

THEOLOGY AND COVENANT IN CONGREGATIONALISM

By

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I am a lawyer by profession. Tonight my client is any individual member of any Congregational Church. He attends church services. He pays his pledge. He brings his children to Sunday School. He serves on a Board or Committee of his church. And he thinks...

Those people who like to doze off early at gatherings like this are now in for a treat: I am going to begin by giving some definitions, taken from the Random House Dictionary of the English Language. Not only is this an act of compassion for those who need the sleep, but hopefully it will put into dialectic focus whatever differences of opinion Dr. Butman and I may express during our dialogue.

Let me begin by defining *Theology*: The field of study, thought and analysis which treats of God, his attributes and his relations to the universe; the science or study of divine things or religious truth.

Contrast that with the definition of *Doctrine*: A particular principle, position or polity taught or advocated, as of a religion; a body or system of teachings related to a particular subject.

The point is obvious: The first word of our topic tonight is "Theology," not "Doctrine." It is a field of study, not a particular position to be taught or advocated. This is as it should be, because Congregationalism is not a body of Doctrine. Gaius Glenn Atkins and Frederick Fagley, in their book "History of American Congregationalism," make the point explicitly:

"From the beginning it has been the idea that a Congregational Church is not made up of Congregationalists as a Quaker congregation is made up of Quakers, but that a Congregational Church is a group of Christians associated together for a definite purpose, not because of peculiarities of belief. Today, as in Cotton Mather's day, a church with perhaps a thousand members may have but a small percentage of its membership who grew up in a Congregational church. Thus, the local church is in truth a union of Christians who are not asked to renounce their previous denominational teachings, but are asked to join in a simple covenant pledging co-operation and fellowship."

Next, I want define *Polity*: A particular form or system of government (i.e., civil polity, ecclesiastical polity); the condition of being constituted as a state or other organized community or body.

Friendly critics of Congregationalism like to say that our Theology is, in fact, Polity; that we are so obsessed with the idea of the local church's autonomy in such matters as the ordination, calling and dismissal of ministers, and the uncontrolled right of the local congregation to own, manage and dispose of property, that we have wholly neglected to develop a body of thought about God and man; in short, that we emphasize procedure above substance; that we worship the local church instead of God; that we are a political creature, and nothing more.

We have given our critics more than 350 years of literature and litigation to support their contention.

For example, William E. Barton, a respected member of the Committee of Nineteen at Kansas City, in 1913, attempted to define Congregationalism as follows:

“Congregationalism is that system of church organization in which all power is resident in the local church, with voluntary associations for fellowship, co-operation and inspiration, but without ecclesiastical authority.”

Even Dr. Butman, in a lecture given at Chislehurst, England in May of 1975, and titled “The Theology of Congregationalism,” said:

“Again, let it be noted that the distinctive witness of our way is to be found in polity – (the manner in which we govern ourselves) – rather than liturgy – (how we worship) or doctrine - (what we believe).”

I re-read that passage several times, and asked myself: “If this is so, and Congregationalism amounts to nothing more than the primacy of the local church in governing itself, then why do not Baptists, Unitarians, Community Churches and Jewish congregations also call themselves “Congregationalists?” They, too, preach and practice local church autonomy. Shouldn't the Executive Committee of the National Association declare them all honorary Congregationalists, and invite their delegates to attend the Annual meeting at Milwaukee?

Obviously, I am putting you on. There are distinctions between those denominations whom we call the “free churches,” when what we mean precisely is “politically-free churches.” Congregationalism is something more than mere polity. But what is it?

All of which brings us to the definition of the remaining word in our title, *Covenant*. “An agreement, usually formal, between two or more persons to do or not to do something specified; (Eccles.) a solemn agreement between the members of a church to act together in harmony with the precepts of the Gospel.

The Covenant is not peculiar to Congregationalism. The ancient Hebrews believed that God had made a covenant with them both as a religious faith and as a nation. The Scots covenanted with each other in 1557, and again in 1638, to observe Presbyterian forms and doctrines against those of the Church of England. The covenant was both political and theological in Jewish and Presbyterian background. What is it in the Congregational heritage?

Even our modern thinkers, sustained by more than three centuries of Congregational usage, cannot agree. Dr. Butman, in his book “The Lord’s Free People,” writes:

“The local church can and does write its own creed, and incorporates it into its own covenant.”

For him the Covenant is a creedal document.

By contrast, Rev. Arthur A. Rouner, Jr., author of a book titled “The Congregational Way of Life,” contrasts Congregationalism with the creedal or confessional churches, and says:

“But the great fact for people of the Congregational Way is that Christ made a covenant with His people. He never said, ‘Believe these items of Theology and you are in!’ Not Jesus. His word was, ‘Follow me. Come walk with me. Trust me. Learn my way. Be my disciple.’ It was not theological correctness He was interested in, but personal commitment. A Covenant is an agreement – here, an agreement between God and Man, what they will owe to each other, what their relationship shall be.”

