

Congregational Foundation For Theological Studies

Toward A Basic Understanding of
Congregational Influence upon
Early American Political Development

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"The idea of a 'government of the people, by the people, and for the people,' was conceived in Congregational churches; was by them urged and developed into a practical scheme, and without them would never have been realized. The blessings of our Republic have come to us through Congregationalism and through the men who found in its faith and polity the principles of self government, together with unswerving loyalty to God." 1

What are we, as Congregationalists, to think about a statement like the one above? Was our denomination as powerfully responsible for the political destiny^{of} our nation as it is proposed to be? Are we to believe that our foreparents in faith were the only ones who brought to us our national policy? Or just how influential was Congregationalism in our nation's political beginnings? I read many of the works about Congregationalism, varied opinions become evident. Which ones do we believe? Do they all bear some truth or are a few just prideful conjectures? With this paper, I hope to present a clearer idea as to the impact of congregationalism upon America's political and philosophical origins. This is a beginning work outlining the basic values and beliefs of early Congregationalism (derived from the "Puritan Ethic") and applying these values and beliefs to a study of that culture which revolted against England and brought this nation into its political independence. Through reading and research I find that Congregationalism did indeed play a large role in that tumultuous time and have found adequate research to prove such an assertion. The difficult part, however, is to find out just how much influence Congregationalism wielded. For the most part, I hope to open new doors of understanding about our denomination, shedding some light on the myths and realities that took place so long ago in our

country's early history.

Congregationalism and the Puritan Ethic

In order to understand what pressures Congregationalism may have placed upon American political philosophy, we must uncover and explore the intellect that developed the Congregational way. This intellect (commonly referred to as the Puritan Ethic)² is a term borrowed from Edmund S. Morgan and means the set of values and beliefs that are derived from Puritanism. We do not have to be Puritans to take part in the Puritan Ethic. Indeed, many of the values and beliefs we hold in this country today stem from Puritanism and could rightly be called part of the Puritan Ethic. In all actuality, only one generation of true Puritans ever existed. Their legacy, however, has stamped its imprint upon our lives so strongly that even to this day we are affected by their historical presence.

What are some of the beliefs of the Puritan Ethic? Morgan states that "the values, ideas, and attitudes of the Puritan Ethic [are]...clustered around the familiar idea of 'galling'.³" This calling leads every person to serve God by serving others and self in a useful and productive manner. One could not embark upon a career unless he or she felt a calling to do so. Once a person succeeded in understanding his or her call to a particular trade or profession, then he or she must accomplish the work and shun both idleness and/or neglect of that call.

Congregationalism grew out of the first generation of Puritanism and, with the coming sociological evolution of the colonies, lost its original form of Puritanism but still clung strongly to

the Puritan Ethic.

"It was the Puritan minister, John Cotton, who coined the phrase Congregational Way... those Salem settlers who gathered themselves into a congregation, adopted the Pilgrim practice [Congregational polity]; and when the Puritans followed en masse in 1630 they found a congregational church polity already in operation... That they adopted it had less to do with political or theological preconceptions than with the fact that nothing else suited the communittees so well." 4

Needless to say, Congregationalism was born out of Puritanism and maintained its strength throughout the years by keeping the Puritan Ethic alive.

After John Cotton coined the phrase "Congregational Way," it grew in popularity. By 1648 it was in general use and over the next 150 years Congregationalism enjoyed a healthy prosperity in the New England area. The colonial period in American history shows us, however, that Congregationalism was not the only denomination on the rise. In fact, much to the dismay of many Puritans who did not believe a state could exist without an official church, America was becoming a country of denominations. Baptists, Quakers, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, a few Roman Catholics, and some smaller sects could be found in every colony by the time of the Revolutionary War. Even so, Congregationalism played a dominate part. "At the time of the Revolution they [Congregationalists] formed the biggest denomination in the United States. It dominated all of New England except Rhode Island,..."⁵ Obviously, based on the sheer weight of numbers, Congregationalism must have played an important role in the development of our nation's political Philosophy.

