

## Remnant or Tapestry, Destiny for Congregationalism Today

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The National Association of Congregational Christian Churches was founded with the intent and purpose of preserving Congregationalism. Faced with a massive pro-merger public relations drive in favor of the creation of the United Church of Christ sponsored by and financed through the institutional assets of the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches those who wished to see classical Congregationalism continue were, in the parlance of nineteenth century naval nomenclature, “out gunned, under-powered and out maneuvered” by the opposition. Still a form of Congregationalism was preserved and for many who had engaged in the “Quixotic” struggle that was victory enough, for the first stage.

It was never the intent of the founders of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches (hereafter referred to NACCC or National Association), however, to merely preserve a “remnant” of the proud and glorious past. They had no desire to keep alive a mere portion of the great tapestry that was Congregationalism. No, the vast majority fought the merger battles with the intent that the NACCC should prove to be a “springboard” for the development and re-birth of Congregationalism throughout the United States and the world.

So far, that re-birth has not occurred. Instead a consolidation has taken place as a result of a “siege” mentality and a certain comfortableness within our little fellowship. In fact, the continuing Congregationalism of the NACCC has been characterized more by the willingness of many to be a close knit, mutual congratulatory fellowship than anything else. We pause long enough to pat each other on the back at least once a year at an Annual Meeting and then go home to spread the word that Congregationalism has been preserved. But my friends, what is a preserve? In culinary terms, it is something canned or bottled and treated in such a way that it can last a long time because it doesn't change.

It is not fresh. It is something which attempts to delay the affects of time. I sometimes fear that if the NACCC were to be labeled, the most appropriate tag might be “Preserve of Congregationalism, circa 1955.” The NACCC no longer exists as a motivated group of activists dedicated to the establishment of Congregationalism as a viable ecclesiastical reality throughout the world.

Even the name “Congregational” has been lost as a term of public usage and awareness. There was a time when Congregationalism was referenced in plays, movies, television, novels, articles and most media. Not long ago I watched the 1937 film *A Family Affair*. It was the first “Andy Hardy” film. Lionel Barrymore was Judge Hardy, Spring Byington was Mrs. Hardy and yes Mickey Rooney was Andy. In the film Mrs. Hardy states they are Congregationalists. At the time I thought, how sad that in 1937 the term could be used and a theater going audience would recognize what it signified. Today it is never used because it is no longer a part of public discourse or awareness. Those of us who frequent a church office know what it is to pick up the phone and be asked if this is the “Congressional” church. Our name was, by and large submerged within the UCC at the time of the merger. And because the NACCC has not succeeded in aggressively promoting the re-establishment of the name either through new church development or strong advertising it has effectively been reduced to the status of an historical curiosity at best. Those of us within the NACCC must prove to be better stewards of our heritage if Congregationalism is to have a future.

## II

### **The Testimony of Dr. Harry Butman**

Writing eight years after the founding of the NACCC, six years after the creation of the United Church of Christ and two years after the proposed Constitution of the UCC was sent to Churches of the Congregational order for consideration, Dr. Harry R. Butman, then moderator of the NACCC, wrote:

The quiet growth of the National Association is assurance that our free way of church life will not die. The fever and peril of the twenty years war is over; Congregationalism will continue.

But it is not enough for the National Association merely to exist; it must live, and live creatively. Religious history is full of petty splinter groups which have maintained a fossil continuance long after their victory has vanished.

We are perilously prone to the temptation to become a tight little group . . . But eschewing this evil we must take upon ourselves the task of witnessing to the worth of Christian love as the true bond between the churches of Christendom . . . If we do this, we shall live.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Butman saw the possibility of the National Association betraying its intended purpose of promoting the growth, rebirth and prosperity of Congregationalism by turning inward upon itself and its mission. His warning was: “We must not turn in on ourselves in close, self righteous isolation.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet the gatherings of the NACCC are, more often than not, distinguished by a close knit fellowship which is not so much open as it is comfortable for those ‘regular’ attendees. If indeed we have become a ‘comfortable little association’ content with getting together every year, then, we no doubt have our reward in our fellowship which is a rich fellowship indeed. It is our fellowship which many uphold as being distinctive about our association of churches. Some insist that it is the reason we exist.

Yet fellowship, as important as it is, expressed at the expense of a way of life is no virtue. If fellowship serves as a comfortable substitute for undertaking the work and witness of building upon a rich heritage and redirects the energy and effort that is required to

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<sup>1</sup>Harry R. Butman, *Handbook, 1963, National Association of Congregational Christian Churches*. (Oak Creek, WI: The Congregational Press. 1963), p.7

<sup>2</sup> Butman, Harry R. *Handbook*. P. 7

revitalize and rebuild a way of life upon the stage of human endeavor, then, we have lost the vitality of a clear vision and embraced the false comfort of easy vanity.

