

Scripture: Acts 2:42-47; Matthew 18:18-20

Today, we look at the foundations of our particular denomination. Since we are moving through these movements historically, the Congregationalists are up next. The Congregationalists also move us across the ocean to America, where much of the action will take place from here on out.

Over the past few weeks, we have created a foundation for the Congregationalists by looking at the Anglican church in England and its American branch of Episcopalians, and we have seen the vast impact and influence of John Calvin by way of the Reformers last week. Now, we are about 90 years out from the beginnings of the Reformation. For Anglicans heavily influenced by Calvin, a question began to form in their minds. The question was put much later by a Lutheran theologian named Soren Kierkegaard, who asked the question concisely, *“If everyone is a Christian, how do you know if anyone is a Christian?”* This was the question of those who came to be called the Puritans in England.

Everyone who was born in England was baptized into the Anglican Church. Remember, the Anglican church retained all the trappings of the Catholic Church, including the structure and simply moved the leadership from the Pope to the King. For the rising Puritans, those who believed the Anglican church needed to be purified, the concern was that if the state, or the king, determines the religion of the people, is anyone really religious at all? The Puritans said, *“We can fix this; we just have to reform, purify, the Anglican Church from the inside.”* But some Puritans went further. Those Puritans said, *“This whole system is messed up. Let’s separate from it and establish something that is true to Biblical faith and practice.”* These Puritans came to be called “Separatists”, or Independents, because they wanted to separate completely from the Church of England, which, since the Church of England was the religion of the state, was rebellion against the state and heresy in the church.

Four of these Separatists – William Brewster, Richard Clyfton, William Bradford, and John Robinson – decided to start a secret church to worship in this purer, more Biblical way. The guiding description of that way was Acts 2 and Matthew 18. Within those two verses are the deep ideas that govern Congregationalism – **mutuality and intentionality**. **Mutuality** means living together in fellowship, forgiveness and grace. **Intentionality** means we bind ourselves together with our full commitment and conscience. In 1606, in Scrooby, England, the postmaster of Scrooby, William Brewster, opened his basement to this radical new church and Richard Clyfton served as the minister. Immediately, the new underground house church gained followers, and attracted the attention of the English authorities. Imprisonments, house searches, and pressure from government and church officials alike forced about 125 of the Separatists to flee to the Netherlands in 1608.

The Netherlands in the 1600s was a crossroads for international trade. The Netherlands had a reputation for being an open country for persecuted peoples from around the world. Jews, Muslims, renegade Christians, and others all found sanctuary in the Netherlands. The Separatists, who called themselves Pilgrims, found refuge in the city of Leiden. Most of the Pilgrims had been well-educated – mostly at Cambridge University, a hotbed of Puritan and Separatist heresy – and well-employed while in England. The Pilgrims went from upper class members of English society to struggling low-wage workers in the Netherlands.

The Pilgrims, now led by John Robinson, decided to try their luck in the New World, seeing the opportunity to worship freely and making a new life in a new world as a God-ordained plan for their future. The Pilgrims set up a charter (like an LLC, but with indentured servants) with England which would allow them to work and establish themselves in the New World.

After a couple of false starts, the Pilgrims set sail on the Mayflower in mid-September 1620. Traveling the Atlantic in a sailing ship in the fall is a rough ride, and this trip was no different. All 125 Pilgrims made it across safely, however, except for their pastor, John Robinson, who stayed behind in Leiden. The English had a very low view of the Pilgrims and it is likely the captain of the Mayflower was not sympathetic to their cause, which is why he directed the ship to the wild and rigorous shores of Massachusetts rather than the warmer and more inviting shoals of Virginia, which is where the Pilgrims wanted to go. The Pilgrims disembarked at an abandoned Indian compound, which they called Plymouth. The exact rock they stepped on when they got to land is still in Plymouth today, where the number 1620 is conveniently carved into it.

Think of Plymouth Colony as an experiment in communal living, **mutuality**, governed by the covenant of the people living together under God, **intentionality**. Aside from the tragedy of many deaths the first winter, the first couple of years were an abject corporate failure for a simple reason. No one could own anything. Everything was shared. That led to decreased productivity and less involvement in the community. William Brewster, who was governor of Plymouth Colony, decided to allow ownership and almost immediately productivity increased and people were more involved in their community.

