

**Comparison and Contrast: Cambridge
Platform and the 1954 Polity and
Unity Report**

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The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast the Cambridge Platform and the 1954 Polity and Unity Report outlining the historical context and situation in which each document was written.

Historical Context of the Cambridge Platform

In the introduction to Williston Walker's *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* Elizabeth Nordbeck noted that early Congregationalism embraced more diversity than the more hierarchic systems of 17th and 18th centuries, yet it is also noted that in New England's Congregationalism, "nascent diversity was limited – and homogeneity was fostered..."¹ John von Rohr reminds that Congregationalism was the exclusive form of church for the early New England colonies. The idea of a holy commonwealth and the early church-state relationship offered restrictive boundaries for the establishment of and admission to church membership.² Within and against these boundaries the early colonies struggled as those who strove to "keep their churches pure, also sought to keep the commonwealth itself free from the

¹Williston Walker. *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*. (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1991), xi.

² John von Rohr. *The Shaping of American Congregationalism: 1620-1957*. (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1992), 77-79.

impurities of Nonconformity.”³ The ideal of religious freedom was not as we conceive of it today in a global ecumenical context.

In the mid 17th century England’s Puritan movement as well as Parliament’s union with Scotland caused a stir in the New England’s Congregationalist who became concerned that Parliament might force conformity with Scotland’s Presbyterianism.⁴ The Westminster Assembly had begun to meet and although the Westminster Confession was acceptable as a statement of faith and doctrine the Presbyterian polity was unacceptable to many⁵, although not all.

Richard Mather, John Cotton and Thomas Hooker published treatises to England defining and forwarding Congregationalism as a response to Presbyterian polity. This caused a stir with some New England pastors sympathetic to a Presbyterian polity. To meet growing tension clergy gathered in 1643 to discuss polity concerns. Von Rohr noted this meeting expressed, “...the growing longing for an instrument that could bring together the independent churches and speak for them with a collective voice...a stated ‘platform of church discipline.’”⁶ Questions of church discipline in terms of advice and admonition stretched to authority over excommunication. Led by Robert Child a group in Massachusetts petitioned the General Court protesting ideas of “selective church membership, the withholding of the sacraments from nonmembers, and the

³ John von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism*, 74-75.

⁴ Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms*, 159.

⁵ John von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism* 83.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

religious restriction applied to the political franchise.”⁷ The tension as well as the desire to gather individual churches together was met in the Cambridge Synod⁸ of 1647.

Von Rohr noted the first order of business was to “declare the importance of the cooperation of church and state in the use of synods for the health of the commonwealth.”⁹ Walker reminds that Ecclesiology then believed the civil magistrate would be involved in matters of doctrine and church practice and did not recognize the democratic element we practice today as New England Congregationalism was Barrowist.¹⁰ Von Rohr summarized that following the principles of Henry Barrow, church government “is given by Christ to the elders, who are responsible for ‘church-rule,’ whereas ‘the work and duty of the people’ consist in ‘obeying their elders and submitting themselves unto them in the Lord.’”¹¹ Walker affirmed the lasting value and influence of the Cambridge Platform in its principles writing, “autonomy of the local church, the dependence of the churches upon one another for counsel, the representative character of the ministry are all plainly taught...”¹² Although church-state relationship of the 17th century changed as well as the democratic structure of autonomous church government, it is in this context that the principles and polity of the Cambridge Platform were formed and would evolve from.

⁷ John von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism* 18.

⁸ Williston Walker notes that modern Congregationalist do not use the word Synod, but would rather call this type of meeting a Council. *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, 167.

⁹ John von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism* 82.

¹⁰ Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms* 185.

¹¹ John von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism* 98.

¹² Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms*, 186.

Historical Context of the 1954 Polity and Unity Report

Douglas Horton wrote an introduction for the 1960 edition of *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* reflecting back on the context of the Congregational way between 1925 and 1960 claiming that a sense of *koinonia* or fellowship was flourishing in Congregationalist (and other Protestants) and moved people to rediscover the church.¹³ Horton felt Congregational leaders were realizing that the individualism of the mid and late 1800's enhanced the authority of the local church over that of the broad communion also undermined the understanding of the Christ as the head of the Church:

It is Christ who gives the Church power, feeding strength to the local church through the whole company of churches and to the whole company through the local church. He is immediately present alike to each church and to the whole...the whole is not itself except as it is made up of free and autonomous parts with direct access to Christ, but the parts are not themselves except as they belong to the whole which is also informed by Christ.¹⁴

Horton asserted that the tie and mutual respect of true *koinonia* between the local church and broad communion as a whole, which is reawakening in the mid 20th century, is the same spirit in which the Cambridge Platform was written.

