

TESTIMONY, NOT A TEST:
CREEDS IN CONGREGATIONALISM

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Congregational History and Polity

Submitted to:
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"Congregationalism originated in the belief that the Bible is a sufficient and authoritative exposition of polity as well as of doctrine, and it has at all times held that the conformity of its beliefs and practices to the Word of God is of prime importance; but it has allowed each church to express its conception of Christian truth in its way. Such expressions become tests for membership in the local church which adopts them in so far as that church desires to use them for such a purpose. At the same time . . . the Congregational churches in their representative gatherings have never hesitated to present their faith in public confessions, but such general confessions are not binding on any local church unless adopted by its own act. They are witnesses to the faith of the church in general, not tests of ministerial fitness."

- Williston Walker, The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism,
pp. 434-435

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Introduction

After graduating from college, I accepted a position on the staff of a Congregational Church. I was not raised in the tradition, but I found the notion of theological freedom very appealing. I had friends in other reformed traditions who had been through strict catechism classes, and I had shared some of their frustrations with the idea that all the "correct" answers to "the questions one should ask" could be found in a little book. Ever since my introduction to the Congregational Way, I have been told and have read that we are a non-creedal church, and that freedom of conscience is very important. However, there is a sentiment (not a new one) from some outside our "way" that says, "Oh, a Congregationalist, those are the people who can believe whatever they want, or who don't believe anything." I wanted to address that sentiment in my reading, and in the writing of this paper. What did being "non-creedal" mean for early Congregationalists? It was clear to me that no one could have scoffed at them as people who didn't know what they believed or who didn't believe anything. What has it meant historically? Has there been a place for statements of belief? And what can we learn for our churches today? We are the descendants of a cloud of witnesses. If we ignore the historical and modern creeds of the Christian Church, we miss the testimony of witnesses in the forms in which those witnesses tried to capture their experience and understanding.

This paper will explore these questions by first defining "creed", then looking at positive functions as well as the dangers of creeds, then tracing some of the creedal developments in Congregationalism, and discussing the notion of "testimony, not a test."

Definitions of "Creed"

Simply put, a creed (from the Latin "I believe") is a confession of faith. Peter Angeles defines a creed as "an official, formal, and authoritative statement of the essential beliefs of a faith."¹ Similarly, G. W. Bromiley, speaking more functionally, says a creed is "meant to express essential biblical truths."² E. Hershey Sneath, expands on the function when he defines a creed "as a formal statement of beliefs on the part of some authorized individual or body of individuals, acceptance of which is supposed to be essential to the Church's welfare or the salvation of the individual."³ (Sneath thus reveals his attitude on the authority of formal statements!)

The terms "creed," "confession," "statement of faith" and "declaration" will appear in this paper. In referring to specific documents I have tried to use the term used by the writers.

What are the positive functions of a creed?⁴

1. To differentiate Christianity from other religions.
2. To use in religious education as an instructional tool, to make the faith

¹Peter Angeles, Dictionary of Christian Theology. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 65.

²G. W. Bromiley, Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, Walter Elwell, ed., (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 1984), p. 283.

³E. Hershey Sneath, Shall We Have a Creed? (New York: Century Co., 1925), p. 11.

⁴The following discussion of positives and dangers is a general summation of material from Sneath, op. cit. pp. 24-62; Bromiley, p. 283-284; and Wm. Kelly, Dictionary of Theology, Everett Harrison, ed in chief, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1960) p 148.

more understandable. In illiterate populations, memorization can be helpful.

3. To distinguish orthodoxy from heresy.
4. To use baptismally like the Early Christian Church - creeds gave the opportunity for the one to be baptized to make a confession. Early forms of words would vary, but common patterns developed.
5. To use liturgically, in worship as a response to the gospel. Inspiration and strength can come from the corporate confessing of belief.

What are some dangers of creeds?

1. They can be instruments of division by becoming sectarian and overly judgmental.
2. They can be illimitably expanded, complex, highly intellectual and abstract, thus making the statements unintelligible to the average person.
3. The pattern of expansion (in #3) can lead to the genuine expression of personal Christian experience getting lost in the shuffle.
4. They can neglect moral values and overvalue the intellect.
5. They can end up taking on such importance as to overshadow Scripture, as well as limiting further questioning and searching for truth.

Congregationalists have historically, and particularly in the modern era held to the side which finds more weight in the dangers of creeds, than in the rewards. However, Congregationalists have never said creeds were of no value. They simply want to guard against the abuse of creeds and hold up Jesus Christ as the head of the Church. So Congregationalists have not made creeds a binding test for fellowship, but they do recognize their value.

Tracing Some Creedal Developments in American Congregationalism

On various occasions, Congregationalists in the United States (or previous colonies) have, in nationally representative gatherings "signified a more or less elastic approval of formal confessions of faith."⁵ A sketch of creedal development should begin with the first two occasions, which were in colonial New England, and were probably much less "elastic" in approval than were the others. A look at the subsequent occasions will follow chronologically.

Early Congregationalists in England and America were Calvinists, and the separation from the established Church of England was primarily over polity, not creed.⁶ Their argument was with the authoritarian government of the state church, which they saw as contrary to the New Testament model - and the Holy Scriptures were the basis of their belief, in doctrine and polity. The interests of nascent Congregationalism were the true nature and constitution of the Church, and the right way to worship God - not doctrinal

⁵William E. Barton, Congregational Creeds and Covenants (Chicago: Advance Publ. Co., 1917) p. 119. Barton refers to five occasions since 1917. The first two are clearly 1648 and 1680. He says the others came 200 years later. The third is the Burial Hill Declaration, and the fifth is the Kansas City Statement. I find Barton a bit unclear on identifying the fourth such occasion of a nationally representative gathering signifying approval of a formal confession. He mentions the Oberlin Declaration (p. 161-172), the creed of 1883 (p. 173-179), and the Dayton Declaration (p. 196-202). Oberlin, in a round about way, affirms Burial Hill, 1883 was never formally approved by the Council although it was favorably received in the churches. Dayton was a statement on an Act of Union which included a declaration of faith, but the union never proceeded.

