

**A HANDBOOK OF  
CONGREGATIONALISM.**



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**BY**

**Ernest J. Price.**

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Ernest. J. Price

*Price: Three Shillings*

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BY

ERNEST J. PRICE, M.A., B.D.

*Late Principal of*

*Yorkshire United Independent College, Bradford*

*(1932 to 1947)*

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## FOREWORD

**T**HIS little Handbook was undertaken at the request of the Literature Committee of the Congregational Union, who felt the need of some more modern presentation to take the place of Dr Goodrich's little Primer which is now out of print. To me, as one of Goodrich's young men in the later days of his Manchester ministry, this was a labour of piety. Hence while the compass of this tiny volume is even more restricted than that of its predecessor (in spite of the necessity for the introduction of new material), I have striven throughout to be faithful to the spirit of the revered pastor of my youth, to whom I owe everything under God. It is my earnest hope that this Handbook may be found useful in catechumen classes as well as by private

readers, and thus accomplish for a new generation something of the service that was so signally rendered by Dr Goodrich's Primer to the generation that is passing.

I gladly acknowledge my indebtedness at many points to the excellent *Primer of Church Fellowship* that was written by our veteran William Pierce in conjunction with the ever-lamented Sylvester Horne, as well as to Granville Sharp's *Our Spiritual Heritage* and the admirable series of papers on Faith and Conduct issued by the Congregational Union.

ERNEST J. PRICE

*Certain corrections and additions have been made to the present edition to bring it up-to-date, but the greater part of Principal Price's work remains unaltered.*

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# I

## THE KINGDOM AND THE CHURCH

THE message of our Lord Jesus Christ was the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. He came to summon men into a new relation to God, in which the divine will was to be the supreme law of life. His words were directed towards teaching His hearers to understand what the reign of God in men's lives means, and by His death He offered the supreme pledge of His loyalty to the Kingdom.,

The Lord Jesus therefore invites us first of all to become citizens of the Kingdom of God, in the faith that God is ready to pardon our sins and to accept our service. The only condition of citizenship is our readiness to trust ourselves entirely to God as little children.<sup>1</sup> In such simple faith and surrender we receive divine power to live the life described for us in the opening verses of the fifth chapter of St Mat-

thew's Gospel as the life which the citizens of the Kingdom of God ought to live.

Thus the Kingdom of God includes all those who are seeking, by divine grace, to live in obedience to God. But such people need to come together to help one another to understand what the will of God is, and to do it in co-operation. In a world that opposes the Kingdom of God the citizens of the Kingdom will unite themselves together to further its interests. By combining their forces they will be able to do far

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<sup>1</sup> Matt. xviii. 3.

more for the Kingdom than they can do separately.

This union of the citizens of the Kingdom is what we mean by the Church. The Church is the fellowship of those who are pledged to serve the Kingdom of God. By bringing together the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, the learned and the ignorant, in a common faith in Jesus Christ and a common devotion to the will of God, it exists to further the ends of the Kingdom. It is not itself the Kingdom, but is the means to it.

The Church furthers the ends of the Kingdom (1) *By Fellowship*. Since it was natural and inevitable that those who loved our Lord and sought to follow Him should come together for mutual encouragement, the Master gave no precise instructions as to the founding of the Church. He took it for granted. Only in two passages in the Gospels does He mention the Church. In the first, in connection with the confession of Peter,<sup>1</sup> He lays it down that the Church is based upon the recognition of Himself as divine Lord. In the other<sup>2</sup> He assumes that the fellowship between the members of the Church will be so real that they can act together like a family to which any member may appeal who has been wronged by a fellow-member. There will be a genuine concern for one another's spiritual interests. Hence the New

Testament writers lay stress upon the note of 'brotherhood' in the Church.<sup>3</sup> The Church is a 'household'<sup>4</sup>; its members are 'brethren' and 'fellow-

<sup>1</sup> Matt. xvi. 18. <sup>2</sup> Matt. xviii. 15-20.

