THE RISE OF THE CONGREGATIONALISTS

Prayer
Scripture: Acts 14:21-23
Hymn: 332 "All People That on Earth Do Dwell"

One of the most striking landmarks in a New England town is the white New England Meeting House of the Congregational Church on, or just opposite, the village green. It was the church of the New England Puritans. It was the established church, supported by public taxes in Massachusetts until 1834 (in Connecticut until 1818). The Congregationalists are proud of their role in the settling and molding of New England, and, through their influence on the political institutions of that region, of their influence on the political ideals of the United States. They point with pride to the part their churches have had in the intellectual and spiritual development of America.

The Congregational Churches were a product of the English Reformation. When Henry VIII replaced Roman Catholicism with his Church of England the majority of Englishmen went along with their king. A minority wanted to restore Catholicism. Another minority wanted a much more thorough and radical reformation. The progress of the Reformation under Edward VI was more to the liking of this minority but still did not go far enough for them. Elizabeth's middle-of-the-road restoration of Protestantism after Mary's return to Catholicism did not satisfy a growing minority. These critics of Elizabeth's Anglican Church pled for the restoration of a "pure" church from which all remnants of popery and Rome had been purged—they objected to clerical clothes, kneeling at the Lord's Supper, the use of the ring in marriage and the sign of the cross in baptism. These critics were called "Puritans." Most of the Puritans had no desire to withdraw from the Established Church—they only wanted to purify it. Many Englishmen who had fled to Geneva under Mary returned to England under Elizabeth, advocating a change from the episcopacy of the Anglicans to the presbyterian system of the Calvinists. The more moderate Puritans who favored a presbyterian system were willing to stay in the Established Church, waiting for the Queen and Parliament to carry out the Reformation. Some, like Cartwright, were driven from the Church of England. Some of these became the Presbyterian Church in close fellowship with the Scotch Presbyterian Church.

Some Puritans grew impatient with the slowness of the Reformation. They separated from the Church of England, denying that it was a true church. They insisted on their right to set up a true church as pictured in the Bible. Sometimes these people were called "Independents" and sometimes "Separatists." They are often referred to as "Non-Conformists" because they refused to conform to the ritual of the Established Church. Sometimes they are called "Dissenters" because they rejected the doctrine of the Anglican Church.
The Separatists grew out of the Puritans. The Congregationalists grew out of the Separatists. Their spiritual and doctrinal roots go back to Wyclif and his Lollards. They owed much to Hugh Latimer (1485-1555) and Nicholas Ridley (1500-1555) who were forerunners of the Puritans in their attempts to further the Reformation in England to bring it closer to the model on the Continent. The Congregationalists were strongly Calvinistic in doctrine but they objected to a national Presbyterian Church as strongly as to a national Episcopal Church.

The Congregationalists look to Christ as the sole head of the church. They maintain the independence and autonomy of each local congregation or church. Each congregation is a "gathered" body of people who have covenanted together to live under the lordship of Jesus recognizing the priesthood of all believers. The early Congregationalists insisted on an experience of grace that was the work of the Holy Spirit and that demonstrated election. They believed that democracy in church government represented first century Christianity. The early Congregationalists believed that the New Testament provided the model for church organization which was a pastor, teachers, and deacons who were chosen by the members of the congregation to serve them and lead them. For years they maintained that this was the only Scriptural organization—modern Congregationalists deny the New Testament provides an exclusive pattern. The Congregationalists affirmed the necessity of voluntary fellowship with other congregations. It was their insistence on the autonomy of the local congregation combined with fellowship with other congregations that distinguished them from pure Independency. Congregationalists are proud of the emphasis that has been put on a learned ministry and educated membership throughout their history. Scripture was the authority—creeds could be useful learning tools but had no binding authority.

THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

There may have been some secret separatist gatherings in the time of Queen Mary. The first known gathered, separatist church was the one meeting in Plumbers' Hall in London that was raided by the sheriffs of the city of London on June 19, 1567. A group of about one hundred people were meeting in Plumbers' Hall, ostensibly to celebrate a wedding, but really they had met to worship God in a purer manner than that of the Church of England. They had chosen Richard Fritz to be their minister and Thomas Bowland to be deacon. The minister, the deacon, and about fifteen of the members were arrested and thrown into prison. They were brought to trial under the bishop of London, Edmund Grindal, and the lord mayor. Their trial revealed that they regarded the ceremonies and canon law of the Established Church as evil. Fritz spoke of "filthy canon law." The system of archbishops, bishops, and deans smacked of papal tyranny and they were determined to be free in the true "Gospel freedom." They regarded clerical clothes as "idolatrous gear." They were a separated, non-conforming, dissenting congregation. They
believed they could constitute a church on the Scripture model. Their justification was the Pauline exhortation to "come out from among them, and be ye separate."