⁶Frederick Fagley, The Congregational Churches (New York: Abbot Press, 1925), p. 55-56.

controversies.⁷ Early on, orthodoxy was not a question, they were Calvinists, and they all knew it. Their uniqueness was in their form of government, "but they never regarded their Christian faith as essentially different from that of the great body of Christians in the Reformed Churches."⁸

The absence of formal creeds and the brevity and simplicity of the covenants in early Congregational churches does not mean they did not care deeply what their members believed. There were strict conditions of membership. The practice of the Rev. John Cotton in Boston represents the practice in New England. Persons seeking church membership had to be examined by the elders as to "their knowledge in the principles of religion, and of their experience in the ways of grace, and of their godly conversation amongst men."⁹ Surely the "principles" were the doctrines of 17th century Calvinism. This examination and the subsequent required rendering of an account to the whole congregation (orally for most men, often in written form for women and some men) became so demanding that many could not give sufficient evidence and others were likely so intimidated they didn't even try.¹⁰ Thomas Hooker's church in Hartford, CT, determined fitness for membership by public question and answer.¹¹ Either way, one cannot say that early New England did not have doctrinal tests for membership. If you

⁷Gaius Glen Atkins and Frederick Fagley, The History of American Congregationalism, (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1942), p. 122.

⁸Barton, p. 14.

⁹Williston Walker, The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism, (Philadelphia, Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1960. Originally Chas. Scribner and Sons, 1893), p. 106-107 quoting John Cotton, Way of the Churches (London: 1645), p. 54.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 107

¹¹Ibid., p. 107, footnote 2, citing Mather, Magnalia, ed. 1853-5, II:68.

wanted to be in the game, you had to play by the rules. So individuals made definite statements, but there was not really a need at first for the churches as a whole to make a general statement, because the uniform Calvinism was understood.

But soon a more public testimony for all the churches became desirable in order to answer to questions coming from England, and to help deal with troubles like inter-church relations, the Antinomian controversy and problems with the Quakers. The Synod in Cambridge resulted in the Cambridge Platform of 1648, which stated New England church polity clearly and logically, and aligned the churches doctrinally with the English Congregationalists and Presbyterians by its affirmation of the doctrinal portions of the Westminster Confession of 1643.¹²

The Cambridge Platform also spoke in moderating tones of the requirements for church membership. "The weakest measure of faith is to be accepted in those that desire to be admitted into the church: because weak Christians if sincere, have the substance of that faith, repentance and holiness which is required in church members...Severity of examination is to be avoided."¹³

Even John Cotton practiced "gentleness" of some sort. "In this trial we do not exact eminent measure, either of knowledge or holiness, ...for we had rather ninety-nine hypocrites should perish through presumption, than one humble soul belonging to Christ should sink under discouragement or

¹² Walker, p. 195, preface of the Cambridge Platform. See Walker chapters 10, 12-14 for background and texts of Cambridge Platform, Confession of 1680, Savoy Declaration, and Heads of Agreement.

¹³ Walker, p. 222, Cambridge Platform 12:3

despair."¹⁴ Perhaps this kind of writing by Cotton contributed to the "weakest measure of faith" sentiment in the Cambridge Platform. However, we may be sure that Calvinism still ruled.

The second occasion of a truly representative approval of a confession of faith was in 1680 as part of the deliberations of the Reforming Synod. Called to address the need for renewal of faith and piety, the synod also took the opportunity to again doctrinally align the churches of New England with the English Congregationalists and Presbyterians by affirming the confession in the Savoy Declaration of 1658.¹⁵ (The Savoy Declaration was virtually identical in doctrine to the Westminster Confession, but differed on the matter of church government and discipline. Westminster was Presbyterian, but Savoy was Congregational.)

Later, in the Saybrook Platform of 1708, Congregationalists in Connecticut adopted the Heads of Agreement (between Congregationalists and Presbyterians in England) the eighth article of which says,

As to what pertains to the soundness of judgement in matters of faith, we esteem it sufficient that a church acknowledge the Scriptures to be the Word of God, the perfect and only rule of faith and practice, and own either the doctrinal part of those commonly called Articles of the Church of England, or the Confession or Catechisms, shorter or longer, compiled by the assembly at Westminster, or the confession agreed on at the Savoy, to be agreeable to the said rule.¹⁶

¹⁴Douglas Adams, Meetinghouse to Camp Meeting: Toward a History of American Free Church Worship (Saratoga: Modern Liturgy-Resource Publications, 1981) p. 49 quoting Cotton, The Way of the Churches of Christ in New England, London, 1645, p. 58

¹⁵ Walker, p. 439, preface to Confession of 1680.

¹⁶Ibid. p. 461. also Barton, p. 15.

If the statement of faith used was a "Direction pointing unto that Faith and Covenant contained in the holy Scriptures" then it was fine, and "no man was confined unto that form of words, but only to the Substance, End and Scope of the matter contained therein."¹⁷

William Barton sees this doctrinal alignment as keeping with the idea that the Congregationalists did not seek to cut themselves off "from the other branches of Christ." They did not see themselves as a sect, but holding common the faith of Reformed churches of the world.¹⁸ They wanted "to hold forth the same doctrine of religion ...which we see and know to be held by the churches of England...we hope it may appear to the world ...that we are professors of the same common faith, and fellow heirs of the same common salvation...This profession ...will exempt us from suspicion of heresy: so we trust it may exempt us in the like sort from suspicion of schism."¹⁹ Therefore they expressed their Biblically based, Calvinist faith through the accepted Reformed confessions.²⁰

Even John Robinson, leader of the Separatist congregation that left Leyden and founded Plymouth, welcomed into his church people of the

¹⁷ Adams, p. 45, citing Nathaniel Morton, New Englands Memorial: Or, A Brief Relation of the Most Memorable and Remarkable Passages of the Providence of God, Manifested to the Planters of New England in America, With Special Reference to the First Colony Thereof, Called New Plimouth, Cambridge, 1669, p. 10. See also Cotton Mather, Magnalia Christi Americana, Cambridge, The belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977, Book I, Ch. IV, pp. 146-147.