John von Rohr in the early 1990's titled his chapter that reflects on this time of broad ecumenical interest as "Tensions and Transitions." Von Rohr summarized that the morale and financial distress of the 1920's and 1930's, the postwar skepticism and moral lethargy, the tension between theological liberalism and fundamentalism to which neo-orthodoxy responded

¹³ Douglas Horton. "Introduction to the 1960 Edition" in *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, 587.

¹⁴ Ibid., 589.

challenged the Church.¹⁵ The post war 1940's and 50's may have brought growth and financial well-being but there remained unresolved tension over "irresponsible radicalism" of the Council for Social Action leading into the question of merger.¹⁶ This tension surrounding the question of merger led in reality to a division in Congregationalism.

In 1950 the Committee on Free Church Polity and Unity was formed in the midst of heightened awareness toward a global ecumenical movement and in Congregationalism the question of merger between the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church. The stated purpose was, "to make a careful study of the principles and polity of Congregational..."¹⁷ The reader is reminded of the ongoing question and attempts toward unity and church union, especially between 1886 and 1946.¹⁸ Rev. Steven Peay and Rev. Lloyd Hall wrote an introduction to a reprint of the 1954 Polity and Unity Report stating that the committees study offers insight into theory and praxis of Congregational Polity and the functional question of ecumenical cooperation.¹⁹

Through the course of history it has seemed that time of change has energized the Church, and the opportunity to purposefully reflect on the relationship of time and context with perceived movements in the church may help us to understand our identity as Congregational Christians.

¹⁵ John von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism*, 451.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Steven A. Peay and Lloyd M. Hall Jr., ed *Congregationalism: The Church Local and Universal- the 1954 Polity and Unity Report*. (Oak Creek, Congregational Press, 2001), 6.

¹⁸ Ibid., 14.

¹⁹ Ibid., 2.

Comparison and Contrast

The Cambridge Platform begins with a preface that affirmed desire for unity & harmony between other churches and their own. There is a concern to answer claims of “Heresy & Schism” in colonial New England’s dispute with encroaching Presbyterian polity. Walker noted charges of doubtful orthodoxy were “frequently made by the Presbyterian party in England, as well a by the Episcopalians...” and care was given so as not to rouse Parliamentary interference.²⁰ There is in the preface to the Cambridge Platform a concern for perceived unity with the Puritan party in England and that a difference in Church order should not become a stumbling block to faith nor a cause for separation or schism.

The 1954 Polity and Unity Report begin a “Guide to the Report” which acknowledges its context and purpose to consider how the Congregationalism, in terms of polity, may be part of the ecumenical movement.²¹ In the 2001 introduction to the reprint of The 1954 Polity and Unity Report Rev.’s Peay and Hall wrote that the committee on Free Church Polity embraced the understanding that diversity is strength not weakness.²² The Committee, similar to the author’s of The Cambridge Platform noted that doctrine or “attitude toward the sacraments, creeds and customs” are not the purpose of the report but rather a “careful study of the principles and polity of Congregationalism.”²³ The context of the New England churches of the mid 17th century

²⁰ Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms*, 185.

²¹ Steven A. Peay and Lloyd M. Hall Jr., ed *Congregationalism: The Church Local and Universal*, 11-12.

²² *Ibid.*, 5

²³ *Ibid.* 6.

claimed unity in doctrine with the Puritan movement with an apologetics approach. The Committee on Free Church Polity and Unity acknowledged that doctrinal concerns do have bearing on the ecumenical movement yet affirmed from the preamble of the Constitution of the General Council, “We hold sacred the freedom of the individual soul and the right of private judgment...”²⁴ This committee was not intended to comment toward the proposed merger which resulted in a division that became the United Church of Christ (1957). But the question of merger was part of the context of that time. The Committee purposed its study to compile a report on the history and current practice of free autonomous fellowships and keep in tension a sense of unity in diversity; a phrase that fit well in the context of the ecumenical movement in the mid 20th century.

The following is a summary of The Cambridge Platform as it is given in Walker’s *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*. It is distinct from the Polity and Unity Report in that scripture is distinctly and particularly referenced as authority for statements made.