For Rev. Rouner, the Covenant seems to be anything but creedal. And faced with apparently irreconcilable interpretations by two respected modern Congregational scholars, I sought help from the ancient documents of the Congregational churches and assemblies.

Williston Walker, in his book titled “Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism.” comments that:

“The Congregational system recognized as the constitutive act of a church a Covenant, individually entered into between each member, his brethren, and his God, pledging him to submit himself to all due ordinances and officers and seek the good of all his associates.”

By that standard, the Covenant is a disciplinary and political instrument in Congregational usage, leaving Theology free and uncontrolled.

The Covenant of The First congregational Church in the Bridewell, London, 1567, committed its membership to the “pure, unmingled and sincere worshipping of God,” the free and pure preaching of His word, and the rejection of the “filthy Canon Law.

Score one for free theology and one for free Polity.

The Covenant of Robert Browne’s “gathered” church at Norwich, in 1581, listed three things to which the members gave their consent: first, to seek (but not necessarily to find) agreement among themselves under God’s laws and government. That scored a point for free Theology. Second, to choose who among them should teach and watch over the salvation of their souls. That seemed to me to treat of local ordination and calling, a point on the scoreboard for free Polity. Third, to prescribe an order for meetings, prayer, thanksgiving, scripture reading and church discipline. Polity again, by a score of two to one.

The signers of the Mayflower Compact covenanted with God and with each other, to combine “into a civil body politic,” and to enact such just and equal laws as should be thought mete and convenient for the general good of the Colony. Walker comments “The Mayflower Compact is in no sense creed or a religious covenant.” It is polity, pure and simple, and civil polity rather than ecclesiastical polity, for good measure.

Atkins and Fagley, in discussing the Covenant at this period of Congregational history, have this to say:

“The Covenant of the early churches was usually brief. For example, the Covenant of the second church founded in New England, the Church at Salem, contained only one sentence: We covenant with the Lord and one with another, and doe bynd our selves in the presence of God, to walke together in all his waies, according as he is pleased to reveal himself unto us in his blessed word of truth.”

Indeed, Williston Walker attributes to William Bradford the possible wording of the Covenant of the Leyden-Scrooby-Plymouth church, although its authenticity is not beyond dispute:

“To walk in all his ways, made known or to be made known, unto them, according to their best endeavors, whatsoever it should cost the, the Lord assisting them.”

All of this points to the Covenant as more a political than a theological help to the early Congregationalist. But the migration from England of increasing numbers

of Puritans, bent upon expressing Calvinism in its political, as well as its Theological aspects, let the New England Congregationalists to gather together in a council at Cambridge.

The Call for the Cambridge Synod, in 1646, was “to discuss, dispute and clear up, by the word of God,” questions of church government and discipline. Atkins and Fagley remark that “the problem was to save the Congregational Way from the reproach of disorder and prevent the Presbyterian Way from getting the control of the Congregation.”

Although that was purely a question of church polity, the resulting document, called the “Cambridge Platform,” required a personal and public confession and declaring of God’s manner of working upon the “soul” of those who “were never in church society before,” upon their admission to the local congregation. This, Atkins and Fagley noted established a precedent for doctrinal tests as a condition to church membership. Thus did the local church covenant take on a doctrinal complexion as a means of safeguarding local church polity. But to the extent that polity was the underlying consideration of what was done at Cambridge, the Cambridge Platform and its spawn of doctrinal covenants were politically-motivated.

The fact of life in those days was that Congregationalism had borrowed from the Church of England the notion of a State-established church, in which the members of the church also happened, not by coincidence, to be the voting member of the political community. In 1664 the exigencies of British politics led King Charles II to decree that all freeholders, irrespective of their notions of church government, were to have the vote. The New England Congregationalists, faced with a multitude of non-Congregational immigrants who could now vote in Town Meeting, invented a pragmatic compromise, called the Half-Way Covenant. By this device one could be baptized in the church and vote in the town elections, but could not receive communion nor be considered full members of the church.

The results, according to Atkins and Fagley, “engendered divisions and controversies of an extent which does not now seem believable.” Various versions of the Half-Way covenant were adopted. They ranged from the relatively mild and generalized undertakings of the Salem version to the Calvinistic declarations and renunciations of such specific fleshly pursuits as drunkenness and fornication, contained in the Hartford version.

Congregationalism, in order to cope with the demands of secular politics, had transformed its local church Covenant from a basis of fellowship to one of creed. In order to preserve the political freedom of the congregation, it had repressed the theological freedom of the individual communicant.

