

**The Tendency Towards Centralization of Authority
Among American Congregationalists and Baptists**

By

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THE TENDENCY TOWARDS CENTRALIZATION OF AUTHORITY AMONG AMERICAN CONGREGA- TIONALISTS AND BAPTISTS

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THE present tendency toward centralization among Congregationalists and Baptists is one of the prominent phenomena of contemporary American Church History. It deserves recognition as a sign of the times; it is for historians to find its place in the continuity of historical development. The records of its latest phases are hardly yet in print; its beginnings are several centuries old.

We are familiar with the story of the beginnings of Separatism. We know that several congregations of English refugees established themselves in the Netherlands, and that from these came the English Congregationalists and Baptists and the Pilgrims of Plymouth in America. Both Congregationalists and Baptists very properly trace their line of descent from Robert Browne. The fundamentals of Congregational polity are expressed in his treatises of 1582 in which he maintained: (1) The right of the individual to decide for himself his church affiliation; (2) the sufficiency of the local church to elect and ordain its officers and to control its own affairs; (3) the principle of fellowship between churches, and the exchange of counsel, but without

any central authority to exercise discipline, or dictate in matters of faith and practice.

In studying the history of American independency we find two periods when interest in polity was intense. One of [26] these was during the first century of New England Congregationalism; the other is that of recent years. We need not seek far for the causes of the first. The problem of polity was of the essence of Separatism. The independent congregations in separating from Episcopacy were absorbed of necessity in the problem of how to organize and conduct themselves after the New Testament model and in a way that would conserve their own Separatist interests. This could not be done in a day, especially as they were not fully agreed.

They began with Brownism, but Brownism was modified by Barrowism, which gave greater power to the elders of the churches.¹ New England Congregationalism was largely influenced by Barrowism, and we know how strong was the influence of the ministers in the Bay Colony. The reasons for this are simple. There was first of all the desire to prevent dissension—a danger which the Separatists in Holland and in England showed to be a very real one. Then there were as contributing causes the heritage of Episcopal authority whose influence could not cease to operate at once, the idea of leadership like that of prophet and priest in the Old Testament, and the fact that the New England divines of the first generation were for the most part able and well-educated men. The early writings of these men show clearly the influence of Barrowism in the ordering of the *New England Way*.²

American Congregationalists started, therefore, with a modified Congregationalism. Baptists in England differed somewhat in doctrine and polity. We may disregard, how-

¹ *Vide* Confession of 1589 of the London-Amsterdam Church in Walker, *Creeks and Platforms of Congregationalism*, pp. 34-37.

² Richard Mather, *Order of the Gospels* (1700), p. 73.

ever, the General Baptists, who ceased after a time to be of importance, and pause only to note that the Particular Baptists, like the Congregationalists, believed in the independence of the local church and practised it both in England and in this country. Their relative weakness in this country during the seventeenth century makes it possible for us to confine ourselves to the story of the New England Congregationalists.

The history of New England Congregationalism in the first [27] century, when questions of policy are of dominant interest, expresses itself most clearly in two declarations of principles—the Cambridge Platform of 1648 and the Saybrook Platform of 1708. Separatism in the Bay Colony was a good deal of an experiment. The Puritans had not separated from the Establishment until they came to America, and they were feeling their way towards a settled polity. There was much dissension and agitation in the early years of the colony, and as the first half of the seventeenth century drew towards its close it appeared desirable that the constitution of Congregationalism should be more definitely defined. Church and State were so nearly synonymous that the General Court took the initiative and called a synod. It was distinctly understood that this synod had no power to legislate for the churches. Hooker expressed this clearly and concisely when he said: "Synods have allowance to counsel and admonish other churches, as the case may require. And if they grow obstinate in error or sinful miscarriages, they should renounce the right hand of fellowship with them. But they have no power to excommunicate, nor to impose their canons or conclusions upon them."¹ The leaders of New England Congregationalism could express their opinions, and their influence gave those opinions the force of law, especially as they were endorsed by the General Court. The Cambridge Platform announced its adherence to Barrowism by declaring that Congregational-

¹ Hooker, Preface to *Survey of the Sum of Church Discipline*.

ism was divinely ordained; that the local church was independent, choosing and ordaining its own officers, and placing the management of its affairs in their hands; that a council might be called to advise locally and a synod to make declaration of principles, but that these had no power of government. Over all was the ægis of the magistrates.¹