Chapter III and IV describe the visible church made up of those who profess faith and repentance and even though individuals may “degenerate, & grow corrupt...through a defect of execution of discipline & Just censures”²⁵ the church is still the church. Further, each church is complete and gathers by covenant. Chapter V describes Christ as head of the church and in Chapter VI – IIX enumerates the offices and roles in each local church as found in scripture and that each officer is chosen or dismissed by free election and when possible the advice of neighbor churches sought. Chapter IX lays out the election which may be followed by ordination

²⁴ Ibid. 8.

²⁵ Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms*, 207.

of officers with the imposition of hands. The relationship of officer or minister is to the church that elected them only and the process repeated to form a new relationship within another congregation. It is distinct to note that this may be done by people chosen to do so by the church and that Elders of another church may be invited also to participate. Chapter X which lays out the power of the Church acknowledges its context in which there was a “mixed government” of Christ as the head (monarchy) and the power Christ grants to the people (democracy) and the organized presbytery or elders (aristocracy) through which the consent of both the people and the elders is had in order to act. This lays the groundwork for action taken in reception of new members and the maintenance of church officers is held within this “mixed government.” The admission, transmission or removal of membership is of deep importance and there is noted interest in the purity of the church in membership. Chapter XII notes those seeking membership are to be “examined and tried” and make a public profession of faith and repentance. There are methods of discipline that are the duty of church members through counsel and consent to maintain.

While the previous sections of the Platform dealt with issues of the local church the final three chapters deal with the communion or fellowship between churches and the broader organization of Synods, and finally the relationship of church and state. Chapter XV lays out the way of communion or fellowship between churches: in mutual care, consultation and admonition, (without authority of one over the other) shared participation in the Lord’s table, sharing ministers in times of need, recommendation for membership, and propagation of new churches. Communion/fellowship between churches may be broken if unrepentant offense is found but individuals, if they bear witness against the offense, may stay in communion. Chapter XVI explains the role of Synods (which may be called by magistrates) to debate issues of

controversy concerning faith, directions for worship, doctrine and administration, but do not carry authority of such over a church. Synods are an assembly of church members and elders. Chapter XVII concludes the Platform explaining civil power within ecclesial matters. The Platform takes care to state, “It is not in the power of Magistrates to compel their subjects to become church-members, & to partake at the Lord’s Table...as it is unlawful for church-officers to meddle with the sword of the Magistrate.”²⁶ In the context of its time the magistrate and church are understood to be of Christ.

The 1954 Polity and Unity Report as noted earlier, does not highlight references to scripture as the Cambridge Platform does. The Cambridge Platform was written in a time before concern for many different denominations was at issue. Rather, potential schism was of a noted concern. In its different context the Polity and Unity Report begins with a review of numerous attempts at union between existing denominations. The Report notes, “The founding fathers of the Christian Church had in common a dream for union of all the followers of Christ.”²⁷ Thus the Report continues this theme outlining in Chapter III titled “The Spiritual and Theological Basis of Congregationalism as Related to Christian Unity.” Although worded differently the Polity and Unity Report affirms the Cambridge Platforms assent to Christ as the head of the church and the autonomy of the local church.

The Report lays out a series of questions to answer relating to Free Church polity and unity. Some of these questions, although not stated in the Cambridge Platform, could have

²⁶ Ibid., 235

²⁷ Steven A. Peay and Lloyd M. Hall Jr., ed *Congregationalism: The Church Local and Universal*, 14.

participated in the thought of those writing it in terms of drawing together the individual churches of New England.

The section titled Congregationalism in Documents there was noted some difference. In the admission of members we see a difference between statements such as, “The doors of the Churches of Christ upon earth, do not by God’s appointment stand so wide open, that all sorts of people good or bad may freely enter.”²⁸ versus, “...the congregational pattern does the difficult thing of keeping the door of Christian fellowship open to admit into one fellowship sincere followers of Christ...”²⁹ Further, the 1954 Polity and Unity Report states in terms of requirements for membership that each church sets its own standards, “These may or may not require baptism or assent to a creed...”³⁰ Is there a different practice or belief surrounding sacramentology today?

The Report lays out definitions of organizations that were not noted nor formed in the time of the Platform, yet the primary issue of voluntary association follows what had been established in the Platform for churches and synods. The Report affirms that each document “describes Congregational Christian polity as it is currently practiced and does not presume to say whether or not what is is what ought to be.”³¹ We are, and should always be, seeking to grow in God’s will and Congregationalism taken seriously requires this of us.

²⁸ Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms*, 221-222.

²⁹ Steven A. Peay and Lloyd M. Hall Jr., ed *Congregationalism: The Church Local and Universal*, 17.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 35.