Nor did things improve with the coming of the 19th century when, in Dr. Butman's words, in "The Lord's Free People," the local church Covenants of the Congregational churches became "marvels of theological intricacy." This happened about 1825, because of what we call the "Unitarian Departure;" but more specifically, it resulted from a Court's decision in the lawsuit involving the Dedham, Massachusetts, church. Stripped of its legalism, the Dedham case held that the property, assets, and political superstructure of a local church belonged to those who could impose their will by a majority vote of the entire membership of the Parish. In the Dedham case, that happened to be the Unitarian faction.

The Congregationalists were astute enough to see that the church covenant was a convenient vehicle by which an orthodox theological majority could put the minority in the uncomfortable "fix" of "departing" minus all claims to the church's property, or remaining, at whatever cost to the individual's private conscience.

As a device it was not new: the Anglican Church had employed various "test oaths" as a means of disenfranchising Catholics and Dissenters alike. What is surprising is that the Congregationalists, who had once been the victims of this tactic, should resort to it.

Local church covenants became a litmus test of belief in the Trinity. All over Massachusetts, doctrinal differences over the Trinitarian concept degenerated to a head-count to see which faction got to keep the church's silver-plate. Fully 25% of the Massachusetts Congregational churches embraced Unitarianism, taking with them the best of the preachers, writers and thinkers of the time. "Congregationalism," one observer wrote ruefully, "has blown its brains out."

But the real damage done by the departure of the Unitarians was not so much the loss of brains as it was the loss of integrity and principle. The Covenant had lost its historic identity as a statement of free Theology and polity, and had become a mere tool in the hands of ecclesiastical politicians, a means to coerce or exclude any theological or doctrinal position which the political majority considered unorthodox. Congregationalism had, in effect, sold its birthright for a mess of polity.

The walls of ancient tradition having been breached, the flood of conformist thinking poured through, notably in the twelve-Article Creed of 1883, and the profession of faith contained in the Kansas City Statement of 1913. But there remained three characteristics about the local church Covenant which made it useless, over the long run, as an instrument of coercion.

First, it is voluntary. The member who subscribes to it upon his affiliation with the local church may also withdraw, not only from the church, but from the obligations of the Covenant.

Second, it is mutual. The member who feels himself coerced or aggrieved has rights, just as surely as he has obligations.

Third, it is transient. Under a system of local church autonomy, the membership of the local church may change the Covenant as often, and in as many particulars, as it chooses.

These hard practicalities make the local church covenants ill-adapted to their uncomfortable role as censors of the private, Congregational conscience. In the context of our title, therefore, I submit that the Covenant is only relevant to a discussion of Congregationalism and Theology as a mutual guarantee of the right of private conscience.

When two members of a Congregational Church covenant with each other, they do not covenant to have a strong faith or a weak faith, or to imitate or deplore whatever faith the other has. They simply covenant to respect each other's right to have, build and practice a personal faith; and that respect renounces absolutely any attempt at coercion.

What our title, "Theology and Covenant in Congregationalism" means to me is that there is, indeed, a Theology of Congregationalism. Its roots lie deep in the non-sectarian religious fellowship ascribed by Atkins and Fagley to the early Congregational churches.

To support this conclusion I draw upon two historic sermons. The first was given by Dr. Charles Jefferson at the National Council Meeting in 1913:

"What is the mission of Congregationalism? To keep alive a theory of church government: No; to keep the soul alive to God. It is often said that Congregationalism is a theory of church government; that it is foundationed on two principles – the independence of the local church and the equal sisterhood of these local churches. But these principles are not foundations. They rest on something deeper. The fundamental thing is Congregationalism is a doctrine of God... Our polity is foundationed on our conception of God.

"We are free men in Christ. We are not bound by the tradition of the second century, or the dogmas of the fourth, or the doctrines of the sixteenth, or the customs of the seventeenth, or the practice of the eighteenth, or the methods of the nineteenth, but are at liberty to build the church along the lines indicated by the Eternal Spirit speaking in the intelligence and conscience of our day, so it shall become more and more an effective instrument in the hands of God for the promulgation of his Gospel and the extension of His Kingdom."

The second was delivered by Dr. Butman at Chislehurst, in 1975:

“...Congregationalism does have a theology: that is, it is rooted in an idea of God. In my younger days as a pastor there was prevalent an idea, not wholly unheard of now: namely, that Congregationalism, not having a national creed, had no corpus of ideas. In contrast to the precisely stated doctrines of such churches as the Roman Catholic or the Missouri Synod Lutheran, the open-thought system of Congregationalism seems vapid and amorphous, without flavor or form. You could be a Congregationalist, so current opinion went, without really believing in anything. This is a travesty on the Congregational idea. Our Way is very subtle, and it takes a mature sort of Christian to be a good Congregationalist.”

