

"THE CONGREGATIONAL WAY"

An Historical Study of the Congregational  
Doctrine of the Church

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## PREFACE

In this Ecumenical Age it is necessary that each Christian Communion consider again its particular doctrine of the Church, and re-state it for the benefit of the whole Body of Christ.

This Thesis is an attempt to show some historical and theological facets of the traditional Congregational doctrine of the Church. However, it must be stated that a full exposition of Congregational ecclesiology is an impossible task for any thesis. Firstly, inherent within Congregationalism is the fear of dogmatizing about matters of faith and practice. It has expressed itself in Statements and Declarations but always with the qualification that these things are 'commonly believed amongst us'. Therefore, Congregationalism, while it has a characteristic ecclesiology, has never formulated a rigid pattern of Churchmanship which has to be adhered to by all the Churches. Secondly, a full study of Congregational ecclesiology would entail the study of the practices of every Congregational Church through the ages. That is an impossible task! Therefore, we have been confined to available material; but material which nevertheless expresses what we would regard as traditional Congregationalism. Thirdly, a study of this nature must be content merely to state, however critically, what Congregationalists have believed about the Church at various times in the history of Congregationalism. It is impossible to convey the pulse and feeling of the life of a Congregational Church, for it is very important in seeking to understand any Churchmanship, not only to understand its theological form and structure, but also to experience its 'koinonia' in its common life and worship.

Nevertheless, an attempt has been made to express those facts and aspects of Congregational ecclesiology which are most true to its traditions and its inheritance, and which are most relevant for a proper understanding of Congregationalism today. In this study, Congregationalism has not been set forth in opposition to other doctrines of the Church in order to prove that it is more Biblical and better, but an attempt has been made merely to show what Congregationalists 'commonly believe' and practise, and thereby to clarify certain issues which are involved in ecumenical discussions. Our purpose has been ecumenical rather than polemical!

In writing this thesis, my warm thanks are due to Professor W.D. Maxwell D.D., D.Litt., Dean of the Faculty of Divinity, who first suggested the subject of the Thesis and guided my research. Also, to Dr. G.F. Nuttall D.D., of New College, London University, who made me aware of some significant books relevant to this study; and to Mrs D.S. Davidson who kindly assisted in the typing of the stencils.

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SUMMARY

CHAPTER ONE: THE CHURCH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Introduction

A Biblical basis is required for any ecclesiology because of the nature of Christian truth and of the Church itself, and for our study, because of the claims of Congregationalism.

New Testament scholarship has taught us that no one form of Church polity can claim sole precedent in Holy Scriptures.

1. The Definition of the Church

- (1) The meaning of 'ekklesia';
- (2) The meaning of 'One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.'

2. The Relationship between the Church and Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit

Ecclesiology is inexplicable apart from Christology and Pneumatology. A discussion on the covenantal and the organic conceptions of the Church, with special reference to some of the New Testament metaphors:

- (1) The Body of Christ;
- (2) The Bride of Christ;
- (3) The Temple of the Holy Spirit;
- (4) The Vine and the Branches.

A study of some recent discussion on the nature of the Church by Flew, Johnston, and Barrett, showing the necessity of the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, for the creation and continuing life of the Church.

A discussion on the gift of the Spirit. The Church has experienced Christ's continuing presence, lordship, and ministry, by the Holy Spirit since Pentecost, and this fact alone gives meaning to the doctrine of the Church and the Ministry.

3. The Ministry and Membership of the Church

"There is only one 'essential ministry' in the Church, the perpetual ministry of the Risen and Ever-Present Lord Himself." Christ's ministry is apostolic, priestly, and pastoral, and every member of the Church shares in it. The word 'ministry' is here confined to the specific orders within the Church's ministry.

- (1) The Nature of the Ministry
  - (a) The call and commission of God,
  - (b) The authority of God,
  - (c) The gifts of the Spirit,
  - (d) The tasks of the Ministry;
- (2) The Orders within the Ministry
  - (a) The Apostles,
  - (b) The Prophet and the Evangelist,
  - (c) Presbyter, Bishop, and Deacon;
- (3) Membership within the Church

4. The Relationship between the Primitive Churches

There is a diversity of organization which gradually develops into monarchical episcopacy in the post-apostolic age. The visible, local Church, is the manifestation of the One, Catholic Church in one place at a particular time.

5. The Church and Civil Authority

A discussion on the relationship between the State and the Church in the New Testament. The Church's attitude towards the State was one of obedience but not compromise.

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CHAPTER TWO: SEPARATIST BEGINNINGS

Introduction

'Separatism' was a movement within English Puritanism. It differed from the other branches of Puritanism mainly in its attitude towards the ecclesiastical authority of the State.

(1) The Nature of Separatism

Special reference is made to the writings of Robert Browne and Robert Harrison.

The Bible was the ultimate authority under God in all matters of faith and practise. The Church established by Law did not conform to the Apostolic Church. The Separatists could not therefore abide within the Anglican Church and still hold a good conscience. They had no love for separatism itself, and did not regard their separation as schism.

(2) The Separatist Definition of the Church

- (1) The Church is primarily a 'gathered Church' of believers;
- (2) The Church is constituted by a Covenant,
  - (a) with God,
  - (b) with each other,
  - (c) it is sealed by Baptism;
- (3) The Church is under the Government of God.

Each member of the Church is called to be a king, priest, and prophet with Christ. The Church must judge all things by the Word of God, and seek only to do the will of Christ. The work of the Holy Spirit is therefore essential in the life of the Church. This is clearly expressed in the exercise of discipline, and, the calling of the Church's ministry by the Church Meeting.

(3) Separatism and Ecumenicity

Although the Separatists emphasised the 'gathered Church' they did not thereby imply a rigid independency between Churches, but they recognised the need for Synods and inter-Church relations also making provision for a ministry which was not confined to any one Church. Separatism at its best was not exclusive but ecumenical in intention.

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CHAPTER THREE: CLASSICAL INDEPENDENCY

I. THE NATURE OF INDEPENDENCY

The nature of 17th century Independency is discussed as a prelude to the next chapter on the ecclesiology of the Independents. In both chapters the "Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order, 1658" is the main source of reference. The 17th century was the age of Classical Independency.

(1) The relation between Separatism and Independency

At the beginning of the 17th century, Separatism is largely an exiled movement in the Netherlands. There it became divided into different forms. As 'semi-Separatism' and 'semi-Congregationalism' it re-established itself in England within the second decade of the century. The subsequent growth of Congregationalism was spasmodic.

English Independency arose about 1640. It was greatly influenced by the Congregationalism of New England, and especially John Cotton, the New England divine. Through the witness of the 'Five Dissenting Brethren' at the Westminster Assembly of Divines, Independency gained prestige and attracted attention. With the political ascendancy of Oliver Cromwell it gained political power, and ecclesiastical strength through the work of some outstanding divines, notably, John Owen.

(2) The Significance and Nature of the Savoy Declaration

This Declaration was the clearest expression of those things which were commonly believed and practised by the Independents. It is divided into two sections: one, on 'Faith', and the other, on 'Order'. It was not intended as an imposition on the Churches, but as an expression of the Churches' faith and practise.

(1) Authority for Independency

Holy Scripture was the basic authority, but there was also an appeal to tradition, and, to the use of reason and prudence in the liturgical practise and organization of the Churches.

(2) Civil Authority and Independency

The Independents were intimately involved in the political struggles of the Age. They obeyed the State, and even used it in their fight for religious freedom, but they did not allow it any ecclesiastical authority.

(3) Independency and Religious Liberty

The Independents stressed religious liberty and the need for a good conscience. During the Commonwealth a certain degree of toleration was achieved in England.

(4) Independency and Ecumenicity

Denominational strife was a stumbling block to union with the Presbyterians. Nevertheless, there was the desire for union, and while the Independents do not appear to be altogether willing at times, their ecclesiology did not imply isolationism, but contained the seeds of ecumenical fellowship.

(5) Independency and Orthodoxy

The Independents were orthodox in the Calvinistic and Reformed sense. There were some who inclined towards Anabaptism and Quakerism, but the faith of the Savoy Declaration is both orthodox and conservative.

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CHAPTER FOUR: CLASSICAL INDEPENDENCY

II. THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

The Independents had a deep understanding both of the nature of the Church and of the necessity for the Church. They made the traditional distinction between the 'invisible' and 'visible' Church, but they stressed the idea of the 'gathered Church'.

(1) The 'gathered Church'

Fundamental to the idea of the 'gathered Church' were the 'voluntary principle' and the 'principle of separation'.

(2) The Covenanted People

The 17th century was the age of the Covenant. The word itself is strangely absent from the Savoy Declaration, but the essential elements are discernable.

(3) The Government of God

Christ is the final authority to which the Church must be obedient. His government is exercised in His Church through its members, especially in the Church Meeting, and through its officers. This is shown in the exercise of discipline, the accepting and excommunicating of members, and in the calling and ordaining of officers. The essential elements in ordination are,

prayer, fasting, and normally, the 'laying on of hands'. There were four Church offices: Pastors, Teachers, Elders, and Deacons.

God thus governs the Church by the Holy Spirit working in and through the Church and its ministry.

#### (4) Synods and Councils

The local Church possesses all the means of grace, and all the privileges which God hath bestowed upon His Church, and yet, it is only part of the whole Catholic Church.

Within 17th century Independency there was a deep-seated desire for mutual consultation and fellowship between Churches. Circumstances often prevented Independency from truly expressing its Catholic belief, but, Synods and Councils were inherent in the nature of Independency.

The Synods had a limited authority, although some desired that they should have more authority. The Synods were brought into being by the Churches themselves for the specific purpose of providing a necessary sense of solidarity and fellowship which a local Church always needs.

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### CHAPTER FIVE: CONGREGATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

This chapter is a discussion of the developments which took place within Congregationalism from the 17th century until the 20th century.

#### Historical Developments

The 'Bloodless Revolution' brought William of Orange to the English Throne in 1688, and soon after an Act of Toleration was passed. This Act gave the Nonconformist Churches a new lease of life, but after the first impetus of expansion and growth was expended, the religious life of Nonconformity declined. In spite of the work of men like John Howard, Isaac Watts, and Philip Doddridge, and the foundation of the Dissenting Academies, the 18th century was a disheartening period for English Congregationalism.

The Evangelical Revival rescued Congregationalism, and was instrumental in revitalizing its faith, and its evangelical and social concern. Independent Churches grew in number and increased in vigour. However, the Evangelical Revival was defective to the extent that it stressed religious individualism at the expense of the corporate nature of the Church. It thereby prepared the way for a decline in Congregational Churchmanship.

There was a wider co-operation between the Churches, and the Congregational Union of England and Wales (CUEW) was formed in 1831. Ultimately, this Union had no authority to legislate for the local Churches.

An early product of Union was the "Declaration of Faith, Church Order, and Discipline of the Congregational, or Independent Dissenters, 1833." Like the Savoy Declaration this was not a confession intended to be imposed upon the Churches, but a declaration of those things commonly believed by Congregationalists. In comparison with the Savoy Declaration there are some remarkable and instructive differences, which can largely be accounted for by the drift away from traditional Calvinism. The later Declaration does not show the same depth and definiteness, nor the catholicity of the older Declaration. It is obvious from a comparison of the two Declarations that within the first few decades of the 19th century Congregationalism was casting aside much of its traditional Independent heritage.

During the 19th century Nonconformists were engaged in struggles against the State for religious liberties. To a large extent, the ecclesiology of Congregationalism remained as it was expressed in 1833. Congregationalism was now strengthened by Union.

Towards the end of the century there were some significant and far-reaching theological trends which began to affect a change in Congregational Churchmanship. Through the influence of

theologians like Schleiermacher and Ritschl; the critical approach to the Bible; and the evolutionary theory of Darwin, Protestant theology was in a state of uncertainty. Congregationalism was itself greatly influenced by the new trends, and some were soon adapting their ecclesiology accordingly.

The ecclesiastical trends of the late 19th century, which were still partly a result of the Evangelical Revival, were individualism and undemoninationalism. The theological trends of the time resulted in some quarters in the deprecation of institutional Christianity, the sacraments, and the ministry; there was a process of 'spiritualizing'. This was evidenced in Congregationalism in the 'Leicester Movement' of 1877, but the greater number of Congregationalists remained true to their convictions, which were stated in 1878 - "the acceptance of the Facts and Doctrines of the Evangelical Faith is an essential condition of Religious Communion in Congregational Churches." During this period R.W. Dale and J.G. Rogers conducted a campaign for the restoration of Congregational principles, the peak of the Revival being marked by the publication of Dale's "A Manual of Congregational Principles" in 1884.

#### Dale's 'Manual of Congregational Principles'

In his manual Dale attempted to restore the 'high-churchmanship' of Classical Independency. He maintained that there are five fundamental principles of Congregationalism:

- (1) "It is the will of Christ that all who believe in Him should be organised into Churches.
- (2) "In every Christian Church the will of Christ is the supreme authority.
- (3) "It is the will of Christ that all members of a Christian Church should be Christians."
- (4) "By the will of Christ all members of a Christian Church are directly responsible to Him for maintaining His authority in the Church.
- (5) "By the will of Christ every society of Christians organised for Christian worship, instruction and fellowship is a Christian Church, and is independent of external control."

Then Dale discusses the nature and functions of Church Officers; and finally, omitting his section on the Sacraments, we note his section on Some Practical Aspects of Congregationalism, especially

- (1) Church Membership,
- (2) Mutual Relations of Congregational Churches.

#### The Twentieth Century

In spite of strong defence of Congregational Churchmanship, by many astute leaders, some Congregationalists were laying aside their true inheritance. During the early years of the 20th century there are three types of Churchmanship within Congregationalism:

- (1) The Churchmanship according to the traditional pattern of 1833;
- (2) The Churchmanship of an extreme group who questioned presuppositions of Dissent and Congregationalism, and accepted the freedom of these as an opportunity for ecclesiastical experimentation.
- (3) The Churchmanship of those who combined an adventurous spirit with a determination to express their Churchmanship in terms of the Gospel. There were those who strove to revive the Genevan heritage of Congregationalism; and those who reasserted the freedom of the Holy Spirit in ecclesiology at the expense of dogma.

CHAPTER SIX: CONGREGATIONALISM IN AN ECUMENICAL AGE

Introduction

The modern Ecumenical Movement is defined, and its importance is stressed. The relationship of Congregationalism to the Ecumenical Movement is commented upon. The 'ecumenical encounter' involves the inner transformation of each Church which regards the movement seriously. This chapter is intended to be a re-appraisal of Congregational ecclesiology in an ecumenical setting.

The Church

1. The Need for the Church - Congregationalists cannot conceive of Christianity apart from the Church.

2. The Holy Spirit in Congregational Ecclesiology - Pneumatology is central to Congregational ecclesiology, but this involves two fundamental questions:

(a) Freedom and Authority - the relationship between freedom and authority is discussed. The terms are defined.

(b) The Spirit and the Word - their relationship is discussed, for 'only as the Word and the Spirit are conceived together is the doctrine of the Church comprehensive'.

In the light of these two questions the Holy Spirit in Congregational ecclesiology is discussed. It is shown that Congregationalism maintains the present rule of Christ in His Church through His Spirit. The questions of religious liberty, creeds, and tradition in relation to Congregationalism are asked, with the conclusion that, Congregationalism must re-examine what it believes about the Holy Spirit and the Church; learning both from the Scriptures and from its own and other traditions what the Spirit says today.

The Church Meeting - the relationship between the work of the Spirit in the Church and the Church Meeting is discussed, and the importance of the Church Meeting is stressed. Four important aspects of the Church Meeting are then discussed:

- (a) The Church Meeting must take place within the regular worship and sacramental life of the Church;
- (b) The Church Meeting presupposes a responsible discipline of understanding of the ways of God with His people;
- (c) The Church Meeting must not be confused with popular conceptions of democracy;
- (d) The Church Meeting must be aware both of its privilege and of its responsibility and limitations.

3. The Local Church and Synods - the local Church has always been emphasised in Congregational ecclesiology. Synods have always been regarded as integral to the doctrine of the Church, but have never been emphasised. Today, Congregationalism is rediscovering the Universal Church. The nature and authority of Synods are discussed with reference to Congregationalism in South Africa.

4. Congregationalism and the Unity of the Church - Congregationalism desires the reunion of the Churches, and is aware that it is only one part of the whole Church. The nature of this unity is then discussed: unity is essential; unity cannot be achieved at the expense of truth; unity is costly.

5. The Congregational Ministry in an Ecumenical Age - The ministry is discussed in relation to its nature, the question of ordination, and the unity of the Church.

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"CHAPTER ONE"

"THE CHURCH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT."

In this initial chapter we shall attempt to lay a Biblical foundation for our subsequent study. The importance and need for such a basis is self-evident from the nature both of Christian truth and revelation and of the Christian Church which is dependent upon that revelation contained in Holy Scripture.

The Christian Church is directly related to the Covenanted People of God in the Old Testament, especially the Remnant of Israel, and we cannot neglect or forget this essential Old Testament connection. But the New Testament depicts a New Israel based on a New Covenant and brought into existence at Pentecost. The New Testament is therefore the primary source for any ecclesiology. Our study - the nature of the Church in Congregationalism - demands that we do in fact start in the New Testament, for the earliest protagonists of Congregationalism claimed that Congregationalism alone had scriptural warrant, and Dr R.W.Dale could boldly declare that "the Churches of the Apostolic Age were Congregational", a claim supported by as eminent a scholar as Hort.

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New Testament scholarship has taught us today, however, that no one form of Church polity can claim sole precedent for itself in Holy Scripture. As Canon Streeter said, "everybody has won and everybody gets a prize !" The New Testament does not present us with a model Church whose external characteristics we should strive to copy in every detail nor even with an ideal Church to which we should aspire. There are many points on which the New Testament is silent, and says C.H.Dodd, "we do

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1. See T.W.Manson "The Church's Ministry" pp 11ff esp. p 15
  2. R.W.Dale "The History of English Congregationalism" p 5  
See Hort "The Christian Ekklesia", also Hatch "The Organization of the Early Christian Churches."
  3. D.Jenkins "Congregationalism" p 16

not know exactly how any church of New Testament times was governed." Indeed, we are also aware that even the most scrupulous attempt to restore the Church of the New Testament in its outer forms must be so highly selective as in effect to be a failure.

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This chapter is divided into five sections:

1. The Definition of the Church
2. The Relationship of the Church to Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit
3. The Ministry and Membership of the Church
4. The Relationship between the Primitive Churches
5. The Church and Civil Authority

#### 1. The Definition of the Church

We shall here deal with two means for defining the Church, firstly, we shall study the etymological meaning of the word 'ekklesia'; and secondly, the theological meaning of the Nicene Definition, 'One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church'.

#### 'Ekklesia'

'Ekklesia' is used only three times in the Gospels, and then, only in St. Matthew's Gospel, but it is used over a hundred times in the rest of the New Testament. Unfortunately, 'ekklesia' is one of those words which have come to carry an inclusive meaning which in the New Testament they do not possess. There has been much discussion about the meaning of the word as it is used in the New Testament, for its importance in defining the Church is great, as Dr G. Johnston says, "it admirably bears the content of the full concept of the society that is God's in

4. C.H. Dodd "The Church in the New Testament." p 15

5. G. Nuttall "Visible Saints" p 2

6. A. Richardson "An Introduction to the Theology of the NT" p284

7. See Hort 'op.cit'; Schmidt "The Church"; Johnston "The Church in the New Testament."

Christ."

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'Ekklesia' is used in the LXX to translate 'qahal', both words having the root meaning 'to call out'. As Hort points out, the idea of 'calling out' is entirely scriptural, but the way in which both 'qahal' and 'ekklesia' are used in the Bible conveys in essence not the idea of the 'calling out' of the people but of 'the assembly' of the people. 'Ekklesia' was the word used by the Greeks to describe an assembly of people met together for a special purpose. For example, the 'Athenian Ekklesia' was the general assembly of the citizens of Athens in which they met to discuss matters of common concern.

'Qahal' moreover, is the word used to describe the People of Israel in their collective capacity as a holy community bound together in covenant with Yahweh and in the worship and service of His holy name. In the English Versions of the Old Testament this usage of 'qahal' was rendered 'the Congregation of Israel.'

In the New Testament, 'ekklesia' is used in both senses. It can describe a Christian assembly in one locality, or the entire Christian community scattered throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. 'Ekklesia' can denote both the local and the universal Church.

It is irrelevant to ask whether the local Church preceded the Universal Church, as this distinction is not made in the New Testament. In the earlier writings of the New Testament 'ekklesia' generally denotes a local assembly, while in the later Epistles of St. Paul it often denotes the Universal Church. But both senses are implicit in the word even if they are not always expressed. As Richardson says, "the congregations (ekklesiai) of Christ in every place were the local manifestations of the Israel of God, the one true 'ekklesia Theou.'" Paul's use of 'ekklesia' in the phrase 'the Church of God which is at

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8. Johnston 'op.cit' p 43 note

9. Hort 'op.cit' p 5

10. cf. the usage of 'ekklesia' in Acts and Corinthians with its usage in Ephesians and Colossians.

11. Richardson 'op.cit' p 286

Corinth', means that "the body of Christians at Corinth represents, or even is, the one Church of God made visible at that point of time and place."

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'Ekklesia' therefore defines the Church of Christ as both a local and a universal community, the local being a true and complete manifestation of the universal, for as Richardson says, "the local congregation is the embodiment at a given place and time of the Church of all the world and of all ages."

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'One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church'

This definition finds its basis in the New Testament.

(i) The Unity of the Church

The Church is here used in its universal sense. The New Testament shows that there is only one Church of Jesus Christ. In the 'high-priestly prayer' of our Lord, there is the petition that all who believe in Him should be one in the same sense of unity as that expressed in the unity of the Godhead. Likewise, St. Paul stresses the unity of the Church, especially in his letter to the Ephesians, and the concept of unity is expressed both implicitly and explicitly throughout the rest of the New Testament.

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The nature of this unity is not to be conceived as the sum of the local congregations joined together in a federation of Churches, but as that which is integral to the nature of the Church. The Church is the Body of Christ, and its unity is only to be found in its one Lord. Local congregations are united with each other not by an imposed union, but by their common participation in Christ.

Moreover, the New Testament intends this unity of the whole Church to be real and visible. The idea of an 'invisible'

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12. Dodd 'op.cit' p 13  
13. Richardson 'op.cit' p 289  
14. St. John's Gospel Ch. 17 v 21  
15. See e.g. Ephesians 2.15; 4.3ff etc.  
16. e.g. John 10.16

Church is foreign to the New Testament, and where there is no visible corporate unity manifested in the Church, the Body of Christ is to that extent broken and wounded. Divisions within the universal Church and the local Church are contrary to the will of Christ.

Once again the concept of visible unity stresses the importance of the local manifestation of the one Church. "Since the Church is an organic and not an arithmetical unity, the whole Christ is present in every local congregation and at every meeting of the local Church however few it may be numerically." Schmidt says, "the fact that a number of separate local communities grew together gradually as an organization creates the impression of a development from separate local churches to one universal Church. But this impression is not decisive. The important fact is that the local congregation was conscious of itself as the representative of the universal Church." The simplest and yet the most profound New Testament definition of the Church is contained in the words of our Lord, "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

(ii) The Holiness of the Church

In the Bible holiness is not primarily an ethical idea; it concerns the relationship between God and man. The holiness of the Church is fundamentally its separation from the standards and values of the world and its dedication to the service of Christ. Holiness signifies that the Church belongs to Christ. The work of the Holy Spirit within the Church is the work of sanctification; and it is His dwelling within the Church which ultimately constitutes the holiness of the Church, for it is His vocation to present the Church "before Christ in splendour

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17. Richardson 'op.cit' p 288

18. Schmidt Quoted by R.H.Fuller "Theological Word Book of the Bible" ed. Richardson Article: "The Church."

19. Matthew 18.20

20. See Stephen Neill "Christian Holiness" Ch. 1

21. J.M.Shaw "Christian Doctrine" p 259

without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish."

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Likewise, the members of the Church are themselves called to be holy, that is, completely consecrated to Christ and through His indwelling to display the ethical characteristics of the Spirit. It is in this sense that St Paul regards the members of the churches as 'called to be saints.'

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(iii) The Church Catholic

Paul defines the meaning of 'catholic' when he writes to the Corinthians and says: "Unto the Church of God which is at Corinth, even unto them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place, their Lord and ours." 'Catholic' literally means 'universal' or 'ecumenical'. According to Cyril of Jerusalem, "the Church is spread throughout the whole of the inhabited world, from end to end of the earth.....it calls and collects all, that they may hear the word of God and learn to fear Him and make confession to Him and praise His name."

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(iv) The Church is Apostolic

'Apostolic' defines the Church's mission. "It is apostolic in the literal sense of being 'commissioned' or 'sent' by Christ to carry out His redeeming purposes in the world." Or as Manson puts it, "the Church is apostolic because she is called by Christ and empowered and instructed by Christ to go and make disciples of the nations." "The Apostolic succession is the evangelical succession."

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22. Ephesians 5.27

23. e.g. I Corinthians 1.2 etc.

24. See Bethune-Baker "An Early History of Christian Doctrine" p 366f

25. Shaw 'op.cit' p 261

26. Manson 'op.cit' p 52

27. P.T.Forsyth "The Church and the Sacraments." p 139

2. The Relationship of the Church to Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit

The Church was created by the redeeming life and work of our Lord Jesus Christ, and brought into existence through the gift and work of the Holy Spirit. Ecclesiology is inexplicable apart from Christology and Pneumatology. In maintaining this we do not destroy the continuity between the Old and the New Israel, but we emphasise the essential difference between them. The Church is a new creation.

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In the history of Christian ecclesiological thought we find two main conceptions of the Church, namely, the organic and the covenantal. Both the organic and the covenantal ideas have their origin in the New Testament doctrine of the Church.<sup>29</sup> We have already seen that within the meaning of the word 'ekklesia' is the idea of an assembly of people gathered or covenanted together (cf. 'qahal') for a specific purpose. This covenantal idea is fundamental to the understanding of the Old Testament, as the religion and history of the People of Israel is essentially one of a covenantal relationship with Yahweh. The covenant between Yahweh and Israel was founded on the election of Israel by Yahweh and His faithfulness and mercy ('hesed') towards Israel, and it required the obedience and faithfulness of Israel in return.

The covenantal idea is implicit if not always explicit in the New Testament. Although Jesus Himself only speaks once of a 'New Covenant',<sup>30</sup> the picture of the People of God in the Synoptic Gospels is covenantal. "The whole weight of emphasis lies upon Jesus calling men to commit themselves to Him in the sharing of a common purpose and the forming of the nucleus of a new people amongst whom God could live and dwell." It also

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28. cf Ephesians 2.15f

29. See F.W. Dillistone "The Structure of the Divine Society" Section Two.

30. See I Corinthians 11.25 cf Mark 14.24, Luke 22.20

31. Dillistone 'op.cit' p 57f

appears that "Jesus regarded His disciples as in a very real sense a covenant-community" writes Dillistone. "He called them to share with Him His mission, His sufferings, His triumph. He made them His friends, His followers, His representatives. Then, in the last solemn hours before His passion, He, as God's representative, sealed the relationship by inaugurating a new covenant. By word, He invested them with authority and partnership within His royal purpose; by sacramental act, He joined them to Himself in a covenant of blood. So, in that hour, the covenant-community took shape and the Old Testament promise of the new covenant began to be fulfilled. Henceforth there existed in the world a community which had been taken into covenant relationship with God through Christ and which was committed to the task of calling men of all nations to enter into the same relationship and to become heirs with them of the promised Kingdom of God."

According to St Paul the Church lives under the 'covenant of grace'<sup>32</sup> which is essentially parallel to the type of relationship which existed between Yahweh and Israel, that of mercy and law.<sup>33</sup>

34

The organic idea of the Church is suggested in the Fourth Gospel and it is implicit in the most important of the metaphors which St Paul uses to describe the Church.<sup>35</sup>

(i) The Body of Christ

Jesus Himself suggests this description when He speaks of raising the Church, the temple of His resurrection body, into the place within the purpose of God which Judaism and its Temple now no longer hold. Otherwise the term is used exclusively by St Paul on numerous occasions and in diverse ways.<sup>36</sup> The expression is used both of the local and the universal Church, as Dale says, "in the highest sense of the words, the Universal Church, in heaven and on earth, is the 'Body of Christ'; but writing to the

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32. Dillistone 'op.cit' pp 77f

33. See Galatians and Romans; also Dillistone 'op.cit' pp 70ff

34. Dillistone 'op.cit' p 84

35. e.g. the allegory of the 'Vine and the Branches' Ch. 15

36. cf Ephesians 2.15f

Church at Corinth Paul says, 'Ye are the Body of Christ, and severally members one of another.'"

37

What St Paul means by the 'Body of Christ' is not always easy to discern, but recent scholarship has thrown much light on the subject. We are especially indebted to J.A.T. Robinson, who writes as follows:

"It is impossible to exaggerate the materialism and crudity of Paul's doctrine of the Church as literally now the resurrection body of Christ.....The body that he has in mind is as concrete and singular as the body of the Incarnation. His underlying conception is not of a supra-personal collective, but of a specific personal organism. He is not saying anything so weak as that the Church is a society with a common life and governor; but that its unity is that of a single physical entity; disunion is dismemberment. For it is in fact no other than the glorified body of the risen and ascended Christ."

39

For St Paul, a Christian is a person who is 'in Christ', and this implies two things: (a) personal union with Christ; and (b) incorporation into the Body of Christ, which is the Church. The two are inseparable, and they imply the unity of the Body of Christ, as Christ is one and not divided. "It is into this one body that Christians are baptized and in that one body that they are set by God in their appropriate places, even as limbs are by the creative act of God set in the physical body to fulfil the several functions required to enable the whole life of the body to be articulated according to divine intention."