As the seventeenth century passed into its fourth quarter it was evident that the ministry of Massachusetts was losing something of its prestige. The charter of 1691 was to destroy the absolutism of the Congregationalist church. The ministers protested against this tendency, and at the Reforming Synod [28] of 1679-1680 favored an increase of power for ministers and synods. The lukewarmness of Court and people in Massachusetts prevented such a step in the direction of Presbyterianism; but in Connecticut there was a strong movement in this direction, culminating in the Saybrook Synod of 1708. This meeting marks a parting of the ways between Massachusetts and Connecticut. The "Fifteen Articles," incorporated into the Saybrook Platform and adopted by the Connecticut Legislature and the various churches, made the churches of that colony practically Presbyterian, and led to sympathy and eventually to a Plan of Union in missionary effort between Connecticut Congregationalists and Presbyterians of the Middle States that had much to do with retarding the growth of pure Congregationalism in New York and the Middle West.²

The Saybrook Platform provided as before for the government of the local church by the local elders, but greater emphasis was put upon the advice of neighboring elders in difficult cases of discipline. Semi-annual ministerial associations were to be held to discuss matters of mutual interest, and especially to safeguard the church from scandal and heresy, and to examine the candidates for the ministry.

¹ Walker, *Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, pp. 210-237.

² Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 515-516; Bacon, *Contributions to the Ecclesiastical History of Connecticut*, pp. 68-70.

Delegates from these associations were to meet in an annual General Association. To prevent local conflicting councils unions of churches known as consociations were formed with considerable power, a consociation generally corresponding to a county.¹ Interpretations of the document varied,² but the consociation became an established and efficient institution until supplanted by the conference in most cases.

The history of Massachusetts Congregationalism thus left to itself in the eighteenth century is not inspiring. The interest in polity declined, and along with it went a general decline in religious interest. People were absorbed in material gain and in colonial politics. The Great Awakening furnished an antidote to this temporarily at the middle of the century, [29] but the revival was followed by a period still more barren spiritually. After Jonathan Edwards and his contemporaries what religious interest there was manifested itself doctrinally until after the Unitarian secession in the nineteenth century, save for a few revivals in the years following 1800.

Meantime other people had been settling in the colonies of the Atlantic seaboard, bringing with them diversities in religious practice. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, Baptists had found their way into various localities in considerable numbers. Bringing with them the Congregational polity they made their contribution to its development in the eighteenth century, while New England Congregationalism stagnated. We may turn to the Baptist history with profit at this point.

The particular institutions of this period that deserve notice are the local council and the association, and their mutual relations. The local council was an expedient in use among the New England Congregationalists in the seventeenth century, and the association was known in England

¹ For the text of the articles *vide* Walker, *Creeds*, pp. 502-506.

² Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 509-514.

from about the middle of the seventeenth century, but these have been the means among American churches of developing an ecclesiastical polity that seems to be metamorphosing itself into a form of Presbyterianism.

Baptist churches were so few in the seventeenth century that associational meetings were impracticable. In 1707 the parent organization was effected in the formation of the Philadelphia Association, growing out of local quarterly and yearly meetings. The purpose of the organization was stated to be the settlement of grievances and troublesome cases of discipline, and the promotion of general interests.¹ In 1729 there was a flourishing association among the Six-Principle Baptists of southeastern New England.² In 1751 the Charleston Association was formed in the South, and the Warren Association, the first of the regular Baptists in New England, was organized in 1767.

The significance of these associations is not to be overlooked. They bear witness to a recognition on the part of American Baptists to the principle of fellowship; and while the minutes of the associations show a careful preservation of the rights of the local churches, they also testify to a consciousness of their mutual interdependence. In a time when the denomination was in its infancy in this country, the associations took upon themselves such matters as the encouragement of education by the founding of higher institutions of learning, the evangelization of outlying sections of country, and agitation for full religious liberty both North and South.³ The fact that the action of these associations was guided by able leaders of the denomination added greatly to their prestige. It became the custom for churches to refer questions of doctrine and polity to the associations, and their replies, while not

¹ Minutes of the Philadelphia Association, 1707-1807.

² John Comer's Diary, pp. 66 n., 70-71 n.