The Plymouth Colony dissolved in 1629 and was absorbed into the Massachusetts Bay Colony (MBC). The leaders of Plymouth became leaders in the Bay Colony. Their influence established the first Congregational church in Salem in 1629. Very quickly, Congregational churches spread throughout the MBC. The need to codify this new way of doing church became important because, in the Congregational tradition, gathered covenanted churches associating with other gathered covenanted churches is what strengthens the church of God on earth.

So, in 1648, many of the great Puritan and Congregationalist ministers and leaders gathered in Cambridge, Mass, and they wrote the Cambridge Platform, which defined Congregational polity.

The Cambridge Platform is simply the Westminster Confession, which we talked about last week, with the back half torn out and replaced with what we know today as Congregational church polity. From these beginnings, Congregationalism became the main expression of Christianity in the United States. This early Congregational association of churches created the foundation for a few breakaway groups, the largest and most extreme being the Unitarian movement of the 1830s.

In the early 1900s, the Congregational association began to separate into more factional expressions. The Coalition of Conservative Congregational Churches (CCCC) formed in the 1940s as a 'first wave' fundamentalist breakaway. By fundamentalist, I mean that they affirm the 5-point platform of fundamentalism that came from Princeton University in the 1890s.

The United Church of Christ (UCC) formed when it unified with the German Evangelical and Reformed Church in 1957, after about 10 years of negotiations, and reached its zenith in the 1980s as the largest denomination in the United States. Toward the very end of those negotiations in the 1950s, a group of Congregationalists decided too many of the original ideals from the Cambridge Platform had been sacrificed to create the UCC. To maintain a sense of historical continuity and to preserve

Congregational principles, the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches (NACCC), our association, formed in 1955.

WORSHIP

Whereas the Reformed church worked hard to break down idolatry in the church, Congregationalism began with no idolatrous imagery in the church and in worship. And so early Congregational worship was very simple, modeling the Biblical model in Acts 2 – gathering together as one people to pray together, chant Psalms together, hear and read the Word together, and share communion together. That is pretty much it.

Congregationalism is, first and foremost, a Protestant statement on how Christian believers are to run a church. The early Congregationalists were reflecting what they read in Scripture and what was taught through John Calvin. This sounds restrictive to our ears, but once you have established how a church will be run and you know yourself to be free to worship in the way God calls you to worship without interference from King or army, there is tremendous freedom to experiment and renew ways of worship. This is what Congregationalists did. They were experimenters in worship, spiritual disciplines, theology because they were free to do so. And that is an intentional feature of the Congregational Way.

THEOLOGY

I mentioned earlier that Congregationalism is built on two ideas that come from our readings today – **mutuality and intentionality**. What are the intentions by which we gather together and how will we mutually live together as people of faith? We can't know the answer to that question until we are gathered together with other people; human beings standing together in one place where they have agreed to meet.

Think about this for a moment. If a structure is built and implemented and then imposed on a group of people, the people serve an idea of the structure.

The structure can exist whether people are present or not, because those people believe in the idea of the structure. Do they serve the structure or the people? Think about our discussion about the Catholic Church. It is, first and foremost, an idea that creates a structure which people participate in. Same with the Anglican Church. But a Congregationalist understands that people gather together in one place together, locally, here, bodies in a place together. This is the **mutuality** of a Congregational church.

In the New Testament, you never see service to an idea. You only see service to a Person, Jesus Christ, and service to other gathered flesh and blood people. People gather together with the Person of Christ as their guide and leader, *then* they decide how they will be together *in that place*. Scripture describes this *being together* through covenants. The people of Israel are together because of their covenant with God. Congregational churches create covenants so people who wish to be a part of that church can agree to be together fully and completely. This is the **intentionality** part of Congregational churches.

Mutuality and intentionality are the foundations of all Congregational theology. People gather together to share a personal, local, mutual experience of Jesus Christ in service to flesh and blood people under the covenant which holds them together because of their trust in the power of God's promises to us.

STRUCTURE

Each Congregational church exists independently of all other churches with Jesus Christ as the head of each local Church. The gathered people who have covenanted together, a covenant they have written together, then decide how best to run their church. You can hear the early ideas of democracy and American ideas of freedom in this, can't you? Unlike virtually every other model of church, power (remember how all these church movements are questions of authority?) is in the people of the gathered church, not in some invisible superstructure (Orthodox or Presbyterian models), or single person (a King or Pope), or in some theocratic governmental structure (early Reformed experiments).

There is a very important aspect to Congregationalism, though, that can be easily overlooked. Congregational structure is a huge check on power and authority.