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In his letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians, Paul's treatment of the metaphor has a different emphasis than his use of it in his other letters, especially Romans and I and II Corinthians. In Romans and the Corinthian letters the union of Christ with the Church is evident, but in Ephesians and Colossians Paul depicts Christ as the Head of the Church, and the Church as the Body in dependence upon the Head. This does not imply a

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37. Dale "A Manual of Congregational Principles." p 212

38. See the discussion in Dillistone 'op.cit' pp 60 ff

39. J.A.T. Robinson "The Body" p 51

40. cf I Corinthians 1.13

41. F.J. Taylor "Theological Word Book of the Bible" ed Richardson. Article: "Body" p 35

42. See Dillistone pp 64f

43. cf. Ephesians 1.22; 4.15; 5.23. Colossians 1.18.

a division between Christ and the Church, for as Nygren says:

"To designate the Church as the Body of Christ and Christ as the Head of the Church is not to imply that one part is allocated to Christ and another to the Church; on the contrary, it emphasizes their indissoluble relationship and unity. Christ is not the Head, pure and simple, but He is the Head of His Church. Similarly, the Church is not a body in itself, viewed apart from the head, but it is just the body of Christ."

44

It is true that Nygren continues to say, "the body of Christ is Christ Himself", but if by this he implies an equation and not an essential unity, we must disagree. Christ is Lord over the Church, He is not controlled by His Church, nor is He within the Church to the extent that the Church is invested with His authority and not subject to His judgments. "The Body of Christ not only signifies the dependence of the Church on Christ for life and strength, but asserts His sovereignty over it, since the directing force is in the Head and the body must be controlled and guided by its Head."

45

Thus, the 'Body of Christ' describes the Church both in its local and universal aspects as one with Christ in an organic unity, within which each individual Christian is incorporated, and over whom Christ is Head and Lord.

(ii) The Bride of Christ

This metaphor is firmly embedded in the Old Testament prophetic image of Israel as the spouse of Yahweh. In the New Testament it is first suggested by Jesus Himself in His sayings and parables which represent His Parousia as the coming of the Bridegroom, and the blessedness of the redeemed as a marriage feast in the Age to come.

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Paul uses the phrase in II Corinthians, and in the latter part of Ephesians there is a natural transition from the

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44. A. Nygren "Christ and His Church" p 96

45. Taylor 'op.cit'

46. cf. Isaiah 54.4-7; 62.4f. Hosea 2.7 Amos 3.2 etc.

47. Richardson 'op.cit' p 257 cf. Matthew 25.6; Luke 12.35ff

48. ibid. cf. Matthew 22.1-14; Revelation 21.2,9.

49. II Corinthians 11.2

metaphor of the Body to the 'Bride of Christ' where Paul works it out in relation to the practical family issues, such as, the unity between husband and wife which serves to illustrate the unity between Christ and the Church. While the relationship is one of indissoluble unity, the husband has the special responsibility of ruling over his wife and family. Likewise, Christ as the Bridegroom and Husband is Head of and rules over the Church:

"For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is head of the Church, being Himself the Saviour of the Body. But as the Church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be to their husbands in everything."

51

Thus, "we have in the marriage metaphor an excellent illustration of the meaning of the doctrine of the 'one body', 'one flesh', and 'one spirit', of Pauline teaching. For the marital relationship is the deepest, richest, and most satisfying personal human relationship of which we have experience; it is an experience of surrender without absorption, of service without compulsion, of love without conditions." This is the relationship between Christ and His Church.

52

(iii) The Temple of the Holy Spirit

One of the facts brought against Jesus at His trial was that He had said of the Temple at Jerusalem, "I will destroy this Temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another made without hands." To the Jews this meant the raising of another building similar to the Temple, to some Christians it has merely meant the risen Lord Himself, but for the evangelist "Jesus spake of the temple of His body". In effect, Jesus is saying, "Destroy this Temple, this present organism in which the Spirit dwells ! Even so you will not be able to destroy the life of God ! Another Temple will appear, another organism in which the Spirit can make His dwelling, the

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50. Ephesians 5.31f

51. ibid 5.23f

52. Richardson 'op.cit' p 258

53. Mark 14.58

organism in fact, of the Christian Church which is the living Temple of God." As Richardson says, "Clearly Jesus had spoken of His <sup>54</sup> ~~won~~ work as replacing the Jerusalem Temple in the purpose of God .....The Temple as the living centre of the worship of God would be replaced by a New Temple, which Jesus was building -- a Temple not made of stones, but of the gathered members of the New Israel which He was incorporating into Himself."

55

St Paul asked the Corinthian Christians the rhetorical question, "know ye not that ye are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you ?" The Greek word here used for 'temple' - 'naos' - denotes the very sanctuary in distinction to the outer precincts ('hieron') of the temple. Paul is saying that the group of believing people at Corinth is the shrine of the Holy Spirit, and moreover, each believer is a "microcosm of the Church as the habitation of God in the Spirit."

57

In his letter to the Ephesians Paul speaks of the Church as the 'household of God'

"Being built upon the foundation of apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the chief corner stone; in whom each several building, fitly framed together, groweth into a holy temple in the Lord. In whom also ye are builded together for a habitation of God in the Spirit."

58

C.H. Dodd says that "'the chief corner stone' is to the building what the head is to the body, and the two figures are kept parallel. And yet, it is impossible to make the analogy adequate to describe the relation of Christ to His Church, for it is 'in Him' that the whole process of its growth or upbuilding takes place." This metaphor of the Temple does not develop the organic view of the Church, but it nevertheless shows again the unity of the Church in Christ, its unity with Christ, and its complete dependence on Christ. Moreover, it speaks of the essential unity

54. Dillistone 'op.cit' p 55

55. Richardson 'op,cit' p 261

56. I Corinthians 3.16

57. cf I Corinthians 6.19

58. Ephesians 2. 19-22

59. C.H. Dodd "Ephesians" in the Abingdon Bible Commentary p 1230

60. cf Dillistone 'op. cit' p 60

which exists between the work of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Christ prepared a dwelling place for "a habitation of God in the Spirit."

(iv) The Vine and the Branches

This figure used in St John's Gospel reveals again the essential unity between Christ and His followers, and yet it stresses the distinctive relationship of the vine and the branches. "One needs to observe" writes Nygren "that there is here no question of the stem and the branches but of the vine as a unity and of the branches which stem from this." "The vine in the allegory is a figure of 'totus Christus, caput et membra'.<sup>61</sup> The branches yield fruit only because their life is drawn from the vine.....St John intends the allegory to teach the doctrine of the essential unity of the Church, through participation in which the individual disciple received the very life-blood of Christ Himself."<sup>62</sup> This allegory must not be pressed beyond its proper limits, however, for its chief emphasis lies on the fact that the branches are utterly dependent upon the parent stock for a continuing life.<sup>63</sup>

In the light of these four metaphors the relationship between Christ and the Church is seen to be one of organic unity, as well as one of essential difference. The essential unity is vital to the existence and life of the Church. That there could be no Church without the Incarnation is self-evident, for "the Ekklesia is what it is through the presence of Christ dwelling in it."<sup>64</sup> "The Church must not be considered in any way separate from its Lord, but always thought of as in closest union with Him."<sup>65</sup> But this very dependence of the Church on Christ suggests an essential difference between Christ and the Church. In the Body Christ is the Head; in the marriage relationship Christ is

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61. Nygren 'op.cit' p 92  
62. Richardson 'op.cit' p 259  
63. Dillistone 'op.cit' p 53  
64. E. Brunner "The Misunderstanding of the Church" p 12  
65. J. Cairns "Christ, the Church His Body, and its Members" Essays in Christology for Karl Barth p 222

the Bridegroom and the Husband; in the Temple of the Holy Spirit He is the chief-corner stone; in the allegory of the Vine and the Branches He is the true Vine. As Dillistone points out, the organic relationship of Christ and the Church is not so much metaphysical as ethical. Because of the close relationship the duty of the Church is to behave in a particular way. There is a danger in speaking of the Church as the 'extension of the Incarnation' because the Church's relationship to Christ is both <sup>66</sup> covenantal and organic.

67

According to Adolf Harnack, Jesus never intended to found a Church, to unite the spiritual and the institutional in the forms <sup>in which</sup> we know the Church. Similarly, Troeltsch "assumes that the first outstanding characteristic of the ethics of Jesus is an unlimited, unqualified individualism, and then asserts that during the time of Jesus' life on earth there was no sign of an organized community." Scholarship has moved away from the <sup>68</sup> premises on which Harnack and Troeltsch based their conclusions. Newton Flew has shown that, in so far as the Church means "a new religious community, with a new way of life, a fresh and startling message, and an unparalleled consciousness of inheriting the divine promises made to Israel of old" and not an institution with an ordained hierarchy, "the Jesus did most certainly take action with such a community in view."

69

George Johnston in his "Church in the New Testament" is unsatisfied with Flew's conclusions; "there is nothing to show that Jesus really gathered His followers into a close society" he says. For Johnston, Flew's definition of the Church fails "to do justice to the necessity of Jesus' death for the constitution of the New Israel. Messiahship, it is true, involves a community, so does the ethical teaching by its very

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66. Dillistone 'op.cit' p 69

67. See Appendix I "The Extension of the Incarnation"

68. N.Flew "Jesus and His Church" p 18

69. ibid

definition: yet the 'Messianic' dignity won recognition for what was only through the glorious exaltation which followed the final humiliation." The 'ekklesia' while having definite associations with the group of men and women whom Jesus gathered round Himself, only really came into existence after the Resurrection. The word 'ekklesia' therefore implies a community of the Resurrection. "Without the Cross and the Resurrection there is no Church."

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71

Following after Flew and Johnston, C.K. Barrett develops this discussion on the nature of the Church. He concludes by saying:

"The New Israel, the 'ekklesia' was the fruit of a fresh act of redemption, and that act, though it may have been initiated during the ministry of Jesus, was consummated only by His death."

72

Barrett then compares the primitive Church with the early community of disciples. There is firstly, a difference of understanding. The disciples generally lack a true understanding of the Person and Mission of Jesus; while the Primitive Church reveals a remarkable understanding. Secondly, there is a marked difference in the ethical and spiritual power clearly revealed in the Apostles themselves before and after the Day of Pentecost. "The difference between the company of Jesus and the Church was the gift of the Holy Spirit."

73

Jesus had spoken freely and at length of the gift of His Spirit to the Church. In His earlier references to the Spirit the gift is offered to individuals - 'the Father who is in heaven will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him'. But as the end approached and the Pentecostal effusion drew near, Jesus spoke of the Spirit as to be given to His disciples collectively.

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0. Johnston 'op.cit' p 50
  1. ibid
  2. C.K.Barrett "The Holy Spirit and the Gospel Tradition." p 137
  3. ibid p 139
  4. Luke 11.13
  5. H.B.Swete "The Holy Spirit in the New Testament." p 306

The importance of the Pentecostal experience in the life and mission of the Church cannot be over-estimated. The Holy Spirit creates the Church and abides with it, and the nature of His presence is the same as the relationship of Christ to the Church. The essential unity between Christ and the Spirit has been stressed by many scholars and it is clearly revealed in the Scriptures. It is important that we should assert again this unity in seeking to understand the nature of the Church. The Holy Spirit is not the soul of the Church; but He does truly indwell <sup>in</sup> the Church, "only He makes His indwelling known by directing the Church's attention to its living and exalted Lord and exposing it to His grace." The Spirit as the Spirit of Christ is over the Church as well as within the life of the Church. He judges the Church even as He strengthens it for its mission.

Thus, since Pentecost the Church has experienced Christ's continuing presence, lordship, and ministry, by the Holy Spirit, and this fact alone gives meaning to any doctrine of the Church and of the ministry. The doctrine of the Church must be in accordance with the fundamental nature of the Church, which is the continuation of the Messianic Ministry of Christ through witnessing to His redeeming work by the Spirit and the Word. In this dependence on Christ as the authority over the Church, and in witnessing to His saving revelation, the Church finds its meaning and essential definition. There is therefore "only one 'essential ministry' in the Church, the perpetual ministry of the Risen and Ever-Present Lord Himself."

77

### 3. The Ministry and Membership of the Church

Christ alone exercises the 'essential ministry' in the Church, and His ministry is apostolic, prophetic and priestly. These three aspects of Christ's Risen ministry are manifested in

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6. G.S. Hendry "The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology." p 66  
7. Manson "The Church's Ministry" p 100

and through the Church,<sup>78</sup> and every member of the Church shares  
in this threefold ministry.<sup>79</sup>

Within the total ministry of the Church there are other  
derived, dependent, and functional ministries to which individual  
persons are set aside. We shall now discuss these ministries  
constantly being aware of the truth that the essential ministry<sup>80</sup>  
of the Risen Lord is entrusted to the whole Church and not to  
any group within it. However, we shall confined the use of the  
word 'ministry' to the specific orders within the Church unless  
otherwise qualified.

(i) The Nature of the Ministry

The nature of the ministry is largely determined by the  
nature of the Church through which Christ is pleased to continue  
His own ministry of reconciliation. However, the ministry within  
the Church is not created by the Church, it is created solely by  
Christ Himself; it is not "an ecclesiastical expedient - it is a  
Divine Ordinance." For it is fundamental to the New Testament  
conception of the ministry that God calls and commissions His<sup>81</sup>  
ministers to do His will. This Divine summons and commission<sup>82</sup>  
therefore precedes the ordination of the ministry by the Church  
through its existing ministry, and it determines the validity<sup>83</sup>  
of the order.<sup>84</sup>

As the ministry is called into being and commissioned by  
God, so it derived its authority from God. Paul claimed that  
he was "an Apostle, not from men, neither through man, but  
through Jesus Christ and God the Father." Likewise, our<sup>85</sup>  
Lord commissioned His disciples to preach, teach, and baptize in  
His name, and in the name of the Father and the Holy Ghost.<sup>86</sup>  
The authority of the ministry is not personal, but it is

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78. See Richardson 'op.cit' Chapter 13. 85. Galatians 1.1

79. ibid p 312 86. Matthew 28.19 cf 10.20

80. Manson 'op.cit' p 100

81. "A Manual of Church Doctrine according to the Church of  
Scotland" ed. Torrance and Selby-Wright p 75

82. cf. John 17.18; 20.21. I Corinthians 12.28.  
Ephesians 4.11

83. See discussion on ordination below.

84. cf. Galatians 1.1,11,12. Acts 22.14

"entirely dependent upon Christ", for His ministers are "His instruments and servants." In the words of the "Manual of Church Doctrine", ".....Christ stands behind the ministry, and the acts done in His name receive effect from Him, who is the only minister of the Grace of God, for in the Church's ministry He himself is directly present in Spirit and Power." And again, "the holy ministry derives directly from the ascended Lord who continues to send down gifts for the ministry upon His Church, so that whenever a man is called to the ministry of the Word and Sacraments He is called and sent by Christ Himself and endowed with gifts for his office by the Spirit."

The function of the ministry is implicit in its calling and its commission to make disciples of all nations. It is a ministry of reconciliation exercised through the threefold ministry of Christ, the prophetic, apostolic and priestly, which He has entrusted to His Church. The ministry is entrusted with "the Word of Reconciliation", "the mysteries of God", and the "tending of the flock", "for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ."

(ii) The Orders of the Ministry

As we have already seen, within the ministry of the whole Church there was a variety of ministries to which individual believers were called. The New Testament does not give a clear and distinct picture of these various ministerial 'orders', but it does enable us to determine sufficiently the general pattern in the Apostolic Church. The important factor, however,

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87. G. Aulen "The Faith of the Christian Church" p 409  
88. "A Manual of Church Doctrine" p 77  
89. ibid p 75  
90. See II Corinthians 5.19f  
91. ibid  
92. I Corinthians 4.1  
93. Acts 20.28; I Peter 5.2  
94. Ephesians 4.12  
95. See Richardson 'op.cit' p 312

is not the accuracy with which we can reproduce these orders today, but whether the Church and the ministry manifest the threefold ministry of Christ. It is fundamental to recognize with Paul that "there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are diversities of ministrations, and the same Lord. And there are diversities of workings, but the same God, who worketh all things in all. But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit to profit withal."

97

### The Apostles

Early in the earthly ministry of our Lord, He chose from among His disciples twelve whom He named Apostles. He chose these twelve not only "to assist Him in His own Galilean ministry of preaching and exorcism, but also He commissioned them to exercise His own ministry of ruling, feeding and serving the flock of God after His earthly task was done." The Apostolate really came into existence only when the Holy Spirit was first given to the Apostles by the Risen Lord.

100

Scholarship appears to have established certain facts about the nature of this Apostolate. Firstly, the Apostles were accorded a certain pre-eminence in the counsels and leadership of the primitive Christian community. This pre-eminence arose out of their intimate association with Jesus during His earthly life, they were eye-witnesses of the 'Christ-event', and from the fact that He Himself commissioned them to be His Apostles during His earthly life. Their status was unique, personal, and also inalienable. It could not be transmuted to another.

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"In the nature of the case the apostolic ministry could be founded only once .....there is one generation of apostles and no more."

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Secondly, the nature of their authority is undefined. However, it appears to have been moral and spiritual rather than legal.

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96. Richardson 'op.cit' p 313

97. I Corinthians 12.4ff

98. Luke 6.13 cf Ephesians 4.11

99. Richardson 'op.cit' p 319

100. cf John 20.21ff See Richardson 'op.cit' pp 321ff

101. e.g. Flew "Jesus and His Church" pp 131, 136ff

102. See Manson 'op.cit' pp 50f

103. Richardson 'op.cit' p 322.

104. Flew 'op.cit' p 137

Hort says concerning the Apostles, "there is no trace in Scripture of a formal commission for government from Christ Himself. Their commission was to be witnesses of Himself, and to bear witness by preaching and healing."

105

The word 'apostle' is also used in the New Testament in a more general way. There were others who were called apostles, for example Barnabas. These other men called 'apostles' were highly esteemed within the Church. The difference, however, between them and the Twelve, together with Paul and possibly James the brother of our Lord, was that the Twelve had received their commission directly from the Lord Himself whereas they had received their commission from Christ through some local Church. Once the Twelve died the original Apostolate ceased and the ministry of the Church was continued by those who were regularly appointed to that work.

Before we discuss these regular orders of the ministry we must briefly mention the ministries of the 'prophet' and the 'evangelist'.

#### The Prophet and Evangelist

In the New Testament and in some early Christian writings, notably the 'Didache', the Christian prophet is given an honoured place next to the Apostles themselves. They were truly regarded as the agents of the Holy Spirit who declared the purposes and will of God to the Church. Their function was also inspired preaching which "promoted the growth in holiness and knowledge of individual members of the Church, and availed also for the conversion of the outsider and the unbeliever."

109

The Evangelist was not a specific order but it described those "who brought the first news of the Gospel." The preaching of the Gospel was in no way confined to a special

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105. Hort "The Christian Ekklesia" p 84

106. See Acts 14.14 also cf Romans 16.7; II Corinthians 8.23 I Corinthians 15.8 cf v 5.

107. Richardson 'op.cit' p 321

108. See *ibid* p 335

109. Flew 'op.cit' p 143

110. *ibid*

order, it was the responsibility of the whole Church. It has also been suggested, however, that the early function of the evangelist was to recite the Gospel-story, before the Gospels were written documents, during the worship of the early Church. 111

Presbyter, Bishop, and Deacon

'Presbyteros' (elder) and 'episkopos' (bishop or overseer) appear originally to have been the same office in the Apostolic Church. The first we hear about 'presbyters' is in the Acts 112 of the Apostles chapter eleven where they appear as responsible officers within the Church at Jerusalem.

Flew has mentioned a number of important features of the 'presbytery' and the 'episcopate' in the primitive Church. 113 Firstly, 'presbyter' denotes the office; 'bishop' denotes the function. Secondly, there are several bishops or presbyters in each local Church and there is no distinction between them. Thirdly, they were appointed by the Spirit or commissioned by the Church or an Apostle. Fourthly, their ministry is one of the Word and the Sacraments.

There has been much debate on the nature of ordination in the Apostolic Church and it is difficult to obtain a clear picture from the New Testament itself. It seems evident, however, that the outward ceremony was the 'laying on of hands'. This 114 was done either by the Apostles, or after their death, by the 115 local Church through its own 'presbytery'. Dale writes:

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"Of the manner in which the "elders", "bishops", or "pastors", of the apostolic churches were elected to office there is no record in the New Testament.....But from Clement's epistle to Corinth (AD 95) it is clear that in apostolic times the whole Church not only concurred in the appointment of elders, but had the power to depose them."

117

Dale makes a distinction between the 'election of' and the

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111. I am indebted to Prof. W.D. Maxwell for this insight.

112. cf Acts 20.17; 20.28. I Peter 5.1f; Titus 1.5ff and see Richardson 'op.cit' p 325

113. Flew 'op.cit' p 142

114. cf I Timothy 4.14

115. e.g. Acts 14.23 also see 6.6

116. This does not appear to be explicit in the NT except in I Timothy 4.14. cf "Manual of Church Doctrine" p 98

117. Dale "A Manual of Congregational Principles." pp 54f

'appointment of' presbyters and deacons in the New Testament. It appears that the local Church 'elected' them, while the Apostles 'appointed' or 'ordained' them. But the evidence is insufficient to be dogmatic on the question of ordination in the New Testament, except to say, that it was practised in the early Church usually . by one of the Apostles or their deputies.

After the death of the Apostles, if not before, it was found expedient to distinguish amongst the presbyters of a Church and to appoint a leading-presbyter, or presiding-elder, who gradually became the sole heir to the title 'episkopos'. During the post-apostolic age the growth of the 'episcopate' took place, until by the third century there were three clearly defined functions within the ministry, those exercised by a bishop, the presbyter, and the deacon.

There are only two references in the New Testament to the 'diaconate'. Although it cannot be substantiated conclusively, it is generally assumed that the seven men "full of the Spirit and wisdom" who were appointed by the Church at Jerusalem to "serve tables" constituted the first diaconate.

However, it is not clear from the New Testament what function the diaconate served. It was certainly not only the "serving of tables" or administering to the poor, for when we do hear of the subsequent activity of any of the Seven, they are preaching the Word, or expounding the Old Testament Scriptures, or working wonders and signs like any Apostle. Paul gives a list of qualifications necessary for the deacons in his First letter to Timothy.

Richardson suggests that early in the second century the diaconate is an important established order within the ministry, and the deacons are "the personal assistants of the bishops both

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118. See Dale 'op.cit' pp 52ff of Acts 1.23-26, 6.2,3.

119. See Richardson 'op.cit' pp 327f

120. See "Manual of Church Doctrine" pp 83 ff

121. Philippians 1.1 and I Timothy 3.8. See Richardson 'op.cit' p 333

122. Acts 6.2-4 See Flew 'op.cit' p 138

123. ibid

in the liturgy and in the administration of church affairs and discipline."

124

#### Membership within the Church

The Church in the New Testament was a distinct community. Its distinctness lay in its adherence to the Gospel, to its "one Lord, one faith, and one baptism." Its uniqueness lay in its acceptance of the scandal of the Cross, and in its confession that Jesus who was crucified is the Risen Lord whom they obeyed and worship. It existed through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to witness to God's saving revelation in Christ.

A member of the Church was someone who through faith and baptism was united with Christ in His death, and risen with Him in the newness of life, thereby being incorporated into the Body of Christ, which is the Church. The Church comprised believers, together with their children, who were partakers of the New Covenant through their baptism. There was no other way of entering the Body of Christ except by confession of faith in Christ as Saviour and Lord, and by baptism into His name.

129

#### 4. The Relationship between the Primitive Churches

The picture of the Apostolic Church in the New Testament is redominantly one of diversity in organization even though there was unity in faith. There were "a multitude of churches developing very much along their own lines, as determined by the circumstances of their foundation, and the influence of their founders." However, from the outset, and especially in the post-apostolic age, this diversity was developing into uniformity and was eventually embraced within the structure of monarchical episcopacy.

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124. Richardson 'op.cit' p333

125. Ephesians 4.5

126. Romans 10.9-11

127. Romans 6.3,4

128. Acts 3.39

129. Romans 10.9 etc and Mark 16.16 etc

130. C.H.Dodd "The Church in the New Testament." p 3

In the light of this, Dodd asks, "if the fact and the idea of the Catholic Church are a creation of the second age of Christianity" is not "the original New Testament order ..... pure Independency ?" This contention is supported by Hatch in his Bampton lectures who writes, ".....the Christian Churches passed from their original state of independence into a great confederation."

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The Church was founded at Jerusalem from whence it spread throughout Judaea, Galilee, and Samaria. The Christians scattered throughout these province regarded the Church at Jerusalem as their Mother-Church, and they themselves as part of it. They therefore looked to the Church at Jerusalem for guidance and authority. Thus far the Church was still within Judaism.

The problem of inter-Church relations and ecclesiastical authority came into being once the Gospel was accepted by the Gentiles, and when the Christian Faith was spread across the entire Roman Empire. After this happened, we no longer read of the Church "throughout Judaea, Galilee and Samaria" but of the Church "at Antioch." During his missionary journeys, St Paul founded a number of Churches. From the Acts of the Apostles and from Paul's own epistles it appears that these "churches act as distinct corporations, each church by itself," and continue under the guidance of Paul or its Elders.

134

The relation of these many Churches to the Church at Jerusalem was not one of subjection to an higher authority. They were independent of Jerusalem in their own life and work, although by no means at variance with or isolated from the Jerusalem Church. Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, was the great protagonist of the organic unity of the Church, and the solidarity which existed between the Churches is practically expressed in Paul's "collection for the saints at Jerusalem."

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131. 'Catholic' is used here in the sense of an Episcopally united Church.

132. Dodd 'op.cit' p 5

133. Hatch "The Organization of the Early Christian Churches."

134. Dodd 'op.cit' p 7

Nevertheless, even as Paul claimed for his apostleship personal independence from the other Apostles, so "he claimed for his churches independence of the mother-church." "We may fairly say that the Pauline Churches represent autonomous communities guided by the Spirit in place of a single community dependent upon the hierarchy of the mother-church." Harnack speaks of the "independence and sovereignty of the local Churches" in the Apostolic Age as resting upon the fact "that they had the Spirit in their midst." The various Churches were independent of external control and imposed ecclesiastical authority because they were complete in themselves - "the one universal ekklesia is represented in the local individual ekklesia."<sup>135</sup>  
<sup>136</sup>  
<sup>137</sup>

We have tried to describe the nature of the relationship which existed between the Apostolic Churches. What we have said is no doubt greatly influenced by Independency, but it seems to accord with the general picture we have in the New Testament of the life of the primitive Church. In no way is this a necessary criticism of ecclesiastical developments during the second and third centuries of the Church's life.

The essence of what we have been maintaining is summed up in Dodd's words concerning the work of Paul:

"What Paul did was to substitute for the idea of the Eternal People of God made visible at one place, to which all its members must look for their legitimatization as its citizens, the idea of the same eternal People of God made visible wherever men are by faith united to Christ, and in Him to one another."

138

In no way does this imply disunity within the Body of Christ.

##### 5. The Church and Civil Authority

In the New Testament the relationship between the Church and the State was one of obedience but not compromise. Basic

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135. Dodd 'op.cit' p 8  
136. ibid p 9  
137. Hort 'op.cit'  
138. Dodd 'op.cit' p 13

to the Church's attitude towards the State was the injunction of our Lord, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's." Likewise, 139 St Paul exhorts the Christian at Rome to "be insubjection to the higher powers; for there is no power but of God; and the powers that be are ordained of God. Therefore he that resisteth that power, withstandeth the ordinance of God: and they that withstand shall receive judgment to themselves. For rulers are not a terror to the good work but to the evil." And the 140 Apostle says to Titus, "put them in mind to be in subjection to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient...." The authorities 141 to whom Christians are to be obedient are clearly the civil magistrates of the Roman Empire. The words of our Lord laid 142 the foundation for the civil attitude of the Church and all Christians, for "it is the King of kings, who has established the civil authority, who requires obedience from us." 143

But the early Church was equally unwilling to compromise with the civil authorities. As Stauffer says, "...among all the senseless political accusations there was one charge which the first Christians took upon themselves, and which they had to take, because it accorded with the facts: the first Christians rejected any attempt to deify the State. 'Give back to God what belongs to Him.' Jesus Himself had put this restriction on his injunction to perform the duties of citizenship." The Church's 144 fundamental obedience is to God, and even though this implies obedience to the powers ordained of God, when the State deifies itself determining what is good and evil then it is the "power of Satan" and contradicts the will of God. Certainly, the Church can never be identified with the State; "the Church is the society that is called out, it is the people of God separated

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139. Luke 20.25

140. Romans 13.1ff

141. Titus 3.1

142. J.Y.Campbell "Theological Word Book of the Bible." Article: "Authority".

143. E. Stauffer "New Testament Theology" p 197

144. ibid p 198

out from the ties of blood that bind the nations together." 145  
On this premise the Church can never be a national organization  
controlled by the State, "it must be a Church for the peoples  
of the world." 146

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145. Stauffer 'op.cit' p 193  
146. ibid p 195

CHAPTER TWO

"SEPARATIST BEGINNINGS"

'Puritanism' was an English expression of Calvinism. Essentially it was an attempt to reform the established Church in England according to Calvinistic doctrine. Although Puritanism emerged largely as a result of the Continental Reformation it had its roots firmly embedded in pre-Reformation English reformers, and until the accession of Queen Elizabeth to the English throne, it was united in its attempts to reform the Church. But largely as a result of the compromising Elizabethan Settlement Puritanism was soon divided within itself and gradually became distinguishable in three forms.

The Elizabethan Settlement was an Anglican compromise between Rome and Geneva, and as such it did not satisfy the Puritans. Further reformation was earnestly desired, but the Puritans were divided on the question of how this could best be accomplished. There were those who were content to abide the decision of Parliament, and thereby entrust the reformation of the Church to the State. These may be called 'Conforming Puritans' and were themselves divided into Episcopalians and Presbyterians.

The third group are commonly known as 'Separatists'. These were Puritans who were unwilling to wait for a further reformation of the Church by constitutional means, asserting that the reformation of the Church was a concern of the Church and not the State. Indeed, "apart from their radical divergences in their attitude towards the State Church, Puritans and Separatists were largely in agreement."