³ Newman, *History of the Baptist Churches in the United States*, pp. 275-278, 352 f., 367 f.

recognized as authoritative decrees, received general acceptance. Oftentimes the association manifested reluctance to express its opinion, fearing to increase the functions of the association and so to establish a court of appeal in the denomination.¹

During this same period, the local council was in operation for advice in matters of local discipline. The normal position of the association and of the council in Baptist churches is made plain in the records of Maine Baptist associations where it is stated: "In associating ourselves we disclaim all pretensions to the least control on the independence of particular churches; our main design is to establish a medium of communication relative to the general state of religion—recommend such measures—give such advice—and render such assistance as shall be thought most conducive to the advancement, peace, and enlargement of the Redeemer's kingdom in the world."² And again: "An association of churches has no power to abrogate the censures of an individual church; and, therefore, all questions and difficulties between churches and excluded members, are to be decided by councils of ministers and [31] churches appointed by the consent of parties."³ All through the eighteenth century we find a general recognition of the council as a temporary association of local churches for a special purpose, and the functions of such a council were not often assumed by an association, mainly because of voluntary self-limitation of the associations.⁴

The nineteenth century opened a wider vista to the churches of America. A new consciousness of the responsibility that lay upon Christians to be of service to their fellow-men led to the formation of missionary societies and humanitarian associations, that added greatly to the multi-

¹ Millet, *Maine Baptists*, pp. 250-253.

² *Ibid.*, p. 103.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

⁴ For the beginnings of Baptist Councils *vide* Allison, *Baptist Councils in America*, (1906), pp. 27-41.

plicity of church organizations. Educational interests came into being with the increased recognition of the need of practical Christian training, and publication societies for the diffusion of Christian information were formed.¹ It was inevitable that in this process there should arise rivalries and differences of opinion; that there should be a waste of resources through duplication of effort; and that through lack of correlation and coöperation there should become evident after a while a failure to meet the rapidly growing demands of that wonderful century of expansion. Conscious of these things and feeling the spirit of the present age which is satisfied with nothing less than a high degree of economy and efficiency, the Christian leaders of the Congregational and Baptist denominations have felt a revived interest in problems of church polity, and recent years have seen various attempts looking towards more efficient organization.

We may trace this tendency in the history of both of these independent bodies in the last twenty-five years. The Congregationalists were the first to begin the movement. They had organized their first local conference of churches in Massachusetts in 1821, and their first State association in Maine in 1826; associations of ministers had been common from the early years of New England settlement. In 1852 and again in 1865, general assemblies of Congregationalists from [32] all over the country met and considered their mutual interests. All these culminated in 1871 in the organization of the National Council, whose purpose as expressed in the preamble of the constitution is "to express and foster their substantial unity in doctrine, polity, and work; and to consult upon the common interests of all churches, their duties in the work of evangelization, the united development of their resources, and their relations to all parts of the kingdom of Christ."² This Council consists of delegates, lay and ministerial, divided

¹ Cf., e. g. Newman, *A Century of Baptist Achievement*, pp. 174-279, 322-254.

² Walker, *Creeds*, p. 572.

"as nearly equally as is practicable," representing local and State associations, and various organizations of the Congregational body. The constitution expressly states that the right of government continues to reside in the local church, but that the principle of fellowship must be recognized in inter-church relations. The National Council has held thirteen sessions, and a fair estimate of its usefulness may be quoted from a Congregational writer: "It has been a most valuable means of expressing and promoting fellowship in the widely scattered churches of our order. It has discussed questions vital to our polity. It has given advice, sometimes wise and sometimes not so well considered, which has been followed or not as it has commended itself to the churches. It has not even been obliged to be always consistent with itself or the precedents which it has created. It has helped greatly in the solution of important questions, and shown that union is possible without uniformity. It will, in the future, be increasingly the rallying place and unifying power of the denomination."¹

The National Council has always disclaimed any intention to infringe upon the rights of individual churches, but the logic of events has been leading in the direction of a greater centralization of authority. From its inception the Council has exerted its influence in favor of Christian unity, and the last few years have witnessed an attempt to bring together the Congregationalists with two other ecclesiastical bodies in an organic union. Such an undertaking involved an amendment of Congregational polity, and at the triennial meeting at Des Moines [33] in 1904 a Committee of Nine was appointed "to do what may be done on its own initiative, and in conference and coöperation with local and State bodies for the better adjustment of our Congregational order to existing conditions."² Besides the matter of adjust-

¹ Boynton, *The Congregational Way*, p. 136.

