Plan of Union of 1801, a possible guideline for future ecumenical relations, it would be this: When entering any official relationship with another denomination it is wise to ask this question, "Will this relationship compromise, in any fashion, our theology, or our unique identity under God?" Our Congregational and presbyterian forebearers would have been well advised to seriously consider the long term consequences of compromising their denominationalism. This consideration was markedly absent, rapidly swept away by the spirit of the times in the harried calling to evangelize the west.

Endnotes

¹Lefferts A. Loetscher, A Brief History of the Presbyterians (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), p. 85.

²Ernest B. Patton, The Past Speaks to Us; an Introduction to the History of the Western New York Presbytery (The Presbytery of Western New York, year unknown), p. 59.

³Harry R. Butman, The Lord's Free People (Wauwatosa, Wisconsin: The Swannet Press, 1968), p. 51.

⁴Sydney E. Ahlstrom, A Religious History of the American People (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 133.

⁵Discussed by Williston Walker, Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1925, paper 1960), p. 78.

⁶Arthur A. Rouner, Jr., "The Congregational Way as a Call to Pilgrimage for the American Church," The Congregationalist Volume 149, No.6, p. 17. *Dec. 1959/Jan. 1970.*

⁷Cited by Walker, Creeds, p. 212.

⁸Loetscher, p. 25-26.

⁹John Cotton, The Keyes to the Kingdom of Heaven (London: Robert Ibbotson, 1644), passim.

¹⁰Williston Walker, Richard A. Norris, David W. Lotz, Robert T. Handy, A History of the Christian Church (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 4th ed., 1985), p. 499.

¹¹Thomas Hooker, A Survey of the Summe of Church-Discipline; Wherein, the Way of New-England is warranted out of the Word (London: E. Griffin, 1648), p. 36ff.

¹²Samuel Rutherford, Due Right of Presbytery, or a Peacable Plea for the Government of the Church of Scotland (London: E. Griffin, 1644), p. 72.

¹³Walker, A History p. 499.

¹⁴Champlin Burrage, The Church Covenant Idea; Its Origin and Development (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1904), pp.96-112.

¹⁵Cotton, Keyes, passim.

Endnotes, (continued).

¹⁶Cotton, Keyes, passim.

¹⁷Richard Mather, An Apologie of the Churches in New-England for Church-Covenant...or a Discourse touching the Covenant between God and men, and especially concerning Church-Covenant, that is to say, the Covenant which a Company doe enter into when they become a Church; and which a particular person enters into when he becomes a member of a Church (London: Robert Ibbotson, 1643), p. 5.

¹⁸Walker, A History, p. 266.

¹⁹Mather, An Apologie, p. 5, 18.

²⁰Rutherford, p. 1.

²¹Rutherford, p. 1.

²²Hooker, A Survey of the Summe of Church-Discipline pp. 45-46.

²³Walker, Creeds, p. 205.

²⁴Ahlstrom, p. 163.

²⁵Ahlstrom, p. 163.

²⁶Leonard Bacon, S. W. S. Dutton and E. W. Robinson (editors), Contributions of the Ecclesiastical History of Connecticut, prepared under the direction of the General Association, to commemorate the completion of 150 years since its first annual assembly (New Haven: William L. Kingsley, 1861), pp. 253-259.

²⁷Walker, A History, p. 67.

²⁸Ahlstrom, p. 293.

²⁹Ahlstrom, p. 293.

³⁰George Marsden, The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 10.

³¹Ahlstrom, p. 294.

³²Ahlstrom, p. 312.

Endnotes, (continued).

³³ Walker, A History, p. 610.

³⁴ Cited by James K. Morse, Jedidiah Morse: a Champion of New England Orthodoxy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), p. 9.

³⁵ Charles Hodge, The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, Part II, 1741-1748 (Philadelphia: William S. Martien, 1840), p. 420-425.

³⁶ Marsden, p. 10, 11.

³⁷ Minutes of the Convention of Delegates from the Synod of New York and Philadelphia and from the Associations of Connecticut held annually from 1766 to 1775, inclusive (Hartford: E. Gleason, 1843), p. 6.

³⁸ Minutes of the Convention of Delegates, p. 18.

³⁹ Hodge, p. 477ff.