1

In this chapter we shall discuss the nature of the Church

as it is found in the writings and practices of some of the early English Separatists, being chiefly concerned with the writings of Robert Harrison,<sup>2</sup> and more particularly Robert Browne.<sup>3</sup>

The word 'Separatist' must be carefully understood as it must not be confused with 'Independency' or 'Congregationalism'.<sup>4</sup> It is not a word which can be precisely defined, for there were different types of Separatism. The Separatists with whom we are here concerned are important for our study because of "their accepted and honoured place in Congregationalism's origins".<sup>5</sup> Use of the term 'Separatist' will in this study be confined to those commonly regarded as the forerunners of English Congregationalism.

### The Nature of Separatism

Like all Puritans, the Separatists regarded the Bible as the final authority under God in all matters of faith and practice. They were not concerned about the traditions of the Church or the teaching of the Fathers. The grounds of religion were to be found in the Scriptures alone.

The Separatists reasoned: If the Scriptures contain all that is necessary for the salvation of men and the true knowledge of God, they must also contain "a complete and authoritative guide to the nature, organization and administration of the Christian Church." According to Barrowe,<sup>6</sup> to establish the real visible Church, there must be before them "a true description out of the Word of God."<sup>7</sup> And Robert Harrison declared that it was those who walked "according to the rule of the word" who were

2. Robert Harrison. An early Separatist and friend of Robert Browne. See the introduction to "The Writings of Robert Harrison and Robert Browne."

3. Robert Browne. See appendix Note 3. "Separatism."

4. See Appendix Note 3.

5. G. Nuttall. "Visible Saints" p 7.

6. W. Walker. "Ency. of Religion & Ethics." Art. "Congregationalism".

7. Barrowe. See H. Davies "English Free Churches." pp 31f.

8. Quoted by A. Peel. "Inevitable Congregationalism." p 38.

faithful in the Lord's House.

9

Harrison in particular laid great emphasis on the need for a correct Church polity, indeed, it is a 'sine qua non' in his thought. He maintained that the Gospel of Christ is blasphemed when the true government of the Church is neglected, and complained that some teach that the commandment of Church government is less than the other commandments. Again, he writes:

11

"....as Saul was reprov'd for not doing the whole will of the Lord, so shall you be reprov'd for not practising the whole Church government, in all points as the Lord hath commanded."

12

"Paul chargeth Timothy with a solemn charge: to keep all those things inviolate whereof he gave commandment, which chiefly in that Epistle were about Church government."

13

Correct Church government was of supreme importance because it entailed either obedience or disobedience to the Word of God, and thereby to the Lord Himself.

According to their interpretation of the Scriptures, the Church as then established by English Law was not in conformity with the Apostolic pattern in the New Testament. Moreover, the fact that it was established by Civil Law was incompatible with the nature of the Church. These were two fundamental reasons why the Separatists felt bound by conscience to withdraw from the established Church.

In the very beginning of his "treatise of Reformation without Tarrying for Any", Robert Browne makes it clear that in withdrawing from the established Church the Separatists are not being disloyal to the Queen in her civil capacity or to the Civil Authorities:

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9. R. Harrison. "A Treatise of the Church". p 33.  
10. R. Harrison. "A Treatise of the Church." p 45.  
11. ibid p 49, p 62.  
12. ibid p 47.  
13. ibid p 48.

"We say that her (i.e. the Queen) authority is civil, and that power she hath as highest under God within her Dominions, and that over all persons and causes. By that she may put to death all that deserve it by law, either of the Church or Commonwealth, and none may resist her, or the Magistrates under her by force or wicked speeches when they execute the laws."<sup>14</sup>

But her authority is civil and not ecclesiastical, and therefore the Church ought not to be dependent upon her decision in ecclesiastical matters. For this reason Browne proceeds to attack the compromise which the Conforming Puritans made in 'tarrying for the civil authority' to reform the Church:

"We hold all those Preachers and teachers accursed, which will not do the duties of Pastors and teachers till the magistrate do force them thereto. They say the time is not yet come to build the Lord's House, they must tarry for the magistrates and for Parliaments. They want the civil sword forsooth, and the magistrates to hinder the Lord's building and kingdom and keep away His government. Are they not ashamed thus to slander the magistrate? They have run their own swords upon the wall and broken them, and now would they snatch unto them the Magistrates sword. Indeed, can the Lord's spiritual government be no way executed but by the civil sword, or is this the judgment that is written, such honour shall be to all His saints?"<sup>15</sup>

Harrison also attacks this conforming position:

"You teach that a true minister lawfully called must stay for authority from the Civil Magistrate, if they be Christian for reforming his charge by Ecclesiastical government you teach that he must wait what the Lord says to him by the mouth of the magistrate."<sup>16</sup>

The true Christian Church is responsible to none but God; if therefore, the conscience of the Christian is troubled by the condition of the Church, which in fact cannot be improved except by constitutional means beyond the reach of the Christian, his duty is to leave the established Church. This position is well stated in the letter of Anne Stubbe to Thomas Cartwright, her brother-in-law and defender of Presbyterianism in England. In the opening paragraph of her letter she writes:

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14. R. Browne. "Treatise of Reformation without Tarrying for Any." p 152.  
15. Browne. "Treatise of Reformation without Tarrying." p 152f.  
16. Harrison. "Treatise of the Church." p 61.  
17. Anne Stubbe. "...a notable Barrowist." Barrowe's doctrine of the Church did not differ in essentials from that of Browne's doctrine.

"I said the people of God was a peculiar people unto the Lord, and therefore we might not join in any spiritual worship with any that did not obey the voice of Christ. Moreover the Lord is one, and therefore the people of God cannot be divided, some with Christ and some not with Him.....I said I was commanded by the Lord to come out from amongst them that were not the Church of God: you asked wherein you were not. You are not the Church of God by a agreement of His word in that you obey not, but resist the voice of Christ....."

18

Likewise, Browne in his "Treatise upon the 23rd of Matthew" likens the Church to Israel who were unable to worship God in Egypt:

"So also in England, though the magistrates should give us leave to worship God rightly, yet the true worship and reformation of the Church, is an abomination to the Bishops, and other wicked preachers and people, and what stirrings and hurly burlies would they make?"

19

The Separatists could not abide within the Church in England and still hold a good conscience. "The Lord's people is of the willing sort" wrote Browne. "It is conscience, not the power of man, that will drive us to seek the Lord's Kingdom." So

they obeyed the command of God: "Go out of her my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not her plagues." Some of the Conforming Puritans maintained that

by staying within the established Church they were better able to fulfil their Christian duties, but to this contention Browne says: "There is danger says the Scriptures, lest those which are won, should be partakers of their sins, among whom they tarry, or lest they should receive of their plagues."

22

For the Separatist this action of withdrawal from the established Church did not imply schism within the Church of Christ. To the charge of being a schismatic Harrison replies, "we are free from the things whereof you accuse us; but the evil lighteth upon your own pates." He contends that those who call

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18. Anne Stubbe. Letter to Thomas Cartwright. p 60.  
19. Browne. "A Treatise upon the 23rd of Matthew." p 201.  
20. Browne. "A Treatise of Reformation without Tarrying."  
21. Revelation Chapter 18 verse 4.  
22. Browne. 'op.cit' p 201.  
23. Harrison. "A Treatise of the Church." p 58.

the Separatists schismatics do not know the real meaning of the word, for the Separatists are not withdrawing from the Lord's People but from the apparent Church of God:

"Whereas they say we rend ourselves from the Church it is childish: for although they were the Church, we might leave one congregation as many occasions may fall out, so that we join with another which is the Congregation of God's people." 24

In these facts lay the justification of Separatism. It was the very duty of all Christians to come out and be separate from the false Church and be gathered together into the visible community of the Saints. 25

The implications of Separatism must now be considered. What was wrong with the established Church? What was the nature of a true Church?

Separatism was not merely a negative protest against the intrusion of the government of Civil Authority within the Church. It was a positive protest because it sought to express something far more important and significant than the independence of the Church from the State. "They had no love of separatism for its own sake." 26 The fundamental reason why the Separatists reacted against the established Church was because they held that Church was not true to its essential nature revealed in Holy Scripture. They did not seek independence for its own sake, nor did they attempt to escape ecclesiastical authority, they sought "to reveal and realize the true idea of the Church" and to assert the authority of Christ over and within His Church. 27

The nature of the Church as set forth in the writings and practices of the Separatists is often indistinguishable from English Presbyterianism as then expounded by Thomas Cartwright.

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24. *ibid* p 37.

25. Cf. G. Nuttall. "Visible Saints." p 131.

26. J.S. Whale. "The Protestant Tradition." p 192.

27. Quoted by A. Peel "Inevitable Congregationalism." p 15. A saying attributed to R.W. Dale cf. his "Idea of the Church" and "Congregationalism" in *Essays and Addresses*.

There was a common heritage derived from Geneva, which, in the Separatists and later Independents was slightly modified through the influence of Anabaptism. The definition of the sacraments, the nature of the Church offices, (that is, its ministry) and the stress on ecclesiastical discipline were generally common to both. They differed on the definition of the Church, and on the nature of the government of the Church.

### The Separatist Definition of the Church

In discussing the nature of the Church we are largely concerned with the exposition by Harrison entitled "A Treatise of the Church", and Browne's more systematic study "A Book which Sheweth the Life and Manners of all True Christians", and his "Short and True Declaration" in which he describes the formation and dissolution of a Separatist Church at Norwich of which both he and Harrison were members.

28

Browne defines the Church as follows:

"The Church planted or gathered, is a company or number of Christians or believers, which by a willing covenant made with their God, are under the government of God and Christ, and keep His laws in one holy communion: because Christ hath redeemed them unto holiness and happiness for ever, from which they were fallen by the sin of Adam."

30

This is the essence of Brownism, and here are to be found some of the fundamental principles of Congregational ecclesiology.

1. The Church is primarily a gathered Church of Christian believers.
2. The Church is constituted by a covenant.
3. The Church is under the government of God.

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28. Anabaptism. See Appendix note 2 for the influence of Anabaptism on Congregationalism.

29. Note on the Independent Church at Norwich. After long discussion between Browne and Harrison on the nature of the Church they resolved to form a 'Congregational' Church at Norwich. This was achieved in 1581. See Dale, "History of English Congregationalism," p 122.

30. Browne. "A Book which sheweth the Life and Manners of all True Christians." Art. 35.

31. Brownism. See Appendix Note 2.

1. The Church is a gathered Church of believers.

The Separatists believed with Augustine and Calvin that the Church "not only comprehends the saints who dwell on earth, but all the elect who have existed from the beginning." This was stated in "A True Description", that the invisible Church<sup>32</sup> "Containeth in it all the elect of God, that have been, are, or shall be." But their chief concern was the Church in its visible manifestations.<sup>33</sup>

In the light of Scripture the Separatists failed to see any legitimate grounds for the existence of territorial or national Churches. or indeed, for the parish system itself.

According to Dale:

"The early Congregationalists (implying Separatists) maintained that a man is not necessarily a Christian because he is an Englishman, and that the evil lives of large numbers of Englishmen were a clear proof that they were not Christians, and therefore, were not proper members of a Christian Church."<sup>34</sup>

Harrison in writing to a Conforming Puritan minister says:

"You yourselves have lately complained, some of you that you have none, and some of you that you have but one that feareth the Lord, in any outward appearing in your parishes: even a just plague for all them, that make parishes and Churches all one."<sup>35</sup>

The Separatists believed and taught that the true Church was the visible, gathered Church consisting of converted and redeemed men and women. As Whale says: "To the separatist the Church meant a company of regenerate persons...."<sup>36</sup> Henry Barrowe is explicit:

"The true planted and rightly established Church of Christ is a company of faithful people - separated from the unbelievers and heathen of the land-gathered in the name of Christ."<sup>37</sup>

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32. Calvin. "The Institutes of the Christian Religion." Vol. 2 p 288.

33. Quoted by W. Walker. "Ency. of Rel. and Ethics." op.cit. "A True Description" was written at Dort in 1589.

34. Dale. "History of English Congregationalism." p 135.

35. Harrison. "A Treatise of the Church." p 55.

36. Whale. "The Protestant Tradition." p 180.

37. Quoted by Peel "Inevitable Congregationalism." p 17. From a letter to Thomas Cartwright (1588).

The 'gathered' conception of the nature of the Church was thus based on the two Biblical ideas of "separation from unbelievers", and "gathered into the fellowship of the Gospel." Much of the Scriptural authority was found in the Old Testament, but the supreme justification for the 'gathered Church' lay in the words of our Lord; "Where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them." The Separatists rightly maintained and firmly believed that "Ubi Christus ibi Ecclesia."<sup>38</sup> The number of believers who gathered together was of no consequence,<sup>39</sup> many Churches were composed of only a handful of people,<sup>40</sup> but as Browne said: "...the kingdom of God was not begun by whole parishes,<sup>41</sup> but rather of the worthiest, were they never so few."

Such a conception of the Church was by no means limited to the early Separatists: it had its parallels on the Continent and throughout the history of the Church, but whereas previously it was often associated with unorthodoxy, as for example the Montanists and Anabaptists, here it had its expression amongst those who were often orthodox (in the Calvinistic sense) even to the extreme.

The Separatists believed, moreover, that they were gathered out of the world and into the true Church by God. It was God through His Spirit, who had so worked in their hearts and consciences, who had brought them forth out of the world of unbelief and disobedience and had gathered them together into the true fellowship of those who believed. As such they did not wish to be identified with an anti-State movement, or with the spiritualistic sects, but with the Apostolic Church of the New Testament.

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38. Matthew 18 v20.

39. "Where Christ is, there is the Church." - St. Ignatius.

40. cf. Nuttall. "Visible Saints." p 163.

41. Browne. "A Short and True Declaration."

2. The Church is Constituted by a Covenant.

In the light of the idea of the "gathered Church", it would appear logical to assert that any group of Christians gathered together constitute a true Church. However, the Separatists with whom we are concerned would not have maintained such a precarious position. Rather they would have said that "a company becomes a Church, by joining in covenant." Browne<sup>42</sup> is explicit on this matter as seen in his answer to the question "how must the Church be first planted and gathered under one kind of government?"

"First, by a covenant and condition made on God's behalf.  
"Secondly, by a covenant and condition made on our behalf.  
"Thirdly, by using the sacrament of Baptism to seal those conditions and covenants."<sup>43</sup>

In one of the earliest catechisms written by a Separatist, Henry Jacob asks the question, "How is a visible Church constituted and gathered?" His answer is:

"By a free mutual consent of believers joining and covenanting to live as members of a Holy Society together in all religious and virtuous duties as Christ and His Apostles did institute and practise in the Gospel."<sup>44</sup>

The covenant-idea is therefore fundamental to the Separatist understanding of the Church, and, as Browne showed above, there are three aspects to the covenant.

The first essential part of the covenant is the covenant made with God; as Browne says, "a covenant and condition made on God's behalf." The nature of this essential basis of the Church's covenant is:

"His agreement or partaking of conditions with us that if we keep His laws, not forsaking His government, He will take us for His people, and bless us accordingly. His promise to His Church, is His sure covenant, remembered, taught and held by the Church, and the seed thereof; whereby, it only hath assurance of salvation in Christ."<sup>45</sup>

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42. Quoted by Walker. "Ency. of Rel. and Ethics." art. "Cong." From R. Mather. "An Apology."  
43. Browne. "A Book which Sheweth." Art. 36.  
44. Quoted by L.E. Cooke. "The Fourth Freedom." p 25.  
45. Browne. "A Book which Sheweth." Art. 36.

To understand this covenant made with God we must recognise the sense of calling and election which alone gave meaning to the faith of the Separatists. All depended on the promise and the faithfulness of the Sovereign God. "His promise to His Church is His sure covenant." His promise alone gives meaning to the existence of the Church, for He has promised "to take us for His people" and this promise was sealed through the redemption of Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit "which is the earnest of our inheritance."<sup>46</sup> This covenant which God has made with His people implies His government over and within the Church, and His blessing upon His people which assures them that they are within the covenant of His saving grace. The existence of the Church depends upon the election and sovereign grace of God.

Nevertheless, as in the mystery of redeeming grace there is the need for faith, so the promise of God to His Church requires a true response from those who are members of the Church. In the covenant relationship between God and Israel as shown in the Old Testament, the obedience of Israel was the necessary corollary of the promise of God; in like manner the covenant which God has made with the Church requires obedience to His laws and commandments. It is therefore required of the Church that she should solemnly covenant to obey God; there is the need for "a covenant and condition made on our behalf."

Browne defines this second aspect of the covenant as:

"The covenant on our behalf, is our agreement and partaking of conditions with God, that He shall be our God so long as we keep under His government, and obey His laws, and no longer."<sup>47</sup>

An illustration of this covenanting together is that recorded by Browne in writing of his experiences at Norwich. After having discussed the question of doctrine and removed certain difficulties, the company

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46. Ephesians Ch. 1 v 14.

47. Browne. "A Book which Sheweth." Art. 38.

"gave their consent, to join themselves to the Lord, in one covenant and fellowship together, and to keep and seek agreement under His laws and government: and therefore did utterly flee and avoid such like disorders and wickedness, as was mentioned before....." 48

Browne further defines this second aspect of the covenant when he says that "our profession and submission to His laws and government, is the keeping of our covenant, by leading a godly and Christian life." 49

The calling and planting of a true Church depends therefore both on the promise and faithfulness of God, and on the obedience of His people. The third factor which Browne enumerates, is that this covenant is sealed by the sacrament of baptism.

This third aspect of the covenant was soon to give rise to a serious problem about the relationship of the children of Christian parents to the Church. For if they were convinced believers in 'paedo-baptism', how were they also able to maintain that all members of the Church should have a personal religious experience? In New England this problem gave rise to a strenuous controversy known as the 'Half-Way Covenant Discussions'. In the Netherlands the problem of baptism also arose amongst the exiled Separatists and was only solved through division.<sup>50</sup> It is important therefore that we should state the position which Browne himself adopted.

Browne was a convinced 'paedo-baptist', and for him baptism was the seal of the covenant made with God, the Church, and its members. He defines baptism as:

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48. Browne. "A Short and True Declaration. p 422.

49. Browne. "A Book which Sheweth." Art. 38.

50. The split occurred in the Amsterdam Church when a certain John Smyth became dissatisfied with the practice of paedo-baptism, and reconstituted a church not on the basis of a covenant, but by the baptism of all professed believers. See H. Davies "English Free Churches." pp 59f.

"....a Sacrament or mark of the outward Church, sealing unto us by the washing of our bodies in water, and the word accordingly preached, our suffering with Christ to die unto sin by repentance, and our rising with Him to live unto righteousness, and also sealing our calling, profession and happiness gotten by our faith in the victory of the same Jesus Christ."

51

And he asserts that the children of the faithful "though they be infants are to be offered to God, and the Church, that they may be baptized, and

"Also those infants or children which are of the household of the faithful, and under their full power.

"Also all of discretion which are not baptized, if they hold the Christian profession, and show forth the same."

52

The determining facts were that the children should be of the household of faith, and that those of maturer years should profess the Christian faith. Baptism was not to be administered indiscriminately to any, but only to those within the covenant relationship of grace.

Seen in this context a "gathered Church" was not a group of schismatics bound together by a common discontent with authority, but a Christian society consciously constituted by a mutual covenant between God and Christian men and women sealed with the sign of redeeming grace and obedient to the commandments of God. Such a Church no longer existed when the covenantal relationship was broken - "He shall be our God so long as we keep under His government, and obey His laws, and no longer."

### 3. The Church is under the Government of God

The Church is planted by God and is in a covenantal relationship with God which is conditioned by the Church's obedience to the government of God. In his "True and Short Declaration" Browne says that there can be no Lord's People without the Lord's government, and Harrison boasts that:

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51. Browne. "A Book which Sheweth." Art. 39.

52. ibid. art. 40.

53. Browne. "A Treatise of the Church." p 52.

"We have our churches planted, the unclean separate from the clean, all open abominations of Antichrist expelled, and our poor flocks redeemed from his iron yoke, and governed by the due order of Christ's government....."

54

This factor has often been ignored in assessing the validity of Congregational polity. The early Separatists did not teach that the Church is a democracy, they taught that the Church is a Christocracy, and only as it is a Christocracy has it the right to be called a Church. Browne and Harrison are explicit on this question. In his "Treatise of the Church" Harrison's opening paragraph is a scathing attack on the Anglican Church:

"Quaestio: Ecclesia Anglicana non est Christi  
Ecclesia.  
Argumentum: Ecclesia Christi est regnum Christi.  
Ecclesia Anglicana non est regnum.  
Ergo non est ecclesia Christi.  
Confirmatio Minor: Ubi Christus non regnat ibi  
non est regnum eius.  
At in Ecclesia Anglicana non  
regnat.  
Ergo non est ibi Ecclesia.  
Confirmatio Minor: Ubi non est vera Disciplina ibi  
non regnat Christus.  
At in Ecclesia Anglicana non est.  
Ergo ibi non regnat Christus."

55

The government of Christ in the Church is essential for it to be truly established, for the Church of Christ is His Kingdom and there He must rule. If the government is taken from His hands, that which claims to be a Church is no longer the kingdom of Christ.

"This is a certain truth, that where any open disorder is incurable, there is not the Lord's Zion, to which He is turned to dwell therein: that is, they are not the Lord's Church, over whom He doth reign to show His kingdom and government. For the Lord's kingdom is not man's, and His rule in the Church is not the rule of man..."

56

The nature of the kingdom of Christ "is His office of government, whereby He uses the obedience of His people to keep His laws and commandments, to their salvation and welfare."

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54. Harrison. "A Treatise of the Church." p 52.  
55. Harrison. "A Treatise of the Church." p 31  
56. Browne. "A Treatise without Tarrying." p 169.  
57. Browne. "A Book which Sheweth." Art. 48.

The Church is therefore responsible to God alone. This is the necessary concomitant of the covenantal relationship. For if the Church is the "Lord's kingdom and not man's", the Church must be directly dependent on Christ and directly responsible to Him. This is the context in which Congregational polity must be seen, for the responsibility of the Church does not rest upon any particular office within the Church, but upon the Church as a whole because all are members of the Body of Christ and all have entered into the covenant together. The member of the Church is called to rule with Christ as part of his high-calling to be a saint - "such honour shall be to all His saints." 58

"The kingdom of all Christians is their office and ruling with Christ, to subdue the wicked, and make one another obedient to Christ." 59

Christ alone is head and ruler of the Church. It was for this very reason that the Separatists rejected the authority of the Queen over the Church; Christ and not Elizabeth was the Supreme Head or Governor of the Church. And under Christ, the Christians and not the Civil authorities had the right to govern the Church for it was their duty and responsibility by reason of their calling and by demand of their conscience.

The calling of the Christian to be a saint not only implied that he was to reign with Christ, but that he was also a priest and a prophet under Christ:

"Their priesthood is their office of cleansing and redressing wickedness, whereby sin and uncleanness is taken away from amongst them.  
"Their prophecy is their office of judging all things by the word of God, whereby they increase in knowledge and wisdom among themselves." 60

This is the privilege of every Christian, it is also his responsibility, but it is not of himself, it is of Christ who is in His own right King, Priest, and Prophet. The Church member must judge all things not by his own criteria, but by the word

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58. Browne. "A Treatise without Tarrying." p 153.  
59. Browne. "A Book which Sheweth." Art. 55.  
60. Browne. "A Book which Sheweth." Art. 55.

of God, he must not seek his own will, but the will of Christ. Troeltsch's statement that "Browne believed that the spirit was all that mattered" and based "the life of the Church solely upon the inward power of the Spirit" is misleading if by this<sup>61</sup> Troeltsch means that for Browne the Christian had no objective standard for exercising his rights within the Church. Browne did not believe that "the spirit was all that mattered." It was the Spirit of Christ within the Church and within the Word of God which mattered.

The work of the Holy Spirit was essential in the life of the Church, and this is most clearly expressed in the government of the Church by the Church Meeting. For the Church is governed by Christ through its members only when they are met together in the name of Christ and in seeking the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. God has promised to govern and to bless His people if they obey Him, can we then deny that Christ governs the Church through its members when they are obedient to His laws and when met together in His name?

(a) The Exercise of Discipline

In spite of their insistence on only the redeemed being members of the Church, the Separatists did not believe that all the members of the Church were beyond reproach. They could not sanction the claim of the established Church that it was comprised solely of Christians, and they bitterly complained that true discipline was not exercised within that Church. But they did not claim that their own Churches were without spot or blemish, rather, they attempted to maintain purity within the Church through the right application of godly discipline. Browne writes as follows:

"Though hypocrites which are called tares, cannot be rooted out, yet no open disorder shall so spread itself, that it cannot be remedied. Else should not the Church be called the pillar and

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61. Quoted by Nuttall "The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience." p 6 from Troeltsch "The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches."

ground of truth, His holy habitation, the Lord's resting place, and His kingdom and glorious renown. Therefore doth Paul call that part of Church government which is to separate the ungodly, the power of our Lord Jesus Christ."

62

Browne thus declares that Church discipline is maintained by the power of Christ, and he thereby implies that it is to be implemented by the Church itself. Even although Elders were given a special place of responsibility within the Church, the Church is the final court of appeal under God. As Dale says, "They could not subject any member to discipline without the concurrence of the whole Church."

63

(b) The Calling and Ordaining of Church Officers

Browne taught that there were three types of officers within the Church. First, there were those "who have their several charge over many churches." These were Apostles, Prophets, and Evangelists, whose individual tasks Browne outlines. Their peculiar significance is that they serve the Church in general having their office and message solely from God. They are not bound to the service of one particular Church, but they have a message for all, and therefore, they are not to be called to minister to one congregation.

Secondly, there are those "who have their several charge in one Church only, to teach and guide the same:

"The Pastor, or he which hath the gift of exhorting, and applying especially.

"The Teacher, or he that hath the gift of teaching especially: and less gift of exhorting and applying. They which help unto them both in overseeing and counselling, as the most forward or Elders."

64

Finally, there are those "who have office of cherishing and relieving the afflicted and poor:

"The Relievers or Deacons, which are to gather and bestow the church liberality.

"The Widows, which are to pray for the Church, with attendance to the sick and afflicted thereof."

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62. Browne. "Treatise without Tarrying." p 169.

63. Dale. "A History of English Congregationalism." p 127f.

64. Browne. "A Book which Sheweth." Art. 53.

65. ibid. Art. 54.

We are only concerned here with the second and third group of officers, for they hold office within the "gathered Church" itself. Their office is from God and not from the Church: but as these offices are within the local church, each person who claims to be called by God to such a position must first be tried by the Church to ascertain his or her worthiness. The criteria for their decision are:

"They must try their gifts and godliness." 66

Depending upon their decision, if it be in the affirmative, such a person is "duly chosen by the Church which calleth him." 67 Browne declared that Christ Himself "would not thrust His Apostles upon any congregation, nor suffer them to take charge of any which did not willingly receive them." It is the Church which decides upon and calls its officers, and yet it can only so act when met together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Upon this fact depends the whole question of the validity of the decision made. Browne records his thoughts about a call he received to preach in Cambridge. He questioned the nature of the call because the bishop of the diocese would be the ecclesiastical authority over the Church at Cambridge, and Browne could not sanction such authority:

"Now next under Christ, is not the bishop of the diocese, by who so many mischiefs are wrought, neither any one which hath but single authority, but first they that have their authority together: as first the Church ..... Therefore the meeting together of many churches, also of every whole Church, and of the elders therein, is above the Apostle, above the Prophet, the Evangelist, the teacher, and every particular Elder. For the joining and partaking of many churches together, and of the authority which many have, must needs be greater and more weightier, than the authority of any single person." 69

The authority of the whole Church is therefore above the authority of any one individual in the deciding the affairs of the Church. For Browne, the Church Meeting was the means

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66. ibid. Art. 118

67. ibid. Art. 53

68. Browne. "A True and Short Declaration." p 400.

69. Browne. "A True and Short Declaration." p 399.

whereby the members of a local Church could meet together to resolve the problems, to seek the will of Christ, and to further godliness within the Church, and so it is in this light that his description of the essential elements in a Church Meeting should be understood. Browne describes how a Church Meeting should function in considering the election and ordination of Church officers:

"Prayer at the choosing upon the word preached, a pronouncement of their earnest desire to have God their gracious Governor, in so weightier a matter, with humble confessing wherein and how much they have need of His help, and an entreating for the same in the name of Jesus Christ."

71

"The gathering of voices and consent of the people, is a general inquiry who is meet to be chosen, when first it is appointed to them all, being duly assembled to look out such a person among them, and then the number of the most which agree, is taken by some of the wisest, with presenting and naming of the parties to be chosen, if none can allege any cause or default against them."

72

We must note from the above quotations the operative acts in the Church Meeting. The Word must be preached; prayer must be made upon the hearing of the Word; God must be acknowledged as the Governor of the Church, and His help must be invoked through Christ. Having thus heard the Word preached and having sought the guidance of God in prayer, the Church can then rightly discuss the question at hand believing that a sound decision will be arrived at in normal circumstances. This does not deny the possibility of human error, but then such error is not avoided through the institution of an Episcopate or Presbytery!

When the Church has arrived at its decision in the calling of a pastor or teacher, she confirms that calling by an act of ordination. Ordination was held in high esteem by the Separatists, although "they differed from the Anglicans in their mode and doctrine of ordination."

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70. Browne. "A Book which Sheweth." p 327.

71. ibid. Art. 119.

72. Browne. "A Book which Sheweth." Art. 119.

73. Davies. "Worship of the English Puritans." p 222.

Browne declares what the pattern of choosing a pastor and ordaining his should be:

- (1) "The Prayers and humbling of all with fasting and exhortation, that God may be chief in the choice.
- (2) "The consent of the people must be gathered by the Elders and guides, and testified by voice, presenting or naming some, or other tokens, that they approve them as meet for that calling.
- (3) "The Elders must ordain, and pronounce them, with prayer and imposition of hands, as called and authorized of God...."