¹⁸Barton, p. 139.

¹⁹Walker, p. 194-195, Preface to the Cambridge Platform.

²⁰Preaching in Early New England reflected this effort to maintain a unity of doctrine. Preaching "was Biblical, textual, soundly evangelical, and meant above all to set out and maintain a body of doctrine. This must be scripturally derived and scripturally defended ..." Atkins and Fagley, pp. 373-74.

Church of England. He said many in the Church of England were true partakers of the faith and fellow members of "that one mystical Body of Christ..." Robinson simply couldn't submit to their church order and ordinances.²¹

In the Congregational Way, church membership was, and is, based on a covenant, not a creed, although creeds can be useful. John Higginson, Salem's pastor in 1665 affirmed "that a confession of faith 'is to be looked upon as a fit means whereby to express ...their Common Faith and Salvation and not to be made use of as an imposition upon any.'"²²

The Savoy Declaration, in its preface, declares (in language almost identical to Higginson's) that a Confession is "to be looked upon but as a meet or fit medium or means whereby to express that their common faith and salvation, and no way to be made use of as an imposition upon any."²³ Already, in this English declaration, affirmed by New England Congregationalists in 1680, is found the basic attitude of our way. However, in Puritan New England, there was great conformity in doctrine and practice, and deviation was not well accepted, as the banished Ann Hutchinson, Roger Williams and others found out.

The next affirmation of a formal confession or statement of faith by a national gathering of Congregationalists was not until 1865. Obviously much

²¹Atkins and Fagley, p. 55.

²²Doug Adams, Meetinghouse to Camp Meeting: Toward a History of American Free Church Worship (Saratoga: Modern Liturgy-Resource Publications, 1981) p. 46, citing Richard D. Pierce, ed., The Records of the First Church in Salem Massachusetts 1629-1736, Salem, Essex Institute, 1974, p. xvii.

²³Walker, p. 354-355

happened between 1680 and 1865, not the least of which were the two Great Awakenings, the Enlightenment, the American Revolution, the westward movement and the American Civil War.

Williston Walker says the 18th century was not conducive to creed making. In Massachusetts the ministerial authority diminished somewhat, such that a general assembly could not be called by government authority. The whole tendency of the country in politics and religion was toward local independence.²⁴ If a general assembly could have been called, it is questionable whether they could have come to any kind of consensus, due to the growth of theological parties.

The Great Awakening (roughly the 1730's-40's) was a catalyst to the development of factions. One group, nicknamed the "New Lights," supported the Great Awakening and the itinerant evangelist methodology. They favored the methods of emotional appeal and the position which looked to "the conscious experience of a change in a man's relations to God as the only proof that a man was truly a Christian."²⁵

The other group felt that the work of the regular ministry was more effective and that the controlling force in such gatherings of awakening was enthusiasm and not the abiding force of God. They doubted whether the results of the itinerants were as permanent as the work of the regular ministry. This group came to be called "Old Lights."²⁶

²⁴Walker, p 524-525

²⁵Williston Walker, A History of the Congregational Churches in the United States, (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1894) p. 261. The section above on the Great Awakening and the parties that developed is based heavily on Walker, Ch 8.

²⁶Ibid.

Out of this division in Old New England Calvinism of the Westminster Confession there ultimately developed two schools: "Liberal Theology" and "New England Theology." The Liberal School (out of which came Unitarianism) started as a reaction to the intense preaching of hard Calvinism, "its most marked doctrinal distinction being a negative attitude toward the main features of historic Calvinism."²⁷ It reflected the influence of the Enlightenment in New England thought, and took a rationalist position. Rational Christianity embraced natural religion and revealed religion. It was Arminian, emphasized human freedom, stressed ethics and philosophical morality (action not belief), and stressed progress. It saw humanity as good, and was optimistic about human potential, but still held to providence and morality.²⁸

In the years following the Great Awakening, Arminian as well as Arian views were widely disseminated in eastern Massachusetts, and supported by leaders such as Charles Chauncy, Lemuel Briant, and Joseph Mayhew.²⁹

New England Theology, the school of Jonathon Edwards, was championed in western Massachusetts and Connecticut by its own set of ministers: Edwards, Joseph Bellamy, Samuel Hopkins, and later on Stephen West, Edwards the younger, Nathaniel Emmons and even later, Timothy Dwight. They sought to hold a middle ground between the Radical Revivalists and the Liberal/Rationalists. (They set the background for the

²⁷Ibid., p. 267.

²⁸Stephen Ware Bailey, *Lectures in Congregational History and Polity*. Boston, August, 1989.

²⁹Walker, *op. cit.* p. 279.

second Great Awakening, which first began in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.) Two subschools developed, one represented by Hopkins and Emmons and the other ultimately by Timothy Dwight.³⁰

These different positions developed despite sharing a common womb in the Old Calvinism of the Westminster Confession and Savoy Declaration. Such confessions of faith do not and cannot prevent dissenting views, although the strength and authority of those parties holding the mainstream position can stifle or retard the growth of alternatives for awhile.

The growth of Liberal Theology led to the "Unitarian Departure", or in what it came to be in the legal sense (due to the Dedham decision of 1818), the departure of the orthodoxy.³¹ Williston Walker says twelve of the fourteen Congregational Churches in the Boston area became Unitarian, the exceptions being Old South and First Charlestown.³² Manfred Kohl says sixteen of the seventeen colonial churches of Boston became Unitarian, also excepting Old South.³³ Clearly the face of the Church in eastern Massachusetts had changed.