² National Council of Congregational Churches of the United States, *Addresses, Reports, . . . etc., of the thirteenth triennial session, Cleveland, Ohio, October 8-17, 1907*, Boston, 1907, pp. 340-347: Report of the Committee on Polity.

ment with the bodies proposing union, this Committee of Nine was to prepare a course of study for ministers as a minimum requirement for ordination, and to devise means for the improvement of the relations between pastors and churches. The committee proceeded to investigate conditions and the attitude of the churches and associations. The whole question of Congregational polity was opened up and discussed, and while many expressed themselves as opposed to anything that threatened the complete independence of the local church, there has been growing a conviction that there should be a strengthening of the Congregational organization for greater efficiency. The report of the Committee on Polity makes plain the current of opinion. Several State associations have reorganized along the lines of greater simplicity and unity, realizing that "the waning use of ecclesiastical council and its inadequacy to meet the demands and needs of the churches, the languishing condition of many feeble fields, the lack of supervisory care, and the complex character of our agencies and organizations call for the initiation of a more truly representative and Congregational system of administration." The committee in its report recently submitted goes on to say:

Entirely aside from and independent of the large and vital interests involved in the proposed Tri-denominational Union, and resultant of what our inquiries have elicited from the large body of our churches, your committee are of one judgment that our Congregational churches may safely and consistently move along the lines of representative order without in the least imperiling either of their fundamental principles of autonomy or fellowship; and we unite in the conviction that our churches should address themselves with earnest and intelligent purpose to such readjustment of their order as shall provide for a representative administration of all of our interests.¹

¹ National Council of Congregational Churches of the United States, *Addresses, Reports, . . . etc., of the thirteenth triennial session, Cleveland, Ohio, October 8-17, 1907*, Boston, 1907, pp. 340-347: Report of the Committee on Polity.

[34] The Committee on Polity reported at the meeting of the National Council at Cleveland in October, 1907, recommending a uniform designation of local assemblies as "associations" and of State bodies as "conferences," the vesting of ministerial standing in the local associations, a larger recognition to local associations as a conciliar unit with continued direct representation in the National Council, and, most important of all, the two following provisions:

That the state organizations become legally incorporated bodies; and that under a general superintendent and such boards as they may create, and acting in coöperation with committees of local associations and churches, they provide for and direct the extension of church work, the planting of churches, the mutual oversight and care of all self-sustaining as well as missionary churches, and other missionary and church activities to the end that closer union may insure greater efficiency without curtailing local independence. That the administration of the benevolent interests of our churches be directed by the representatives of the churches in national organization and that this Council appoint a commission of fifteen, including a representative from each of our benevolent societies, who shall report at its next regular meeting such an adjustment of these societies to the bodies of the churches represented in this Council as shall secure such direction, care being taken to safeguard existing constitutional provision of those societies and the present membership of their boards of control, but also to lodge, hereafter, the creation and continuance of these administrative boards in the suffrage of the representatives of the churches.

This last provision is proof of the fact that there is a rapid tendency towards centralization of authority when we compare it with the constitution of the National Council, which declares in its preamble that the "National Council shall never exercise legislative or judicial authority, nor consent to act as a council of reference."¹ The report of the committee was adopted.

Along the same path but more slowly have moved the

¹ Walker, *Creeds*, p. 573.

Baptists. Having made successful trial of district associations and [35] state conventions, Baptists north and south united in a General Convention for missionary purposes in 1814. This convention undertook to carry on foreign and home missions, education, and journalism, but with unequal success; after a few years it confined itself to foreign missions, and other societies were organized as needed. In 1845 Baptists north and south divided over the question of slavery, and the Southern Baptist Convention was organized on the plan of the original "Triennial Convention." Boards of Home and Foreign Missions were constituted as committees of the convention. Membership in the Southern Convention includes those who have contributed a certain sum to its funds, and delegates from "District Associations that coöperate with the convention." Membership in the northern societies is on the same basis of contribution to the funds of the societies.

With this system of loose voluntary organization for benevolent purposes, of State conventions and district associations, supplemented temporarily by local councils when necessary, the Baptist churches of America have got along, cherishing jealously the autonomy of the local church. In one respect the Baptists had improved upon the polity of the Congregationalists—in the adjustment of the local council to the association and the improvement of its efficiency. While the Congregational tendency has been away from the council to the association in such matters as ordination and the approval of ministerial standing, Baptist practice has been in the direction of emphasizing more the function of the council while its relation to the association was carefully defined.¹

Two attempts were made by the Philadelphia Association between 1837 and 1845 to secure the participation of a committee of the Association in each session of a local council, but the attempt failed. Since 1896 several associa-

¹ Allison, *Baptist Councils in America*, p. 84.

tions have appointed advisory committees for consultation by churches or for the examination of ministerial candidates before the calling of a council; and while there are practical objections to this plan, it has worked well thus far. The most significant step has been [36] the adoption of the plan of a Permanent Council. This plan was initiated by the Southern New York Baptist Association in October, 1895, after the report of a committee appointed two years before. It provided for a permanent council, consisting of every pastor and one delegate from each church in the association, to meet regularly for the consideration of such matters as are usually brought before local councils, to take the initiative when necessary in matters pertaining to the common good, to act for the association during the interval between the meetings of the association, and to report to the association regularly.¹ Such a Permanent Council was vigorously opposed in the session of the Baptist Congress a month later²; but the organization was perfected with some changes, and proved a model for similar councils in other places.