74

Henry Ainsworth defended the Separatist manner of ordination

by using Numbers Chapter 8 vv9 ff as his proof-text:

"....for the order and manner of giving, Moses governed the action, to him it was said, 'Thou shalt sprinkle water, thou shalt bring them before the Lord' and then the Children of Israel imposed hands: this I understand not of every particular man, but of some of the chief for the rest: as the Elders, heads of tribes, chief fathers of families and 'etcetera' as when all the multitude brought an oblation for their sign, the Elders put their hands on the head of the sacrifice, Lev. 4:14,15. Accordingly have we practised in our ordination of officers....some of the chief of the Church, the ancients and fathers of families, imposed hands in the name of the rest."

76

The practice of the imposition of hands was not universal amongst the Separatists, as some would have regarded it as a superstitious act, but the majority would have regarded it as part of the act of ordination even if it was not an essential part.

It is clear that the Elders, and they would include the Pastor and Teacher, constituted a council with the Church which had both the privilege and responsibility of guiding and instructing the Church in its faith and witness. They had the authority to ordain, to reprove, and to counsel, but their authority was derived from the Church under God. For under God the Church itself was the authority for all decisions when

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74. Browne. 'op.cit' Art. 119

75. Ainsworth. A teacher in the Church at Amsterdam during the exile. See Selbie "Congregationalism." p 43.

76. Quoted by Davies. "The Worship of the English Puritans." p 222f.

duly assembled around the Word of God and in prayer. According to the words of our Lord, "tell it to the Church",<sup>77</sup> any member could appeal directly to the Church on any matter of concern.

We have only considered the way in which the Church Meeting exercises discipline and calls its officers; but similarly it is, under the government of God, the governing instrument of the Church in all matters. According to Browne and his successors, "The Church is not a voluntary club for the regulation of which members may make what rules they please, the rights and powers of individual members being based upon free contract between themselves; it is a society of which Christ is the founder, the Head and Lord. Its members have no right to admit whom they like or to exclude whom they like; they have no right to elect men to office according to private tastes and preferences. Nor are they at liberty to please themselves in the conduct of public worship. In the whole life of the Church they have simply to give effect to the will of Christ, who is present whenever the Church meets, and apart from whose concurrence and sanction all the decisions of the Church are without validity."<sup>78</sup>

#### Separatism and Ecumenicity

It may appear that the essence of Separatism is complete independency. However, it was never the intention of Browne or the other Separatists that each Church should be completely independent and unrelated to other Churches, nor has this ever been part of Congregational theory. Each local Church is autonomous, but each Church is <sup>not</sup> and can never be independent of other Churches especially of the same order. The Separatists were clearly concerned with emphasizing the nature of the 'gathered Church', but in doing so, they did not imply the isolation of one Church from another.

We have seen how Browne recognized a type of ministry which was not confined to any particular local Church but intended to

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77. Matthew Ch. 18 v 17.

78. Dale. "A History of English Congregationalism." p 135.

be exercised for the benefit of the whole Church. Moreover, we have seen that the meeting together of many Churches, as of every whole Church, has a greater authority than one man.

Browne firmly believed that when a Church could not arrive at a decision, or was unable clearly to discover the will of Christ in some matter, it should seek the guidance of other Churches:

"There be Synods or the meetings of sundry Churches: which are when the weaker Churches seek help of the stronger, for deciding or redressing of matters: or else the stronger look to them for redress."

79

And again Browne writes:

"A Synod is a joining or partaking of the authority of many Churches met together in peace, for redress and deciding of matters, which cannot well be otherwise taken up."

80

Such Synods, it is seen, are only to be called by the Churches themselves, whether for mutual edification or for the resolving of some problem. They have no authority other than the Churches themselves give to them, but the question of their authority does not really arise, as Synods would not be brought into being or convened if the help and fellowship of other Churches was not desired.

Separatism and Ecumenicity are therefore not antithetical as shall be evident also in the writings and practices of the Independents. The definite need for inter-Church counsel is recognised, and Separatism like Independency at its best, is not exclusive but ecumenical in design and practice.

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79. Browne. "A Book which Sheweth." p 51.

80. Browne. "A Book which Sheweth." p 51.

CHAPTER THREE

"CLASSICAL INDEPENDENCY"

1. "THE NATURE OF INDEPENDENCY"

An Historical Introduction

In the preceding chapter we discussed the nature of the Church as expounded by those Separatists who can be regarded as the immediate historical predecessors of 17th century Independency. In this chapter we shall discuss the nature of 17th century Independency itself, a necessary introduction to our next chapter which deals solely with Independent ecclesiology. In these two chapters our main source of reference will be the 'Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order' of 1658.

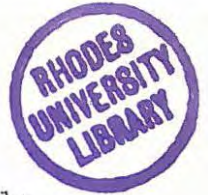
During the 17th century Puritanism reached its height in England both as an ecclesiastical and a political power. Likewise, there can be no doubt that this century was "in terms of internal energy, purity and clarity of conviction and influence over great events, unquestionably the greatest period in the history of Congregationalism, both in England and America"<sup>1</sup> This was the age of Classical Independency, the period which produced some of the greatest exponents of Congregationalism.

The Relation between the Separatists and Independency

At the beginning of the 17th century the majority of the Separatists with whom we are chiefly concerned were in exile in the Netherlands. There, Separatism became divided into a number of parties, two of which represent early 'Congregationalism'.<sup>2</sup> Of these two 'Congregational' groups, the one could be called the 'semi-Separatists'<sup>2</sup> for they were more rooted in Separatism than the other group whom we might call 'semi-<sup>3</sup>

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1. D. Jenkins. "Congregationalism." p 34  
2. cf. Nuttall. "Visible Saints" p 9.  
3. cf. H. Davies. "The Worship of the English Puritans." p 233.



Congregationalists', for they were less inclined towards Separatism. Notable amongst the 'semi-Separatists' were men such as Francis Johnson,<sup>4</sup> Henry Ainsworth, and John Robinson from whose Leyden congregation many of the Pilgrim Fathers came. Notable amongst the 'semi-Congregationalists' were William Ames,<sup>5</sup> and Henry Jacob who was to re-establish 'Congregationalism' in England in 1616.<sup>6</sup> Although neither of these two groups can be regarded as Independents or Congregationalists themselves, their place in the pre-history of Congregationalism is as assured as is Browne's.<sup>7</sup> They were the early exponents of the basic principles of Congregationalism, the precursors of the Congregationalism which reached its apex in the Independency of the middle decades of the 17th century.

From the time of the return of the exiles to England until the rise of Classical Independency, the growth of 'Congregationalism' in England was ~~very~~ spasmodic. The cause was especially effected when the 'Pilgrim Fathers' departed for America in 1620. Generally we have a picture of small independent congregations scattered throughout many of the English counties. Some of these congregations were Brownist or Barrowist in origin, but many were the outcome of the influence of the returned exiles.

Little seems to have been known by their contemporaries about the ways and manners of these congregations. As late as 1641 "when the war was brewing" Richard Baxter says of himself that "Till Mr. Burton published his 'Protestation Protested',<sup>8</sup> I never thought what Presbytery or Independency were, nor ever spoke with a man that seemed to know it."<sup>9</sup> As Dale says, there were many devout and educated men in England in 1640 who knew nothing of the writings of Robert Browne, Henry Barrowe, John

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4. Francis Johnson. See Dale "History of English Congregationalism". pp 166ff.  
5. William Ames. See Nuttall "Visible Saints" p 11.  
6. See Davies. "English Free Churches." p 57.  
7. Nuttall. "Visible Saints" p 9.  
8. Burton's Protestation Protested'. See Dale 'op.cit' p 366.  
9. ibid.

Robinson, Henry Ainsworth or Henry Jacob. Amongst the men who<sup>10</sup> knew nothing about these early 'Congregationalists' were the majority of those who were to become the classical exponents of 17th century Independency. What Dr. Nuttall says of Browne could be said of most of the early 'Congregationalists' and 'Separatists': "Few Congregationalists (i.e. in the strict sense) indeed, had been directly influenced by the Brownists or by Brownist writings. They had their own path of development, and while this often ran parallel with the Brownists' path it was not a projection of it." This partly accounts for the reason why the Independents were<sup>11</sup> often called 'Separatists' or 'Brownists' by their adversaries.

#### The Influence of New England

We must be continually aware of the fact that parallel to the development of Congregationalism in England was its development in the New England States of America. Because of the influence of the 'Pilgrim Fathers' these States were almost entirely Congregational States. Here Congregationalism was put into practice helped by the State.

About the year 1640 several members of the English Parliament wrote to John Cotton of New England and appealed to him to return to England "that he might support with his experience of the practical working of Congregationalism the few scholars and divines who were maintaining the struggle for ecclesiastical freedom." In spite of the fact that he declined the invitation,<sup>12</sup> Cotton had an important influence on English Congregationalism through a manuscript which he sent to England when he himself was unable to go. This manuscript was entitled "The True Constitution of a Particular Visible Church, proved by Scripture," and it was published in 1642. We shall see how this treatise affected the future of Congregationalism in England

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10. Dale. "History of English Congregationalism." p 365f.  
11. Nuttall. "Visible Saints." p 8.  
12. Dale. 'op.cit' p 372.

when we realise that through it a number of the outstanding English Divines were converted to Congregationalism.

14

The "Five Dissenting Brethren"

Another important historical fact for a true understanding of 17th century Congregationalism was the witness of a few Independents at the 'Westminster Assembly of Divines' in 1643, where they vigorously defended basic Congregational principles. The five men who formed the Independent bloc, Philip Nye, Thomas Goodwin, William Bridge, Jeremiah Burroughs, and Sidrach Simpson, revealed an awakening definiteness amongst the Independents on matters of faith and practice. Dale assesses their influence in this way: "...what contributed most of all to attract the attention of the most intelligent and devout men in England to the 'Congregational Way' was the manner in which these 'Five Dissenting Brethren' maintained their position in the Westminster Assembly. Their moderation lessened the alarm with which their principles were regarded; their courage, their intellectual vigour, their ingenuity, and their learning, commanded universal admiration and respect."

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It is nevertheless true to say that in the 1640's Independency or Congregationalism was regarded with suspicion by the majority of the members of the English Parliament, and by the Anglican and Presbyterian Churches. But as the political structure of England began to change, Independency became more and more a political and ecclesiastical power. Politically this was effected through the success of Oliver Cromwell; ecclesiastically, chiefly through the influence of a number of outstanding Independent Divines. Notable amongst these were the 'Five Dissenting Brethren', John Howe and in particular John Owen who could be regarded as the most outstanding

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14. For the influence of Cotton see Nuttall "Visible Saints" pp 14ff.

15. Dale. "History of English Congregationalism" p 372.

16. John Howe. He was probably more of a Presbyterian than an Independent. He was however a domestic chaplain to Oliver Cromwell. See Davies. "English Free Churches" p 116.

Independent of the times. John Owen, Thomas Goodwin, and his brother John, were all converted to Congregationalism through Cotton's treatise, indeed, Owen was converted in the act of writing a reply to it! All of these men were academically highly qualified for their role of leadership during this period of Classical Independency. "For with John Owen and the 'Dissenting Brethren' safely on the stage, we have before us some of the leading representatives of the Congregational way."<sup>17</sup> Without doubt there were many true Independents who would not have agreed with these Divines, but it is still true to say that they best represent Classical Independency in the 17th Century.

#### The Significance and Nature of the Savoy Declaration

The 'Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order' was the product of the Conference held at Savoy in 1658. The date is significant; a few weeks before the Conference met Oliver Cromwell died, a year later the English Monarchy was restored. The Declaration was therefore the product of an Independency unhindered by the State and yet fully aware of the critical position England was in, and the precarious position which it would itself be in if the Monarchy was restored. The sense of urgency which characterised the whole Conference is clearly evident and can best be estimated from the fact that the whole Conference only lasted eleven days.

As the Conference itself "may be taken to manifest the full strength of the recognized Congregational Churches in England",<sup>18</sup> so the Declaration was the clearest expression of that which was commonly believed and practised by the Independents of those times. As A.G. Matthews writes, "The Conference brought into clear light what some of those present must have been already partially aware of, that there was in operation, explain its origin as they might, a body of principles regulating Congregational Church life."<sup>19</sup>

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17. Nuttall. "Visible Saints" p 17.

18. See A.G. Matthews. In the Introduction to the 1959 edition of the 'Savoy Declaration'. 19. ibid. p 21.

Later he continues and says ".....if we look ahead we find a few objectors to this and that in the Declaration, but no non-Savoyan Independent denounces the document 'in toto', or challenges the claim implied on its title page, that the men at the Savoy speak for all the Congregational Churches in England." 20 21

The Declaration is divided into two sections. The first is on 'Faith' and the second on 'Order'. The first section is substantially the same as the Westminster Confession of Faith. The second, on 'the Institution of Churches and the Order appointed in them' is wholly the work of the Savoyans. Some inspiration for the section on 'Order' came no doubt from the Cambridge Synod and Platform of New England', and it is noteworthy that the Savoy Declaration became for the New England Churches an authoritative standard of faith and practice while in England it soon passed out of notice. 22

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The Declaration was never intended to be an authoritative statement binding on all Independents. It was specifically an expression of what was commonly believed by them.

Thus in the Preface, supposedly written by John Owen, we read that "such a transaction is to be looked upon but as a meet and fit medium whereby to express that their common faith and salvation, and no way is to be made use of as an imposition upon any: Whatever is of force or constraint in matters of this nature causeth them to degenerate from the name and nature of confessions, and turns them from being Confessions of Faith into exactions and impositions of Faith....." 24

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#### The Authority for Independency

In the last chapter we noted that the Separatists based their doctrine of the Church solely upon their interpretation

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20. cf. Nuttall. "Visible Saints." p 18

21. Matthews. 'op.cit' p 26.

22. An important Church Platform drawn up at Chambridge, Mass., in 1648. See Matthews 'op.cit' pp 36f.

23. cf. Matthews 'op.cit' pp 45f.

24. It is not certain whether Owen did. See Selbie "Cong." p87.

25. Preface to "Savoy Declaration" p 51f.

of Scripture. Holy Scripture was their authority not only for faith but also for Church order and government. In the 17th century the Independents were to maintain this position as can be ascertained from the Preface to the Savoy Declaration:

"What we have laid down and asserted about Churches and their government, we humbly conceive to be the order which Christ Himself appointed to be observed, we have endeavoured to follow Scripture-light...." 26

Likewise John Owen writes:

"What I beseech you shall bind my Conscience to acquiesce in what is pleaded from the 4 or 5 first Centuries consisting of men, that could and did err.....Have I not liberty to call for Reformation according to the Scriptures only?" 27

The Independents are still convinced that Scripture contains the blue-print for Church-organization, once given for all time:

"The Models and Platforms of this subject laid down by leared men, and practised by Churches, are various: we do not judge it brotherly, or grateful, to insist upon comparisons as some have done; but this experience teaches. That the variety, and possibly the disputes and emulations arising thence, have much strengthend, if not fixed, this unhappy persuasion in the minds of some learned and good men, namely that there is no settled Order laid down in Scripture; but its left to the prudence of the Christian Magistrate, to compose or make choice of such a Form as is most suitable and consistent with their Civil Government...." 28

"In their concentration on Scripture, to the exclusion of the Fathers, the Congregational men were, therefore, at one with much contemporary Protestant apologetic." But two other important factors now become evident in the Independents' appeal to authority. These two factors must not be regarded as contradictory to their belief in the Scriptures as the final authority but as indicative of a broader approach to theology than that of the Separatists. Firstly, there is an appeal in the Preface not only to their uniformity "with our brethren in New England" but also to the "ancientist customs of the" 30

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26. *ibid* p 68.

27. Quoted by Nuttall "Visible Saints" p 59.

28. Preface to "Savoy Declaration" p 68.

29. Nuttall. "Visible Saints" p 60.

30. Preface to the Savoy Declaration p 68.

Churches" and the writings of "our soundest Protestant Divines" who substantiate all the parts of Church government "with our Reverend Brethren the old Puritan non-conformists..."

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Secondly, there is a significant addition to the earlier view on the finality of Scriptural authority. The Separatists renounced all recourse to tradition and custom in determining the nature of the Church, and indeed, this is maintained by 17th century Independents to a great degree as can be seen from the 'Cambridge Platform':

"The parts of Church Government are all of them exactly described in the Word of God, being parts or means of Instituted worship according to the second Commandment: and therefore to continue one and the same unto the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, as a kingdom that cannot be shaken, until He shall deliver it up unto God even the Father. So that it is not left in the power of men, officers, Churches, or any State in the world, to add, or diminish, or alter, anything in the least measure therein."

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The 'Cambridge Platform' was the New England expression of Congregationalism, and while the English Independents would have agreed with what is said in this extract from it, the Savoy Declaration reveals a new spirit in the understanding of Scripture. In the article entitled "Of the Holy Scripture" we read after the final authority of Scripture has been attested to, these words:

".....Nevertheless we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the Worship of God and the Government of the Church, common to humane actions and Societies, which are to be ordered by the Light of Nature and Christian Prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed."

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It must be clearly understood that was was not an appeal to reason for the determining of doctrine. It is rather an appeal to the use of reason and prudence in liturgical practice and in

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31. ibid. p 72.

32. Peel. "Inevitable Congregationalism". p 43.

33. The Savoy Declaration of Faith. p 77 Chapter 1 Art. VI.

the organization of the Church, an appeal conditioned by the continual observance of the "general rules of the Word." It is a very significant and definite departure from the rigidity of Separatism. This article reads the same in the Westminster Confession, so that we might legitimately say there was a general move amongst the Puritans away from the letter of Scripture when determining the worship and government of the Church. However, Scripture retained its traditional place for "the <sup>S</sup>upreme Judge by which all controversies of Religion are to be determined, and all Decrees, Counsels, Opinions of ancient Writers, Doctrines of men and private Spirits are to be examined, in whose sentence we can rest, can be not other, but the holy Scripture delivered by the Spirit; into which Scripture so delivered, our Faith is finally resolved."

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#### Civil Authority and Independency

The Independents regarded Civil Authority, as embodied in the Magistrates, in a similar way to the Separatists. They were, however, more involved in the political struggles of their age. The Savoy Declaration asserts that "God ..... hath ordained civil Magistrates to be under Him, over the people for His own glory and the public good," and "it is the duty of people to pray for Magistrates, to honour their persons, to pay them tribute and other dues, to obey their lawful commands, and to be subject to their Authority for conscience sake." The Independents were not averse to use the State in their fight for religious freedom, for "if the State's demands were to be denied where the Crown rights of the Redeemer were at stake, the State's restraints might still be a useful ally in the fight against the priest."

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But

"in such differences about the Doctrines of the Gospel, or ways of the worship of God, as may befall men exercising a good conscience, manifesting it with their conversation, and holding the foundation, not disturbing others in their ways or

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34. ibid. p 78 Art. X.

35. The Savoy Declaration. Chap. 24 Art. iV p 109.

36. Nuttall. "Visible Saints." p 142.

worship that differ from them; there is no warrant for the Magistrate under the Gospel to abridge them of their liberty."

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Indeed, the questions of 'conscience' and 'liberty' in religious matters were vital issues of the period, being bound up with both the civil and the ecclesiastical powers', exercising of their authority.

#### Independency and Religious Liberty

It is important for us to understand the 'mood' of the Independents so that we might be able to see their ecclesiology in its true perspective. They might have maintained that Congregationalism alone was the Apostolic way of organizing the Church, but they were adamant on the question of religious liberty. Indeed, it was said that the Independent "reckons Liberty of Conscience to be England's chiefest good."

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In England at this time there were numerous sects which had come into existence during the past few years, and which, because of their beliefs and practices were regarded as a grave danger by all who were concerned about the religious welfare of England. These sects were by nature separatist movements, and this helps us to understand why the Independents dissociated themselves from the name of 'Separatist'.

The Anglicans had always strived after religious uniformity, and the Presbyterians of this period also were intent on making Presbyterianism the ecclesiastical norm for the national Church in England. They believed that if the country was to be saved from ruin, the independent sectarian congregations scattered throughout England would have to be dissipated. It was for this reason that they feared the triumph of Independency, and not on any other theological grounds, for they held these in common. "Independency meant toleration; and to tolerate these intolerable heresies would, in the judgment of the best men of those times,

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37. The Savoy Declaration. Chap. 24 Art. 111. p 109.

38. Quoted by Nuttall 'op.cit' p 105.

have been treason against both God and the nation." Therefore we need not be surpris<sup>39</sup>ed that the Scots Commissioner Baillie and his fellow Presbyterians at the Westminster Assembly "were not in haste in meddling with Independency!"

It was in these circumstances that the 'Five Dissenting Brethren' produced their 'Apologetical Narration'. In it they disclaimed any connection with the sectaries, asserted their own orthodoxy, and proceeded to maintain the principles of Independency against the 'divine right of Presbytery'. They were prepared to give the Civil Magistrate more authority than were the Presbyterians for the establishing of religious peace, and they pleaded earnestly for the liberty and spiritual autonomy of each individual Church. With their strong belief in Congregationalism religious liberty rather than uniformity was of vital importance to the Independents. No authority outside the local Church itself, whether it was the authority of an Assembly, Presbytery, Bishop, or magistrate, could be imposed upon a congregation of Christ's people who had covenanted with Him and with each other to obey His dictates as their Head and their Authority.

With the triumph of Independency as a political power under Cromwell, the plea for tolerance and religious liberty did not cease, rather during the Commonwealth a certain degree of toleration was put into practice throughout the realm so that:

"The Christian religion as contained in the Scriptures was recognised as the national religion....and, all persons professing faith in God by Jesus Christ were to have 'freedom and protection in their ministry and worship so long as they did not disturb the public peace and promote Popery or Prelacy."

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Naturally the toleration was not extended towards those who were non-Christians, with the notable exception of the Jews who were welcomed into the kingdom at this time; it was a tolerance more

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39. Dale. "A History of English Congregationalism." p 279.

40. Peel. "A Brief History of English Congregationalism." p 53.

41. See Nuttall. "Visible Saints". pp 143ff.

tolerant than anything England had ever known, but very restricted if viewed in the light of subsequent history. This type of tolerance is also expressed in the Savoy Declaration:

"....let this be added to give full weight and measure, even to running over, that we have all along this season, held for this great principle of these times, That amongst all Christian States and Churches, there ought to be vouchsafed a forbearance and mutual indulgence unto Saints of all persuasions, that keep unto, and hold fast the necessary foundations of faith and godliness, in all matters extra-fundamental, whether of Faith or Order."

42

This fact raises the question of the extent to which the Independents were ecumenically conscious and concerned.

#### Independency and Ecumenicity

The 17th century in England was a century of ecclesiastical strife, and while this incessant strife was lessened during the decades with which we are more concerned, denominational feeling and tension is everywhere apparent. As we have seen, the sympathisers of Papacy or Prelacy were regarded as traitors. Amongst the Puritans, "the Saints of all persuasions", there was a certain amount of harmony and goodwill. It is true, however, to say that once the Puritans were in power the differences which separated them, though formerly of minor importance, now became major issues. The Presbyterians were suspicious of the Independents, and both Presbyterians and Independents were suspicious of the Episcopalians. Once the Independents were in power and held the ecclesiastical reins of the country, they themselves began to distrust the Presbyterians. Although the Presbyterians and the Independents were close to each other in matters of doctrine, ecclesiology, and historical roots, the Preface to the Savoy Declaration suggests that the Savoyans were not over-anxious to unite with the Presbyterians. The Independents' approach to the question of ecumenicity as a whole might be judged by Owen's rejection of ecumenical councils as pretences!

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42. Preface to the Savoy Declaration. p 56.

43. See the Preface to the Savoy Declaration. pp 70ff. and also Matthews "Introduction" p 16.

44. Grant. "Free Churchmanship in England." p 25.

Nevertheless, two important factors must be clearly seen. There was a movement for unity between the Independents and the Presbyterians in spite of the denominational strife which characterises the period; and, the Independents did have a wider vision of the Church than the word 'Independency' might suggest. The 17th century Independents might not have been over-concerned about ecumenical relations, but their ecclesiology did not imply a rigid independency and isolationism, but in fact contained the seeds of ecumenicity. This will become apparent when we deal with the Independents' conception of Synods and Councils.

#### Independency and Orthodoxy

Orthodoxy is here used in the Calvinistic and Reformed sense; as John Robinson said, in respect of faith he was in complete accord with the reformed faith of England, Germany, and Holland. In this sense, as we have seen, the Separatists were themselves orthodox in their faith.<sup>45</sup>

There is little doubt that the central group of 17th century Independents were orthodox in their faith and doctrine and stood within the main stream of Reformed theology. Richard Baxter went so far as to call John Owen an "over-Orthodox Doctor",<sup>46</sup> and Owen himself wrote:

"There is nothing determined by the ancient councils to belong unto Christian faith which Dissenters disbelieve....they own the doctrine of the Church of England as established by law, in nothing receding from it: nor have they any novel or uncatholic opinions of their own."<sup>47</sup>

This orthodoxy and conservatism in doctrine is expressed in the Savoy Declaration of Faith. We must not forget, however, that there was a left-wing within Independency which inclined towards Anabaptism and even towards Quakerism. Nevertheless, on the

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45. See Whale. "The Protestant Tradition". p 194.

46. Nuttall. "The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience" p 11.

47. Whale. 'op.cit'

question of orthodoxy within 17th century Independency it will suffice to note that a fundamental reason for the meeting of the Savoyans is contained in this statement:

"We desired in the first place to clear ourselves of that scandal, which not only some persons at home, but of foreign parts, have fixed upon us, viz. That Independentism (as they call it) is the sink of all Heresies and Schisms. We have therefore declared what hath been our constant Faith and Order, to be published to the World. And to show our harmony with the most Orthodox at home and abroad we have expressed our assent to that Confession of Faith (the Westminster) which is the latest and best....."

48

The Independents of the 17th century therefore must not be regarded as heterodox or unorthodox. These terms would apply to some within all the Communion which claim to be orthodox, and they do apply to some Independents, but the classical exponents of Independency were all within the reformed stream of Christian orthodoxy.

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48. Quoted by Matthews. Introduction to the Savoy Declaration p 12.

CHAPTER FOUR

"CLASSICAL INDEPENDENCY"

11. "THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH"

The Independents whose faith is declared at Savoy cannot be criticised for not having a true and deep understanding both of the necessity and the nature of the Church. Indeed, one of their predecessors, John Robinson, wrote in the early years of the 17th century that:

"There is but one body, the Church, and but one Lord or Head of that body, Christ; and whosoever separates from the body, the Church, separates from the head, Christ."

1

John Owen himself wrote that the mystical body of Christ has "the properties of perpetuity; invisibility; infallibility; as to all necessary means of salvation attending of it; not as notes whereby it may be known....but as certain adjuncts of its nature and existence...." Thus, while it is not expressly stated in the Savoy Declaration,<sup>2</sup> the whole tenor of the section on the Church implies that the Independents believed with Calvin that "beyond the pale of the Church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped for...." and "the abandonment of the Church is always fatal."

3

According to Dr. Daniel Jenkins the chapter in the Savoy Declaration entitled "Of the Church" affirms the only Catholic character of the doctrine of the Church which inspired the Independents of the school of Owen. Although this chapter differs largely in content from the similar article in the Westminster Confession,<sup>4</sup> it is clearly in the Reformed tradition. It asserts belief both in "a Catholic Church which is invisible, and which consists of the whole number of the Elect, that have

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1. J. Robinson. "Works".  
2. Quoted by Nuttall. "Visible Saints" p 67.  
3. Calvin. "The Institutes." Vol. 2 Book iV Art. 4 p 283f.  
4. See Declaration p 50 (Additional Note.)

been, are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ", and in the "visible and Catholic Church of Christ" which comprised "the whole body of men throughout the world, professing the faith of the Gospel and obedience unto God by Christ according to it..."<sup>5</sup> Over this Catholic Church there is no other Head but the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup>

7

John Owen says that Scripture speaks of the Church in three ways:

"I. For the Mystical body of Christ, His Elect, Redeemed, Justified and Sanctified ones throughout the world, commonly called the Church-Catholic-Militant.

"II. For the Universality of men throughout the world, called by the preaching of the word, visibly professing and yielding obedience to the Gospel; called by some the Church-Catholic-visible.

"III. For a particular Church of some place, where the instituted worship of God in Christ is celebrated according to His mind...."

8

The distinction which is made between the 'invisible' and the 'visible' Church must be seen in its historical context, for this description of the Church has been challenged in modern ecumenical debate. It is a distinction made by Calvin, following St. Augustine. It did not imply that the Church was divided into two separate entities, for all agreed that the Church Catholic was one, but it was a distinction thought to be necessary for a right understanding of the nature of the Church. As Calvin wrote:

"I have observed that the Scriptures speak of the Church in two ways. Sometimes when they speak of the Church they mean the Church as it really is before God....in this case it not only comprehends the saints who dwell on the earth, but all the elect who have existed from the beginning of the world. Often too, by the name of the Church is designated the whole body of mankind scattered throughout the world, who profess to worship one God and Christ....In this Church there is a very large mixture of hypocrites, who

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5. Savoy Declaration. Chapter XXVI Art. 1.

6. Savoy Declaration. Chapter XXVI Art. 11.

7. ibid. Art. IV.

8. Quoted by Nuttall. "Visible Saints." p 67.

9. See Brunner. "The Misunderstanding of the Church."

10. See "The Nature of the Church." ed. Flew p 95.

have nothing of Christ but the name and outward appearance...."

11

The distinction which these two terms are meant to convey is important, eg., the "Manual of Church Doctrine" says:

".....In the knowledge and eternal purposes of God, 'The Holy Catholic Church' of all ages exists and constitutes 'one thing'.... it is the whole company of the redeemed..... from the human point of view this is necessarily 'invisible', since by far the greater part of its existing membership is at rest in Paradise. Part only, then, of this Holy Catholic Church can be at one moment 'visible'. 'We who are alive' represent in place and time that whole which God sees in its completeness."

12

The Independents, while they would have acknowledged this distinction made between the 'invisible' and 'visible' Church as necessary for a true understanding of the nature of the Church, were not very concerned about the 'invisible' Church as such because their chief concern was with the visible Church.

13

To this extent Professor G. Henderson is right when he says that the "Independents usually found no need for the word 'invisible', for to them the Church was a group of believers". In spite of

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all that may appear to be to the contrary, "Christ always hath had, and ever shall have a visible kingdom in this world, to the end thereof, of such as believe in Him, and make profession of His name."