⁴⁰ Loetscher, p. 83.

⁴¹ Loetscher, p. 84.

⁴² Leonard J. Trinterud, The Forming of an American Tradition. A Re-examination of Colonial Presbyterianism (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949), pp. 15-37.

⁴³ Cited by Charles E. Cuninghame, Timothy Dwight, 1752-1817, A Biography (New York: Macmillan Company, 1942), p. 335.

⁴⁴ "A Sermon Delivered in Boston, September 16, 1813, before the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions," cited by Cuninghame, p. 336.

⁴⁵ Cuninghame, pp. 125-126.

⁴⁶ Cuninghame, p. 128.

⁴⁷ Jonathan Edwards, The Works of Jonathan Edwards, D. D., Late President of Union College, With a Memoir of his Life and Character by Tryon Edwards, in 2 Volumes (Andover: Allen, Morrill and Wardwell, 1842), II, pp. 230-231.

⁴⁸ Edwards, pp. 230-231.

Endnotes, (continued).

⁴⁹Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, from its organization A. D. 1789 to A.D. 1820 inclusive (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1841), p. 146.

⁵⁰Hodge, p. 438ff.

⁵¹Morse, p. 24.

⁵²W. B. Sprague, Annals of the American Pulpit, Nine Volumes, Volume III and IV, "Presbyterians" (New York: R. Carter and Brothers, 1858-1869), III, p. 156.

⁵³Minutes of the General Assembly, 1788-1820, p. 146.

⁵⁴Samuel Baird, A History of the New School (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen & Haffelfinger, 1868), p. 153.

⁵⁵Walker, Creeds, p. 514.

⁵⁶Zebulon Crocker, The Catastrophe of the Presbyterian Church in 1837, including a full view of the recent theological controversies in New England (New Haven: B. and W. Noyes, 1838), pp. 8,9.

⁵⁷Crocker, p. 10.

⁵⁸William W. Sweet, Religion on the American Frontier, Volume II, The Presbyterians, 1783-1840 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1936), p. 41.

⁵⁹E. H. Gillett, History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, Two Volumes (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Publication Committee, 1864), pp. 393-394.

⁶⁰Gaius G. Atkins and Frederick L. Fagley, History of American Congregationalism (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1942), p. 142.

⁶¹Sprague, p. 399.

⁶²Sprague, p. 403.

⁶³Robert H. Nichols, "The Plan of Union in Ohio," Church History, Vol. VI, (June 1937), p. 37.

⁶⁴Gillett, p. 392.

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⁶⁵ William W. Sweet, Religion on the American Frontier, Volume III, The Congregationalists (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), pp. 13-42.

⁶⁶ Walker, Creeds, p. 529.

⁶⁷ Leonard W. Bacon, The Congregationalists (New York: Baker and Taylor Company, 1904), p. 150.

⁶⁸ Atkins and Fagley, p. 143., see ftnt. 16.

⁶⁹ Atkins and Fagley, p. 143.

⁷⁰ A History of the Division of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, by a Committee of the Synod of New York and New Jersey (New York: M. W. Dodd, 1852), p. 11.

⁷¹ Crocker, p. 10.

⁷² Isaac Brown, A Historical Vindication of the Abrogation of the Plan of Union by the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (Philadelphia: William S. & Alfred Martien, 144 Chestnut St., 1855), pp. 31-32.

⁷³ Walker, p. 529.

⁷⁴ Walker, p. 529.

⁷⁵ Minutes of the General Assembly, 1789-1820, p. 212.

⁷⁶ Minutes of the General Assembly, 1789-1820, p. 212.

⁷⁷ Minutes of the General Assembly, 1789-1820, p. 222.

⁷⁸ Waldemar Manfred Kohl, Congregationalism in America (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: The Congregationalist Press, CCC/NA, p. 33.

⁷⁹ Kohl, p. 33.

⁸⁰ Kohl, p. 33.

⁸¹ Walker, Creeds, p. 541.

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⁸²William S. Kennedy, The Plan of Union: or A history of the Presbyterian and Congregational Churches of the Western Reserve: with Biographical Sketches of the Early Missionaries (Hudson, Ohio: Pentagon Steam Press, 1856), p. 151.

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