

News of what God did for us is acted out in broken bread and poured-out cup. The Word spoken from the pulpit is acted at the Table.

### 3. THE PEOPLE THEMSELVES

Finally, it is the people themselves who show perhaps most clearly the meaning of the Meeting

House. They are gathered for one purpose: to hear God's Word and to respond to it. The pews are often placed so that the people sit almost literally on three sides of the pulpit, the better to hear what is most important in their worship.

But even as they come, eager and expectant to fill that house with their prayer and their listening,

the gathered people suggest something fundamental to the nature of their Meeting House. It is a Meeting House. It is where God's people are called together to meet God and each other. It is where our name receives its fullest meaning: "congregational". It is where the life of the whole people - not just individual believers - is seen to be the meaning, and the hope, and the purpose of our Way.

There is a place for cathedrals. But for us the Meeting House is a place built for a living congregation to meet a living Lord, and from there to go out to serve Him. For us, the Congregational Way is as stirring, and exciting, and as beautiful as anything in life for the Christian.

*...the greatest symbol is on the floor of the Meeting House in front of the pulpit, or perhaps raised up in the sanctuary. It is a simple, strongly built table. The Communion Table.*

## About the Author

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Congregational  
Way Series

# The Meaning of the Meeting House

by  
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*"...the Meeting House is a place built for a living congregation to meet a living Lord..."*

# The Meaning of the Meeting House

An American traveler stepped into one of England's most beautiful churches, the Anglican Cathedral in Lincoln. It was during a sunset, and although no one was in the pews, the service of evensong was about to begin. Fading light filtered through the high window, and the great Gothic columns moved the heart toward heaven. The music of the organ and the singing of the choir burst out of the silence like an angel chorus and that mysterious, half-darkened cathedral became a place apart. The traveler will remember these moments of rare and precious beauty.

Perhaps it is no wonder that as a Congregationalist he should come away asking: Why doesn't my tradition have cathedrals like that?" Most Congregational church buildings in America are very simple, their decor is plain. And if tradition be followed, our Congregational church buildings are not even "churches;" they are "Meeting Houses." For three hundred years, Congregationalists of America have rejoiced in their simplicity and have been uplifted by their plainness.

Whence came this tradition? Why were these places of worship so revered by their Puritan congregations? For Congregationalists, what is the meaning of the Meeting House?

## 1. GATHERED BY GOD

From the earliest days of their separation from the state church in England, Congregationalists have thought of their churches as "gathered

churches." They believed that a Christian church was formed when Christ gathered a few people together and promised to teach and guide them.

In other words, they thought a church was a company of people among whom a living, acting Lord was present. Two things then, were needed: the Lord, who had come to speak to His people, and the people who had come to hear what the Lord said. And it is this relationship of speaking and hearing that has dominated the whole conception of the Congregational Meeting House.

Our Roman brethren make elaborate use of symbol to express the relationship of people to God. Statuary crowds their churches. Vaulting columns suggest the mystery of the divine presence and incense and pageantry in the service deepen the sense of awe.

Yet, the Congregational Meeting House was never meant to be a symbol at all! It was a place for Christian people to meet and for the Word to be preached and prayer to be offered. Almost in spite of themselves, these buildings have had a meaning. In village after village among New England's hills and valleys the pure white lines of Congregational Meeting Houses have reminded the generations that people of God made those towns. And the character of the God they loved is reflected in the buildings they built. Plain and white. Pure and clean. Simple, yet rich. But always, the place for worship. Always, the place where people were to meet on Sunday morning to hear the living God who would speak to them there.

## 2. WITHIN THE WALLS

But come inside. What does the Meeting House mean when viewed from the pew? What symbols do the people see, and how does this building "fitly framed together" bespeak the God they serve?

From the pew, what does a person look up to see first? They see the pulpit, high and lifted up in the center of the Meeting House. Why have most of the Reformed Churches placed the pulpit in the center of the peoples' attention? Because this, to them, has always been the symbol of the Word of God dwelling in their midst. It may be the minister who stands there and speaks, but it is God's Word the people strain to hear! The pulpit is a kind of throne for the Word of God - a visible sign that the living God is one who speaks to His people, and that they have tried to make a fit place for the Lord to be heard.

And on that pulpit is another symbol, which is the Bible. This is God's Word

written and recorded on the pages of history. Not only through the speaking of a person, but also through the reading of the Bible comes the Word of the Lord to His people. The Book is open, to suggest that God's Word is free to everyone - no longer closed to the people, written in a language they could not understand, and chained to the pulpit as in medieval times!

And yet the greatest symbol is on the floor of the Meeting House in front of the pulpit, or perhaps raised up in the center of the sanctuary. It is

a simple, strongly built table. The Communion Table. The Holy Table at which Christ and His friends ate the Last Supper and where we eat it too, in remembrance of Him. It is a Table at which the Church's treasured communion silver is set, perhaps only six or eight times a year. Here the Good

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