15

#### 1. The Gathered Church

"If ever I saw the beauty of Sion and the glory of the Lord filling his tabernacle, it hath been in the manifestation of the divers graces of God in the church, in that heavenly harmony, and comely order, wherein by the grace of God we are set and walk....Now that the church, commonly called visible, is then most truly visible indeed, when it is assembled in one place; and the communion thereof then most full and entire, when all its members inspired, as it were, with the same presence of the Holy Ghost, do from the same pastor, receive

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11. Calvin. "The Institutes" Book IV Chap. 1 Art. 7. Vol.2 p 288.
  12. Wotherspoon and Kirkpatrick. "A manual of Church Doctrine." rev. edition p 7.
  13. cf. Nuttall. "Visible Sainst". p 160.
  14. G.D. Henderson. "Church and Ministry" p 79.
  15. The Savoy Declaration. Chap. XXVI Art. 111.

the same provocations of grace, at the same time and in the same place: when they all by the same voice, "banding as it were together," do with one accord pour out their prayers unto God: when they all participate of one and the same holy bread... This singular and sole assembly may, under Christ the Head, use and enjoy every one of His institutions: the communion of saints combined together in solemn and sacred covenant, the Word of God, sacraments, censures, and ministrations, whatsoever by Christ appointed, and therewith, the same Christ's most gracious presence." 16

These words were written by John Robinson early in the 17th century and they are a fitting introduction to the idea which his successors, the Independents, strove to expound in their ecclesiology. Nothing could be more definite than this in extolling the grandeur of the visibly manifested Church on earth—the whole Catholic Church expressed in the local congregation of Christ's flock: "it is then most truly visible when it is assembled in one place."

The idea of the "Gathered Church" is fundamental to the Independents' ecclesiology even as it was to the ecclesiology of the Separatists. The author of the Preface to the Declaration writes:

".....so the Saints, when nor abiding scattered, but gathered under their respective Pastors according to God's heart into an house, and Churches unto the living God, such together are, as Paul forespake it, the most steady and firm pillar and seat of Truth that God hath anywhere appointed to Himself on earth, where His truth is best conserved, and publicly held forth..." 17

Fundamental to the idea of the "Gathered Church" were two principles: The Voluntary Principle, and the Principle of Separation. To quote Dr. Nuttall: "To the Congregational men it was indeed the Lord who gathered them out of the lands: 'ye did not choose me, but I chose you'. To suppose that their gathering was in their own wills, as if their churches were no more than

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16. D. Horton. "The Nature and Power of Councils: and other Matters thereunto Belonging." Congregational Quarterly Vol. XXIX, No. 3 p 224.  
17. Preface to the Savoy Declaration. p 61.  
18. See Nuttall. "Visible Saints". Chapters 1 and 111.

secular clubs, would be a superficial misunderstanding. At the same time, their response to what they believed to be the divine commands, 'Come ye out' and 'Gather my saints together unto me', was a voluntary response, was given <sup>with</sup> a willing mind." John

Owen defends the Principle of Separation when he writes: <sup>19</sup>

"Causeless separation from established Churches, walking according to the order of the Gospel, (though perhaps failing in the practice of some things of small concernment) is no small sin; but separation from the sinful practices and disorderly walkings, and false unwarranted ways of worship in any, is to fulfil the precept of not partaking in other men's sins.....He that will not separate from the World and false-worship is a separate from Christ."

20

The parish system in England had passed into a mere semblance of its former self, and during the Commonwealth it largely ceased to function. The ecclesiastical situation was one of co-habitation rather than denominationalism, for according to the Savoy Declaration of Order:

"Saints living in one city or town, or within such distances as that they may conveniently assemble for divine worship, ought rather to join in one Church for their mutual strengthening and edification, than to set up many distinct societies."

21

Oliver Cromwell was very sympathetic towards the Independents, but his aim and the aim of his ecclesiastical advisers was not to disrupt the Church-life of the realm. He wished rather, to establish true piety and faith amongst the people. They did not try to secure a Congregational Uniformity, for although it is true that many parish Churches became Congregational Churches, this was seldom brought about except through the desire of the parishoners; it was not imposed from above. Nevertheless, the emphasis on the "Gathered Church" affected the whole

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19. Nuttall. "Visible Saints" p 108.

20. Quoted by Nuttall. "Visible Saints." p 54.

21. Savoy Declaration of Order. Art. XLIV p 126.

ecclesiastical life of the times, for Cromwell can tell Parliament in 1654 that "he has received petitions from the Presbyterians of many counties asking liberty of worship and 'for the purging of their congregations!'" As Matthews says, <sup>22</sup> "a purged congregation and a gathered Church are synonymous .... Here in the gathered Churches, these ecclesiolae set in the soulless framework to which the parish system had in many instances been reduced, Cromwell saw the core of 'the godly interest', upon whom depended the maintenance of vital Christianity, and therefore the maintenance of national righteousness." <sup>23</sup> In order to establish true faith and to secure 'godly interest' Cromwell formed his famous Committees of Ejectors and Triers in 1654. Their function was not to establish Independency, but to test the spiritual and academic fitness of all who were ordained to the ministry and of all who were seeking ordination. <sup>24</sup>

The Independents however did not compromise their belief in the "gathered Church", and their whole ecclesiology was centred around the local congregation:

".....the Lord Jesus Christ calleth out of the World unto Communion with Himself, those that are given unto Him by His Father...." <sup>25</sup>

Note that the local Church has its origin in the activity of God-it is Christ who "calleth out of the World."

"Those thus called (through the ministry of His Word by His Spirit) he commandeth to walk together in particular Societies or Churches....." <sup>26</sup>

## 2. The Covenanted People

The 17th century was the century of the covenant, for this conception meets us on every hand. The Bible was the book of the covenant, theology was 'covenantal theology', political theory was based on Locke's idea of the 'social contract', and Scotland well knew the meaning of the 'covenanters.'

<sup>27</sup>

22. Matthews Introduction to Savoy Declaration. p 32.

23. Matthews. "Introduction to the Savoy Declaration." p 32.

24. See Davies. "The English Free Churches." p 82.

25. Savoy Declaration of Order. Art. 11 p 121.

26. ibid. Art. 111.

27. See Nuttall. "Visible Saints" pp 75ff & F.W.Dillistone "The Structure of the Divine Society" Chap. 8.

It is not surprising therefore that the idea of the Covenant should find ecclesiastical expression amongst the Independents with their stress on the 'gathered Church'.

In the Savoy Declaration of Order the word 'covenant' is entirely absent, while in the Declaration of Faith it is only used in the sense of God's covenant with man through Christ, that is, the covenant of grace. The absence of the word from the Declaration of Order is puzzling, for as Matthew points out "the term was then so prevalent in this country (England) and in New England, and is so familiar to us to-day, that it is a little surprising to find that it does not occur in the classical formulation of Congregational Church order." 28 The essential elements however, of the Church covenant are easily discernable in the Declaration, for those whom Christ has called out of the world must

"....walk before Him in all the ways of obedience, which He prescribeth to them in His Word."

29

And,

"The Members of these Churches are Saints by calling, visibly manifesting and evidencing (in and by their profession and walking) their obedience unto that Call of Christ, who being further known to each other by the confession of the Faith wrought in them by the power of God, declared by themselves or otherwise manifested, do willingly consent to walk together according to the appointment of Christ, giving up themselves to the Lord, and to one another by the will of God in professed subjection to the Ordinances of the Gospel."

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A possible reason for the omission of the word 'covenant' was that some Independents were reticent in the use of it, but they are exceptional. Most Independent Churches had written covenants, all of which are very similar in content although they vary in expression. A typical example may be quoted:

"We do Covenant or Agree in the Presence of God, through the assistance of His Holy Spirit, to walk together in all the ordinances of our Lord Jesus, so far as the same are

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28. Matthews. "Introduction to the Savoy Declaration" p 34f.

29. Savoy Declaration of Order. Art. 11. p 121.

30. ibid. Art. VIII p 122. cf. Dillistone 'op.cit' p 143.

made clear to us: endeavouring the advancement of the Glory of the Father, the Subjection of our Wills to the Will of our Redeemer, and the mutual Edification Each of the other in His most holy Faith and Fear."

31

In his "True Nature of a Gospel Church" John Owen emphasised the need for a Church to "perform all Church Duties in the way and manner prescribed for their performance", and if they were unable to do so such a body could not be legitimately called a Church. Even two or three gathered together in the name of Christ did not necessarily constitute a Congregational Church. As Grant says, "The Church is mutually constituted, according to the Congregational theory, by a 'mutual confederation' or 'solemn agreement' of its members. This covenant binds the members to Christ and to each other." According to Owen:

33  
"The Formal Cause of a Church consisteth in an Obediential Act of Believers, in such numbers as may be useful unto the ends of Church Edification, jointly giving up themselves unto the Lord Jesus Christ, to do and observe all His Commands, resting on the promise of His especial presence therein; giving and communicating by His Law, all the Rights, Powers and Privileges of His Church unto them; and in a mutual Agreement among themselves, jointly to perform all the Duties required of them in that State....."

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### 3. The Government of God

Like all the Reformed Confessions of the age, the Savoy Declaration was adamant on the question of who was the only Head of the Church. "There is no other Head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ." Likewise the Declaration or Order begins by declaring:

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"By the appointment of the Father all Power for the Calling, Institution, Order, or Government of the Church, is invested in a Supreme and Sovereign manner in the Lord Jesus Christ, as King and Head thereof."

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31. The Church at Market Weston, 1654. Quoted Nuttall "Visible Saints" p 79.  
32. Quoted by Grant. "Free Churchmanship in England" p 18.  
33. Grant. 'op.cit' p 18.  
34. ibid.  
35. Savoy Declaration of Faith. Chap. XXVI Art. IV.  
36. Savoy Declaration of Order. Art. 1 p 121.

This was and is of course the common teaching of all Christian Communion, but it was obscured in the Anglican Church over which the Monarch was Head or Governor, and in the Roman Church's claims for the Papacy. The final authority to which the Church must be obedient is Christ who is both its Head and Lord. This is fundamental to Independency.

The government of each 'gathered Church' lay ultimately in the hands of its only Head, but this government was exercised by Christ through His Church which was a corporate body comprising those whom He had called out of the world and those whom He had appointed to be pastors and guides. As John Owen wrote:

"The Rule of the Church is in general the exercise of the Power or Authority of Jesus Christ, given unto it according unto the Laws and Directions prescribed by Himself unto its Edification. This Power in Actu Primo, or fundamentally, is in the Church itself; in Actu Secundo, or its exercise, in them that are especially called thereunto..."

37

Thus as with the Separatists, the exercising of authority within the Church was an act of the Church especially through itself as it met together in the Church Meeting, and also through its officers. The Declaration of Order is explicit on the derived authority of each Church which God has brought into being:

"To each of these Churches thus gathered, according unto His mind declared in His Word, He hath given all that Power and Authority, which is in any way needful for their carrying on that Order in Worship and Discipline, which He hath instituted for them to observe with Commands and Rules, for the due and right exerting and executing of that Power."

38

And again

"These particular Churches thus appointed by the Authority of Christ, and intrusted with power from Him for the ends before expressed, are each of them as unto those ends, the seat of that Power which He is pleased to communicate to His Saints and Subjects in this World, so that as such they receive it immediately from Himself."

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37. Quoted by Grant. "Free Churchmanship in England" p 59.  
38. Savoy Declaration of Order. Art. 1V p 121.  
39. ibid. Art. V p 122.

From these statements it is clear, firstly, that Christ alone is the Authority over the Church, so that "none are to be admitted unto the Priviledges of the Churches, who do not submit themselves to the Rule of Christ...", and secondly, that the Church in its visible and particular manifestations is invested by Christ with all the authority and power necessary for its life and witness. This however is conditional, for the Church which claims the authority of Christ must be "gathered according to his mind declared in His Word."

Moreover, each 'gathered Church' organised according to the will and Word of God, is in itself not needful of any other ecclesiastical authority or supervision.

"Besides these particular Churches, there is not instituted by Christ any Church more extensive or Catholic entrusted with power for the administration of His Ordinances, or the execution of any authority in His name."

40

We shall now examine two aspects of the Church's authority- the exercise of discipline together with the question of Church membership, and the calling and ordaining of officers to the ministry of the Church.

(a) Discipline and Church Membership

Like as the Separatists and Calvin acknowledged that there were hypocrites and tares to be found within the Church in its visible manifestation, so the Independents were also aware that "the purest Churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error." Calvin clearly saw the necessity for true discipline when he wrote, "as the saving doctrine of Christ is the life of the Church, so discipline is, as it were, its sinews."<sup>41</sup> "Independents regarded this discipline as a necessary concomitant of the idea of the gathered Church. They tested the qualifications of applicants for membership, rebuked members

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40. Savoy Declaration of Order. Art. VI p 122.

41. Calvin. "The Insitutes" Book IV Chap. 12 Art. 1 Vol. 2. p 453.

for faults that imperilled their relations to Christ and the brethren, and excommunicated those who failed to respond to milder action. Churches regarded their judgments as fallible, but as the highest possible on earth and hence to be respected by their members and by other Churches with whom they are in communion".<sup>42</sup> The Independents, together with all the Puritans, were intensely serious on matters of discipline as can be estimated from the numerous publications at that time on the reasons for and the nature of ecclesiastical censures. There were grave dangers inherent in this stringent exercising of discipline, and these dangers were basically two, "scrupulosity in the governors of the Church and hypocrisy in those governed." But true ecclesiastical discipline was as necessary then as it<sup>43</sup> has ever been in the Church of Christ, and the motive for that discipline whether exercised by the Corinthians or by the Independents was the desire to preserve the purity of the Church as the Body of Christ. The Church was composed of "visible saints".

In the exercise of discipline the Church fulfilled the following role assigned to it by Christ:

- (a) Churchmembership depended upon the consent of the Church.<sup>44</sup>
- (b) Each Church has power to exercise and execute Admonition and Excommunication.<sup>45</sup>
- (c) "The Power of Censures being seated by Christ in a particular Church, is to be exercised only towards particular Members of each Church respectively as such; and there is no power given by Him unto any Synods or Ecclesiastical Assemblies to Excommunicate, or by their public Edicts to threaten Excommunication, or other Church censures against Churches...."<sup>46</sup>

Entrance into the membership of a Congregational Church was dependent upon the consent of the Church, for it was the Church's responsibility to preserve the spiritual and moral life necessary for its own existence and mission. In the covenant of the Church

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42. Grant. "Free Churchmanship in England" p 11.

43. Davies. "The Worship of the English Puritans" p 235.

44. Savoy Declaration of Order. Art. XVII p 124.

45. *ibid.* Art. XVIII p 124.

46. *ibid.* Art. XXI p 125.

at Altham drawn up about 1650 there is this characteristic clause:

"...we thus apprehend, that they only are worthy that are Saints visible to the eye of rational charity, or such as, professing faith and repentance, live not in the neglect of any Christian duty or in commission of any notorious sin: having such a measure of knowledge as to lead Christ into the soul, and the soul to Christ."

47

In many Independent Churches it was necessary to give an account of one's spiritual experience and conversion before the Church or its Elders prior to being accepted into Church membership. But all required a confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord before the whole Church. The faith of the individual was expected to reveal itself in godly living as a necessary test of Christian loyalty. According to Grant, for example, John Owen applied the Calvinist test, esteeming as the proper Subject Matter of a Visible Church "such as in the judgment of charity entitle them unto all the appellations of Saints."<sup>48</sup> The Savoy Declaration states that the purpose for this concern is to assure that "love (without dissimulation) may be preserved between all the members thereof."<sup>49</sup>

49

Every Church also had the power to censure and to excommunicate unworthy members. This was often carried to an extreme on occasion by the Puritans, especially the Independents. However, before the penalty of excommunication was inflicted "Christian charity demanded a serious attempt at admonition and reconciliation....The expulsion of impurity from the Church members was greatly preferred to the expulsion of the impure from the Church." When every attempt at correction by Church censure failed,<sup>50</sup> excommunication necessarily followed, and that this was of a severe nature can be judged from the words of Owen:

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47. Nuttall. "Visible Saints" p 132.

48. Quoted by Grant. "Free Churchmanship in England" p 12.

49. Savoy Declaration of Order. Art. XVII p 124.

50. Grant. 'op.cit' p 14.

"The rejection of an offending brother out of the society of the Church, leaving him as unto all privileges of the Church in the state of an Heathen, declaring him liable unto the Displeasure of Christ, and Everlasting punishment without repentance, is the excommunication we plead for."

51

Finally, the Church to whom a guilty member belonged alone had the "power of censures" for that person. Excommunication could only be exercised by that particular Church, and the person who was being censured could appeal only to that Church if he or she considered the penalty unjust.

(b) The Calling and Ordaining of Officers

Fundamental to the whole conception of the ministry was the Lutheran doctrine of the 'priesthood of all believers'. This did not mean however, the laicising of the ministry as some might be led to believe, for the Independents had a real and deep understanding of the essential nature of the Christian ministry.

There are two basic considerations or questions which are raised when discussing the nature of the ministry. Firstly, what is the relationship of the ministry to the Church<sup>?</sup>, and secondly, what is the essential requirement for the ministry<sup>?</sup>

The Independents believed that the Church existed prior to the ministry and was therefore not dependent on the ministry for its existence and witness. In other words, the ministry is not of the 'esse' of the Church. "The Church is before the ministers seeing the power of choosing ministers is given by Christ to the Church."<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, the ministry was very important in the structure of the Church and essential to its completion and fulfilment. In the 'Nature of a Gospel Church' John Owen writes:

"(the ministry is) the principal ordinary means of all the ends of Christ in and towards His Church. Wherefore, although He can Himself feed His Church in the Wilderness, where it is deprived of all outward instituted means of Edification,

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51. Quoted by Davies. "The Worship of the English Puritans." p 233.

52. Quoted by Nuttall. "Visible Saints". p 86.

yet where this office fails through its neglect, there is nothing but disorder, confusion, and destruction, that will ensue thereon, no promise of Feeding or Edification."

53

In like manner, the Independent, William Strong, in a sermon at Westminster Abbey during the period in which the Abbey was a Congregational Church, declared:

"though a Church without officers be a true Church in respect of the essence of it, when there is a society of visible Saints, united into one body by mutual consent, in the profession of the faith of the Gospel, as appears in Acts 6 there was a true Church at Jerusalem before there were deacons: and a Church at Antioch before there were elders, Acts 14:23: but yet it is not a complete Church in all parts of it, as an Organical body: therefore it hath officers superadded, and therefore as soon as the Apostle(s) had converted a people to the faith, first they did embody them, and then for their perfection they set officers over them."

54

The Savoy Declaration of Order is also explicit on this matter when it says that "A particular Church gathered and completed according to the mind of Christ, consists of Officers and Members." And after stating the fourfold nature of the officers it says that the "Churches thus gathered and assembling for the worship of God are thereby visible and public, and their Assemblies are therefore Church or Public Assemblies."

55  
56

The Independents believed that the essential requirement of the ministry was the inward and spiritual call of God which manifested itself in spiritual gifts and grace. The ministry is essentially "fitted by the Holy Ghost", "Appointed by Christ", "gifted by the Holy Ghost". Because of this they must reveal to the Church some "Gifts, Abilities, and Endowments" for "nothing at all can be done without these spiritual gifts; and therefore, a Ministry devoid of them, is a mock-ministry, and no ordinance of

53. Quoted by Grant. "Free Churchmanship in England." p 48.

54. Quoted by Nuttall. "Visible Saints." p 86.

55. Savoy Declaration of Order. Art. VII p 122.

56. *ibid.* Art. X p 123.

57. Grant. 'op.cit' p 49.

Christ." The Church is nevertheless essential to the ministry,  
for any doctrine of the ministry that would give any man minister-  
ial order apart from the Church is denying the fact that the  
ministry is inconceivable without the Church for none "can take or  
assume to himself" the power and authority of that office.  
The inward call of God is ratified by the call of a Church and  
subsequently by the ordinance of ordination.

"....The Lord having given to His called ones  
Liberty and Power to choose Persons fitted by  
the Holy Ghost for that purpose, to be over  
them, and to minister to them in the Lord." 61

And, continues the Savoy Declaration:

"The Essence of this Call of a Pastor, Teacher  
or Elder unto Office, consists in the Election  
of the Church together with his acceptance of  
it.....The Calling of Deacons consisteth in  
the like Election and acceptation....." 62

"....that he be chosen by the common suffrage  
of the Church itself...." 63

Ordination was an essential part in the constituting of the  
ministry, but it presupposed both the call of God and the call of  
a Church:

"Ordination alone without the Election or pre-  
cedent consent of the Church, by those who  
formerly have been ordained by virtue of that  
Power they have received by their ordination,  
doth not constitute any person a Church-officer,  
or communicate Office-power unto him." 64

Nevertheless Ordination was not deprecated or held in light  
esteem by the Independents, for as the Savoy Declaration of Order  
says:

"The way appointed by Christ for the calling  
of any person, fitted and gifted by the Holy  
Ghost, unto the office of Pastor, Teacher or  
Elder in a Church is, that he be chosen there-  
unto by the common suffrage of the Church it-  
self, and solemnly set apart by Fasting and

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58. Quoted by Nuttall. "Visible Saints." (John Owen) p 87.

59. See Grant. "Free Churchmanship in England. pp 49f.

60. *ibid.* p 50 (John Owen).

61. Savoy Declaration of Order. Art. VII p 122.

62. *ibid.* Art. XII p 123.

63. *ibid.* Art. XI.

64. *ibid.* Art. XV. p 124.

Prayer, with Imposition of hands of the Eldership of that Church if there be any before consituted."

65

Essential to the act of ordination was the prayer,<sup>66</sup> and fasting of the Church, and then, although not without exception, followed the act of the 'laying on of hands.' This act of the 'laying on of hands' was not regarded as the means whereby the minister received the necessary grace and authority for his task, it was the Church's outward recognition of God's call and the seal of their own call to him who was ordained. The ordination was an act of the Church on behalf of God. For this solemn occasion "the church also invited, and welcomed the fellowship of other Churches, as expressed in the presence.....of their ministers or other 'messengers'."

67

The Savoy Declaration states that the officers who are appointed by Christ are four in number: Pastors, Teachers, Elders, and Deacons, These officers are set in authority by the Church to preach, teach, and admonish the Church. Their authority comes from God and from the Church, it is not merely the authority of an office. Owen was explicit that the Church

"does not give unto such Officers a Power or Authority that was formally and actually in the Body of the Community, by virtue of any Grant or Law of Christ, so as that they should receive and act the Power of the Church, by virtue of a delegation from them; but only they design, choose, set apart the individual persons, who thereon are intrusted with Office Power by Christ Himself....."

68

The officers are, according to the Savoy Declaration, over the members of the Church "to minister to them in the Lord."

69

This is well illustrated by Matthews when he tells how some of the Independent ministers reacted to the invitation to meet at Savoy. One replied as follows: "if the Church here shall think

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65. Savoy Declaration of Order. Art. XI p 123.

66. See Nuttall. "Visible Saints". p 93.

67. ibid. p 94.

68. Quoted by Grant. "Free Churchmanship in England." p 55.

69. Savoy Declaration of Order. Art. VII. p 122.

fit to send me, I purpose to serve them." 70

While others besides ordained ministers may preach, 71 as is suggested by the Declaration:

"....yet the work of Preaching the Word is not peculiarly confined to them, but that others also gifted and fitted by the Holy Ghost for it, and approved may publicly, ordinarily and constantly perform it; so that they give themselves up thereunto." 72

The Independents were very wary of anyone celebrating the Sacraments or Ordinances of the Gospel:

"where there are no teaching officers, none may administer the Seals, nor can the Church authorize any so to do." 73

Thus, the exercising of discipline, the calling and ordaining of the ministers of the Church, show clearly the firm and constant belief of the Independents that God Himself governs the Church by the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church through each of its members met together to hear the Word of God preached and to seek the will of God in prayer.

### Synods and Councils

In the last chapter under the heading of "Independency and Ecumenicity" we said that within Independency itself there were the seeds of ecumenicity. We have been emphasizing the stress which Congregationalism or Independency places upon the "gathered Church". According to the Independents the local church is a truly catholic church possessing all the means of grace and all the privileges which God hath bestowed upon His people. Yet it is nonetheless true to say that the Independents regarded the local Church as only part of The Church which embraces all Churches. To quote a recent article by a Congregationalist writing on "Corporate Congregationalism":

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70. Matthews. "Introduction to the 'Savoy Declaration' " p 14.

71. See Nuttall. "The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience." p 78.

72. Savoy Declaration or Order. Art. XI p 123.

73. *ibid.* Art. XVI p 124.

"This corporate conception of the Church was quite clear in the minds of the early Congregationalists of the 16th and 17th centuries. With all their emphasis on the local church and its autonomy under Christ, they had no intention of being ecclesiastically presumptuous or schismatic. To use Dr. Douglas Horton's phrase, they disliked the separateness of Separation as much as the authoritarianism of Episcopalianism or Presbyterianism. From the beginning they were as concerned to express their unity with each other in the visible church of Jesus Christ as they were to safeguard their independence from any authority either secular or ecclesiastical which would question their right of freedom to receive the gifts of Christ and obey His will as they were led to understand it in fellowship and prayer and the reading of the Scriptures."

74

This sense of unity and corporateness was clearly expressed on the occasion of the ordination of a minister, and the constant communication between the churches themselves. There were many matters of mutual concern which churches had to discuss, and many were the mutual problems which had to be solved. For example we read in the Yarmouth church record that

"The church in Woodbridge having given Mr. Woodall a call unto the Pastor's office among them, in opposition hereto, the church in Hapton have called him to the Teacher's office; their joint desire is that messengers from hence might meet the messengers of other churches at Hapton to consider of this business on the 28th day of this instant."

75

Within 17th century Independency there was the deep-seated desire and the need expressed for mutual consultation and fellowship between the churches. This feeling was well expressed by the writer of the Preface to the Savoy Declaration when he wrote:

"We confess that from the first, every, or at least the generality of our Churches have been in a manner like so many ships (though holding forth the same general colours) launched singly, and sailing apart and alone in the vast Ocean of these tumultuating times, and they exposed to every wind of Doctrine, under no other conduct than the Word and Spirit and their particular Elders and principal Brethren, without Associations among ourselves, or so much as

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74. J.A. Figures. "Corporate Congregationalism." Article in the "Congregational Quarterly." Vol. XXXV no. 1. p 46.  
75. Quoted by Nuttall. "Visible Saints." p 98.

holding out common lights to others, whereby to know where we were." 76

There is no doubt a great deal of over-exaggeration in this statement, and it must not be read to understand that there was little or no fellowship existing between the Independent Churches of the time. For as Matthews says, "If the Churches had really been as cut off from one another as that the Savoy meeting would have been a sheer impossibility." 77

Nevertheless, amongst the Independents there was a great desire for inter-church communion, "and it was in this spirit that the churches sent their messengers to the Savoy in London in 1658." 78

The Declaration itself says:  
"...the Churches themselves (when planted by the providence of God, so as they may have opportunity and advantage for it) ought to hold communion amongst themselves for their peace, increase of love, and mutual edification." 79

And again,

"...it is according to the mind of Christ, that many Churches holding communion together, do by their messengers meet in a Synod or Council, to consider and give their advice in, or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the Churches concerned." 80

Independency did not therefore mean isolation "although the circumstances of their early dissent forced a measure of isolation upon them." 81

The Cambridge Platform emphasises the fact that:  
"The churches ought to preserve church communion with one another consisting of (1) prayer and care for one another; (2) relief by community of gifts; (3) maintaining unity and peace; (4) seeking and accepting help in divisions and contentions; (5) taking notice in love of troubles and scandals and giving help; (6) admonishing one another when there is need for it." 82

Dr. Horton has shown how synods and councils were inherent in the very nature of Congregationalism, especially in New England. He shows how the Pilgrim Fathers and their followers

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76. Preface to the Savoy Declaration. p 60.  
77. Matthews. "Introduction to the Savoy Declaration." p 21.  
78. Nuttall. "Visible Saints." p 99.  
79. Savoy Declaration of Order. Art. XXV p 126.  
80. ibid.  
81. Grant. "Free Churchmanship in England." p 31.

set up a 'Church-State' amongst themselves for the same purposes as the English Congregationalists met in Synods. Horton<sup>83</sup> emphasises that the nature of the synod or council is in itself rightly regarded as a Church. He quotes Cotton as having written, "What is a Synod else but a Church of churches?"<sup>84</sup> However, the Congregationalism of New England was essentially more of a corporate fellowship than the Independency of England which was often driven into itself by the State. And therefore, it is not to be expected of the Savoy Declaration to declare that the Synod is essential to the church's life or that the Synod is in itself a church.

Although the Synods had a limited authority only, as the Independents were unanimous in their rejection of any authority being imposed from without the local church upon it,<sup>85</sup> yet the authority of the Synods was a reality. As Owen said:

"There is a three-fold power ascribed unto Synods. The first is declarative consisting in an authoritative teaching, and declaring the mind of God in the Scriptures. The second is constitutive, appointing and ordaining things to be believed, or done and observed by and upon its own authority; and thirdly executive in acts of Jurisdiction towards persons and Churches."<sup>86</sup>

The local Church was still the final authority under God and could judge all the deliberations of the Synods in the light of Scripture and conscience, for

"....these Synods so assembled are not entrusted with any Church-Power, properly so called, or with any jurisdiction over the Churches themselves, to exercise any censures either over Churches or Persons, or to impose their determinations on the Churches or Officers."<sup>87</sup>

This statement from the Savoy Declaration appears to negate the authority which Owen gave to the Synods, and the contradiction cannot easily be resolved. Suffice it to say, that Owen with others desired a greater degree of authority within the Synods

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83. Horton. "The Nature and Power of Councils." Congregational Quarterly, Vol. 29. No. 3.

84. ibid. p 227.

85. Grant. "Free Churchmanship in England." p 25.

86. ibid.