In the aftermath of any major dispute, parties often choose to clarify their identity. Thus, trinitarian statements became common in the covenants

³⁰Ibid., pp. 280-308.

³¹Walker, History p. 342. The society, which was the legal voters of the Parish, overruled the evangelicals who were the majority of church members, in calling a Unitarian minister. The evangelicals withdrew. The case ruled that the continuing society had the right to the property and the name "First Church."

³²Ibid., p. 343.

³³Manfred W. Kohl, Congregationalism in America (Oak Creek Wi: The Congregational Press, 1977), p. 31.

and constitutions of orthodox churches in New England. Early church covenants had been

"remarkably free from doctrinal expression, being usually a simple promise to walk in fidelity to the Divine commandment and in Christian Faithfulness one to another. Nor was anything of peculiar sanctity supposed to lie in the form of words adopted at the beginning... it was widely the custom for each new minister to draught the particular agreement to which he took the assent of candidates for church membership, without necessarily submitting his form of words to the approval of the church. The essential matter was the agreement, not its verbal expression."³⁴

But now, the Unitarian controversy had "sharply defined... the lines of Christian dogma"³⁵, and churches became more explicit in their expressions.

Another example of the reaction to the Unitarian controversy is the 1809 founding of Park Street Church to be a bastion of orthodoxy in liberal Boston. It seemed natural at the time to include a form of doctrinal assent as part of admission to membership. The Park St. creed, adopted in 1811, was written by the church's first pastor, Dr. Griffin. It was replaced in 1873 by a more simple statement of belief, assent to which was required for membership, but assent to the 1811 creed was still required of ministers and deacons.³⁶ Park Street made a creed a test for membership, rather than a testimony. This was a radical move, though certainly nothing in Congregational polity prohibits the local church from taking that step.

³⁴Walker, op. cit., p. 218.

³⁵Barton, p. 9.

³⁶Ibid, p. 211-212.

The westward movement resulted in new churches in communities usually unfamiliar with Congregationalism, and where other churches had creeds. This situation along with the association of Congregationalists with Presbyterians (the Plan of Union), contributed to the desire for a statement of faith.³⁷ Many of the churches had outgrown the Cambridge Platform and the earlier documents. They had gone through two Awakenings, the Unitarian departure, but had been united in the abolitionist movement. Rigid Calvinism was losing power and there was a frustration at the looseness of the order. So, some called for an agreed upon statement of faith to help the now national body function in the rapidly changing post Civil War world.³⁸ With strong impetus from the western churches, the National Council of 1865 in Boston gathered to address the growing national consciousness, and to discuss a declaration of faith.

The Rev. Leonard Bacon of New Haven spoke of the need for a statement of belief:

I have some apprehension that some of our brethren in some parts of the country have an idea of Congregationalism that it consists in believing nothing in particular ... it is the right and duty of any such body of representatives to stand up, and with one heart and voice to say what we believe - what we unitedly believe ... there is a great body of Christian doctrine upon which we are unanimous as to the substance of it and which we know our churches hold as the basis of their special fellowship and communion, and cooperation in the advancement of the kingdom of Christ.³⁹

³⁷Ibid., p. 213-214.

³⁸Atkins and Fagley, p. 202-203.

³⁹Atkins and Fagley, p. 204, quoting the Debates and Proceedings of the National Council, Boston, June 14-24, 1865, pp.350-351.

A committee was appointed to consider the expediency of setting forth a declaration of faith as being common for Congregational churches. They presented a report in which they "they could not regard it as their function to prepare a confession of faith to be imposed by act of this or any other body upon the churches of the Congregational order." They quoted from the Saybrook Platform that the Scriptures were the only rule of religion, and said the faith of the churches was essentially Calvinistic in accord with the confessions of 1648 and 1680. But they saw a variety in unity which they did not wish to alter.⁴⁰

Their report was referred to a second committee which presented a longer report, using some of the same language as the first, but making some more elaborate statements and in particular adding a paragraph which declared "our acceptance of the system of truths which is commonly known among us as Calvinism..." This led to great debate. Some did not want to use the name "Calvin" because it identified them with a "party" and could be misunderstood. Others were staunchly in favor of the report. Still others wanted to approve no statement at all.⁴¹

The Council had adjourned without a vote. The next day's meeting was to be at Plymouth. A few prominent members, led by the Rev. A. H. Quint, wanted to break through the debate and present a statement which would stand on the essential union of doctrine and purpose with the Pilgrims, but remove the objectionable phrases from the previous reports while stating the faith in relatively modern language. Hurriedly, (even to the point of Mr. Quint completing the writing of the introduction while using

⁴⁰Barton, p. 143

⁴¹Walker, Creeds and Platforms, p. 559-560.

his hat as a table aboard the train from Boston to Plymouth), a third statement was prepared. Mr. Quint presented the paper.⁴² Taking advantage of the location atop Burial Hill in Plymouth, he began,

Standing by the rock where the Pilgrims set foot upon these shores, upon the spot where they worshipped God, and among the graves of the early generations, we, Elders and Messengers of the Congregational Churches of the United States, like them acknowledging no rule of faith but the Word of God, do now reiterate our adherence to the faith and order of the Apostolic and Primitive Churches as held by our fathers, and substantially as embodied in the confessions and platforms which our Synods of 1648 and 1680 set forth or reaffirmed...⁴³

Quint and the others achieved their goal. The Burial Hill Declaration was formally adopted the next day. Barton thinks this declaration did two things. First, it said that the faith of 1865 embodied the same truths as the faith of the Pilgrims. (The faith of those in 1865 was Calvinist "in the sense in which (Henry Ward) Beecher called himself a Calvinist - he believed what he thought Calvin would have believed if Calvin were now living!") And secondly, it proclaimed that the older confessions did not embody that faith in a form or expression with which modern people could agree.⁴⁴

Walker says that the Burial Hill Declaration shows advance over the earlier confessions in simplicity and catholicity, but is "marked by the flavor of time and place, and by a certain exuberance of expression...". That, and its

⁴²Ibid, p 561-562. Barton, p 152-153.