There is little doubt that much of the rhetoric which spawned

our nation's independence was cultivated in New England. Furthermore, there is considerable evidence that much of the rhetoric from New England came from Congregationalists. Their discourse contained the central elements of the Puritan Ethic. "The course of liberty and self-government in colonial America was nourished by several Puritan principles." ⁶ Within the woven fabric of American political ideals and philosophy we can find some of the beliefs and values that are important in the Puritan Ethic. We must realize, however, that though the Puritan Ethic flavours the events of our nation's political origins, it seldom influences directly the end results.

"...the important events of time can seldom be seen as the result of these ideas and never as the result solely of these ideas. Yet the major developments, the resistance to Great Britain, independence, the divisions among the successful Revolutionists, and the formulation of policies for the new nation, were all discussed and understood by men [sic] of the time in terms derived from the Puritan Ethic." ⁷

In all probability then, Congregationalism, with its free and autonomous polity, its origins in Puritanism, and heavy population in Colonial America (especially New England), was one of the major contributors to the rise of the American Revolution and the political philosophy that developed there after.

Some Major Contributions Congregationalism Brought to Our Nation's Early Development

One of the most striking contributions that grew from Congregationalism beyond its denominational boundaries and into our national culture came about as a result of a great internal controversy in the churches. Since the Pilgrim's landing in Plymouth

Bay, the Puritans, which included all Congregationalists, tolerated only one religious practice in Massachusetts. That was, of course, Puritanism; found mostly in the forms of Congregationalism and Presbyterianism. Both of these churches were very close theologically at the time. It is ironic that the Puritans were so lacking in tolerance since they had left England purely because there had been no tolerance for them there. As I mentioned before, many denominations began to appear in the colonies shortly after the Puritan movement and some even dared to enter New England which was under Puritanical law.

"The early New England Congregationalists were in no mood to permit dissenters to undermine their attempt to fashion a new Zion in the American wilderness. Having sacrificed much to leave their homes in pursuit of an opportunity to 'bring into familiar and constant practice' that which they previously had been able to 'maintain as truth in profession only,' they saw no reason why their endeavor should be compromised by dissidence. Others, they contended had full liberty to stay away." 8

As minority denominations and religious groups continued to filter into New England, religious tolerance was activated. However, religious tolerance is quite a distance from religious liberty even though the minority group has the freedom to stay. In fact, religious tolerance provides all religions the right to worship as they please but denies them the civil liberties of the accepted dominate group; in our case the Puritans. Congregational Puritans fought the issue so diligently that concern for civil and religious liberties became of national importance.

"in the end,...in Jefferson's great act for establishing Religious Freedom and disestablishing legislation that surrounded it, this goal, sought jointly by spokesmen for minority denomination-ism and enlightened reform, was attained..." 9

As the Puritans fought for their own civil and religious liberties from Great Britain, they could hardly deny those same freedoms for other groups, though they would have liked to. Their own struggles for liberty and also their hypocrisy led toward a broader freedom for worshipers in our nation.

Another major contribution toward political freedom that emerged from Congregationalism was the activity of many Congregational preachers who supported the revolution and the ideology of civic freedom.

"There is probably no group of men in history, living in a particular area at a given time, who can speak as forcibly on the subject of liberty as the Congregational ministers of New England between 1750 and 1785." 10

Congregationalists like Thomas Mayhew were in the forefront of the pursuit of liberty. Mayhew expressed many of the views contained within the Declaration of Independence, twenty years before Jefferson wrote that well known document. Franklin Cole points out, in his book They Preached Liberty, several sections of one of Mayhew's sermons that actually parallel the Declaration of Independence. This is not to suggest that Mayhew's ideas reached Jefferson, because there is no evidence that either Jefferson or Mayhew had ever been exposed to each other's thought. The suggestion is that, whatever the circumstances, the political climate was ripe for a change and Mayhew exhorted the feelings of many in New England and the Colonies. Furthermore, he was not alone among his Congregational peers. Many other Congregational ministers were touting British rule with much of the same rhetoric.