87. Savoy Declaration of Order. Art. XXVI p 126.

while the Declaration produced by the Savoyans was reticent in giving the Synods any powers which would negate a basic principle of Independency.

Finally, it must be said, that the Synods were brought into being by the churches and not vice versa, and the Churches brought them into being for the specific purpose of providing the necessary solidarity and fellowship which a local church needs. The Synods were therefore subject to the local churches and existed only for the good of those churches. "The messengers (therefore) sent to meetings for common counsel were able to act responsibly not only because they were, and intended to remain, deeply at one with those who had sent them, but because they knew and loved and trusted one another in the wider fellowship of the Congregational way."

88

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88. Nuttall. "Visible Saints". p 165.

CHAPTER FIVE

"CONGREGATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS"

In this chapter we shall discuss the developments within Congregationalism which have taken place from the time of the Classical expression of Independency in the Savoy Declaration until the era of Modern Congregationalism in the 20th century. We can do no more than briefly survey the significant historical features of these three centuries.

The Savoyans were aware that their immediate future would be critical for Independency, and their deepest fears were realised when the English Monarchy was restored in 1660. For with the Restoration of the Monarchy came the persecution of all Non-Conformists which lasted until the 'Bloodless Revolution' in 1688 when William of Orange ascended to the English throne. A year later an Act of Toleration was passed in Parliament and the Dissenting Churches regained much of their liberty and became legally recognised by the State.

The first effect of the Act was to give Non-Conformity a new lease of life, since the first three decades of the 18th century and the last few years of the 17th century were marked by a growing expansion of the Dissenting Churches. With this came the desire for unity amongst the Non-Conformist Churches, but the attempt was ultimately a failure partly as a result of the influx of Socinianism and Arianism into the religious life of England. Arianism negatively affected the Churches in two ways: it either destroyed the evangelical thrust and conviction of the Church, or else, it drove the Church into a shell of strict orthodoxy which in turn began to lose its vitality and relevance.

After the first impetus of expansion had spent itself, the religious life of Non-Conformity seriously declined. Powicke

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1. W.B. Selbie. "Congregationalism" p 105.  
2. See H. Davies. "The English Free Churches." p 119.

says: "The word decadent might be written over most of the Independent Churches for the greater part of the 18th century. A visible sign of this is the fact that after 1715 the formation of new Churches ceased for the next 50 years.....and the inward state corresponded to the outward signs. Nearly all we read about the Churches describes or bemoans the decay of moral and spiritual life." It is true that there was little attractive about the worship<sup>3</sup> of the Congregationalists, and their theology was generally rigid Orthodoxy without any vitality. The situation however was partly redeemed by the witness of men like John Howard the prison reformer, and, in the early years of the 18th century, the work of Isaac Watts and Philip Doddridge. This was also the age when the Dissenting Academies came into being and began to shape and influence the future of English education. But in spite of these redeeming features the 18th century was a disheartening, if not a decadent, period for English Congregationalism. A revival was needed if Congregationalism was ever to regain its vitality and true churchmanship.

Congregationalism was rescued from the slough of despond into which it had fallen, by the Evangelical Revival.<sup>4</sup> This revival of English religious life centred in the work of George Whitfield and John and Charles Wesley gradually gained momentum in the Methodist movement during the second half of the 18th century. For a long time Wesley's Arminianism filled the leaders of Dissent with alarm; for in many of their Churches a loose Arminianism had led to Socinianism, and had quenched the fire of spiritual earnestness.<sup>5</sup> But in spite of their strict Calvinism the Independents began to discover a difference between the loose Arminianism to which they were accustomed and the evangelical faith the Methodists were proclaiming.

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3. F.J. Powicke. "English Congregationalism in its Greatness and Decline." From "Essays Cong. and Catholic." ed. Peel p 302.
  4. A. Peel. "A Brief History of English Congregationalism." p 65.
  5. Townsend. "A New History of Methodism." Vol 1. p 66.

Apart from the initial fervour and zeal which the Revival imparted to the Non-Conformist Churches, it was the theological influence of the Revival upon the theology of Congregationalism which was the most significant and important contribution of the Revival to Congregationalism. Congregationalism we have seen was rooted and grounded in Calvinism, but unfortunately in the 18th century this Calvinism had degenerated into evangelical inactivity and exclusiveness. The Revival however, "was to provide a vigorous experiential theology and a profound sense of fellowship; it was to open the eyes of Protestantism to their world-wide responsibilities." Calvinism and Arminianism were not reconciled, but as Dr. Dale says of the Congregational preachers who caught the true spirit of the Revival, "they might hold fast to the creed that only the elect would really repent and appeal to divine mercy; but they preached as if they thought that every man might repent and trust in Christ. They might be assured that, according to the eternal counsels of God, Christ died only for the elect; but they preached as if they thought that He died for every man in the congregation." Thus there came into being a Calvinism modified by the Revival which began to replace the older Calvinism of the Independents, and to restore evangelical fervour and spirit exemplified in the formation of the 'Congregational Home Missions' and the 'London Missionary Society'. Meanwhile, the number of Independent Churches in England grew in number and increased in vigour.

However, the Evangelical Revival was defective ecclesiastically. "It had failed to assign to the Church its due place in the spiritual life; it had laid the whole stress on individualism, disparaging or ignoring the function of an organised religious society for education and discipline." With its stress on

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6. Davies. "English Free Churches." p 141.
  7. Dale. "The History of English Congregationalism." p 587.  
See pp. 587 for "The effects of the Evangelical Revival on the doctrinal position of the Congregational Churches."
  8. See Peel. "These Hundred Years." p 75f.
  9. L.W.W. Dale. "The Life of R.W. Dale." p 348.

individualism it undermined the Congregational emphases on the nature of the Church and churchmanship, and it prepared the way for the decline in Congregational ecclesiology which becomes evident through the 19th century. The Revival did however, provide an impetus towards Congregational unity, for "between the years 1780 and 1810 Associations of Congregational Churches were formed in most of the Counties with the object of helping the poorer Churches, founding new Churches and generally doing aggressive and evangelistic work. As time went on the experience of the Associations demonstrated the importance and advantage of co-operation and fellowship among the Churches, and so prepared the way for the wider union of Churches."

10

The formation of the Congregational Union of England and Wales (C.U.E.W.) took place in 1831. This did not happen without a struggle within Congregationalism which was perhaps the necessary corollary to the moulding of a strong Independency with an inter-dependency with its own constitution. As Selbie writes:

"The difficulty of reconciling Independency with Congregationalism was a very real one, and the way in which it has been surmounted, though it has involved some sacrifices, has proved the wisdom of trusting to the guidance of the Spirit of God rather than to a hard and fast organisation."

The constitution adopted allowed each individual Church the greatest possible freedom within a Union, for ultimately the Union had no authority to legislate for the local Church.

The period immediately after the foundation of C.U.E.W. showed the wisdom of union and of the benefits to be gained by it. For from the beginning a new sense of solidarity and power was experienced, and the common convictions of Congregationalists throughout England and Wales were expressed with one voice. One of the first-fruits of Union was the "Declaration of Faith, Church

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10. Selbie. "Congregationalism." p 132.

11. See Peel. "These Hundred Years." A History of the C.U.E.W.

12. Selbie. 'op.cit' p 144.

13. Peel. 'op.cit' p 82.

Order, and Discipline of the Congregational, or Independent Dissenters" which was accepted by the Annual Meeting or Assembly of the Union in 1833. Before we proceed with the historical developments within Congregationalism we must examine this Declaration to show the departures which early 19th century Congregationalism had made from their Independent forefathers two centuries earlier.

The Declaration of Faith and Church Order, 1833

In his Introduction to the "Savoy Declaration" A.G. Matthews spares no pain in passing critical judgment on the 1833 Declaration in the light of the "Savoy Declaration". Speaking of the Declaration produced at Savoy, Matthews writes:

"We must envisage the Declaration as a relic of the greatest period of Congregational history; a high-tide mark on the sands of time. It stands in isolation. As no general assembly had met it had no precursor; and we should be reluctant to say it had a successor ("we do it wrong being so majestic" to give that name to the would-be substitute of 1833). The Declaration was never re-affirmed for the simple reason that for wellnigh two centuries no general assembly competent to reaffirm it was held. When such an assembly did meet in 1832, they pronounced the Declaration "almost obsolete."  
.....The Assembly, thinking to do the denomination lasting service, blundered into producing 'Declaration of Faith, Church Order, and Discipline of the Congregational, or Independent Dissenters'; it was a grand name without being a grand thing....."

14

Like the Savoy Declaration, the Declaration of 1833 was not regarded as a creed or a confession but as a declaration of things commonly believed by Congregationalists. As such it was accepted with comparatively little discussion, and no division of opinion. But as Matthews suggests, there were remarkable and instructive differences between the two Declarations. These differences can be explained partly "by the differences in intellectual cultivation and intellectual habits which separated the Congregationalists of the 17th century from the Congregationalists

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14. Matthews. "Introduction to the Savoy Declaration." p 39.  
15. Peel. "These Hundred Years." p 74.

of the 19th century,"<sup>16</sup> for the Declaration of 1833 "is popular rather than scholastic, the product of preachers rather than theologians. There is want of theological precision that would have shocked the 17th century divines....."<sup>17</sup>

But the real reasons for the divergence between the two Declarations lies elsewhere. "For two centuries the Congregational Churches had been gradually drifting away from their traditional Calvinism." As Dale says:<sup>18</sup>

"It is probable that a still large number - perhaps the majority - supposed that they were Calvinists, but had admitted into their creed beliefs which were inconsistent with the fundamental assumptions and characteristic conclusions of Calvinism. They had not consciously and frankly rejected the theology of their ecclesiastical ancestors, but it was no longer the accurate expression of their true faith. When they approached the critical articles of the system they were ill at ease. They clung to the substance of the old faith, but the traditional and authoritative definitions seemed too hard and uncompromising; they thought it possible to express the same truth in a form more tolerable by expressing it more vaguely. They did not know that their Calvinism was decaying and that as yet they had found no other system that satisfied them."<sup>19</sup>

There were those who lamented this loss of the 'old faith' but the majority were in a state of wavering between a definite Calvinism and an indefinite moderate Calvinism, as is clearly apparent from the Declaration. This modified Calvinism was made explicit in the words of the Committee for the Declaration when it was said that "the attachment of Congregationalists is firm and unshaken to evangelical doctrine understood agreeably with a moderate Calvinistic theology....."<sup>20</sup>

The modification of the traditional faith of the Independents led also to the modification of certain aspects of Church Order and Discipline. The eight articles of the 1833

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16. Dale. "History of English Congregationalism." p 704.  
17. Peel. "These Hundred Years." p 75.  
18. Dale. "History of English Congregationalism." p 704.  
19. ibid.  
20. Peel. 'op. cit'.

Declaration on the 'Principles of Church Order and Discipline' as compared with the thirty-three articles of the Savoy Declaration of Order do not evidence the same depth and definiteness, nor catholicity of the older Declaration.

There is a weakened grasp of the idea of the 'gathered Church' as being called out of the world and brought into being by God. Where the Savoy Declaration says:

".....the Lord Jesus Christ calleth out of the World unto Communion with Himself, those that are given unto Him by His Father, that they might walk before Him in all the ways of Obedience, which He prescribeth to them in His Word."

21

The 1833 Declaration reads, that it is

"the will of Christ that true believers should voluntarily assemble together to observe religious ordinances, to promote mutual edification and holiness, to perpetuate and propagate the Gospel in the world, and to advance the glory and worship of God, through Jesus Christ; and that each society of believers, having these objects in view in its formation, is properly a Christian Church."

22

The difference between these two statements is only too obvious; in the second there is not ~~conception~~ conception of the covenant, nor of the creativity of God through His grace in Christ in initiating the Church. The emphasis on obedience to the Word of God is replaced "by having objects in view" which, however true to the Word of God, lack the definiteness and precision which characterises the call of obedience to all the counsels of God.

No longer do we find the fourfold office of Pastor, Teacher, Elder, and Deacon, but the tasks of these are confined to two, "bishops or pastors and the deacons." The election of these to the ministry is not elaborated to any degree. The Declaration is clear that every Church is to elect its own officers who are only responsible to the authority of Christ and the appro-

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21. The Savoy Declaration of Order. Art. 11 p 121.

22. The Declaration of 1833. Art. 1.

23. ibid. Art V. (Bishop being uses in the sense of 'presbyters').

bation of the Church, but there is no sense of the inward call of God to the ministry,<sup>24</sup> or of the ratification of that call by the act of ordination with prayer and fasting by the Church.

Compare also these words of the Savoy Declaration, "The Members of these Churches are Saints by calling, visibly manifesting and evidencing their obedience to the Call of Christ, who being further known to each other by their confession of the Faith wrought in them by the power of God....."<sup>25</sup> with the words of 1833:

"They believe that no persons should be received as members of Christian Churches, but such as make a credible profession of Christianity...."<sup>26</sup>

Finally, the 1833 Declaration says nothing about the need for or the nature of Synods or Church Councils, nor does it mention the ways and means of inter-communion. All that the 1833 Declaration really does, is to substantiate the authority of the local Church in its own affairs, to declare the sole Lordship of Christ in the Church, and to state the bare necessities of the nature of the ministry, the relation of the Church to the Scriptures and church-membership-and these it does too inadequately. It is obvious that, within the first few decades of the 19th century, Congregationalism was casting aside much of its Independent heritage and Calvinistic Faith, and even while the terminology used might have been similar or constant, the content of what was expressed in 1833 is simply a 'would-be substitute' for a deeper and more convincing theology and ecclesiology.

#### Later 19th Century Developments

During the greater part of the 19th century English Non-Conformists were engaged in a long succession of struggles for the defence or the extension of their religious liberties.<sup>27</sup> Generally, the state of Congregationalism continued as it was

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24. ibid. Arts. IV and V.

25. The Savoy Declaration of Order. Art. VIII p 122.

26. 1833 Declaration. Art. VI.

27. Dale. "History of Congregationalism." p 609 See pages ff.

during the early years of the century and as expressed in 1833, but strengthened by the Union and sustained by mutual help and co-operation. We shall not concern ourselves with the period from 1833 to 1870, as no significant or apparent changes occurred in Congregational ecclesiology during those years. But about the year 1870 some very significant and far-reaching theological and ecclesiastical trends and changes began to appear, although they had already been seething beneath the surface of theological and ecclesiastical life for some years past.

#### Theological Trends in the late 19th century

The theology of Protestantism during the late 19th and the early 20th centuries was greatly influenced by the idealistic philosophies of Kant and Hegel, and the theological and critical studies of men such as Baur, Feuerbach, Strauss, Dorner, Biedermann and especially Schleiermacher and Ritsehl. Through their influence, with which was coupled the advent of the scientific and critical approach to the Bible and the evolutionary theory of Darwin, Protestant theology at the turn of the 20th century was in a state of uncertainty if nothing else.

The English Congregational theologians and scholars together with many of the ministers were largely affected by this theological upheaval on the Continent. Some retreated fervently from the logical conclusions which Continental theology was postulating, but many others having no definite theological standpoint were drawn towards the new trend regarded as carrying the basic principle of the Reformation to its logical outcome, but which was in fact more akin to the rationalism and humanism of the Enlightenment than the faith either of the New Testament or of the Reformers.

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However, what chiefly affected English and Congregational thought of this period was not so much the new departures in

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28. See C.F. Henry. "Fifty Years of Protestant Theology." Ch. 1.  
29. See H.R. Mackintosh. "Types of Modern Theology." p 6.

theology, as the advent of the critical studies of Scripture which questioned belief in the plenary inspiration of the Bible. It is this which concerns us most here, for "the leaders of Congregationalism had for some time been accepting many of the results of the Higher Criticism and the scientific research with friendly caution, and had been adapting their conception of the Church accordingly."

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Ecclesiastical Trends in late 19th century Congregationalism

Throughout the middle years of the 19th century the ecclesiology of the Congregationalists remained substantially the same as it was in 1833, retaining part of its Independent heritage in terminology if not in practice. Partly as a result of the Methodist Revival with its stress on the individual, the Independents of these decades were not as Church-conscious as their forefathers. As Dale said:

"The revival (i.e. the Evangelical Revival) had exerted a powerful influence on the polity of Congregational Churches. The Congregational tradition was in a large measure lost....."

30 a

With the spread of an individualistic approach to the Christian Faith came a spirit of undenominationalism, and a carelessness about denominational boundaries and concerns. This naturally affected the way in which Congregationalists regarded their own Church. It was no longer recognizable as the Body of Christ and the sphere of God's redeeming activity.

The three so-called 'theological gains' of the latter half of the 19th century - (i) a heightened sense of divine immanence; (ii) evolutionary development as God's method; (iii) the higher critical view of the Bible - all affected ecclesiology.

31

As the results of Biblical criticism were becoming known there was a retreat from the formerly held view that Church polity and organization must be based on the Bible. Congregationalists were even more convinced through the studies of Hort

30. Dale. "History of Congregationalism." p 588.30a. *ibid*.

31. Henry. "Fifty Years of Protestant Theology." p 23.

and Hatch, that Congregationalism was the primitive ecclesiology and saw no reason why they should depart from their Church order, but they began to see that they could not claim to possess all scriptural truth concerning the nature of the Church. Dale himself admitted that "when the Church came into existence on the Day of Pentecost, the apostles were not prepared with any system of Ecclesiastical organization; and the development of the polity of the primitive Churches appears to have been as gradual as the development of the apostolic doctrine."<sup>32</sup>

There was also the inclination amongst Non-conformists and Congregationalists in particular to depreciate forms and institutions, the sacraments and the ministry, and to relax the exercise of godly discipline within the Churches. Grant calls this the process of 'spiritualisation' the key-note of which was the freedom of the spirit; unfortunately it resulted in the liberty of each man doing that which was right in his own eyes.<sup>33</sup> The sacraments were neglected, the ministry became dependent upon personal success in the pulpit, and church-membership depended upon whether or not the individual regarded his own profession as genuine and sincere. The influence of immanentism and the idea of progress clearly underlies much of this reaction against the traditional Independent ecclesiology. A symptom of this was evidences in the 'Leicester Movement' of 1877 which held that agreement in theological opinion was not essential to religious communion, and which would set no range of belief within which religious communion should take place.<sup>34</sup> Grant maintains that the origin of the idea that Congregationalism means 'creedlessness' seems to be found in this period.<sup>35</sup>

The greater number of Congregationalists together with the more influential leaders of the denomination clearly stated their own conviction in 1878 that "the acceptance of the Facts

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32. Quoted by Grant. "Free Churchmanship in England." p 72.  
33. *ibid.* pp 74ff.  
34. *ibid.* pp 91f.  
35. *ibid.* p 92.

and Doctrines of the Evangelical Faith" was "an essential condition of Religious Communion in Congregational Churches" and spurred on by the pitiful state of the Church many began to take a renewed interest in the Church, notably R.W. Dale and J.G. Rogers. Dale and Rogers conducted a constant campaign during this period to restore Congregational principles, the peak of the Revival of Congregational Churchmanship being marked by the publication of Dale's "Congregational Principles" in 1884. As Grant remarks, much of the credit for this revival of Congregational 'high-Churchmanship' must be seen as a legitimate reaction to the Oxford Movement within the Anglican Church. A quotation of length from Grant will well establish the tenor of the times:

"In 1872 Dale and Rogers founded 'The Congregationalist' which they edited in succession. Before this publication had been in existence many months, a writer to 'The Universalist Herald' issued a warning against a new kind of High Churchmanship.

'Mr. R.W. Dale and others have for some time been passing from 'Broad Church Independency' to a species of 'High Church Independency'... Congregational Churches are composed of members supernaturally regenerated and saved, and presided over by ministers supernaturally called, supernaturally trained, and supernaturally endowed to teach and guide these extraordinary collective centres of supernatural endowment.'

"Dale expressed his gratification that the principles of the paper were so well understood!"

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Dale with most of the other Non-conformists and Congregationalists severely criticised the 'Ritualistic Movement', but Dale and likeminded Congregationalists were not merely concerned with reacting against Anglo-Catholicism. They were concerned with the reinstating of that 'high' doctrine of the Church traditional to Independency and firmly based on Congregationalism's reformed and Calvinistic heritage.

"A Manual of Congregational Principles" by R.W. Dale, 1884

Although Dr. Dale was not bound in his theological thought

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36. Grant. *ibid.* p 105.  
37. *ibid.* p 102 & p 112.  
38. *ibid.* p 104.

to the past, he was concerned to bring back into Congregationalism its true heritage of Churchmanship. He believed that Congregationalists were in danger of abandoning their principles mainly, if not wholly, because they were ignorant of their own past.

In its churchmanship the 'Manual' marked a return from the individualism of the Evangelical Revival to the high Independency of the Savoy Declaration.<sup>39</sup> Fundamental to the purpose of the 'Manual' is to show that "the Church is the supernatural creation of Christ Himself, and that within the polity of Congregationalism the Church is enabled to live most nearly in conformity to the intentions of Christ."<sup>40</sup>

The 'Manual' is divided into four books. Book 1 deals with 'The Principles of the Congregational Polity'; Book 2 with 'Church Officers'; Book 3 with 'The Christian Sacraments and Christian Worship'; and Book 4 with 'Some Practical Aspects of Congregationalism'. We shall confine ourselves to Books one, two, and four in expounding the Congregationalism of Dale. However, it is noteworthy, that Book three created much controversy, as Dale was a firm believer in an objective view of the Sacraments akin to Calvin's and the Savoyan's sacramental teaching, while the prevailing Non-conformist sacramental teaching was largely Zwinglian and often purely subjective.<sup>41</sup>

(i) The Principles of Congregational Polity

In his introduction to the 'Manual' Dale stressed the importance of ecclesiastical polity both to the controversy with unbelief and to the practical work of the Church.<sup>42</sup> While the New Testament does not contain any law declaring that a particular scheme of church government is of universal and permanent obligation,<sup>43</sup> yet it is Dale's chief purpose in the 'Manual'<sup>44</sup>

39. A.W.W. Dale. "Life of R.W. Dale." p 351.

40. Grant. 'op. cit.' p 105.

41. *ibid.*

42. See A.W.W. Dale. 'op.cit' pp 358ff. Grant. 'op.cit' pp105ff.

43. Dale. "Manual of Congregational Principles." p 2.

44. *ibid.* p 4.

to show that the principles of Congregational polity determined the organization of the apostolic churches, and are intimately related to some of the greatest truths and facts of the Christian Faith. For "it is not enough to prove that the apostolic churches were Congregational; it is necessary to prove that Congregational principles are permanently rooted in the central truths of the Christian revelation, and that the Congregational polity is at once the highest and the most natural organization of the life of the Christian Church."<sup>45</sup><sup>46</sup>

There are five principles of Congregational polity according to Dale. Some of them would be accepted by all the orthodox communions, but Dale found it necessary to assert them in the light of contemporary misconceptions of the Church. For example, Principle one states:

"It is the will of Christ that all those who believe in Him should be organized into Churches."<sup>47</sup>

That is, the Church is of the 'esse' of the Christian Faith. It is true that this principle as it is stated raises the question, do the believers precede the Church or vice versa, but Dale is here contending that there is no such thing as an individualistic Christianity, for the fellowship of the Church is intrinsic to its very nature. Dale is concerned with the local Church, and he says that these societies were founded by the apostles in Christ's name and by His authority, and that all converts to the Christian faith were required to belong to them.<sup>48</sup>

Likewise, most would agree with Dale's second Principle:

"In every Christian Church the Will of Christ is the supreme authority."<sup>49</sup>

This principle however, must be seen in the context of Congregational polity, which asserts that the local Church is a volun-

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45. Dale. "Manual of Congregational Principles." p 4.  
46. Dale. "Manual of Congregational Principles." p 8.  
47. *ibid.* p 9.  
48. *ibid.*  
49. *ibid.* p 34.

tary society, that is, free of all external authority in order to govern itself. But 'voluntary' used in this sense does not imply liberty for the Christian people to please themselves,<sup>50</sup> "The powers which belong to the members of a Christian Church correspond more closely to the powers of the trustees and governors of a chartered foundation. The charter limits their freedom."<sup>51</sup> And the charter of the Church is the will of Christ. Dale deals at length with the question "How are we to know the will of Christ?"<sup>52</sup> In essence we know the will of Christ through the Gospel, as P.T. Forsyth declares in his book 'The Charter of the Church', "Free grace, the cry of the Reformation, the Word of the Gospel, is the charter of the Free Churches."<sup>53</sup> The will of Christ is inherent in the nature and principles of the Gospel handed down to us in Holy Scripture, and applied to the situation through the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit through the Church.

Principle three states:

"It is the will of Christ that all members of a Christian Church should be Christians."<sup>54</sup>

This principle might appear to be self-evident, but Dale is here refuting the legitimacy of a national established Church. Dale writes, "The only real question on this point between the different systems of church polity is whether personal faith in Christ should be made the condition of church membership; and this resolves itself into a deeper and more vital question - whether, apart from personal faith in Christ any man can be really a Christian."<sup>55</sup> And again, "The polity of every church has its roots in its theology, in its conceptions of the relations between God and man, and of the nature of the Christian redemption. Congregationalism, in affirming that only those who have personal faith in Christ should be members of the Church of Christ,

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50. Dale. "Manual of Congregational Principles." p 26.  
51. Dale. 'op.cit' p 34.  
52. ibid. p 36f.  
53. P.T. Forsyth. "The Charter of the Church." p 32.  
54. Dale. 'op.cit' p 41.  
55. ibid. p 47.

asserts in its polity the unique and infinite importance which is attributed to personal faith by the whole contents of the Christian Revelation. But if any other qualification for church membership is demanded, the force of this testimony to the unique and infinite importance of personal faith in Christ is broken. Faith in Christ is the only condition of the remission of sins and of eternal salvation; this great truth is obscured if a church insists on anything besides faith in Christ as a condition of church membership."

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Having maintained that all Christians should be Churchmen, that every Church has the will of Christ as its supreme authority, and that only Christians should be members of a Christian Church, Dale proceeds to assert what he would regard as the logical inference of these three principles, i. e. Principle four:

"By the will of Christ all members of a Christian Church are directly responsible to Him for maintaining His authority in the Church."

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This is the crucial principle for Congregational polity and as such we shall deal with Dale's argument at length.

The fundamental question concerns the authority of the ministry in relation to the Church, for "the question to be considered is, whether the officers alone are directly responsible to Christ for maintaining His supreme authority in the Church, or whether the responsibility - and the direct responsibility - lies upon all the members of the Church."

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First, we must examine the place and authority given to the Church as a whole in apostolic times and with apostolic sanction.

- (1) The Church as a whole was responsible to Christ for the election of men to fill the various offices in the Church:

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56. Dale. 'op.cit' p 50.

57. *ibid.* p 51.

58. *ibid.*

59. *ibid.* p 52.

- (a) the whole Church was called upon to elect an apostle (Acts i. 23-26) 60
  - (b) the whole Church elected the men who were to administer the charity of the Church. (Acts vi. vv 2-3) 61
  - (c) Of the manner in which the "elders", "bishops" or "pastors" of the apostolic churches were elected to office there is no record in the New Testament. But from Clement's epistle to Corinth (AD 95) it is clear that in apostolic times the whole church not only concurred in the appointment of elders, but had the power to depose them. 62
- (ii) The Church as a whole was responsible to Christ for the exercise of church discipline. 63
- (a) The power of discipline was entrusted to the Church by our Lord Himself in the words recorded in Matthew xviii. 15-20. 64
  - (b) The power of discipline was exercised by the whole Church in apostolic times. 65

Secondly, we must ask the question, why should the responsibilities imposed on the commonalty of Christian Churches in apostolic times be withdrawn? To quote Dale at length: 66

"Christ is the true Lord of the Church, and His authority is to be exerted through the concurrent action of all the members of the Church, because, according to the Christian ideal, all the members of the Church are one with Him. It is not only the officers of the Church that are in Him, but the commonalty of the Church; and, therefore, it is through the commonalty of the Church, as well as its officers, that He maintains His authority and gives effect to His will. The great contention of Congregationalism is not that every Christian has a right to share in the government of the Church, but that every Christian man is directly responsible to Christ for securing in the discipline, doctrine and worship of the Church the supremacy of its Divine Founder and Lord. This responsibility rests upon the wonderful union between Christ and all who are restored to God through Him. He is the life of their life. He reveals Himself through them. The right of all church members to take part in the government of the Church is an inference; they cannot discharge their responsibility unless the right is conceded."

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60. Dale. 'op.cit' p 52f.  
62. *ibid.* pp 54ff.  
64. *ibid.*  
66. *ibid.* p 60.

61. *ibid.* p 54.  
63. *ibid.* p 57.  
65. *ibid.*  
67. *ibid.* p 62.

Principle five asserts the Independency of the Church of Christ:

"By the will of Christ every society of Christians organised for Christian worship, instruction, and fellowship is a Christian Church, and is independent of external control." 68

If all the members of a Christian Church are directly responsible to Christ for the maintenance of His authority in the Church, they must elect their own officers, regulate their own worship, determine what persons shall be excluded from it. The Church must be free from the interference of any authority external to itself, and it must not be too large for all its members to meet regularly to fulfil the trust which they have received from Christ.

Congregationalism is impossible without Independency. 69 The real ground and justification for Church independency is the declaration of our Lord, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them." Independency is an attempt to realise this august conception. The members of Congregational churches may be far enough from reaching that complete union with Christ which is the perfection of the Christian life. In their church meetings they may often forget that Christ Himself is present, and that they have to do His will, and not please themselves. But to surrender the independence of their churches would be an act of despair. It would be a confession that they have lost faith in the assurance of Christ that when those who believe in Him are assembled in His name, He Himself is among them, and authoritatively confirms their decisions. 70.

(ii) Church Officers

According to Dale the New Testament names 'elders', 'bishops', 'pastors and teachers', 'presidents', and 'rulers', all denote the same office, 71 and it was usual for every church, that is every separate assembly, to have several of these officers. 72. There is nothing to indicate that there were gradations of rank

68. Dale. p 69.  
70. ibid. p 75.  
72. ibid. p 95.

69. ibid.  
71. ibid. p 94.

amongst these officers for they shared common responsibilities and a common position within the Church. Dale discusses at great length the origin of episcopacy in the Church,<sup>73</sup> and maintained that when the Church found its centre of unity and its authority<sup>74</sup> in the office of the 'bishop' it departed from apostolic precedent and violated the principles on which apostolic churches had been founded. Congregationalism was suppressed.