After the Pastor, Fritz, and the deacon died in prison, a petition addressed to the Queen in 1571 styled them "a poor congregation whom God hath separated from the churches of England, and from the mingled and false worshiping therein used." They declared that they "do serve the Lord every Sabbath-day in houses, and on the fourth day in the week we meet or come together weekly to use prayer and exercise discipline on them which do deserve it, by the strength and sure warrant of the Lord's good Word, as in Matthew 18:15-18."

It was a rudimentary type of Congregationalism that had advanced beyond ordinary Puritanism to form a company of poor, ignorant Christians, determined to carry out a complete reformation. They believed they had found the pattern of the true church in the New Testament.

This little church was broken up by the government. No one knows how many other groups like them were secretly meeting in England. We do not know whether any of the members of this little congregation found their way to other meetings or what influence they may have had on congregations that appeared later.

THE CONGREGATION OF ROBERT BROWNE

The next appearance of Congregationalism came in the 1580's under the preaching of a young Anglican cleric named Robert Browne (born about 1550). He came from a family of considerable local prominence in Rutlandshire. The family enjoyed the friendship of Lord Burghley of the neighboring country of Lincoln. By 1570 Browne was a student in Corpus Christi College in the University of Cambridge. He received his bachelor's degree in 1572. His years in the university were the years of the great controversy between Cartwright and Whitgift. Cartwright was removed from his professorship in December, 1570, and from his fellowship at Trinity College in September, 1571, and forced into exile, making him the champion of the Puritans. For three years after his graduation Browne taught school (probably in Southwark) and preached to unlawful gatherings in gravel-pits about Islington. When plague broke out he returned to Cambridge for more theological study. He stayed in the rigorous Puritan home of Richard Greenham, whose instruction he valued above that of the university. Greenham had no sympathy for Separatism, but encouraged Browne to preach in Puritan pulpits even without a license. Browne was well received by the Puritans but began moving in a Separatist direction. He attacked the Church of England as an unchristian body. Early in 1580 he was forbidden to preach—the prohibition was delivered by Richard Bancroft. Browne received the prohibition with scorn and it strengthened his Separatist leanings. A former schoolmate in the University was conducting a school in Norwich in the adjacent county of Norfolk. This friend, Robert Harrison, was also meeting with a group who were seeking a purified church. Browne moved to
Norwich where he taught school and joined Harrison in the study of the New Testament and in the effort to establish a pure church.

It is possible that Browne and Harrison met some Anabaptist handidraftsmen from Holland in Norfolk. Browne did not mention the Anabaptists in his writings but in his thinking he resembled them at some points and differed from them in others—He continued to accept infant baptism. It is impossible to tell whether he borrowed either directly or indirectly from them. Some insist that clear Anabaptist influence in England did not appear until a hundred years later. Browne became the pastor of the little flock at Norwich. Browne visited other groups of like mind, one of which was Bury St. Edwards, where his preaching was well received. His work attracted the attention of the Bishop of Norwich who lodged complaints with the Archbishop of Canterbury that both Harrison and Browne were corrupting the minds of the children. They were forbidden to continue teaching and only his friendship with Lord Burghley saved Browne from prosecution.

Browne visited East Anglia and preached for a non-conforming Puritan congregation. He was jailed, released, and jailed again for preaching against the Established Church. His experiences convinced him that it was useless to try to complete the reformation in England. Late in 1581 or early in 1582 Browne and Harrison moved a part of their Norwich congregation to Middelburg in the Dutch province of Zeland. They joined a Puritan congregation of which Cartwright was pastor. Browne and Harrison kept in touch with the part of the congregation that remained in Norwich. Browne and Harrison soon experienced difficulties with Cartwright and decided that he was unworthy of fellowship because his congregation had continued in the national church. They felt compelled to separate and to form a church of their own. In 1582 they published three treatises largely for the benefit of the group back in Norwich—two of the treatises are counted among the most important documents of early Congregationalism: A Treatise of Reformation without tarrying for Anie, and of the wickednesse of those Preachers, which will not reforme till the Magistrate commaunde or compell them, A Booke which sheweth the life and manners of all True Christians, and howe unlike they are unto Turkes and Papistes, and Heathen folke, and A Treatise upon the 23 of Matthew.