Before his death Dr. Butman lamented in our frequent personal phone conversations that the NACCC had become exactly what he had warned about in 1963. He described us as a “comfortable, mutual admiration society” which had indeed ‘lost its vitality and vision.’ He noted the declining numbers reported in our yearbook and the lack of intellectual activity. He expressed fear that we had betrayed our mission as well as our reason for existence. Dr. Butman in one of our last conversations said that we needed to grow out of our comfort zone and embrace new endeavors for the sake of congregationalism itself.

### **III. Systemically or Attitudinally Wrong?**

There has always been debate over the “system” or “non-system” of Congregationalism. From the earliest days there has been a tension between those who would promote the tendency to “Presbyterianize” Congregationalism and those who advocated the virtual independency of the churches. The late Rev. Harry Stubbs wrote during the 1960’s of this tendency in his address: “On Rediscovering the Genius of Classical Congregational Order.” The Rev. Dr. Stubbs re-iterated that to embrace either a Presbyterian interpretation of Congregationalism or, an unfettered independency was ultimately destructive. Dr. Stubbs gives his stark and serious warning:

Here we can see with all necessary clarity just exactly the difference between independency and Congregationalism. Independency “affirms the seat of ecclesiastical power to reside in the brotherhood (i.e. in the local church) so zealously as to ignore any check, even of advice, upon its actions.” Congregationalism affirms the equal sisterhood of all local churches. It has not a single basic principle: autonomy. It affirms as the sine qua non of its existence as a form of Church Order the “fraternal and

equal fellowship between these independent churches, which invest each with the right and duty of advice.” It affirms adelphity as well as autonomy.

I most vigorously asseverate that Independency is as much a departure from Congregationalism as is Presbyterianism. We must be assiduous in our opposition to the encroachments of the former as of the latter.

Fifteen years ago 90% of Congregational churches in the country allowed themselves to be Presbyterianized. Now, if another 10% allow themselves to be seduced by Independency, there will be no Congregational churches left. Congregationalism, born as out of travail and flourishing since 1580, will have vanished from the earth, Given a world that knows little but bureaucratic organization, I doubt if Congregationalism will ever know renaissance.<sup>3</sup>

What Dr. Stubbs saw as “bureaucratic organization” in 1969 has extended beyond systemic organization to the “politically correct” agenda and attitude today. The focus of the mainline Protestant bureaucratise is often a politically correct agenda which seeks to distinguish mainline perspective and priorities from that of the religious right. In the process many denominations have lost reference to their distinctive ecclesiastical and theological contribution to the church universal. The diminishment of specific tradition and unique theological perspective among denominational leaders and bureaucrats which upholds conformity to a politically correct agenda as the hallmark of faithfulness creates a vacuum in church life in which many members feel lost and disoriented. One of the reasons for the growth of evangelical and fundamentalistic churches is that they appear to offer traditional perspectives from a Biblical viewpoint on many issues in contrast to those politically correct stances which are articulated by leaders of many mainline denominations. The irony of these two radically divergent views of how to be church is

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<sup>3</sup> Harry Stubbs *On Rediscovering the Genius of Classical Congregational Order*. First Congregational Church, Toledo, Ohio, 1969. P.6

that both are often articulated by their respective adherents with the same attitudinal fervor, which is, the conviction that their perspective upholds an absolute truth which is superior to all others.

The result is an ecclesiastical world in which convictions are often articulated in such a way as to increase conflict and where biblical perspectives and sociological rubrics are sacrificed to a polemical perspective.

#### **IV.**

### **The Dilemma of Libertarian Perspective In / for the NACCC**

Many who helped found and fund the NACCC were, by and large, men and women who endorsed a Libertarian view of life. Libertarianism in all forms exalts individualism. It states that every unfettered individual view and act is good and brings a perspective which ultimately enhances the whole. Libertarianism diminishes arbitrary absolutes as points of interpretation. Even the place and perspective of Scripture as authoritative is called in question. The National Association of Congregational Christian Churches from its founding has been conditioned by libertarian perspectives to a remarkable degree. The libertarian viewpoint finds expression in phrases like: 'I'm a Congregationalist and I can believe what I want' or 'We have freedom of belief, no creed can be imposed upon me.'

The founders of Congregationalism held no such views. They believed that it was encounter with scriptures that produced theological awareness and a well-founded church.<sup>4</sup> Moreover the early Congregationalists endorsed the Westminster confession of faith as an adequate statement of their theological perspective yet rejected the

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<sup>4</sup> Henry M Dexter *Congregationalism: What it is; Whence it is; How it Works; Why it is Better Than Any Other Form of Church Government; and its Consequent Demands.* (Boston, Lockwood Brooks and Company. 1876), pp.25-28

Presbyterian order of church government outlined in that document offering instead the Savoy Declaration where a Congregational order was affirmed.<sup>5</sup>

My point is simply this. Early Congregationalists wanted individuals to develop their theological perspective and commitment. Study of the Scriptures, knowledge of where statements like those of the Westminster Assembly applied and where they did not were crucial for the development and life of the churches.