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Dale then proceeds to show that the office of 'bishop' 'elder' and 'pastor' did not derive its authority from nor was it created by the Church. "The Church determined what men should fill the office, but the office was instituted by Christ; the Church determined who should exercise the authority, but the authority came from Him." And again, Dale writes:

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"In the Church the will of Christ is supreme. If it has rulers, they must rule in His name and by His appointment; and their power must come, not from the Church, but from Him. In electing its officers the Church acts, not for itself, but for Christ. It appoints men whom He has chosen, and it appoints them to exercise an authority which He has conferred."

77

After having dealt with the permanence of the office of 'bishop', 'elder' or 'pastor', Dale deals with the 'Diaconate in Apostolic Churches; and its Permanence'. "In addition to 'bishops', 'elders', 'pastors', the apostolic churches, when fully organised, had 'deacons'; and there are clear indications that women had an official position as deaconesses. The functions of deacons and deaconesses appear to have been of an administrative and executive kind." Unfortunately, as Dale points out, in English Congregationalism there has been a departure from apostolic example, for some 'deacons' are really 'elders' as "we give the title 'deacon' to men discharging two wholly different functions- the function of leadership or government, and the function of service."

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73. Dale. p 95.  
75. *ibid.* p 97.  
77. *ibid.* p 100.  
79. *ibid.* p 116.

74. *ibid.* pp 216ff (App.Art.111)  
76. *ibid.* p 99.  
78. *ibid.* p 109.

There is evidence of some confusion in the use of names for the offices in Congregational Churches.

(iii) Some Practical Aspects of Congregationalism

(a) Church Membership

Dale discussed Church Membership in great detail and we shall therefore confine ourselves to a statement of the fundamental principles of Church Membership which he lays down.

Firstly, persons received into church fellowship are received by the Church itself, and when a person is received into fellowship the Church receives him as one who is loyal to Christ and who shares the life of Christ. 80

Secondly, conduct which, in the judgment of the Church is inconsistent with the profession of fidelity to Christ is followed, according to its gravity, by censure, suspension, or exclusion from membership. 81

Thirdly, Church membership implies that each member undertakes to further the work of the Church and to secure the objects for which the Church exists. 82

(b) Mutual Relations of Congregational Churches

Once again we shall just state the fundamental tenets which Dale propounds:

Firstly, Congregational Churches must respect the decisions of other Congregational Churches on questions of the same kind. 83

Secondly, there is nothing in the independence of Congregational churches to prevent them from co-operating in Christian enterprises in which they have a common interest. 84

Thirdly, there is nothing in the independence of Congregational Churches to prevent co-operation of another and more

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80. Dale. *ibid.* p 164f.

82. *ibid.* p 171f.

84. *ibid.* p 179.

81. *ibid.* p 168.

83. *ibid.* p 178.

intimate kind. That is, in the formation of "Associations" or "Unions" of Congregational Churches.<sup>85</sup> However, "it is a fundamental principle with all Unions that they have no kind of control over the churches associated with them. But if, in the judgment of the associated churches, any particular church is guilty of a grave violation of Christian duty, or if it has renounced any of the central articles of the Christian Faith, the connection of that Church with the Union may be, and should be, dissolved."<sup>86</sup>

By the assertion of these principles of Congregationalism, Dale tried to revive traditional Independent Churchmanship within late 19th century Congregationalism. The similarities between the Principles which he expounded and the Savoy Declaration, and, to a certain extent the Declaration of 1833, are self-evident. Dale was convinced that until and unless Congregationalists rediscovered their heritage Congregational Churchmanship would continue to lose its depth and reality.

#### The Twentieth Century

From the time of Dale to the present day Congregational Churchmanship reveals phases of development, regression, confusion, and revival. We shall attempt only a succinct summary of these more recent trends, reserving especially the effect of the "Genevan Revival" within Congregationalism until our next and final chapter.

Even before the time of Dale we have seen how the traditional doctrine of the Church was challenged by some, and although Dale and others succeeded in stemming the tide of an advancing heterodox ecclesiology for a while, the traditional doctrine of the Church did not have an unchallenged grip on Congregationalists as the years past into the twentieth century. It is true that Congregational tradition never lacked astute and accomplished defenders and the greater number of Congregationalists would have still insisted that they stood by the Reformed Church tradition.<sup>87</sup>

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85. Dale. p 179.

86. *ibid.* p 180.

87. Grant. 'op.cit'  
pp 122f.

But in spite of this Congregationalists were losing hold on their tradition and many were eagerly laying aside their inheritance.

Grant suggests that there were three types of Churchmanship within Congregationalism during these years. <sup>88</sup> Firstly, there were those whom we have already mentioned who adhered to and defended the general traditional ecclesiological pattern, although often it was a diluted form of Dale's 'high churchmanship'. Secondly, there was an extreme group who questioned the presuppositions of traditional Dissent and Congregationalism and accepted the freedom of Congregationalism merely as an opportunity for experimentation. For example, under R.J. Campbell and others a "New Theology" was postulated which resulted in the denial of the need for a Church, for as Campbell himself said, "Religion is necessary to mankind, but Churches are not." <sup>89</sup> The revolt against and the repudiation of dogmatic theology in the early years of this century, together with the application of the 'idea of progress' to all spheres of thought and life, when focused upon the idea and the nature of the Church resulted in making Congregationalism synonymous with democracy and freedom to believe almost whatever one desired to believe. Church membership became "the expression of a purpose and (a) pledge to help on the ends for which the Church stands, so that there is no reason why any man, who does not want to help and be helped, should not become a member!" <sup>90</sup> Needless to say, the Church meeting lost its significance; the function of the ministry with its authority from Christ to preach, administer the sacraments and exercise discipline was belittled; and the Church itself lost sight of its calling, purpose and mission. Unfortunately, these tenets became all too characteristic of early twentieth century Congregationalism and they are still apparent in some present-day Churches.

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88. Grant. 'op.cit' pp 266f.

89. Quoted by Grant. 'op.cit' p 141.

90. *ibid.* p 148.

Thirdly, there were those who combined an adventurous spirit with a determination to give expression in their Churchmanship to the Gospel enshrined in the Christian Faith. Amongst this third group were the most virile and constructive thinkers, and they were generally divided into two distinct groups. There were those who strove to revive the Genevan strain of Independent Churchmanship within Congregationalism, many of whom gained their inspiration from the work of P.T. Forsyth. Notable "Genevans" are Nathaniel Micklem, the late Bernard Lord Manning, J.S. Whale, and, more recently, Daniel Jenkins. According to Grant, "The Genevan school has devoted its attention both to the evangelical basis and to the formal superstructure of the Church. In their consideration of the evangelical basis its representatives have laid an unaccustomed stress on dogma. In their discussion of the Church's expression in the world they have drawn attention to her visible manifestations, to her unity and continuity.....they have explored the relations of the local Church to the whole visible Catholic Church rejecting that conception of Independency that would allow no formal connexional bonds." This revival of Reformed tradition has begun to gain ground within Congregationalism during the past decade, but the emphasis laid on dogma has called forth a liberal reaction.

There were and are those who would stress more the freedom of the Spirit in their ecclesiology, yet reasserting traditional Congregational Churchmanship based on a liberal approach to theology and doctrine. Until recent years these thinkers and churchmen have influenced modern Congregationalism most. Numbered amongst them are A.E. Garvie, W.B. Selbie, and Albert Peel - all of whom have made a significant contribution to Congregationalism. More recently G.F. Nuttall of New College, London, has been reasserting the need for the liberty of the Spirit within Congregationalism, showing that this liberty is inherent within the nature and true to the tradition of

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91. See Grant 'op.cit' pp 325 ff.

92. Grant. 'op.cit' p 325.

Congregationalism. He is influenced by the Quaker and Anabaptist expressions of Nonconformity and his work is important for a full understanding of the ethos of Congregationalism. The important feature to notice within both sections of this third group is the desire to recapture the traditions of Congregationalism in its early classic expressions. Thus can be explained how one group tends to emphasise the Genevan strain, and the other the Anabaptist strain.

In conclusion, it must be stated that through the formation of the International Congregational Council and the growing solidarity of national Unions, Congregationalism is by no means synonymous with what was popularly understood as 'Independency'. Indeed, the appointment of county or district moderators, and the participation of Union officials in Ecumenical discussions on behalf of Congregationalists, are indications of the way in which Congregationalism is functioning today.

In this chapter we have attempted to deal with the developments within Congregationalism over a number of centuries. The important features have been the drift away from traditional Calvinistic theology, the decay of Churchmanship, its revival under Dale, the repudiations of Churchmanship in this century with its revived expression under those who are concerned to restate Congregationalism in the light of its inheritance and tradition. In our next chapter we shall ourselves attempt to undertake this task of restatement, believing that as we rediscover our heritage we shall thereby be enabled to further the revival of the Church as such, and make our own distinct contribution to the ecumenical movement today.

CHAPTER SIX

"CONGREGATIONALISM IN AN ECUMENICAL AGE"

It should be evident to all Christians today that the Church has "become newly aware of the indisputable oneness" inherent in its own nature as the Body of Christ, and that we are living in an age of 'ecumenical vision'; indeed, the 'ecumenical movement' is one of the most significant factors of our time. We can define it as a "movement for the renewal and re-integration of the divided parts of Christ's Church on earth, in the light of a fresh vision of the Church as a single entity given by Christ as part of His Gospel." It is therefore important that we should conclude our present study of the Congregational doctrine of the Church by viewing it in an ecumenical setting.

Congregationalists who have remained faithful to their inheritance in faith and practice have always regarded themselves as part of the Catholic Church, for "Congregationalism, where it understands its own history, remains loyal to the catholic faith of Christendom." As Bernard Lord Manning wrote, "our Congregational Churches are Churches because they are part of the great Church, and only because of that. They are part of the One, Holy, Catholic, Evangelical Church, that Church of which we say in the Creed: 'I believe in the Holy Catholic Church.'" The awareness and appreciation of this fact has often been dimmed and negated by a certain sectarian narrowness in the past, a narrowness even more tragic when displayed in the present. However, the ecumenical movement has provided fresh stimulus for re-thinking Congregationalism in the context of the Church Catholic. This is vital to its life and mission, as "no Church can clearly

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1. J.S. Whale. "The Protestant Tradition." p 317.
  2. cf "The ecumenical movement is the great new fact of our era" William Temple. See also Whale 'op.cit' pp 317ff.
  3. D. Jenkins. "Congregationalism: A Restatement" p 11.
  4. N. Micklem. "Congregationalism and the Church Catholic" pp 13f.
  5. B. Manning. "Why not Abandon the Church." p 34.

discern God's will for itself unless it sees itself as part of the whole and as having<sup>a</sup> distinctive responsibility to the rest of the whole." P.T. Forsyth rightly said, "the Free Churches need to cultivate a sense of the great Church, if their freedom is not to lose all its greatness."

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There have been a number of important attempts to relate Congregationalism to the 'ecumenical movement' during the past few years. In 1939, C.J. Cadoux wrote an article on "The Possibility of a United Christendom from the Standpoint of the Congregational Communion" in an ecumenical symposium entitled the "Union of Christendom."<sup>8</sup> In 1950, an important statement on Congregationalism was made to the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches,<sup>9</sup> But perhaps the most significant contribution to the discussion is that of Daniel Jenkins' in his book published in 1954, "Congregationalism: A Restatement".<sup>10</sup> In this chapter we shall refer to these contributions; to the writings of what we called the "Genevan" group within Congregationalism; and to the work of P.T. Forsyth, for although historically Forsyth's contribution to ecclesiology should have been included in our last chapter, he was a thinker and a prophet before his time and much of what he wrote has great relevance for our present discussion.

According to Daniel Jenkins, the 'ecumenical encounter' demands that "each Church must itself undergo a painful and inner transformation."<sup>11</sup> This transformation of a Church, in the sense of a Communion or Denomination, results from re-examining the New Testament conception of the Church; from humbly seeking in other Churches ways of making up that which is lacking in its own life; and from re-examining its own traditions.

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6. Jenkins. 'op.cit' p 63.

7. P.T. Forsyth. "The Church and the Sacraments." p 7.

8. "The Union of Christendom" ed. K. Mackenzie. Vol. 11.

9. Also contained in the "Nature of the Church" ed. Flew.

10. A very important and fresh approach to the discussion, as compared to Cadoux's realistic but too traditional approach.

11. Jenkins. 'op.cit' p 12.

In examining its own traditions, a Church must be prepared to cast aside that which was merely historically expedient or is found wanting in the light of the New Testament, and it must treasure that which is true to the Scriptures to edify the whole Body. While we have not attempted to discuss the ecclesiologies of other Communion, we have nevertheless studied the New Testament doctrine of the Church and the traditional ecclesiological formulations of Congregationalism, and in the light of these we shall attempt a re-appraisal of Congregational ecclesiology in an ecumenical age. We shall not endeavour to review all the aspects of Congregationalism with which we have hitherto been concerned, but those which we regard as most relevant to the modern situation.

### The Church

#### 1. The Need for the Church

The intense individualism which permeated the life of Congregationalism during the late 19th century is no longer with us to the same degree. The churchmanship of the Separatists and the 17th century Independents could not be conceived of in individualistic terms, and modern Congregationalist thinkers are recalling us to our heritage in churchmanship. Writing about the rise of Nonconformity, P.T. Forsyth says, "it came from men who believed more in the Church than in the individual, from men who held that the Church did more to make Christian individuals than these did to make the Church." According to Bernard Lord Manning<sup>12</sup> "we have never been able to conceive of a churchless Christianity, a private sect, a Christian experience that is not also an ecclesiastical experience. We have always associated the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ with the communion of saints."<sup>13</sup> When Christ calls, He brings the company of His saints with Him. Each individual is called by name, but he is not called in isolation.<sup>14</sup> The same act which sets us in Christ sets us also in

12. Forsyth. "The Charter of the Church" p 62.

13. B.L. Manning. "Essays in Orthodox Dissent." p 141.

14. Jenkins. 'op.cit' p 47.

the society of Christ. Forsyth says some very striking words  
about this: 15

"Our union with Christ is a communion of saints. If He be but Master of You, He is not a King. He is not a king who has but one subject."

16

"It was a community that Christ redeemed. And it is into this ideal community of redemption that as units we are saved. We are saved, as units, from being units, into a redeemed community....."

17

In this modern age where men are in danger of being lost in humanity, and where the individual is seeking true community and fellowship, it is vital that the Church of Christ - the community of the Holy Spirit ('koinonia') - should realize its vocation. Individualistic Christians, if such a term is permissible, cannot fulfil their calling; neither can a Church which is unaware of its society nature, and is no more than an association of individual believers. With Paul we must assert again that "we are the Body of Christ, and members in particular." Congregationalists true to their heritage cannot sever their personal faith from an intense churchmanship. Indeed, Bernard Manning regarded 'churchmanship' as "our distinctive contribution" to the Catholic Church. 18  
Needless to say, he was thinking about that aspect of Congregational churchmanship which is in itself distinctive, and to this we shall now turn.

## 2. The Holy Spirit in Congregational Ecclesiology

In our study of the Church in the New Testament, we saw that the Church only really came into being when the Holy Spirit was given at Pentecost. Throughout the history of Congregationalism Pneumatology has always been central to ecclesiology; indeed, the Congregational doctrine of the Church cannot be understood except in terms of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, in this last chapter we must make explicit what has been implicit throughout our study, for as Alec Vidler so aptly says, "it is as fatal as it is common, in thinking about the Church, to by-pass the Holy

15. Forsyth. "The Church and the Sacraments" p 61.  
16. Forsyth. "The Charter of the Church" p 64.  
17. ibid. p 63.  
18. Manning. "Essays in Orthodox Dissent" p 106.

Spirit. For the Holy Spirit is the creator of the Church, its Lord and Life-giver, its reformer and tormentor, and at last its only resource." As Forsyth reminds us, "if the Church deny the Holy Spirit who is its life, it sins against its own soul." 19 20

Before we can rightly discuss the Holy Spirit and Congregational ecclesiology however, we must first attempt to understand two questions more fundamental, namely, the relationship between freedom and authority; and, the Spirit and the Word.

### Freedom and Authority

Earlier we mentioned Manning's assertion that churchmanship was Congregationalism's distinctive contribution to the Church Catholic. Manning proceeds to define his contention when he writes:

"Our distinctive contribution - what determines our place in the Catholic Church - is our theological conception and our historic practice of liberty and churchmanship; full liberty, undiluted churchmanship." 21

In his book "Faith, Freedom, and the Future" Forsyth shows that Classical Congregationalism is essentially a fusion of Calvinism with its emphasis on the Word of God, and Anabaptism with its emphasis on the freedom of the Spirit. Both these emphases are complementary, and Congregationalism when it is true to its nature must hold them in tension. History shows how an over-emphasis on the Word at the expense of the Spirit results in dead orthodoxy or legalism; while an overemphasis on the Spirit at the expense of the Word results either in libertinism or Quakerism. 22 Fundamentally, it is the question of the relationship between freedom and authority. 23 It is thus necessary to define what we mean by 'freedom' and 'authority'.

The 'liberty' inherent in Congregationalism is the liberty of the Spirit. "It is where the Spirit is, and there alone,

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19. A.R. Vidler. "Christian Belief" p 73.

20. Forsyth. "The Church and the Sacraments." p 112.

21. Manning. 'op.cit' p 106.

22. For example in 18th century Congregationalism.

23. See Nuttall "The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience."

that there is liberty." <sup>24</sup> This means, firstly, freedom to believe what the Holy Spirit reveals to the mind and conscience of a man through the Word, yet without denying that He may work through other means. It was not

"freedom among men but freedom before God. It was not freedom to hold any religion or none, but the freedom which was religious or nothing, the freedom which was identical with Christianity, freedom not of action or opinion but of soul." <sup>25</sup>

Secondly, it is freedom in the Church, and not freedom from the Church. "It is the combination of liberty with the highest, fullest, most rigid churchmanship." <sup>26</sup>

Freedom is therefore, not freedom from authority, for there can only be true liberty where there is true authority. "Not freedom alone is our genius; for freedom alone is but caprice, atomism, and anarchy in the end. But it is freedom created and founded and reared by an authority which cannot be either evaded or shaken." <sup>27</sup> Again and again, Forsyth declares that our freedom is a "founded freedom." <sup>28</sup> "It is a freedom which arises from the experience of God in Christ as the Scriptures declare Him and as the Spirit-guided Church throughout the ages has known Him." <sup>29</sup> Thus it is that "for every true Church the note of authority must be uppermost: To put liberty, which is a secondary matter, before authority, which is a primary and fental even for liberty itself, is to confess a sect and not a Church." <sup>30</sup>

#### The Spirit and the Word

It is commonly believed by Christians that the Holy Spirit works primarily through the Word of God as contained in Holy Scripture and through the Sacraments. We cannot rightly divorce the work of the Spirit from the Word, as "the Holy Spirit

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24. Jenkins. "The Unity of the Free Spirit." (Congregational Quarterly Vol. xxxiii No. 1) p 58.  
25. Forsyth. "Faith, Freedom, and the Future." p 198.  
26. Manning. 'op.cit' p 108.  
27. Forsyth. "Faith, Freedom and the Future" p 347.  
28. e.g. ibid. p 290 etc.  
29. Jenkins. 'op.cit' p 50.  
30. Forsyth. 'op.cit' p 290.

was never to be detached from the fontal Word." Geoffrey Nuttall has shown that "on the whole it remains true that in earlier Puritanism even those to whom the doctrine of the Holy Spirit was most central were careful not to separate the Spirit from the Word." <sup>31</sup> To quote Richard Baxter at length:

<sup>32</sup> "We must not try the Scriptures by our most spiritual apprehensions, but our apprehensions by the Scriptures: that is, we must prefer the Spirit's inspiring the apostles to indite the Scriptures, before the Spirit's illuminating of us to understand them, or before any present inspirations..... This trying the Spirit by the Scriptures, is not a setting of the Scriptures above the Spirit itself; but is only the trying of the Spirit by the Spirit; that is, the Spirit's operations in ourselves and his revelations to any pretenders now, by the Spirit's operations in the apostles, and by their revelations recorded for our use. For they and not we are called the foundations of the Church." <sup>33</sup>

Congregationalists have rightly loved to quote John Robinson's farewell speech to the Pilgrim Fathers, and in particular the words:

"The Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth out of His holy Word." <sup>34</sup>

It is important to notice exactly what Robinson said here. He did not say that the Spirit would lead into more truth and light, but that more truth and light would break forth from the Word than had already been revealed to the Church. The Spirit speaks to the Church through the Word - this is the authority of the Church. Our liberty is founded on the redemptive Word of God, and it is to this Word that the Spirit bears witness. Indeed, "only as the Word and the Spirit are conceived together is the doctrine of the Church comprehensive." <sup>35</sup> Similarly, to isolate the doctrine of the Spirit in the Word from its context in the faith of the Church is to put asunder what God has joined together." <sup>36</sup> With this in mind, let us review the idea of the Holy Spirit in Congregational ecclesiology.

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31. Forsyth. 'op.cit' p 11.  
32. Nuttall. 'op.cit' p 24.  
33. Quoted by Nuttall. 'op.cit' p 32.  
34. Quoted by Jenkins. 'op.cit' p 31.  
35. W.L. Bradley. "P.T. Forsyth - The Man and his Work" p 223.  
36. G.S. Hendry. "The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology" p 95.

The Holy Spirit in Congregational ecclesiology

The uniqueness of Congregationalism historically has consisted in the extent to which it has maintained that the present rule of Christ in His Church through His Spirit is the principle of Church order. Indeed, "if we do not really believe in the present <sup>37</sup> guiding Holy Spirit of a living Word and Gospel in our midst - then we are not churches; and we are bound to lose, to communions that remain real churches, those members who take the church idea in most earnest." These words are echoed again and again in the writings of Congregationalists throughout its <sup>38</sup> history and particularly today, when we are trying to rediscover our true nature and heritage. Nathaniel <sup>e</sup> Micklem writes:

"the Congregational Church rests, and justifies itself, on the belief that the Holy Spirit is present to guide the faithful when they meet for worship and to seek the will of Him who is the Head of the Church. A Congregational Church is a fellowship where Christ reigns, Christ alone, and no man may 'lord it over' the people of God; all are responsible to Christ, and to all is the Holy Spirit given."

39

We have seen how the idea of the 'gathered-church' was an integral part of the ecclesiology of the Separatists and the Independents. In breaking away from the established Church in England these early Congregationalists were declaring in effect that Christ alone exercises authority in His Church through the Spirit. Here the influence of Anabaptism is clearly seen, but it is not to be rejected simply because of its association with Anabaptism; rather does it emphasize something which is both scriptural and which the Church itself realises when it is most aware of its nature and calling. The Holy Spirit has been given once for all to the Church, but not with a clearly defined dogmatic and legalistic authority so that His activity and power are completely canalized and incorporated into an institution. The Spirit of Christ has a sovereign independence within the Church. This does not imply that Congregationalism is

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37. Jenkins. 'op.cit' p 53.

38. Forsyth. "Faith, Freedom, and the Future" p 210.

39. Micklem. 'op.cit' p 30.

synonymous with 'Montanism', 'Anabaptism' or 'Enthusiasm' for as Hendry shows, "Enthusiasm exults in the sovereign freedom of the Spirit over against the Roman Catholic tendency to canalize and domesticate the Spirit in the Church, but in such a way as virtually to sever the connection between the mission of the Spirit and the historical Christ."<sup>40</sup> The Congregational emphasis is not on the Spirit alone, but on the primacy of Christ in the Spirit. The Spirit is the Spirit of the Word, Jesus Christ. Congregational Churches are founded on an act of belief in the Lordship of Jesus Christ and His reign in the Church through the Holy Spirit.<sup>41</sup>

Congregationalism, rightly or wrongly, has regarded itself as the custodian of religious liberty, but as Jenkins so aptly shows "freedom is an empty word or a cloak for self-centredness if it is not founded freedom."<sup>42</sup> Too often, Congregationalism with its stress on liberty has failed to understand its nature. This has resulted in the past in what we have called 'spiritualizing'; while the modernist episode in our history has clearly shown the acute dangers of an unfounded freedom. When the freedom of the Spirit is misunderstood, democracy replaces Christocracy in the life and government of the Church.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, such freedom radically affects belief - this is something which Congregationalism has to reconsider very deeply today.

We have shown that the central tradition of Congregationalism has generally been orthodox in faith, even while refusing to adopt the common Creeds of Christendom as binding and final. But a possible danger of this becomes apparant when we read words such as these:

"Congregationalism has thus shown itself to be no fixed deposit, but an abiding spirit of free growth, capable of indefinite development, such as ever reaches out to new truth and yet retains undiminished its central Christian loyalty."<sup>44</sup>

40. Hendry. 'op.cit' p 68.  
41. Jenkins. 'op.cit' p 51.  
42. ibid. p 68.  
43. see ibid. p 62.  
44. Cadoux. 'op.cit' p 504.

We must sincerely ask, "can Congregationalism remain loyal to the central Christian tenets without a 'fixed deposit' of Apostolic truth?" A 'fixed deposit' does not necessarily imply a static orthodoxy; whereas, 'an abiding spirit of free growth' suggests an idea of progress foreign to the New Testament and to the work and nature of the Spirit who is the Spirit of the Word. Forsyth rightly says, "Independency did not live for dogma but it could not live without it, and it ceases to be Independency without it. It ceases to be a Church."<sup>45</sup> In this ecumenical age it is imperative that we should re-examine our faith, and as Jenkins has challengingly said, "other churches have a right to demand that Congregationalists clear their minds on this matter and deal honestly with themselves in relation to creeds and confessions.....We are just as much committed to faith in the Lordship of Christ as other Churches are. The fact that we may allow a greater liberality of interpretation of what that means than some others do may be wise, but it does not exempt us from the necessity of drawing a line somewhere, and our hesitation over doing so earns us a reputation not for catholicity of temper but for irresponsibility. Such irresponsibility may be engaging and even beneficial for a brief season in the life of a church, as it can be in the life of an individual, but once the ecumenical question is seriously raised it becomes manifestly culpable." Our attitude to Creeds and Confessions<sup>46</sup> cannot be discussed in this present study; suffice it to say that our emphasis on the freedom of the Spirit must not prevent us from hearing what the Spirit is saying to us today in this ecumenical age. The need for authority in doctrine and ecclesiastical law is vital if Congregationalism is to face the modern world and be effective in it. To quote Forsyth again:

"if we are without such an authority in our midst we are not churches, and we have no future; we have no right to boast of an old Independency as our past,

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45. Forsyth. "Faith, Freedom, and the Future" p 122.  
46. Jenkins. 'op.cit' p 58.

and we have no right to look forward to a Christian future....."

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"a real authority is even more needful to our loose-hung liberty than it may seem to be for churches more organised."

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While Micklem asks, "is freedom incompatible with rules binding upon the church? Without law is no freedom."

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Thus, Congregationalism must rediscover and re-examine what it believes about the Holy Spirit and the Church; learning both from the Scriptures and from its own and other traditions what the Spirit says today. Indeed, we must learn the deeper meaning of Scripture and tradition. Our roots are embedded in the common faith of Christendom, and more especially of the Reformation - there we must always stand, "or else go to dust as the mere sanctuary of every error and the consecration of every whim."

50

To conclude with the heart-searching words of Jenkins:

"'The Congregational way of doing things' or 'the commonsense attitude of the people of our churches' or a superficial pride in alleged intellectual superiority or an isolationist localism or a catch-penny topicality which is indifferent to the deeper meaning of Scripture and tradition can be as effective barriers to venturing into the unknown in the power of the Spirit as any more easily specified obstacles. Just as churches which call themselves Catholic have no automatic exemption from the perils of becoming false churches because they bear that mystic name, so Congregationalists cannot avoid being entangled again in the yoke of bondage from which Christ liberates us simply by trusting in the 'Congregational witness on behalf of freedom.'"

51

Let us be true to our faith, our Scriptures, and our Reformed inheritance which has come to us through our Independent forefathers. In so doing we shall rediscover the deep reality, that "in truth, taking the Holy Spirit seriously is a sine qua non of our Churchmanship for, if His grace is lacking, what else have we to rely on as the bond of our peace and unity?"

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47. Forsyth. 'op.cit' p 210.

48. ibid. p 211.

49. Micklem. 'op.cit' p 49.

50. Forsyth. See 'op.cit' p 97.

51. Jenkins. 'op.cit' p 69.

52. Glynnor John. "The Holy Spirit in our Ecclesiology" (The Congregational Quarterly. Vol. xxxiv No. 1) p 14.

### The Church Meeting

Perhaps no other institution within Congregationalism reflects its belief in the immediacy of the Holy Spirit as the Lord and Life-giver of the Church than does the Church Meeting. For that reason we cannot by-pass it in our study; moreover, it is most important to discuss it as there has been a great revival of interest in the place of the congregation in the life of the Church today, which is by no means confined to Congregationalism. Writing on 'The Parish Meeting' Alfred Shands in his book "The Liturgical Movement and the Local Church" says, "There is every reason why the Methodists and Congregationalists should be a great resource to the entire Church on this score, for the Methodist Society Meeting and the Congregational Church Meeting have much in common with what is intended by the parish meeting, and much more experience in its conduct." <sup>53</sup> Indeed, for the Congregationalist "the worship of the Church is incomplete and impoverished unless to the preaching and the Lord's Supper the Church Meeting be added." <sup>54</sup> Jenkins goes so far as to say, "the place where the life in fellowship of a Congregational Church is meant to find its focus is the Church Meeting." <sup>55</sup>

Four important aspects of the Church Meeting must be noted. Firstly, it must take place within the regular worship and sacramental life of the Church, that through the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments it might be conscious and aware of the guidance and authority of the Spirit. It is the duty of the presiding minister "to call the attention of the assembled company to the teaching of Scripture and the experience of the Church throughout the ages and the practice of other Churches in relation to matters similar to those with which that particular Church is now dealing, so that as the Church waits, in prayer and discussion, upon the Spirit, it may strive to ensure that its mind is sufficiently open to all that the

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53. A.R. Shands. "The Liturgical Movement & the Local Church"  
54. "Congregationalism." A Statement made to the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. p64.  
55. Jenkins. 'op.cit' p 46.