⁴³Walker, Creeds and Platforms, p. 562, The Burial Hill Declaration.

⁴⁴Barton, p. 158-160.

lack of precision have worked against it as a possible local church creed and "have made it ...comparatively little known and little used."⁴⁵

It seems to me that Walker's comments are objective, historical observations, while Barton, though not in error, sees in Burial Hill a statement and movement (especially in his point two above) in line with his own views.

The drawbacks of the Burial Hill Declaration noted by Walker led some to desire another statement. Just how strictly the 1865 statement affirmed the ones of 1648 and 1680 was not clear. The Ohio Association, in May 1879, set forth such deficiencies and called on the National Council to create "a formula that shall not be mainly a reaffirmation of former confessions, but that shall state in precise terms in our living tongue the doctrines which we hold today."⁴⁶ This call followed the acknowledgement by the Oberlin Council in 1871 "that there had 'come up from all quarters, earnest calls for some brief manual of doctrine and polity for use in the families and Sunday-schools of our churches."⁴⁷

In 1880, the National Council adopted three resolutions resulting in the appointment of a committee of seven, who would select twenty-five knowledgeable men representing "different shades of thought" in the churches,

to act together as a commission to prepare, in the form of
a creed or catechism, or both, a simple, clear, and comprehensive

⁴⁵Walker, Creeds and Platforms, p. 564-565.

⁴⁶Barton, p. 173.

⁴⁷Ibid., from the Minutes of National Council, 1871, p. 41.

exposition of the truths of the glorious gospel of the blessed God, for the instruction and edification of our churches. . . and that the result of their labors . . . be reported, not to this Council, but to the churches and to the world through the public press - to carry such weight of authority as the character of the commission and the intrinsic merit of their exposition of truth may commend.⁴⁸

The fruit of the labor was the Creed of 1883. All but three of the 25 commissioners deemed the statement an adequate expression. It was not binding on the churches, but could be used as a local expression of faith. True to its resolutions, the National Council took no official action regarding it. But it was widely accepted in the churches, and many adopted it as their own.⁴⁹

Walker praised it highly, saying (in 1894) that the Creed of 1883 gave Congregationalism "what no other considerable religious body in America possesses, - a widely recognized creed, of modern composition, and expressing a fair consensus of the present belief of the communion whose faith it sets forth."⁵⁰

The Creed of 1913, usually called the Kansas City Statement of Faith, had its beginning in the report of a Committee on Constitution of the Commission of Nineteen on Polity, appointed by the Council in 1910. The Committee's report included a brief article on "faith" which was approved by the Commission and then circulated. Sentiment came forth to make it more Christological, and this prompted general discussion, out of which came the feeling that it should be put into creedal form. It was rewritten and

⁴⁸Ibid., from the Minutes of National Council, 1880, p. 24, 25.

⁴⁹Walker, Creeds and Platforms, p. 582. Barton, p. 174-175.

⁵⁰Walker, Creeds and Platforms, p. 582.

approved by the Commission in January, 1913, and adopted by the National Council in Kansas City in October, 1913.⁵¹

William Barton was the "main author" of the "theologically liberal and socially progressive" Statement,⁵² and of course thought it comprehensive and adaptable, acceptable to the churches.⁵³ But Frederick Fagley also, writing in 1925 said it was widely adopted by churches and some state conferences, and was in accord with the belief of a large number of Congregationalists.⁵⁴

Since the Kansas City Statement, two other statements of faith deserve mention. In 1945, some conservative Congregational churches joined in fellowship, became the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference in 1948, and incorporated in 1949. Membership in the "Four C's" requires full assent to its statements of faith and polity.⁵⁵ The United Church of Christ was formed at the Uniting Synod of 1957, and adopted a statement of faith in 1959, (an inclusive language version by Robert V. Moss also appears in the 1986 UCC Book of Worship.)

Testimony, Not a Test

For early Congregationalists, doctrine was not the problem. The bone of contention was proper authority. The problem was "not so much the

⁵¹Barton, p. 203-204.

⁵²Kohl, p. 48.

⁵³Barton, p. 204.

⁵⁴Fagley, p. 59

⁵⁵Kohl, p. 56.

articles of belief . . . as it was the authority which assumed the right to compel belief."⁵⁶ About the time of the Creed of 1883, the phrase "a testimony, not a test" came into common use as an expression of the Congregational attitude. The phrase was used in an 1856 sermon by Prof. Daniel T. Smith to the Maine Missionary Society, in which he lamented the use of creeds as tests of admission. Said Smith,

. . . the creed of a church is to be looked upon not so much in the light of a test as of testimony; and that its true use consists not in its furnishing a standard by which to estimate in all cases the character of one who claims to be a follower of Christ, but in its being a means of maintaining in the world those views which it is believed that Scripture was designed to teach, in distinction from the errors which its language may be perverted to support.⁵⁷

This view is in accord with the position of the preface to the Savoy Confession: that confessions are "a fit medium whereby to express . . . their common faith and salvation, and in no way to be made use of as an imposition upon any."

Congregationalist have seen in creeds the dangers of idolatry, judgmentalism, and closed mindedness (closed to new light and truth yet to break forth). They have refrained from imposing them on believers because they know we will never get a full handle on the truth, never understand it all. But creeds can help us start, even though faith is not the same as creeds and a creed cannot confine it all.