The NACCC was founded to preserve Congregationalism. The name itself has been, for intent and purpose, lost. The Libertarian orientation of those who founded the NACCC has further eroded the ability of individual Congregationalists and churches to articulate their faith. Therefore, a mere remnant of Congregationalism remains and not the full tapestry that was once the heritage of our way. By becoming a comfortable, safe fellowship where individual personality is known and celebrated at the expense of developing theological awareness and insight, we have failed to re-store the great heritage or fellowship that once existed. The NACCC has also failed to develop a new tapestry of its own making. It has instead merely continued to exist.

Last year more than 200 churches withdrew from membership in the United Church of Christ including one of the largest churches of that fellowship, the First Church of Christ in Wethersfield, Connecticut.<sup>6</sup> Few of those 200 plus churches have sought to become members of the NACCC. The reason is that we have so effectively hid our light under a bushel over the years that few recognize us as a legitimate expression of Congregationalism. To exist in such a situation is to betray our heritage, not enhance it.

Several practical steps must be taken in order to reclaim our heritage. I would recommend the following:

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<sup>5</sup> Williston Walker *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*. (Pilgrim Press, Philadelphia, Boston 1968), pp.340-353. Walker analyzes the work and purpose of the Savoy Declaration

<sup>6</sup> ucctruth.com

- Churches seeking information about Congregational bodies should not have to work at making contact. The NACCC needs to develop a first class network connection which is “stranger friendly” and provides the kind of quick access that helps lay leaders in local congregations feel comfortable. It must fully yet simply explain who we are and how we can help local churches of Congregational heritage.
- Our national staff must be trained and rewarded for responding to any requests from the internet with professionalism and follow through.
- While maintaining an “open, tolerant, and affirming” attitude toward all people. Our publications and information communicated through all sources should articulate that the vast majority of people connected with our Association uphold traditional values. This is essential to counter balance the politically correct mantra of the mainline bureaucracies of most denominations.
- Support of publications which uphold the name of Congregationalism and articulate perspectives that enhance our Way of Life must be strengthened by encouragement and support. The International Congregational Journal is but one example.
- The development of funds for a foundation for the purpose of programmatic endeavors beyond the national office must be a priority. The endeavor to develop such a fund must not be seen as an attempt to secure finances for the support of existing staff while support from churches and individuals continues to fall. Such a development needs to be for outreach and growth.
- A professional guild dedicated to developing and maintaining standards for clergy must be developed without the creation of a Ministerial Association which could proscribe or determine standing. Although an independent lot, being a Congregational minister must stand for more than merely being hired by a church

of Congregational tradition. The system of Ecclesiastical Councils of the Vicinage works up to a limit. A “Council of Ministry” could uphold higher standards as minimal expectations for clergy conduct and ethics.

At the high watermark of the merger controversy of the 1950’s, the Rev. Malcolm K. Burton wrote his *Destiny for Congregationalism*.<sup>7</sup> The destiny for Congregationalism is yet to be determined. A remnant of a once large and great tapestry has survived. The restoration of the whole has been impeded by a philosophy which exalted individualism above all else and the seduction of a warm and cozy fellowship. Whether the Congregational interpretation of church order and faithful existence ever regains its rightful place within the Orthodox and Catholic Church orders of this world remains a question for our time and place as advocates of the way.

The questions are simple:

Will we succumb to comfort or embrace sacrifice that our way might be re-born? Will we organize ourselves into a “seeker friendly fellowship,” or, remain a self-satisfied group which upholds ‘faith, freedom and fellowship’ without theological awareness or scriptural substance? Will we allow unrestrained individualism to dominate our Association or ask for self-critical understanding and accountability to Jesus Christ as the covenanted Master of the Churches to become our standard of faith and practice?

The answers to these questions will determine if we remain a remnant or emerge to restoration of a full tapestry, that is, a new tapestry conditioned by past tradition in our time and place today. The destiny of Congregationalism remains for us to determine today.

If indeed it is a time of destiny for Congregationalism once again, we must not despair or lack confidence in the future. As people of faith we affirm that God is with us and therefore all things are possible, “all things” can “be made new.”

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<sup>7</sup> Malcolm K. Burton, *Destiny for Congregationalism*. (Modern Publishers, Inc. Oklahoma City. 1953)

Turning to the Prophet Haggai we hear words that apply to us in the NACCC today. Originally, these words were addressed to the remnant of God's chosen people following the Babylonian captivity concerning the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. Still, these words apply to all continuing Congregationalists today:

In the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai, saying: Speak now. . . to the remnant of the people, and say, Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? Yet now take courage, . . . says the Lord; . . . take courage, all you people of the land, . . . for I am with you, . . . My spirit abides among you; do not fear. . . I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts . . . The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, . . . and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts.

Haggai 2:1-9 (NRSV)

With God with us, a remnant can become a thing of splendor, a shining example of renewal unto God's glory. All that is required is that the people of the remnant trust in God's good purposes, organize their life to greater prosperity in the Spirit and determine to be active in working with God. The destiny of our fellowship will be fulfilled with such reliance upon God and determination of action. It is indeed, the means by which a remnant is transformed into a glorious tapestry.