Congregational ministers went beyond the activities of preaching and writing on behalf of the rebellion. Many also participated

in revolutionary activities; showing an active sense of responsibility in connection with their beliefs. "The Congregational leadership matched word with deed during the struggle, providing chaplains, officers and men, and material support for the revolutionary armies." 11 This was not as major a contribution as the writing and preaching, but it did show that the response among Congregational leadership and its followers was wholistic. It must be remembered, however, that the Congregational effort, though effective in its own way, was only a part of the entire movement to shape the nation. "Among the Protestants, three groups of ministers were especially active in backing the Revolution: the Congregationalists of New England, the Presbyterians of the middle colonies, and the Baptists generally." 12

The last major contribution of Congregationalism, that I have found, is what I believe may be the most ambiguous to present and the most difficult to defend. However, I also believe that it may potentially be the greatest influence Congregationalism had upon our nation during and after the Revolutionary War. I believe that Congregationalism contributed one of the major examples by which our nation could pattern itself. Congregationalism maintained a free polity based on democratic ideals. It provided a blue-print. "...a major source of ideas and attitudes of the Revolutionary generation stemmed ultimately from the political and social theories of New England..."¹³ The Puritan Ethic was not conceived for the function of national government but only as a guide giving personal lives a direction. Early Puritan leaders did not want to change civil governments and most certainly would not have risked the dangers of democracy if the occasion of change occurred.

"It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of the adoption of the Congregational form of church polity by the New England churches, in terms of the future of democracy. It is true that the democratic seed here planted was of slow development, but there was no other soil in the world so well adapted to its full unfolding as was that of the American frontier. The oft quoted statement by Gooch, that 'democracy is the child of Reformation, not the Reformers,' suggests a similar generalization that New England democracy was the child of Congregationalism, not the Congregational leaders." 14

After five generations of Congregational polity, then, one generation became ready to take the risk of being civilly governed in the same way they were governed as a religious entity. Congregational polity crossed into many denominations, including Baptist and Quaker, and therefore would not be a stranger to those who lived outside the New England area. Arthur A. Rouner sums up the feelings of our Congregational fore-parents.

"Probably there is nothing that we Americans prize more than freedom. Freedom is our heritage. In many ways it is the meaning of America.

"But freedom is more than America's Heritage. It is the Congregational heritage as well. Indeed, Congregationalism has had a great deal to do with the bringing of freedom to America." 15

Conclusion: Congregationalism, a Part of the Whole

Throughout this paper I have hoped to portray some beginning ideas as to the influences of Congregationalism upon the early American political destiny. Also, I hope to convey the idea that the Congregational Way, though important to the entire process, is only part of the whole. Indeed, much of what I wrote and what others have written about this subject cannot be accurately mea-

sured but only speculated upon. There is no doubt, for instance, that Congregational polity influenced the shaping of democracy, but by how much is not known. When did political concern meet religious concern? Why was not some other form of polity adopted? These questions may never have to be. For a fact we know that certain events did occur, for better or worse, which brought us to where we are today. It is good to speculate about how one system affected another in our history, but we must remember that those same basic systems remain and are still affecting each other today. Our responsibility is to make sure our Christian faith informs, critiques, reforms, and makes better our lives in both our religious and civil spectrums, now. That is our Puritan and Congregational legacy.

Endnotes

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2. Morgan-Edmund S., "The Puritan Ethic and the American Revolution," The William and Mary Quarterly, Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, January-1967.
3. Ibid. (pg. 4)
4. Starkey-Marion L., The Congregational Way, Doubleday and Company, Garden City, New York, 1966. (pg. 4)
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6. Rossiter-Clinton, Seedtime of the Republic, Harecourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1953. (pg. 53)
7. Morgan. (pg. 7-8)
8. Hudson-Winthrop S. (edt.), Nationalism and Religion in America, Harper and Row, Publishers, New York, Evanston, and London, 1970. (pg. 35)
9. Bailyn-Bernard, The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution, The Belknap Press, Cambridge Mass., 1967. (pg. 9)
10. Cole-Franklin P., They Preached Liberty, Fleming H. Renell Company, New York, (Date Unknown). (pg. 37)
11. Handy-Robert T., A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada, Oxford University Press, Boston, 1894. (pg. 140)
12. Stokes and Pfeffer. (pg. 37)
13. Handy. (pg. 139)
14. Sweet-William Warren, Religion in Colonial America, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1942. (pg. 84)
15. Rouser-Arthur A., The Congregational Way of Life, Prentice-Hall Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1960. (pg. 15)

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