Browne declared that the true church is a body of professed believers in Christ who unite to one another and to the Lord in a voluntary covenant. The covenant transforms an assembly into a church. Christ is the only head of the church. The members of the church are not all the baptized inhabitants of a kingdom, but only those of genuine Christian character. Each church is in charge of its own government and discipline and chooses its own pastor, a teacher, elders, deacons, and widows. These officers do not relieve the ordinary member from responsibility for the welfare of the church to which he belongs. Browne asserted the full autonomy of the local church and the full responsibility of each member for the good order of that church. He also held that the churches have obligations toward each other
for mutual watchfulness and brotherly helpfulness. The civil authorities have no right to exercise lordship over spiritual concerns. Harrison disagreed with him at this point.

Browne's ideas were far too revolutionary for England where his works were widely circulated. Queen Elizabeth issued a proclamation against them describing them as "sundry seditious, schismatical, and erronious printed Bookes and libelles, tending to the depraung of the Ecclesiastical government established within this Realme"; all persons possessing copies were ordered to surrender them and all who distributed them were threatened with the penalties of sedition. On June 4 and 5, 1583, John Coppin and Elias Thacker were hanged at Bury St. Edmunds on the dual charge of heresy and the circulation of the works of Browne and Harrison. Forty copies of the confiscated books were burned at the executions.

Browne and Harrison began to disagree and the congregation fell into bitter arguments. Late in 1583 Browne with four or five of his followers and their families moved from Holland to Scotland. Browne met strong opposition from the Presbyterian government and was imprisoned. He failed to gain any important following. He concluded that the Presbyterians were even less tolerant than the Episcopacy of England. By the summer of 1584 Browne had returned to England. In 1585 he was charged with circulating a pamphlet against Cartwright and had to sign a recantation. He made his submission to the Church of England and became the head of a grammar school at Southwark in 1586. In 1591 he was ordained a priest in the Church of England and became rector of Achurch-cum-Thorpe in Northamptonshire, which he served in quiet obscurity for forty years, dying in 1633.

Browne had sown seed that continued to bear fruit. Separatist gathered congregations continued in Bury St. Edmunds, in Gloucester, in London, in Chatham, and in the west of England, according to a Confession of the London group in 1596. The Church of England tended to label all separated churches as "Brownist" but after Browne's return to the Established Church the Separatists were ashamed to be associated with his name, although they continued to hold the principles he had taught.

Anglicanism was strengthened and more firmly established by the enlargement of the powers of the Court of High Commission in 1583 and by Act of 1593 that decreed banishment for all who attended the meetings of dissenters and of all who denied the supremacy of the Queen in religion. Even so a few congregations continued to be gathered.

THE MARTYRS OF THE LONDON CONGREGATION

The first known event of importance in the history of London Congregationalism was the arrest of John Greenwood, a young clergyman, in the autumn of 1586. Greenwood had entered Corpus Christi College in Cambridge University in 1578. Upon his graduation in 1581 he was ordained and became a chaplain in
the household of Lord Rich, a Puritan noble of Essex. Greenwood moved from Puritanism to Separatism and in the fall of 1586 preached to illegal assemblies in London. He was arrested and imprisoned in the Clink prison. A friend and fellow-laborer, Henry Barrowe, a man of higher social rank and ability, visited Greenwood in the prison. The jailor, knowing that Barrowe had already incurred the displeasure of Archbishop Whitgift, arrested Barrowe without a warrant.

Henry Barrowe was from a prominent Norfolk family. He was a student at Clare Hall in the University of Cambridge from 1566 to 1569-70. He was a profligate student with little interest in religion. In 1576 he became a lawyer of Gray's Inn, continuing his immoral life. He became an extreme Puritan and then moved to Congregational Separatism.

Greenwood and Barrowe were repeatedly brought before Archbishop Whitgift, John Aylmer, Bishop of London, other church dignitaries, Lord Burghley and the chief justices and prominent civilians in an effort to win them to the Established Church. They steadfastly maintained that in government, rites and sacraments it was no true church. They admitted that the Queen was sovereign in civil affairs but denied that she had any power over the church. The clergy of London visited the prisoners twice a week attempting their recovery to conformity but none of the efforts changed them. Their friends smuggled paper to them, a page at a time, and smuggled out of the prison their writings page by page. They were secretly carried to Dort in Holland for printing. Barrowe and Greenwood produced eight controversial treatises containing over nine hundred printed pages while in prison. The most important treatise, published in 1589, was the True Description out of the Word of God, of the Visible Church. Another was Barrowe's Brief Discoverie of the False Church, of 1590. In 1591 they made a sharp reply to an able Puritan critic in their Plaine Refutation of M. Giffards Brooke, intituled, A short treatise against the Donatistes of England. These writings led to the conversion of Francis Johnson who became the first regular pastor of the London church of Barrowe and Greenwood.