What does this attitude look like in practice? Barton asked ministers of leading churches (early in the 20th century) to contribute to a symposium

⁵⁶Barton, p. 229.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 292.

on creeds and church membership. The results are in Part Three, Chapter VI of Congregational Creeds and Covenants, pp. 304-325. The statements from the ministers overwhelmingly hold a "testimony not test" position. However, one of the respondents, the Rev. H. Kingman of Claremont, California submitted the results of his survey of 52 southern California pastors. (Likely taken before the Kansas City Statement of 1913, since it is not mentioned). He had asked them, "What creedal or confessional test does your church require of applicants for membership?" He discovered that out of 44 conclusive replies, seven used one of the three forms from the Council Manual or the Pilgrim Pastor's manual, eight used one of two forms from the Handbook of California Congregational Churches, five used only the Apostles Creed, four used the Creed of 1883, five used forms from other sources, and fifteen used simple statements peculiar to themselves, non-creedal in nature, most drawn up by the pastor of the church. The majority of the forms used required at least two statements: the Apostles Creed and a general blanket statement that "they accept, according to the measure of their understanding of it, the system of Christian truth held by the churches of our faith and order, and by this church, etc."⁵⁸ Of those using forms of non-creedal expression, they agreed on three points of repentance, discipleship, and fellowship. Kingman goes on to explain that of all the ministers responding, not one personally was in favor of a detailed creed as a test for membership. But in practice, twenty-nine could have been called "creedal."

One wonders what the results of such a survey would look like if done today. What is the current practice in Congregational Churches of the

⁵⁸ibid., p. 319.

National Association? This would be a topic for a future History and Polity Seminar paper!

Conclusion

For early Congregationalists, "non-creedal" meant turning to Holy Scripture, not the words of a human council or a state church. It did not mean church members could hold a belief outside historic Calvinism.

As the years went on and different theological parties grew, hard Calvinism was modified, not just by Unitarians, but within orthodox churches as well. The freedom of Congregational polity meant that local churches could draw up their own confessions of faith in the language of their choice. (In practice, each church will come to its own basic principles of faith, whether explicitly stated or not.) The only limitation on a church "is that a grossly erroneous or heretical statement would subject the church adopting it to withdrawal of fellowship by its sister churches."⁵⁹

Congregational Churches have sought to maintain a continuity with the Christian faith of history, and also to testify to their "common faith and salvation" in the language of their day. And so they have valued historic creeds but also commended to the churches several modern statements of faith as representative of the belief of those churches.

Congregationalists value creedal statements as testimonies of faith, not as tests of belonging. Since the days of persecution in England, they have been wary of the dangers of imposed authority. They have realized that the quest for understanding and new ways of expressing one's religious

⁵⁹Walker, History, p. 397.

This practice seems more identifiable in the recent Moderate/Fundamentalist feud in the Southern Baptist Convention than it does in Congregational circles.

experience cannot be squelched by the codification of a particular view. However, this certainly does not diminish the value of testimonial creeds as an instrument for seeing ourselves in the historical context of the Christian Faith.

I believe there are pendulum swings in history, and in local churches. One such possible swing is between a staunch non-creedal position (no creeds used in any way) and the slavery of a creedal stance with no latitude or elasticity of interpretation. Could it be that some churches in the National Association have, in practice, swung to the extreme non-creedal view? By this I mean that even the value of creeds as testimony is not present? I have rarely, if at all heard reference in our churches to ancient creeds, historic confessions, or modern statements of faith. I do not advocate a swing to the side of creeds as a test, but I propose that our churches reflect on these testimonies. My hope is that such reflection would help a church define itself, (for itself and for its larger community) not in reaction to Fundamentalism or Unitarianism, but proactively as its own faith community, standing in a long line of witnesses, and connected with the greater church of Jesus Christ. Perhaps by using creedal statements as instruments in education classes (adult, as well as confirmation or Pastor's classes) we can help people arrive at their own statement of faith as they try to capture their own experience and understanding. And maybe we can pick up on the strength and inspiration of corporate confession by more frequent use of church covenants and statements in worship services. We might also discover whether there is any truth to the accusation by those who scoff at the Congregational way saying, "those are the people who don't believe anything, or don't know what they believe." Could not such reflection and

use also lead to better educated people, and to greater application of faith to life, particularly through the testimony of the modern statements?

Two quotes, one from Williston Walker and one from William Barton seem a fitting closing. Walker, concluding his monumental work Congregational Creeds and Platforms, 1893 says,

The fathers stood on the common basis of Puritanic Calvinism; modern Congregationalism is simpler, less scholastic in its faith, more catholic in its sympathies. If it is less confident than were the fathers that it understands all the secrets of divine counsel, it is more conscious of its duties toward a suffering and sinning world. The Gospel it presents is essentially the same that the fathers set forth as the basis of their faith, but it holds that Gospel to be intended for all men and to be wide enough in its provisions of redemption for the needs of the whole human race.⁶⁰

And Barton,

... every creed is an imperfect impression of the truth it endeavors to embody, and ... no creed can ever stand upon the same plane of authority with the Holy Scriptures interpreted by the spirit that gave them. . . He who accepts a creed in Congregationalism accepts not its *ipsisima verba* but the substance of faith, which from age to age has been in all creeds.⁶¹

⁶⁰Walker, Creeds and Platforms, p. 584.

⁶¹Barton, p. 272.

APPENDIX

Burial Hill Declaration, 1865
(from Walker, Creeds and Platforms, pp. 562-564.)

Standing by the rock where the Pilgrims set foot upon these shores, upon the spot where they worshipped God, and among the graves of the early generations, we, Elders and Messengers of the Congregational churches of the United States in national Council assembled, - like them acknowledging no rule of faith but the word of God, - do now declare our adherence to the faith and order of the apostolic and primitive churches held by our fathers, and substantially as embodied in the confessions of and platforms which our Synods of 1648 and 1680 set forth or reaffirmed. We declare that the experience of the nearly two and half centuries which have elapsed since the memorable day when our sires founded here a Christian Commonwealth, with all the development of new forms of error since their times, has only deepened our confidence in the faith and polity of these fathers. We bless God for the inheritance of these doctrines.

We invoke the help of the Divine Redeemer, that through the presence of the promised Comforter, he will enable us to transmit them in purity to our children.

