

The Biblical Basis of Congregationalism

Congregationalists have historically accepted the Bible as a sufficient rule in matters of faith and practice. They therefore base their church government, upon Spiritual foundations. At a time when the Congregational Christian Churches are being asked to speak up for their tradition, it is well to ask: What is the basis for their faith and practice and how does it harmonize with the Bible-based usages which Congregational Christian Churches have followed across the centuries?

"For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them."

The great central text of Congregationalism is Matthew 18:18-20, in which Christ says to the early Church:

"Truly I say unto you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again I truly tell you if two of you agree on earth about any thing you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them." (NRSV)

From this passage we draw two principles of faith: **1. The headship of Christ, and, 2. The completeness of the gathered local Church.**

THE HEADSHIP OF CHRIST means that Christ is the head of each local Church. It is commonly but erroneously supposed that Congregational Christian

Churches are democratic, or majority-ruled, in their government. This error, together with the strong and persistent stress on the democratic ideal in secular government has lead to the perversion of the New Testament teaching of the Divine in the midst of human activity and decision. True Congregationalists simply do not determine ultimate issues of right and wrong by counting noses! such arithmetical heresy has been widely practiced, and in no small measure it has fostered an ecclesiastical secularism. Because of this men have turned to centralized forms of church government in the hope of finding more spiritual authority than is resident in the common human mind of fifty or a hundred neighbors. The true Congregational Christian Church is a theocracy; it is ruled and guided by God. It is not ruled by a written constitution, person, or tradition of the church.

THE COMPLETENESS OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

is based upon these words from Matthew 18. This means that God has given to the local Church every power necessary for its spiritual functions. The local Church does not need the authority of a pope or general council or body external to itself in order to do the Lord's work. This is a radically different concept than that of the one great national or international Church. Any ecclesiastical organization which ignores or contravenes the completeness of the local Church is not Congregational. In historical practice in America, Congregationalism has come to stand for two basic principles :

1. THE AUTONOMY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

2. THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE LOCAL CHURCHES

No better definition of Congregationalism has ever been written than that of the noted scholar, Dr. William E. Barton, which is to be found on page 15 of his definitive book *The Law of Congregational Usage*.

Congregationalism is that system of church organization which recognizes the equal rights of all believers, the independence and autonomy of the local Church, and the association of the Churches, through voluntary organizations devised for fellowship and cooperation.

Those Churches which intend to be Congregational cannot accept a constitution or ecclesiastical organization which is at variance with this definition.

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God is the distinct witness of churches of the congregational order. The small "c" is deliberate here in order to include denominations such as the Baptist and Unitarian, which have a polity like ours. It is worth remembering that the most popular polity in the United States is congregational. In practical terms, autonomy means that a local Church is free from the bondage of ecclesiastical control. We have unfortunately been forced to stress one principle doctrine to the exclusion of the second great truth of Congregationalism.

That truth is THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE CHURCHES. In the New Testament we find that Churches associated with one another as equals,

with neither one Church claiming authority over the others. The early Churches lived together in an atmosphere of mutual love, not in a relationship of dominance and submission. Congregationalists, following their example, have companied together because they chose to, not because a book of discipline forced them to any ecclesiastical organization which attempts to define, describe or delineate the life, work, and relationships of our

Congregationalism is based on Biblical truths which are eternal.

Churches to Christ violates the congregational principle of fellowship because it presumes to put in black and

white what ought to be written only on the heart.

Any organization which claims to be congregational in polity will, therefore, have these four marks, clearly stated and visibly practiced.

1. It will specifically honor the Headship of Christ in each local gathered Church;
2. It will exalt the spiritual completeness of each local Church;
3. It will acknowledge, respect and defend the autonomy of each local Church;
4. And, it will recognize Christian fellowship, not ecclesiastical law, as the tie that binds our Churches together.

About the Author

The Rev. Dr. Harry Butman has been a pastor of several Congregational Churches and one of the great founders and champions of our movement. Author of several books, speaker, mentor, pastor, preacher, and consultant to Churches, he is of a generation of clergy whose love for our past is powerfully articulated in the language of hope for our future. At the time this publication was reprinted, his was over 100 years old and just completed another book to help our churches.

The NACCC is an association of autonomous Churches bound by our belief that Christ alone is the head of the local Church. With this in mind, we express and discuss theological issues respecting different positions. There is no one document which directs all our Churches, rather clergy and laity are encouraged to establish their own understandings of scripture and congregational life in Christ. This piece represents the views of one of our respected leaders and is submitted to the larger fellowship of Churches for consideration and/or edification.

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The Biblical Basis of Congregationalism

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*"The completeness of
the local church is based
upon Christ's words."*