With the opening of the twentieth century there was an increasing sentiment among Baptists that something should be done to coördinate the various benevolent enterprises of the denomination, to increase the unity and efficiency of the churches, and to reflect the Baptist consciousness of the denomination as a whole on the great questions of the day. This sentiment found expression locally in ministerial gatherings and at the anniversary meetings of the missionary societies. Committees were appointed and the matter was agitated with little definite result for a time, except that a committee of reference was created designed to be permanent, for the better coördination of the missionary societies. Meantime, in 1905 the Northern anniversaries and the annual meeting of the Southern Convention occurred simultaneously at St. Louis and the opportunity was improved to organize a

¹ Allison, *Baptist Councils in America*, pp. 97-98.

² *Report of the Baptist Congress, 1895*, p. 65.

General Convention of American Baptists "to promote closer fellowship among American Baptists, their increased efficiency, and spirituality, and the evangelistic spirit in our churches; to consider subjects having a bearing upon the missionary, educational, and philanthropic enterprises of the denomination and upon the moral and spiritual welfare of society." The organization was composed [37] of representatives of local churches, district associations, and State conventions all over the country.

This achievement was hailed with satisfaction as marking a distinct step towards the reunion of northern and southern Baptists, but the organization promised no great effectiveness, and agitation continued for the creation of a general organization of northern Baptists for the purposes already enumerated. The initiative was taken by the Chicago Association; this was supported by officials of the missionary societies; and a provisional organization was effected at the anniversary meetings in Washington, May 17, 1907, under the name of the "Northern Baptist Convention." Resolutions were offered declaring adherence to the principle of the independence of the local church, the advisory and representative nature of the district and State associations, but at the same time affirming the general conviction that a general body was needed to minister to the common interests of the denomination. A constitution and by-laws were adopted to be ratified a year later, after the churches and associations generally had acted upon the matter.¹ The completion of such organization will give to the Baptists of the United States two great conventions, the Northern and the Southern, based on State and district associations, and on the local church as the unit and foundation of the whole, and with a General Convention of all as the apex of the pyramid.

Briefly summarized the story of the evolution of Congregationalism as a church polity is from the simple to the complex, and from the local to the national and even inter-

¹ Cf. *The Standard* (Chicago), May 25, 1907.

national organization. Based on the principle of the self-government of the local church with no definite relation to other churches except as occasion demanded a local council or a synod, the Congregational and Baptist denominations have come to include widely diverging agencies closely related in organization, and becoming continually more co-operative, all finding a common head in a general council or convention. The outstanding features of present-day Congregationalism may be said to include:

[38] (1) The local church, conserving its own interests through its own membership, but acknowledging and practising the principles of fellowship and coöperation.

(2) The district association, considering matters of mutual interest, and in the case of the Congregational body having to a large extent the oversight of ministerial standing and ordination, which in the Baptist body is relegated to a temporary or permanent council.

(3) The State conference or convention, organized especially for a missionary purpose, but serving also to cement more firmly the common interests of the churches.

(4) The Congregational National Council, and the Baptist Northern and Southern Conventions culminating in the General Convention of the United States, organizations composed of representatives of churches and associations with a partially defined oversight of the benevolent activities of the denomination, and able to express, though without the force of authority, the denominational consciousness.

Congregationalism has many points in common with American civic interests. It has learned to combine flexibility with permanency, and is striving to adjust local independence to national efficiency. Could the three bodies seeking union under the leadership of the Congregationalists combine with the three seeking similar union under the leadership of the Baptists—nearly all having a recognized Congregational polity, we should have the spectacle of nearly seven million evangelical Christians that in the

spirit and form of their organizations most nearly resemble the national government under which we live. The law of continuity of development seems to point in that direction.

We are in the midst of the making of history. Independence has proved its worth in the course of the last three hundred years, but there is a general conviction that the direct democracy of the churches should be supplanted by a more effective representative system. The trend of opinion is very manifest in the history of the last five years in both of the bodies under consideration. There is no probability that the fundamental principles of Congregationalism will be sacrificed, [39] but there will come modifications of the system. The whole movement is but an added exemplification from contemporary history that time and environment are certain to modify the type, that changes of structure must conform to changes of function in the organism, and that the Christian church, if it would maintain life and efficiency, must adapt itself always and everywhere to the demands of the age.