Spirit may say." 56

Secondly, "the Church Meeting presupposes a responsible discipline of understanding of the ways of God with His people and of how His people should conduct themselves in transacting His business." This follows on from our first point, as such 57 obedience and discipline which are required can only be acquired in the light of the Word preached and the sacramental fellowship of the Church. Where men of such understanding are absent, 58 as often in extension or mission work, then tradition must not prevent more authority from being given to appointed leaders or to the District Association in the handling of the affairs of that Church.

Thirdly, the Church Meeting must not be confused with popular conceptions of democracy. We have seen throughout our study that the early Congregationalists were concerned not with democracy but with Christocracy in the government of the Church. Forsyth says, "between a Church and a democracy is this eternal gulf, that a democracy recognises no authority but what arises from itself, and a Church none but what is imposed on it from without."

59 The society of Christ does not depend for its life and its right on the goodwill of any society of men. Indeed, "the Church so long as it has a God holy in His love has the note of an eternal aristocracy, of Him whose right it is to reign in love." Can a Church gathered about a King be a 60 democracy? It was in no idea of political democracy or individualism that Congregationalism took its historic rise, but in obedience to Jesus Christ in the face of all the powers or majorities around it. It was the mother of political democracy and freedom, not its child. 61 Therefore, the Church Meeting

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56. Jenkins. 'op.cit' p 97.

57. ibid.

58. cf. Jenkins. 'op.cit' p 46.

59. Forsyth. "The Principle of Authority" p 253.

60. Forsyth. "The Church and the Sacraments" p 118.

61. Forsyth. "Faith, Freedom and the Future" p 193.

exists "to discover God's will for itself and prays to be given the power to do His will. In seeking the mind of Christ it finds itself led to a common mind, and often to decision and corporate action under the Lordship of Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit."

62

Fourthly, the Church Meeting must be aware both of its privilege and of its responsibility and limitations. Its privilege exists in that it is the final court of appeal - it calls the minister; it regulates the form of worship; it expels, corrects, or admits members. Where the Church Meeting feels incompetent to act or to make a decision, it should be prepared in humility to seek the help and guidance of other Churches. We have seen that this has been advocated throughout the history of Congregationalism by those most aware of its ecumenical nature. For "without instructed and responsible Church Meetings Congregationalism rapidly becomes one of the worst forms of church order and wastes the most precious gift which it holds in trust for the whole Church."

63

A Church Meeting must in sincerity and truth to be able to say, "It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us."

### 3. The Local Church and Synods

"By various ways God calls men and women into fellowship with Himself and thereby into Christian fellowship with one another. The Church is a community of those who have been called into such fellowship and have been redeemed by Christ into newness of life. In this redeemed fellowship, with its marks of faith, worship and service, true continuity with the Apostolic Church is found. Every local church is directly under the Lordship of Christ and the guidance of His Holy Spirit."

64

These words, written in recent years as part of the statement on Congregationalism presented to the World Council of Churches, reflect what has been commonly believed by Congregationalists since the time of the Separatists - the Church is the community of the redeemed manifested in a certain place, and each such Church is

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62. "Congregationalism" 'op.cit' p 17.  
63. Jenkins. 'op.cit' p 100.  
64. "Congregationalism" op.cit' p 16.

under the Lordship of Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. "This emphasis on the particularity of the Church, much more than its emphasis on freedom" writes Jenkins, "is, perhaps, the greatest contribution of Congregationalism to the life of the whole Church. It takes the Church seriously, not by developing a 'high' doctrine about it whose character may be largely symbolic, nor by magnifying the power and dignity of the hierarchy in such a way that the weakness of the believing fellowship is concealed by its strength, but by insisting that every believer must come to terms with it in its most concrete form, the local company of Christ's people gathered together into church order."

65

The book by Alfred Shands quoted earlier begins by saying: "The LOCAL CHURCH has been rediscovered!" For the Congregationalist the local church was rediscovered at the beginning of its history. This emphasis has never died- it is the characteristic of Congregationalism. This emphasis remains, but in Congregationalism today there is a second emphasis for the Universal Church has been rediscovered. We have seen how from the earliest times of our history, Congregationalists have believed in the Catholic Church and have found Synods necessary for the life of the Church; but both the sense of the Universal Church and the function of Synods have often been lost under the emphasis placed on the local Church. Partly as a result of the ecumenical movement Congregationalists today are in process of becoming aware of their need for a greater understanding of the nature of Catholicism, and have also found that 'connexionalism' is not incompatible with Congregationalism. As Dillistone says: "while possessing an obvious strength, this theory (congregationalism) also has its grave weaknesses. The local community can never for long remain isolated."

67

T.W. Manson has some very penetrating criticisms of Congregationalism in his "Church's Ministry." He suggests that one

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65. Jenkins. 'op.cit' p 44.

66. Shands. 'op.cit' p 11.

67. Dillistone. "The Structure of the Divine Society" p 168.

fundamental problem Congregationalism has to solve is "whether congregational omnipotence and omnicompetence can survive unmodified along with the real recognition of the existence and effective functioning of the Body of Christ of which all congregations are part."

<sup>68</sup> Hence he finds Dale's five principles of Congregationalism unsatisfactory because "he has no theory of the relation of one Church to others, and he has not thought about the meaning of the word 'external'." He continues to ask, "Is one Church acknowledging the Supreme Authority of Christ wholly external to another Church which also acknowledges the Supreme Authority of Christ?"

<sup>69</sup> This is a perversion of the New Testament doctrine of the Church as the Body of Christ. Manson rightly proceeds to add another principle to those of Dale, namely,

"By the will of Christ every Christian Church has an obligation to care for and be in fellowship with other Churches."

<sup>70</sup>

Congregationalists have always been aware of this lack, never more so than today. It is a vital corrective to Congregational ecclesiology, and must find its expression in Synods and inter-church relations.

### Synods

Synods, we have maintained, are an integral part of Congregational ecclesiology. It was the opinion of that astute defender of classical Congregationalism, Bernard Manning, "that we need far more co-operation among our Churches than we have at the present day in Congregationalism." Moreover, Micklem pleads for more authority to be given to these councils - not only are they necessary, but they need certain powers to function as Synods. Referring primarily to the Independents, Owen and Goodwin, Micklem writes:

"...the calling of synods of the churches is of the very essence of Congregational polity....the failure to call such synods is one of the chief causes of

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68. Manson. 'op.cit' p 93.

69. ibid. 'op.cit' p 94.

70. ibid.

71. Manning. "Why not abandon the Church" p 42.

decay and apostasy....the subject of such synods is the faith and witness and discipline of the churches... any church which will not be subject to the discipline and admonition of such synods thereby cuts itself off from the great Church catholic and is guilty of schism. This is the principle upon which the Church catholic must be organised on foundations congruous at once with reason and the implicit requirements of Christ. This is Congregationalism."

72

There is no reason to suppose that the Holy Spirit only speaks to and guides the Church Meeting and not the Churches meeting together in Synods. "Equally essential with the local autonomy of every congregation under Christ is the duty of all the churches to care for one another's spiritual and temporal welfare, to take conference together in the presence of their Lord concerning their common affairs, and to expect the guidance and authority of the Holy Spirit in their synods or common councils as in their church meetings." It is clear that the desire for greater solidarity and the need for more centralised authority which the denomination is showing today does not infringe upon the autonomy of the local church. To illustrate the way in which modern Congregationalism functions in South Africa, we quote from the "Constitution" of the Congregational Union:

Preamble:

1. "Certain powers and duties belong to the individual Church in self-government under the headship of the Lord Jesus Christ, due regard being had to the interest of other churches of our own and of other denominations. For example (save in so far as the Constitution of the Union otherwise provides): the reception and dismissal of members; the discipline necessary to preserve purity of communion; the calling of a minister and the termination of his pastorate; the election of deacons and other officials; the order of worship; financial arrangements; and all that concerns the internal administration of the Church.
2. "Certain duties and responsibilities concern Congregational Churches collectively, and these can be most effectively fulfilled by a Union of Churches....."

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Then follows a list of such duties and responsibilities.

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72. Micklen. 'op.cit' p 70.

73. Micklem. 'op.cit' p 71.

74. "The Year Book of the Congregational Union of South Africa - 1959,60. p 12.

The objects of the Union indicate further the present trend in Congregationalism: For example, we might quote the following clauses:

2. "To strengthen the fraternal relations of Congregational Churches and to facilitate co-operation in everything affecting their common interests.
5. "To authorise the ordination of qualified candidates for the ministry.
12. "To promote Christian unity....."
13. "To maintain correspondence with other Christian communities with a view to the re-union of the Church of Christ."

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Finally, we may quote from Article 3 of the "Constitution" on the "Functions and Powers of Assembly":

- (a) "The Assembly is the governing body of the Union and its ultimate court of appeal. Its functions are inspirational, deliberative and executive and, in the case of need, judicial. Its decisions are final and binding.
- (b) "Should a Church refuse to accept a decision of the Assembly, that Church may, by decision of the Assembly, be dissociated from the Union."

76

Within the Union there are also County or District Associations, which have certain powers and authority over the local Churches comprising the Association.

In conclusion, we quote Jenkins, "What has been at fault in Congregationalism has not been so much its conception of visibility as its conception of locality. It has always recognised the need for a communion of churches with each other but it has not always seen clearly how much of the real life of individual churches should flow through that communion and it has often had too limited a conception of what a local church should be..... the whole matter of what functions are properly performed by councils and what by the local church is clearly one of great complexity which must occupy the attention of Congregationalists in the near future much more than it has yet done." There is a definite

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75. ibid. p 13f.

76. ibid. p 15.

77. Jenkins. 'op.cit' p 86.

need for the strengthening of the central organization of Congregationalism.

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#### 4. Congregationalism and the Unity of the Church

From our study of the New Testament and traditional Congregationalism it is clear that, even as the writers of the New Testament could not conceive of the Church except as a unity, so Congregationalists have firmly believed in the One Church of Christ. And yet Congregationalists are well aware of the great divisions within Christendom; they know that they themselves are not guiltless, and they desire the reunion of the Church of Christ. The more Congregationalism faces the challenges and opportunities of the 'great Church' in these days the more realistically will it have to acknowledge that, like all denominations, whether they give themselves the title 'Catholic' or not, it is but one part of the whole Church and can only speak as one voice among many. Forsyth asks, "What is the modern affair that lies nearest to the concern of any Church? What at the moment is the supreme interest of the Church within the world? What is the greatest gift it can give the world? What is its prime condition for reaching the world? It is its own union." "Our union with other Christians is not a matter of mere choice but of spiritual necessity."

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The nature of Church unity however, must be clearly defined. Forsyth strongly advocated unity by federation, especially for the Free Churches in England. Whether he regarded union by federation as sufficient in the final analysis for the union of Christendom is difficult to determine, but the unity which Congregationalism is bound to assert is not and cannot be merely that of Church federation. Bishop Leslie Newbigin writes: "...all conceptions of reunion in terms of federation are vain." They

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78. ibid. p 88.

79. Jenkins. 'op.cit' p 88.

80. Forsyth. "Faith, Freedom, and the Future" p 330.

81. Forsyth. "The Church and the Sacraments" p 44.

82. ibid. See chapter 111 and pp 45ff.

"leave the heart of the problem - which is the daily life of men and women in their neighbourhood - untouched. They demand no death and resurrection as the price of unity. They leave each sect free to enjoy its own particular sort of spirituality, merely tying them all together at the centre in a bond which does not vitally and consistingly involve every member in every part of his daily life.....They do not grapple with the fact, which any serious reading of the New Testament must surely make inescapable, that to speak of a plurality of Churches, is strictly absurd...The disastrous error of the idea of federation is that it offers reunion without repentance." 83

Union is vital, but it must be a vital union - union founded on truth, and not union on the basis of a lowest common denominator. It is true that union must cost - there must be a radical transformation and heart-searching repentance - but it is of no avail if the fundamental issues involved are shirked. The visible manifestation of the unity of the Church cannot be achieved by ignoring theological and ecclesiastical differences. "It should be no part of ecumenical tactics to contend that our traditional differences are ultimately unimportant and meaningless. Our fathers risked the evil of schism for something more than a shibboleth: it is for something more than unimportant details that we perpetuate it, whether we be of Rome or Constantinople, of Canterbury or Geneva." 84 As Micklem says, "loyalty to Christ must come before sentiment and the desire for unity at any cost." 85 The foundation for this unity is to be found in the Gospel - this is the note asserted by many Congregationalists, and it echoes throughout Forsyth's writings on the Church:

"Let us find the unity of the Church not in itself but in its message, in the unity of the Gospel that made the Church" 86

"The unity of the Churches can only rest on the unity, i.e. the theology, of the Gospel that created them." 87

"The unity of the Church rests on a basis not subjective but objective. It rests upon God's grace and Gospel." 88

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83. L. Newbigin. "The Household of God" pp 21f.  
84. J.S. Whale. "The Protestant Tradition" p 326.  
85. Micklem. 'op.cit' p 15.  
86. Forsyth. "The Church and the Sacraments" p 39.  
87. ibid. p 54.  
88. ibid. p 60.

"....no Church unity is possible except on a doctrinal, that is for us, an Evangelical basis. Because no Church can otherwise exist. The sole unity of the Church is in the Gospel; and the Gospel must be stated; and it cannot be stated in doctrinal terms....." 89

"The union which is the one thing needful at the hour, the one pressing thing the Church owes the world, can only grow from its concentration on its creative base, on the one positive Gospel which makes a Church a Church." 90

The very reason why the Separatists and Independents broke away from the Church of England was doctrinal - it concerned the nature of the Gospel. Unity was sacrificed for truth. "The unity that we want is, first and most, a union that recognises and expresses our religious unity in the faith of the Gospel." 91 92

Three things are thus apparent. Unity is essential; unity cannot be achieved at the expense of truth; unity is costly. The real tragedy of division is seen amongst those Churches who agree on the fundamental nature of the Gospel, and yet will not unite. J.S. Whale rightly says, "agreement to differ must be genuinely safeguarded, or external unity would merely be the prelude to new schism," however, he continues to say "there is a large, positive agreement on the fundamental truths and doctrines of the Christian faith, and this surely provides a broad and firm basis on which to build anew. Pulling down our barns to build greater has its dangers, but rebuilding will mean some genuine reconstruction. The ecumenical movement will be convincing only when each separate communion is prepared to give up some cherished feature of its own architecture, in the interests of the great design of architectonic unity." 93 Without doubt, each Communion cherishes features peculiar to its own tradition and which it must truly preserve, we must indeed, be loyal to the truth as we have received it, but we must beware of thinking that all truth is

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89. Forsyth "The Church and the Sacraments" p 104  
90. Forsyth "Faith, Freedom, and the Future" p 331  
91. cf Manning "Essays in Orthodox Dissent" p 108  
92. ibid p 141  
93. J.S. Whale 'op.cit' p 342

with us. We must stand for our principles, but we must beware of the sectarian mind and heart. It is a painful and penitent operation which we need to undergo to achieve our Lord's will that we should be one in Him; but if His desire and prayer for our unity be true, we should sacrifice those peripheral hindrances of unity for the sake of the truth - "that they may be one..... that the world might believe".

5. The Congregational Ministry in an Ecumenical Age

Congregationalists would agree whole-heartedly with the words of T.W.Manson which we quoted earlier, namely, that "there is only one 'essential ministry' in the Church, the perpetual ministry of the Risen and Ever-Present Lord Himself." The ministry of Christ is exercised through the ministry of the whole Body, and is not confined to a separate priestly class of men. The ministry of the Church embraces every member of the Church; unto each Christ has given gifts to be used in His service. The Church has made provision for each member to serve, and for this reason, the necessary distinction between 'laity' and the 'ministry' can cloud this fundamental truth - we are all priests unto God. Indeed, a "church order which does not take this ministry of the laity seriously is to that extent at least defective." Today, the Church is and must become more aware of the role of the laity in the service of the Church, and Congregationalism has something to contribute to this need. However, we are here concerned primarily with the ministry of those who have been called and ordained to be ministers of the Word and the Sacraments.

The Nature of the Ministry

"The Congregational minister must be one who has heard the call of God to enter His service, has been willing to prove his call to those competent to judge, and has been willing to submit himself to whatsoever training may be deemed needful." The call

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94. Micklem 'op.cit' p 60

95. See W.J.Huxtable "The Ministry" p 54

96. ibid

97. A.R.Vine "The Nature of the Congregational Ministry"  
'The Congregational Ministry in the Modern World' edited by  
H.Cunliffe-Jones p 8

of God lies at the heart of what we believe about the ministry. In his characteristic way Forsyth puts it like this, "the first requisite of the minister is not the preaching gift, but the gospel within it."

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Having been called by God the call is further sanctioned by a call from a Church which makes it possible for the man to be set apart that he may, by a life devoted to the study of God's message, and by communion with God on behalf of his people, help his brethren to maintain their spiritual warfare in true and worthy manner. We believe that the Church itself does not appoint its ministry: rather it puts the official seal of recognition upon an act performed by the Holy Spirit. "The Church can appoint ministers, but the ministry, as an institution, is God's gift to His Church."

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The ministry is essentially what Forsyth calls "a sacramental ministry", for "an effective ministry is creative - nothing less; and a creative ministry is sacramental.....the ministry is sacramental to the Church as the Church itself is sacramental to the world." Indeed, Bradley points out that Forsyth contends for a priestly ministry as essential to the Church, but it is a priestly ministry because of Christ's ministry in the Church:

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"The minister is what the Church is. He is priest only in so far as he represents the essential priestliness inherent in the Church; and the Church is priestly only in so far as it represents the cross and sacrifice of Jesus Christ."

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### Ordination

Today the question of the nature and doctrine of ordination lies central to ecumenical discussion. As such, a short treatment cannot do justice to the subject, but certain aspects may be observed which are relevant to the current discussion.

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98. Forsyth "The Church and the Sacraments" p 136  
99. Bradley 'op.cit' p 237  
100. Forsyth 'op.cit' p 132  
101. ibid p 133  
102. Quoted by Bradley 'op.cit' p 236

It should already be apparent that Congregationalists have always acknowledged the necessity of this ordinance, although they have not always been explicit concerning what they do believe about it. Ecumenical discussions are forcing Congregationalists to re-think and to re-consider the nature of ordination. For example, it was not uncommon practice in earlier days for a minister to be re-ordained each time he was called to a new pastorate ! Today, such a practice is virtually unknown, for we firmly believe that a minister can never be re-ordained.

Congregationalists maintain with Christians of all the ages, that God has created the office of the ministry. Furthermore, according to the Statement of Faith recently authorized by the Assembly of the Congregational Union of South Africa, "we believe it is the duty of the Church to set apart those whom it believes God has called to the Ministry of the Word and the Sacraments and to the pastoral office, for in such an act the divine call is sealed on earth." In the act of ordination the ministers of a District, often together with a representative of the local Church, with the laying on of hands. A minister is not ordained only to the ministry of one local Church but he is ordained to the ministry of the Gospel in the Church of Christ.

Concerning the validity of Congregational orders, we may refer to the excellent sentiments expressed by Manning: "to classify the work of grace as sometimes valid or regular, sometimes invalid and irregular, to ask if grace may be invalid though regular, this is frivolity in the holy of holies." And Forsyth writes, "the ministry is valid or regular according as it is effective as a sacrament of the gospel to our experience within the Church." Congregationalists have no objection to Episcopacy, nor to Apostolic Succession, for some would even regard Episcopacy as a necessary means of Church re-union.

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-alists" 1959.  
103. "A Statement of Things Commonly Believed Among Congregation-  
104. See "A Book of Public Worship" Ordination Service p 203  
105. ibid p 204  
106. Manning "Essays in Orthodox Dissent" p 115  
107. Forsyth 'op.cit' p 141 108. cf Mickleth 'op.cit' p36

Congregationalists acknowledge the value of the Apostolic Succession claimed by Episcopalian Communion, but they deny that it necessarily gives any kind of binding guarantee of the authenticity of a Church. We should be more inclined to regard Apostolic Succession as the succession of apostolic truth rather than the succession of 'regularly' ordained ministers of that truth. It may be true that in the past the Congregational doctrine of the ministry has been such that it would not satisfy the demands of other Communion, but today the whole question of the ministry must be re-considered, for "the question of Church unity is the question of the ministry".

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#### Unity and the Ministry

Jenkins has stressed the fact that the ministry of Congregational Churches is the greatest human factor in making what Forsyth calls "the local church the outcrop of the great Church." He writes: "The guarantee that a church is not led astray by false teaching and remains of one mind with the great Church is ultimately the same in Congregationalism as it is in other Churches; it is the presence in the local church of the apostolic ministry." The task of the minister is to make known to the Church what concerns not only itself but the whole Church of Christ. "The chief way in which the Ecumenical Movement should be influencing churches and in which churches should be expressing their allegiance to it is, therefore, in the way their minister preaches the Word and dispenses the Sacraments."

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Much has been left unsaid about the ministry of Congregational Churches in this ecumenical age, but our chief concern has not been to develop a doctrine of the ministry but to state the Congregational doctrine of the Church and the ministry in relation to it.

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109. Jenkins 'op.cit' p 76  
110. See Forsyth 'op.cit' p 138; also Manning "Why not Abandon the Church?" pp 57ff  
111. Forsyth 'op.cit' p 149  
112. Forsyth *ibid* p 65 f  
113. Jenkins 'op.cit' p 75 p 23  
114. Jenkins "The Congregational Ministry in an Ecumenical Age"

- CONCLUSION -

The aim of this thesis has been chiefly to state what Congregationalists of different periods in history have thought and taught about the Church.

Beginning in the New Testament we traced briefly the main emphases in the doctrine of the Church as expounded by the Evangelists and Apostles in the early days of the Church's existence. We then turned to the Separatists who believed that they had re-discovered the true nature of the Apostolic Church, and who separated from the Church of England in order to establish churches according to their understanding of the New Testament pattern. The next step in Congregational history concerned the 17th Independents with their classic exposition of Congregationalism in the Savoy Declaration. In studying the ecclesiology of the Independents we saw something of the <sup>↑</sup>grader and depth of their understanding of the Church. Here was Congregationalism at its best - a worthy criterion for all later teaching and practice. In our next chapter we viewed the development of Congregational thought about the Church, noting the periods of decadence and expounding the 'high-Churchmanship' of Dale, through the 18th and 19th centuries. Finally, we attempted to re-state some of the more relevant aspects of traditional Congregationalism in the light of the modern ecumenical movement.

What about the future? There can be no future worth contemplating for Congregationalism except in terms of the whole Church of Christ. "The prospect for Congregationalism is good only to the extent to which it partakes of the nature of that one Church to which the divine promise has been given and finds its true life in obedience to its Lord."

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115. Jenkins "Congregationalism: A Restatement" p 150

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I

The Extension of the Incarnation

The description of the Church as the 'extension of the Incarnation' does not appear in the New Testament, but it is a description of the Church widely used in ecclesiastical discussion. It is therefore important that we should ascertain its importance, and the extent to which it is true to the New Testament understanding of the Church.

Neville Clark in his "Approach to the Theology of the Sacraments" is very illuminating on the subject when he writes:

"Rightly to enunciate the relationship of identity and distinction between the crucified, the mystical, the sacramental and the glorified body of the Lord may be, in the end, an impossible task; but it must again and again be attempted. We have seen that the Pauline exposition suggests the identification of the Church with the resurrection body of Christ; but this simple equation must now be examined, qualified and plotted with greater precision. To fail to allow for the elements of metaphor in the Pauline usage is the perennial danger of a wholly admirable and desperately needed endeavour to do justice to biblical realism at this point; and this error lies at the root of a too facile and impatient dismissal of the concept of the mystical body. If we assert that the Church is the body of Christ, that Head and members together constitute the 'Totus Christus', yet it must be immediately added that the Church is not thereby deified nor is its relation to deity ever unmediated. Lacey's comment is timely and wholly just: 'To say that the Church is the Body of Christ is not the same as to say that the Church is Christ.....The Body of Christ stands properly for the whole human nature of Christ.' The union by which the Church is made sharer in the life of the Trinity is always and only a union mediated by the glorified and perfected manhood of the Son. Yet there is a further qualification to be added. For though we assert that 'God made us alive together with Christ....and raised us up with him and made us sit with him in heavenly places', yet we cannot go on to claim unreservedly an identification of the Church with the ascended and glorified body of the Lord. To do this would be to bypass Golgotha and to anticipate the consummation, to forget that the Church remains 'in via', is not yet 'in patria'."

(1)

The problem is seen clearly when we ask the question, "Can the Church sin?" For "were the Church literally a continuation of the Incarnation, then its actions would automatically and inevitably be the actions of Christ; a position so absurd that no one would think of maintaining it." (2) "We agree," writes Bishop Newbigin, "that the Church is a real incorporation of men in the life of the Risen Christ, in such wise that His life is in them and their in Him. It is a real communication of the life of Jesus to men.....The Church is thus truly spoken of as the body of Christ. But it is important to stress the point that it is

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1. Clark N. "An Approach to the Theology of the Sacraments"  
p 79

2. Cairns D. 'op.cit' p 225

not truly spoken of as the 'extension of the Incarnation'. That phrase springs from a confusion of 'sarx' with 'soma'. Christ's Risen body is not fleshly but spiritual. He did not come to incorporate us in His body according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. That is why He told His disciples that it was expedient for them that He should go away. The Spirit could not come until His offering up of Himself in the flesh had been completed." (3)

Therefore, if we are to use the term 'extension of the Incarnation' we must not thereby imply that the Church shares the deity of Christ, or can in any way complete His work of Redemption. The work of Christ on earth is complete, there is no need to extend the Incarnation. But the phrase is meaningful when it is used to describe the Church as the instrument whereby God makes known to the world the revelation of Himself and His redemption of the world in the Incarnate Christ. "As in His incarnate life, Christ had to have a body to proclaim His Gospel and to do His work, so in His resurrection life in this age He still needs a body to be the instrument of His Gospel and of His work in the world." (4) In the words of St. John:

"Jesus therefore said unto them again, Peace be unto you: as the Father hath sent me, even so send I you." (5)

As Christ is the Incarnation of the love of God, the Church is the incarnation of Christ's Spirit and purpose....the Church is His incarnation as He is God's. (5)

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## II

### Anabaptism and Congregationalism

Dr. G.F.Nuttall pointed out "that Congregationalism was never pure Calvinism but has always had a strain of Anabaptism in it." (7) P.T.Forsyth has developed this relationship between Congregationalism and Anabaptism at great length in his "Faith, Freedom and the Future", in which he says, "Independency was Calvinism flushed and fertilised by Anabaptism on English ground. It drew from Calvinism its positive and theological Gospel of the Word, from Anabaptism its personal and subjective religion of the Spirit....." (8)

The Anabaptists were a sectarian group of radical reformers, mainly found on the Continent especially in Germany, but also in England as early as 1534. They were opposed not only by the Roman Catholic Church, but also by the Reformers Luther and Calvin, for apart from their repudiation of paedobaptism, they emphasised the freedom of the Spirit apart from the Word, and repudiated the Augustinian doctrine of Grace.

The extent to which they influenced the development of Congregationalism is not certain, for the Brownists, Barrowists, and Independents, repudiated any connection with the movement. Nevertheless, the English Anabaptists were part of the separatist movement and it cannot be denied that Browne and Barrowe, together with their followers, were influenced by their teaching. They

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3. Newbigin "The Household of God" p 80
  4. Richardson "An Introduction to the Theology of the NT" p 256
  5. John 20.21
  6. Fairbairn A.M. quoted by Wheeler Robinson "The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit" p 151
  7. In private correspondence
  8. Forsyth "Faith, Freedom and the Future" p 50

were largely at one in their belief that the true Church is composed of believers only, and that if this could only be achieved by withdrawing from the established Church, such was the course of Christian duty. The extent to which the Anabaptist emphasis on the freedom of the Spirit influenced the early Congregationalists is a question of great importance, for it is clear that the ecclesiology of the early Congregationalists centred around the work of the Holy Spirit, and an emphasis was placed on personal spiritual experience, some indeed, tended towards Quakerism. However, the central tradition of early Congregationalism was in no way 'spiritualistic', for it was firmly entrenched in Calvinism.

See further: The article on "Anabaptism" in the E.R.E.  
The article on "Anabaptism" in the Oxford  
Dictionary of the Church.  
G.F.Nuttall "The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith  
and Experience." Especially the Historical Introduction.  
P.T.Forsyth "Faith, Freedom, and the Future."

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III

Separatism

We must not confuse Separatism with Independency and Congregationalism. Horton Davies writes, the term "'Separatist' cannot be legitimately applied to the Independents, but it is more properly reserved for the Barrowists, Brownists, and Anabaptists." (9)

We have used the word 'Separatist' to describe those 'separatists' who can rightly be regarded as the earliest expounders of the essential aspects of Congregationalism. But the word 'Separatist' is usually used to denote those sects which broke away from the Established Church, and would therefore include the Quakers, and such radical sects as the Seekers and the Levellers.

"The term 'Congregational' came into general use about the beginning of the Great Civil War in England, and contemporaneously in New England, as descriptive of a form of Church polity in which the local congregation is the unit of organization and the source of ecclesiastical government. From the last decade of the 16th century its adherents had been nicknamed 'Brownists' from Robert Browne. Against this they protested. They were also called Separatists because of their withdrawal from the English Establishment. The title 'Independency' was attached to the system at about the same time as that of 'Congregationalism' and, though an object of early protest long remained its usual designation in Great Britain." (10)

See further: G.F.Nuttall "Visible Saints" p viii and Ch. 1.  
R.W.Dale "The History of English Congregational-  
ism" pp 374 ff  
H.Davies "The Worship of the English Puritans" Ch.7.  
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