<sup>3</sup> Romans xii. 10; 1 Thess. iv. 9; 1 Peter ii. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Eph. ii. 19; Gal. vi. 10.

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citizens'<sup>1</sup>; they are as closely united as are the members of the body.<sup>2</sup> Hence the Church is not a merely casual group of people connected with a particular building, but a family circle whose members are in the most intimate relations with one another. Being united by their faith in Christ, they bear one another's burdens. The keynote is 'love of the brethren'. To a world that does not know or understand the Spirit of Christ, the Church offers a concrete expression of the meaning of Christian brotherhood.<sup>3</sup>

(2) *By Worship.* Worship springs out of the recognition that our life is dependent upon God and finds its completeness only in His service. In worship the heart responds to the divine love, the will to the divine goodness, and the mind to the divine truth; in it the whole life is consecrated to God. Men can worship God in private, but worship can only reach its highest expression when we unite with our brethren in prayer and praise, and feel the impulse of a common life that flows from God. Our faith is deepened and our sense of God's presence quickened when we bring our common needs and tasks to Him. And it is the function of the Church to emphasize this need of common worship and to afford opportunities for it. In this respect no other institution can take its place. Without the Church Christian worship would die out.

(3) *By Teaching.* Christian truth must be taught if people are to be saved by it. This, too, is the function of the Church—a function which is discharged by

<sup>1</sup> 1 Tim. iv. 6; 1 John iii. 14; 1 Peter i. 11; Eph. ii. 19.

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<sup>2</sup> Romans xii. 4–5. <sup>3</sup> Gal. vi. 10.

<sup>10</sup>

preaching and by instruction in church organizations such as Sunday schools, junior churches, youth groups and study circles. The Church is a school of Christian education in which, not only in childhood, but throughout their whole life, people are being taught the deep things of God and disciplined in Christian character. And in this regard the duty of the Church is not limited to those who are already in its fellowship. It is its task to extend the Kingdom by evangelization both at home and abroad.

(4) *By Witness.* The Church exists to bear witness to the message of Jesus Christ. It confronts the world with the ideal and the programme of the Kingdom of God. It is the only institution in the world that is committed without reserve to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and exhibits the power of the Gospel in the lives of its own members.

(5) *By Service.* Since the Church exists to serve the ends of the Kingdom, its work includes the re-generation of society as well as the salvation of individuals. It challenges all that is un-Christian in life and seeks to build up an order of society in which the Spirit of Christ can find complete expression. The individual is saved to serve the Kingdom in the world; and it is the task of the Church so to train and inspire its members that they may seek to bring all human relationships under the control of Jesus Christ. Though the Church cannot itself enter into politics, it can and must impart the Christian attitude to those who are responsible for legislation and to those who take part in commerce and industry. The Church serves the Kingdom by producing such men as St

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Francis, Lord Shaftesbury, John Howard, David Livingstone, Wilfred Grenfell and Albert Schweitzer —men whom no other institution could have produced.

Thus the Church is the indispensable agent of the Kingdom, in bringing together the citizens of the Kingdom for fellowship and worship, and enabling them to unite their gifts for the purposes of education, witness and service. In these respects it follows the aims and method of Jesus Christ to whom it looks as its founder and head. Hence Christians who remain outside the fellowship and service of the Church are so far disloyal to their Master. In refusing to recognize any responsibility towards the Church they cut themselves off from their fellow-Christians and leave it to others to maintain that corporate witness to the Kingdom, without which Christianity would speedily perish.