In the times that are before us as a nation, times at once of duty and danger, we rest all our hope in the gospel of the Son of God. It was the grand peculiarity of our Puritan Fathers, that they held this gospel, not merely as the ground of their personal salvation, but as declaring the worth of man by the incarnation and sacrifice of the Son of God; and therefore applied its principles to elevate society, to regulate education, to civilize humanity, to purify law, to reform the Church and the State, and to assert and defend liberty; in short, to mould and redeem, by its all-transforming energy, everything that belongs to man in his individual and social relations.

It was the faith of our fathers that gave us this free land in which we dwell. It is by this faith only that we can transmit to our children a free and happy, because a Christian, commonwealth.

We hold it to be a distinctive excellence of our Congregational system, that it exalts that which is more, above that which is less, important, and by the simplicity of its organization, facilitates, in communities where the population is limited, the union of all true believers in one Christian church; and that the division of such communities into several weak and jealous societies, holding the same common faith, is a sin against the unity of the body of Christ, and at once the shame and the scandal of Christendom.

We rejoice that, through the influence of our free system of apostolic order, we can hold fellowship with all who acknowledge Christ; and act efficiently in the work of restoring unity to the divided Church, and of bringing back harmony and peace among all 'who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.'

Thus recognizing the unity of the Church of Christ in all the world, and knowing that we are but one branch of Christ's people, while adhering to our own peculiar faith and order, we extend to all believers the hand of Christian fellowship, upon the basis of those great fundamental truths in which all Christians should agree. With them we confess our faith in God, the Father,

the Son, and the Holy Ghost, the only living and true God; in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, who is exalted to be our Redeemer and King; and in the Holy Comforter, who is present in the Church to regenerate and sanctify the soul.

With the whole Church, we confess the common sinfulness and ruin of our race, and acknowledge that it is only through the work accomplished by the life and expiatory death of Christ that believers in him are justified before God, receive the remission of sins, and through the presence and grace of the holy Comforter are delivered from the power of sin, and perfected in holiness.

We believe also in the organized and visible Church, in the ministry of the Word, in the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, in the resurrection of the body, and in the final judgment, the issues of which are eternal life and everlasting punishment.

We receive these truths on the testimony of God, given through prophets and apostles, and in the life, the miracles, the death, the resurrection, of his Son, our Divine Redeemer, - a testimony preserved for the Church in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, which were composed by holy men as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.

Affirming now our belief that those who thus hold 'one faith, one Lord, one baptism,' together constitute the one Catholic Church, the several households of which, though called by different names, are the one body of Christ; and that these members of his body are sacredly bound to keep 'the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace,' we declare that we will cooperate with all who hold these truths. With them we will carry the gospel into every part of this land, and with them we will go into all the world, and 'preach the gospel to every creature.' May He to whom 'all power is given in heaven and earth' fulfil the promise which is all our hope: 'Lo, I am with you alway, even to the end of the world.' AMEN.

STATEMENT OF DOCTRINE

I. We believe in one God, the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible;

And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who is of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made;

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who is sent from the Father and Son, and who together with the Father and Son is worshipped and glorified.

II. We believe that the providence of God, by which he executes his eternal purposes in the government of the world, is in and over all events; yet so that the freedom and responsibility of man are not impaired, and sin is the act of the creature alone.

III. We believe that man was made in the image of God, that he might know, love, and obey God, and enjoy him forever; that our first parents by disobedience fell under the righteous condemnation of God; and that all men are so alienated from God that there is no salvation from the guilt and power of sin except through God's redeeming grace.

IV. We believe that God would have all men return to him; that to this end he has made himself known, not only through the works of nature, the course of his providence, and the consciences of men, but also through supernatural revelations made especially to a chosen people, and above all, when the fullness of time was come, through Jesus Christ his son.

V. We believe that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the records of God's revelation of himself in the work of redemption; that they were written by men under the special guidance of the Holy Spirit; that they are able to make wise unto salvation; and that they constitute the authoritative standard by which religious teaching and human conduct are to be regulated and judged.

VI. We believe that the love of God to single men has found its highest expression in the redemptive work of his Son; who became man, uniting his divine nature with our human nature in one person; who was tempted like other men, yet without sin; who by his humiliation, his holy obedience, his sufferings, his death on the cross, and his resurrection, became a perfect Redeemer; whose sacrifice of himself for the sins of the world declares the righteousness of God, and is the sole and sufficient ground of forgiveness and of reconciliation with him.

VII. We believe that Jesus Christ, after he had risen from the dead, ascended into heaven, where, as the one mediator between God and man, he carries forward his work of saving men; that he sends the holy Spirit to convict them of sin, and to lead them to repentance and faith; and that those who through renewing grace turn to righteousness, and trust in Jesus Christ as their Redeemer, receive for his sake the forgiveness of their sins, and are made the children of God.

VIII. We believe that those who are thus regenerated and justified, grow in sanctified character through fellowship with Christ, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and obedience to the truth; that a holy life is the fruit and evidence of saving faith; and that the believer's hope of continuance in such a life is in the preserving grace of God.

IX. We believe that Jesus Christ came to establish among men the kingdom of God, the reign of truth and love, righteousness and peace; that to Jesus Christ, the Head of his kingdom, Christians are directly responsible in faith and conduct; and that to him all have immediate access without mediatorial or priestly intervention

X. We believe that the Church of Christ, invisible and spiritual, comprises all true believers, whose duty it is to associate themselves in churches, for the maintenance of worship, for the promotion of spiritual growth and fellowship, and for the conversion of men; that these churches, under the guidance of the Holy Scriptures and in fellowship with one another, may determine each for itself their organization, statements of belief, and forms of worship, may appoint and set apart their own ministers, and should cooperate in the work which Christ has committed to them for the furtherance of the gospel throughout the world.