But what keeps a Congregational church from going rogue and becoming a cult? Congregationalists believe strongly in the intentionality and mutuality of individuals, but also of local churches together. The check on any given church is...other churches. Covenanted local churches associate with other covenanted local churches. Congregational churches gathered together by mutuality and covenant creates a powerful witness in the face of cults of personality, renegade destructive practices, and are able to serve large mission projects and regional efforts to share the Gospel. So, we are covenanted members of the Congregational Christian Churches of Maine as well as the NACCC.

The local church and the associations of covenanted local churches only exist *when people are gathered together*. "*Wherever two or more are gathered together in my name, I will be there with you.*" Not only is Jesus' statement to the disciples not some idea to think about, it is a statement that doesn't even have meaning until people actually gather together in the name of Christ. It is a truly powerful and revolutionary idea, isn't it?

MISSIONS

Congregationalism is the first purely American expression of Christian faith. It is a New World and frontier way of being church. So, the Congregational church went into the frontier quickly and with Bible in hand. Early missions revolved around education, because an educated clergy is an expectation of Congregational churches. Harvard University was established to train Congregational pastors. Oberlin College in Ohio was the first university established beyond the Appalachian Mountains.

While the MBC had contentious, brutal, and deadly relationships with the Native Americans, which is putting it mildly, many later missions to Native Americans were respected and welcomed. Perhaps one of the most successful ministers to Native Americans was the one and only Jonathan Edwards, who, after being fired from his church in Stockbridge, MA, went into Indian communities and served them as their beloved pastor until his death.

Because of their theology and structure, there was a liberalizing effect on the engagement of Congregationalists in issues of the day. By 'liberalizing', I don't necessarily mean 'liberal'. Instead, think freedom.

Congregationalists ask themselves, "*What leads to more freedom here?*" when they are wondering how to engage the culture. And so Congregational minister Lemuel Haynes was the first ordained black pastor in the United States, back in 1785. Antoinette Brown was ordained by her local

Congregational church in 1853. In 1972, William Johnson was the first openly gay minister to be ordained in the United States. He was a Congregationalist.

Many Congregational churches were Underground Railroad depots in the North. Sunday School started in Congregational churches to get kids out of factories for at least one day a week. Social justice movements for equal pay, fair wages, and humane working conditions were all Congregational missions.

If you remember from last week, the Reformers and Calvin knew the Christian to be a mustard seed or yeast in the culture. Congregationalists take that teaching very seriously. God's Kingdom can only be known to others by hearing the Word and experiencing the love of Christ. Congregationalists believe that can only be true where freedom and fellowship can flourish. That leads to faith.

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

Congregationalists were experimentalists when it came to prayer and personal practice. Imaginative engagement with Scripture were part of a person's devotional time. Congregationalists kept journals detailing how God was working in their daily lives. I highly recommend the practice of having a "*Today I saw God in...*" journal, where at the end of the day you write down where you saw the presence of God in your daily life. The early Puritans did it, and it is a powerful spiritual discipline. With spiritual disciplines, the same conditions apply as in the Reformed tradition – if the practice does not deviate from Scripture, does not create a new idol, or become a personal aggrandizement, it is probably a good practice.

In closing, I would like to do a thought experiment with you all. Bring to mind an early Puritan, perhaps someone who lived in the MBC.

What do you see? How are they dressed? What are they like?

What did you see?

Did you see a dour, proud, dressed in black person with buckles on their shoes and a Bible in hand, ready to judge someone for their failure to live up to the rules of the Scriptures?

That person probably didn't exist. Well, that was Nathaniel Hawthorne's father.

Most Puritans, especially early Congregationalists, were friendly, outgoing, colorful, grace-filled people who sought grace in business and mercy in courts. They were revolutionaries who sought freedom to the best of their understanding. They dressed in colorful clothes, had parties, and were heavily influenced by a theology of grace and salvation, not one of sin and punishment. Puritans were the first sexual revolution in America. The common good in terms of wealth and prosperity was their first thought. At the same time, the value and dignity of the individual was of the highest importance to the early Congregationalist and Puritan, because it was important for Jesus.

For the rest of our Christian movements, we will be in America. America is a hotbed of religious innovation, for better or worse, and we will see how they conflicted with and agreed with the ideals of our particular movement.

May the Lord continue to bless our Congregational tradition, and may we be grateful for the gifts of mutual and intentional faith, fellowship, and freedom we share with our founders. Amen.