Barrowe and Greenwood presented a theory of the church almost identical with that of Browne. The true church is a company of faithful and holy people, having their own officers consisting of pastors, teachers, elders, deacons and widows, chosen in free elections by a free and holy people. The church has the full power of discipline and Christ is its only head. Barrowe and Greenwood differed from Browne by being less democratic. They put the execution of the government of the church in the hands of the church officers. The duty of the ordinary member was to be "a most humble, meek, obedient, faithful, and loving people." Two generations later the Rev. Samuel Stone of Hartford described the Congregational Church as "a speaking aristocracy in the face of a silent democracy." The Congregational Churches of both England and America followed Greenwood and Barrowe rather than Browne.
The London congregation continued to grow while Greenwood and Barrowe were in prison. In 1589 the London clergy tried to convert fifty-two Nonconformists in prison. In 1592 fifty-nine prisoners signed a petition begging the help of Lord Burghley. For a few months the lot of the prisoners was less severe and even Greenwood and Barrowe were permitted to visit outside prison walls. It was then that John Penry and Francis Johnson were converted.

John Penry was a Welsh Roman Catholic who entered the College of Peterhouse at Cambridge in 1580. Before he graduated in 1583–84 he became an ardent Puritan. He published a number of controversial tracts and was suspected of having some connection with the Martin Marprelate pamphlets. He fled to Scotland where he received protection in spite of a letter of Queen Elizabeth requesting his extradition and a proclamation of James VI against him. In 1592 he returned to London where he joined the congregation of Greenwood and Barrowe.

Francis Johnson was a clergyman of the Church of England from Yorkshire who graduated from Cambridge in 1581. A strong Puritan sermon in 1589 caused him to be deprived of his fellowship in Christ's College and to be expelled from the university. He fled to Middelburg where he became the pastor of the English church of Cartwright. He had no sympathy for Separatists. He learned of Barrowe and Greenwood's refutation of Gifford that was being published in Holland and notified the English ambassador who commissioned him to see that the books were burned. Johnson did a thorough job burning the books which he had not read. He saved two copies from the flames and when he read one of them he was converted. He resigned his pastorate in Middelburg, went to London where he visited Barrowe in prison—Greenwood had been freed—and joined the London church.

The London church, with Greenwood and Barrowe in prison, had adopted a covenant in 1588, stating that "they wold walke with the rest & yt so longe as they did walke in the way of the Lorde, & as farr as might be warranted by the word of God." They exercised the discipline of excommunication but did not administer the Lord's Supper. They tried to make Penry their pastor but he refused, hoping to return to Wales as a missionary. In September, 1592, the London church met in the house of Mr. Fox in Nicholas Lane, and elected Johnson as pastor, Greenwood as teacher, as elders, Daniel Studley, who had helped smuggle the manuscripts out of the prison, and George Kniston. Christopher Bowman and Nicholas Lee were chosen deacons, and the church began administering baptism and the eucharist.

The authorities were alarmed at the growth of the Separatist Church. In December, 1592, Greenwood and Johnson were imprisoned. Penry avoided arrest until March, 1593, when he was captured. Fifty-six members of the church were imprisoned also in March. Barrowe and Greenwood were tried before Chief-Justice Popham on March 23, 1593, on the charge of attacking the authority of the Queen and inciting to
rebellion. They were convicted and hanged on April 6, 1593. Penry was hanged on May 29th—when he was arrested he had an unfinished manuscript in which he complained that the Queen and her government prevented the service of God as taught in his Word.

The bishops sent to Parliament a bill to strengthen action against critics of the Establishment—the Act of 1593. Sir Walter Raleigh estimated the number of "Brownists" at more than twenty thousand.

Johnson and the more prominent members were kept in prison. The poorer members went into exile in Holland. Settling in Amsterdam they lived in great poverty still looking to their leaders in the London prison for leadership.

The little company of exiled in Holland received great comfort and strength when they were joined in 1593 or 1594 by Henry Ainsworth, a man without a university education but who had educated himself and had become an able Hebraist. He was the most learned of the early Congregationalists. He had grown up in Norwich the center of Browne's work. He had lived on boiled roots and worked as a porter in a bookseller's shop for nine pence a week, in order to educate himself. When he joined the Amsterdam exiles they made him teacher in the place of Greenwood.