XI. We believe in the observance of the Lord's Day, as a day of holy rest and worship; in the ministry of the word; and in the two sacraments, which Christ has appointed for his church; Baptism, to be administered to believers and their children, as a sign of cleansing from sin, of union to Christ, and of the impartation of the holy Spirit; and the Lord's Supper, as a symbol of his atoning death, a seal of its efficacy, and a means whereby he confirms and strengthens the spiritual union and communion of believers with himself.

XII. We believe in the ultimate prevalence of the kingdom of Christ over all the earth; in the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ; in the resurrection of the dead; and in a final judgment, the issues of which are everlasting punishment and everlasting life.

The Congregational Churches of the United States, by delegates in National Council assembled, reserving all the rights and cherished memories belonging to this organization under its former constitution, and declaring the steadfast allegiance of the churches composing the Council to the faith which our fathers confessed, which from age to age has found its expression in the historic creeds of the Church universal and of this communion, and affirming our loyalty to the basic principles of our representative democracy, hereby set forth the things most surely believed among us concerning faith, polity and fellowship:

FAITH

We believe in God the Father, infinite in wisdom, goodness and love; and in Jesus Christ, his Son, our Lord and Saviour, who for us and our salvation lived and died and rose again and liveth evermore; and in the holy Spirit, who taketh of the things of Christ and revealeth them to us, renewing, comforting, and inspiring the souls of men. We are united in striving to know the will of God as taught in the Holy Scriptures, and in our purpose to walk in the ways of the Lord, made known or to be made known to us. We hold it to be the mission of the Church of Christ to proclaim the gospel to all mankind, exalting the worship of one true God and laboring for the progress of knowledge, the promotion of justice, the reign of peace, and the realization of human brotherhood. Depending, as did our fathers, upon the continued guidance of the holy Spirit to lead us into all truth, we work and pray for the transformation of the world into the kingdom of God; and we look with faith for the triumph of righteousness and the life everlasting.

POLITY

We believe in the freedom and responsibility of the individual soul, and the right of private judgment. We hold to the autonomy of the local church and its independence of all ecclesiastical control. We cherish the fellowship of the churches, united in district, state, and national bodies, the counsel and co-operation in matters of common concern.

THE WIDER FELLOWSHIP

While affirming the liberty of our churches, and the validity of our ministry, we hold to the unity and catholicity of the Church of Christ, and will unite with all its branches in hearty cooperation, and will earnestly seek, so far as in us lies, that the prayer of our Lord for his disciples may be answered, that they all may be one.

Conservative Congregational Christian Conference
Statement of Faith, and Statement of Polity
(from Kohl, Congregationalism in America, pp.56-57.)

Statement of Faith

1. We believe the Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testament, to be the only inspired, inerrant, infallible, authoritative Word of God written.
2. We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Ghost.
3. We believe in the deity of Christ, in His virgin birth, in His sinless life, in His miracles, in His vicarious and atoning death through His shed blood, in His bodily resurrection, in His ascension to the right hand of the Father, and in His personal return in power and glory.
4. We believe that for salvation of lost and sinful man regeneration by the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential.
5. We believe in the present ministry of the Holy Spirit by Whose in-dwelling power and fullness the Christian is enabled to live a godly life in this present evil world.
6. We believe in the resurrection of both the saved and the lost; they that are saved unto the resurrection of life, and they that are lost unto the resurrection of damnation.
7. We believe in the spiritual unity of all believers in Christ.

Statement of Polity

1. We believe that Jesus Christ is the Head of His body, the Church universal, and of each local church.
2. We believe that each local church is in itself a complete church, and therefore autonomous and possesses all rights and responsibilities of the church by the Holy Spirit as set forth in the Holy Scriptures.
3. We believe that Jesus Christ exercises His authority in each local church by the Holy Spirit and through the Holy Scriptures.
4. We believe that each local church is amenable only to Jesus Christ, and not to any association, conference, council, synod, or any other ecclesiastical body.
5. We believe that it is proper and beneficial for each local church to seek fellowship and counsel of other such local churches.

United Church of Christ Statement of Faith
approved by the Second General Synod of the United Church of
Christ, 1959
(from the UCC Book of Worship, 1986)

We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, Father of our Lord Jesus
Christ and our Father, and to his deeds we testify:

He calls the worlds into being,
creates man in his own image
and sets before him the ways of life and death.

He seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness
and sin.

He judges men and nations by his righteous will
declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and
risen Lord,
he has come to us
and shared our common lot,
conquering sin and death
and reconciling the world to himself.

He bestows upon us his Holy Spirit,
creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ,
binding in covenant faithful people of all ages,
tongues, and races.

He calls us into his church
to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,
to be his servants in the service of men,
to proclaim the gospel to all the world
and resist the powers of evil,
to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table,
to join him in his passion and victory.

He promises to all who trust him
forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,
courage in the struggle for justice and peace,
his presence in trial and rejoicing,
and eternal life in his kingdom which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto him,
Amen.

United Church of Christ Statement of Faith
Adapted, 1976 by Robert V. Moss, Jr., President of the
United Church of Christ, 1969-1976.(from UCC Book of Worship 1986)

We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, who is made known :
to us in Jesus our brother, and to whose deeds we testify:

God calls the worlds into being,
creates humankind in the divine image,
and sets before us the ways of life and death.

God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and
sin.

God judges all humanity and all nations by that will of
righteousness declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and
risen Lord,
God has come to us
and shared our common lot,
conquering sin and death
and reconciling the whole creation to its Creator.

God bestows upon us the Holy Spirit,
creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ,
binding in covenant faithful people of all ages,
tongues, and races.

God calls us into the Church
to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,
to be servants in the service of the whole
human family,
to proclaim the gospel to all the world
and resist the powers of evil,
to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table,
to join him in his passion and victory.

God promises to all who trust in the gospel
forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,
courage in the struggle for justice and peace,
the presence of the Holy Spirit in trial and rejoicing,
and eternal life in that kingdom which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto God.
Amen.

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