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## II

### THE CHURCH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

THE word used in our Greek New Testament for ‘Church’ is ‘ecclesia’, a term which had long been employed at Athens to designate the public assembly in which all the citizens came together to discuss and decide the affairs of the Commonwealth. The constitution of the Athenian ecclesia was democratic. All citizens had equal rights both of speech and of vote. The term was a very appropriate one to use for the Christian assembly of citizens of the Kingdom of God, and in using it the New Testament writers indicate that in their view the Christian assemblies recognize equal rights for all the members and impose equal obligations upon them. The affairs of the Kingdom are not the peculiar concern of any special class of Christians but devolve upon all alike. The Christian ecclesia is a family united by the love of Christ, and since faith is the sole condition of entrance into it, all have the same standing.

Hence the New Testament churches, like the Athenian ecclesia, were self-governing and democratic assemblies. It was the *whole* Church at Jerusalem that elected an Apostle to take the place of Judas.<sup>1</sup> It was the whole body of church-members, and not the Apostles, who chose the Seven to serve tables. i The power of discipline was committed by

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<sup>1</sup> Acts i. 24–26. <sup>2</sup> Acts vi. 2–6.

<sup>13</sup>

Christ, not to the bishops or pastors, but to the whole Church;<sup>1</sup> hence in 1 Cor. 6 an unworthy member is dealt with, not by the apostle, but by the whole Church ‘gathered together’. Thus to the Church as a whole, in free assembly, belonged the right and the duty of administering discipline, and appointing to office those who had been qualified by the Spirit of God.

Such an assembly of Christian freemen might meet in any locality as a Christian church to determine the affairs of the Kingdom in its midst. The size of the assembly was a matter of indifference provided that it met in the faith of Christ to do His will. For it was to such assemblies that the Lord promised His abiding presence. ‘Where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them’. It was the presence of Christ, and not anything else, that made them churches. They were responsible to Christ alone for all that they did, and they could claim His solemn sanction for all decisions carried out in His Name.<sup>2</sup>

For this reason, the Apostolic Churches were independent of one another, in the sense that they did not need to refer to one another for ratification of their acts. The church at Ephesus had no control over the church at Corinth, or the church at Rome over the church at Jerusalem. Each was responsible solely to Christ for its decisions, and each could equally claim the presence of Christ in its assemblies. And

this was because all alike were composed of men and women who had faith in Christ. Only the 'faithful in

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<sup>1</sup> Matt. xviii. 15–20. <sup>2</sup> Matt. xvi. 19; xviii. 18.

<sup>14</sup>

Christ Jesus' were admitted to them.<sup>1</sup> Hence Paul can write to the church of God at Corinth as to 'those that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints'. To the Apostles the Church was always a society of believers, 'the body of Christ' of which Christ Himself was the Head.

In the New Testament, however, the word church is used not merely of the local congregation but also of the whole body of believers throughout the world. This is the Church which Christ 'loved' and for which 'He gave Himself' and which He cleansed 'that He might present the Church to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.' From this it follows that membership in the local church carried with it membership in the Church Universal; a church-member assumed obligations not merely towards those with whom he enjoyed personal fellowship but also towards all in every place who loved and served the Lord. The local church was a representative part of the Holy Catholic Church.

In the New Testament, the word Church is never used in any intermediate sense. The Apostles would never have spoken of the 'Church of England' but only of the 'Churches of England', just as they spoke of the 'Churches of Macedonia'<sup>2</sup> and of the 'Churches of Galatia'.<sup>3</sup> In the original conception of the Church there is nothing between the local congregation and the whole aggregate of believers throughout the world.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Eph. i. 1. <sup>2</sup> Cor. viii. 1. <sup>2</sup> Gal. i. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hatch, *Growth of Christian Institutions*, p. 139.

<sup>15</sup>

The ministers of the Apostolic churches were called elders and deacons. The function of the elders was to preside and to teach, the deacons being their assistants in the work of administration. In the New Testament the word 'bishop' is used in the same sense as 'elder' (or presbyter). In many Churches there were several elder-bishops, but in the course of the second century the name bishop came to be restricted to a particular elder who acted as permanent president of the congregation. Thus the earliest bishops were Congregational pastors and not officers ruling a whole group of congregations. Moreover, the elders or bishops did not constitute a separate priestly 'order' in which resided any exclusive authority. Their authority was based upon the consent and support of the church. All the church-members were 'priests', for all alike through faith had received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and there was laid upon all the responsibility for one another's spiritual welfare.