In 1596 the Amsterdam church published a statement of faith with the title "A True Confession of the Faith, Humble acknowledgement oe the Alegance vvhich vvee hir Maiesties Subjects, falsely called Borvvnists, doo hould towwards God, and yeild to hir Majestie and all other that are ouer vs in the Lord." These poor exiles denied the Queen had any power over the church.

Early in 1597 the English government allowed most of the prisoners to join their associates in Holland. Johnson was allowed to plan and attempt to plant a colony on the Magdalen Islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The colony failed within the year and Johnson joined the church in Amsterdam. It was not long before both the small congregation surviving in London and the Amsterdam church were torn with strife. The quarrel began in the London church and spread. It came out of the duty of brotherly watchfulness. The London pastor's brother made objections to the dress of the pastor's wife. Pettiness and uncharitableness destroyed the effectiveness of the churches.

CONGREGATIONALISM UNDER JAMES I

When James I came to the throne there were high hopes among Puritans and Separatists that he would change ecclesiastical policy and allow free worship in England on the same terms granted French and Dutch Protestants in exile in England. The King's reaction to the "Millenary Petition" of 1603 in the Hampton Court Conference of January, 1604 made it clear that the only safety would be in exile. Puritanism and Separatism continued
to make some gains. John Smyth, a clergyman of the Established Church adopted Separatism and gathered a congregation at Gainsborough. Persecution led Smyth to lead his congregation to Amsterdam in 1608. Smyth got into a controversy with Johnson over the way to admit members to church fellowship. In 1608 or 1609 Smyth withdrew and formed an English Baptist Church while keeping the Congregational government.

In 1610 Ainsworth and Johnson disagreed over church government and the church in Amsterdam divided again. Johnson died in Amsterdam in 1618 and Ainsworth in 1622 or 1623.

Another Separatist congregation gathered in the home of William Brewster at Scrooby. William Bradford was a young member. John Robinson, a learned clergyman of the Church of England, became the leader. Persecution forced the little congregation to go into exile in Amsterdam in 1608. Fearing they might become involved in the quarrels raging in the Amsterdam church, the little band moved on to Leyden in 1609. By hard work and honest they earned the respect of their Dutch neighbors. They purchased a large house opposite St. Peter's Church for their meetings. Brewster printed books for them. Robinson engaged in a debate with the Arminian champion, Episcopius. Life was hard for the exiles but they were encouraged when they were joined by the young Edward Winslow. Fearing their children would succumb to the temptations of the foreign city, they began planning an emigration to the New World. They considered Guiana and then applied to the Virginia Company for the right to establish a colony for a free church. Robinson and Brewster drew up and submitted to the authorities in 1617 a statement of their beliefs. They admitted a willingness to accept the authority of the king to appoint bishops and his supremacy over all causes and persons. They requested a guarantee of tolerance. James I was only willing to give a verbal promise that they would be unmolested as long as they behaved peaceably. The London merchants drove a hard bargain--for seven years all profits from the colony would go to repay the company. After many delays and much ship trouble the "Mayflower" sailed in September, 1620, reaching Cape Cod in November, 1620. After a month of exploring they landed at Plymouth in December, 1620. They were bringing Congregationalism to America.

It was the more active minority of the Leyden congregation that sailed to America. Robinson stayed in Leyden with the majority. Even before the minority had sailed for America, Henry Jacob, a member of the congregation in Leyden, William Ames, a theologian who had been exiled to Leyden, and William Bradshaw, a Puritan writer, had enunciated an Independent or non-separatist Congregational position. They wanted to avoid separation from the Church of England while working to establish a nation-wide system of Congregational churches. Jacob, in 1616, founded a church in Southwark--the first Congregational church to remain in continuous existence.
CONGREGATIONALISM UNDER CHARLES I (1625-1640)

In 1628, resenting the heavy handed attempts of Archbishop Laud to enforce conformity in the name of Charles I, the non-separatist Congregationalists began their emigration to Massachusetts. A royal charter was secured and a church formed in Salem in 1629. In 1630 John Winthrop led a large group of emigrants to Massachusetts. Strong churches grew up around Massachusetts Bay.

Gradually the separatist churches of the Plymouth area and the non-separatist churches of the Salem and Boston areas joined in a fellowship of Congregational churches that separated from the Church of England and from the English Crown. The Congregationalists exercised great influence in the shaping of a new nation.