Later on in the same address, dealing with the headship of Christ in each local church, he says:

“This runs counter to a shallow notion held by many, that congregationalism is a mere democracy in which issues of right and wrong are decided by counting noses.”

Taking those two statements in conjunction, we have a good working definition of Congregational Theology. It is personal and private. It is not collective. It is not at the mercy of a Pope, Bishop, Superintendent, Synod, Council or Minister. Even less is it what the occupant of the adjacent pew thinks or votes it ought to be. It is free to change as the individual changes according to his study, prayer, reading and common experience in the world. It is voluntary. It may be expressed in any number of ways. It is always correct, because in Congregationalism there is no such thing as orthodoxy.

In short, the individual member of a local church stands, Theologically speaking, in exactly the same stance as his church assumes, politically speaking, when it becomes a member of the National Association: his witness is voluntary and not subject to direction at the caprice of anyone, individual or majority.

This is the quality which distinguishes our Theology from that of other churches which are just as “free” as we are, in terms of Polity. One might expect to find slender thread of common belief among the members of a Unitarian or a Baptist congregation, but one should be startled, and possibly offended, to find that same homogeneity in a Congregational church.

Looking back on the merger controversy and the litigation that grew out of it, from the perspective of twenty years of hindsight, one may confess that, strategically speaking, we blew it. We fought our fight on the other fellow’s ground, which was temporal and political, and we defaulted in the great responsibility and opportunity to show that there was and is a difference between the freedom and individualism of Congregational Theology and the regimented thinking which was discernible even between the lines of murky prose in the Basis of Union.

But it is never too late. There are plenty of Dr. Butman's "mature sort of Christians" in today's Congregationalism. All that is needed is that they work at cultivating their own personal faiths as scrupulously as they respect the right of their fellow-member to work at his, even though it may differ much or little from theirs.

This concept of Congregational Theology was never said better than by Rev. Jonathon Mayhew, minister of West church, Boston, in 1749:

"We have not only a right to think for ourselves in matters of religion, but to act for ourselves also. Nor has any man Whatever, whether of a civil or sacred character, any authority to control us unless it be by the gentle methods of argument and persuasion. To Christ alone, the supreme and only head of the Christian church, and the final judge of Mankind – to him alone we are accountable for not believing his doctrines and obeying his commandments as such.

"And whosoever attempts to restrain or control us, takes I upon him to rule another man's servant, forgetting that he also is a man under authority, and must hereafter stand or fall by a sentence from the same mouth as ourselves."

"While we are asserting our own liberty and Christian rights, let us be consistent and uniform, and not attempt to encroach upon the rights of others. They have the same right to judge for themselves and to choose their own religion, with ourselves. And nothing is more incongruous than for an advocate of liberty to tyrannize over his neighbors."

"We have, all, liberty to think and act for ourselves in things of a religious concern; and we ought to be content with that, without desiring a liberty to oppress and grieve others."

COVENANTS – "Digestif"

There is a principle of Plane Geometry which says that the whole is equal to the sum of its parts. The whole figure cannot change its area, or its circumference, or its shape, by changing the length or shape or figuration of its lines and angles.

For Dr. Butman, the National Association is the whole, and the local churches are the component parts. Perhaps it is right and natural for a Minister to work with this frame of reference. And what he has said to us is that the whole cannot coerce its component parts, theologically-speaking, without changing the character of the whole itself.

Perhaps it is just as right and natural for a layman to look at the local church as the whole, and the individual church members as the component parts. And my point has been that on the day a local Congregational Church attempts to coerce its component parts, theologically-speaking, it becomes something other than a Congregational Church.

Our differences, as I see them, are the reasons we put forward for the inability of the whole to use the Covenant as an instrument of coercion. Dr. Butman makes the point that the National Association cannot impose creed upon the local churches because the Articles of Association and By-Laws SAY that it cannot. But I want to point out to you that the Articles and By-Laws, just like the local church Covenant, can be changed by the simple political act of a vote. Hence, if we base our approach to Congregational Theology on man-made documents, such as By-Laws and Covenants, we have conceded that our Theology is whatever 51% of our membership says it is.

I prefer to base my position on the intangibles of historic Congregational usage: the idea that there are things specifically-forbidden to Congregationalists as surely as the fruit of knowledge of good and evil was forbidden to Man; and that one of those things is presumptuous intrusion into another's private and sacred beliefs. We do not respect anyone's rights of conscience because Man tells us to, but because God told us to.

In my opinion, the local church Covenant is useful to express community of purpose, willingness to serve our churches, desire to grow spiritually, and agreement to have a personal faith, but it can never regulate the nature or quality of what form that personal faith shall finally take.