Thus the Apostolic churches were self-governing fellowships of Christian freemen, responsible solely to Christ for their acts and decisions. Congregationalism is the endeavour to realize under modern conditions the spirit of the New Testament Church—its notes of brotherhood, freedom, and direct responsibility of the individual in spiritual concerns. We do not claim that the Apostolic church polity is of necessity a binding rule for all time. Changing conditions must lead in some degree to changed method. Nevertheless we hold that no church organization can be true to the inner spirit of Christianity as we find it in the New Testament which does not give

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adequate expression to the Apostolic conception of the Church as a fellowship of equal citizens in the Kingdom of God.

To-day there are many different types of Church organization. Besides our own there are the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England, the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church, and many others. These are all 'Churches' in so far as they serve the ends of the Kingdom of God as we have described them. Together they constitute the one Catholic or Universal Church which includes all Christian believers. But they differ from one another in the ways in which they serve the ends of the Kingdom and what we claim for Congregationalism is that it approaches most nearly the New Testament ideal of the Church and its functions.

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### III

#### FORMS OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT

THE form of church-government is not a matter of indifference; organization and life are mutually dependent, and the Church should seek that form of organization which gives the widest scope to the development of Christian life in fellowship. In the Christian Church, as in the political realm, there have appeared three main types of government, viz. despotism, aristocracy and democracy. Despotism, or the rule of a single arbitrary will, and aristocracy, or the rule of a special class, have played their part in political history in preparing the way for democracy or government by the people themselves. They are justified only when the people lack the intelligence of mind and freedom of spirit essential for self-government.

It is the duty of every Christian to consider how far each of these forms of government is adequate to the New Testament ideal of the Church. (1) The Roman Catholic Church is governed despotically. Whereas

in Apostolic times the bishops were Congregational pastors, they came subsequently to have control of a large number of churches, and the rights of the Christian assembly were lost. When Christianity became the state-religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, it copied the Imperial form of government, and subjected its bishops to the rule

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of archbishops and these in turn to the rule of the Bishop of Rome, who claimed authority over the whole Church, partly because Rome was the Imperial capital, and partly because St Peter, who was regarded as the first Bishop of Rome, was supposed to have had supreme authority committed to him by Christ. This claim was slowly developed during the first five centuries, and issued ultimately in the Vatican Decree of 1870 which recognized the infallible authority of the Pope as the representative of Christ on earth. Thus the minds and consciences of all Roman Catholics are subjected to the Pope. What he declares to be right and true is binding upon all.

Furthermore, it is declared that the Pope is the sole channel through which divine blessings can come to men. The Church cannot exist without the Pope, and to repudiate his authority is to cut oneself off from divine grace.

It is clear that there is no foundation for Papal despotism in the New Testament. Nay, rather it cuts at the very roots of New Testament teaching and practice. It is a repudiation of the solemn promise of Christ to be present wherever two or three are gathered together in His Name, and a complete subversion of the Apostolic conception of the Church as the fellowship of the citizens of the Kingdom.

(2) The Anglican Church may be described as aristocratic in its government. It is ruled by bishops, who have equal authority each in his own diocese.

The two archbishops have higher rank and dignity, but do not rule the Church in the sense in which the Pope rules the Roman Church. The bishops are the

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highest order in the ministry. They represent the apostles, from whom, through an unbroken line of successive bishops from the earliest age, they have received authority. This authority they transmit to priests and deacons, to whom, by episcopal ordination, is imparted a special gift of the Holy Spirit which cannot be obtained in any other way. Only the man who has received this gift has divine authority to administer sacraments and discharge pastoral functions. This view of Apostolic Succession and Ordination is common to Anglicanism and Romanism. Roman Catholics however deny that Anglicanism possesses the Apostolic Succession.

This conception of the bishop as the indispensable channel of Divine grace is a denial of the character of the Church as a fellowship of Christian freemen. Whereas in the New Testament every believer is a priest, in Anglicanism the priesthood is restricted to those who have been ordained by the bishop. The theory of Apostolic succession, in restricting the gifts of the Spirit to one historical channel, turns a spiritual process into a mechanical one, and ignores the New Testament teaching that the Holy Spirit is imparted to every believer in order that he may become a blessing to others. Moreover, the conception of the Church as a fraternal fellowship disappears from both Anglicanism and Romanism. There is no provision for the Church to function as a fellowship. If a Christian, having a difference with a fellow-Christian, desires, in obedience to the command of Christ, 'to tell it to the Church', he cannot do so. He can only tell it to a clergyman.

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In recent years, in accordance with the Enabling Act, church councils and assemblies have been set up in Anglicanism in order to bring the church members into closer co-operation with the clergy in the administration of the church. But the vital points remain untouched. The bishop retains the sole right to ordain and authorize the clergy; the clergy retain the sole right to administer the sacraments. The members of the church have no power to exercise discipline, and, except in a few favoured instances, no effective voice in the choice of their clergy. Hence in the most important matters of its life the church has no opportunity to act as a self-governing fellowship of the New Testament pattern, but is under the control of a priestly caste.

(3) In varying degrees the Free churches approach the democratic ideal in church government. In Presbyterianism, the government of the church is vested, not as in Anglicanism in the clergy, but in elected representatives known as elders or presbyters. In each congregation, the elders, together with the minister, are the controlling body. The congregations, however, are grouped into districts which are ruled by presbyteries, consisting of the minister and one elder from each congregation. The presbytery has jurisdiction over all its constituent churches in matters of common concern; it ordains and inducts ministers. The presbyteries, again, are subjected to a national assembly consisting of representatives from the presbyteries. The assembly is the final court of appeal for the Church as a whole; it legislates for all the congregations, which therefore lose that auton-

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omy and direct dependence upon Christ which was the mark of the Apostolic churches. The authority of the local Christian fellowship has been transferred

to presbyteries and assemblies which alone determine questions of faith, of discipline and of practice.

The Methodist Church is for the most part presbyterian in government, though certain features resemble Congregationalism. Methodism was born in the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century. The leaders were Anglican clergymen who were driven, against their will, to organize their societies of converts into churches outside the State church. The members of the local Society met regularly in Christian fellowship for mutual edification, but not to administer the affairs of the church. The supreme authority was an annual conference composed of representatives of the whole Church. Methodism soon split into several denominations, the grounds of separation being a demand on the part of the laity for a larger share in the administration of the church, and a demand on the part of the local congregations for a larger measure of self-government. These differences, however, were largely overcome when in 1932 the majority of Methodists re-united to form the Methodist Church, a single organization including those formerly described as Wesleyan, United or Primitive. In this reunited body the connexional principle; involving the subordination of the local church to the denomination as a whole, remains the central feature. The Independent Methodists and the Wesleyan Reform Union did not come into this union, as their principles lean more towards Congregationalism.

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Over against these forms of church government, the Congregational and Baptist churches stand for the New Testament polity, which recognized no authority save that of Jesus Christ, and left each local fellowship to govern itself in obedience to the Living Lord who dwelt in its midst. Hence, whereas in Romanism the Church centres in the Pope, in Anglicanism in the Bishops, in Presbyterianism in the Presbytery, and in Methodism in the Conference,

'in Congregationalism, the centre of the church's organization remains still in the fellowship of each individual church gathered in church meeting. In Episcopacy the Divine Grace is represented as coming down to men through the Sacraments of the Church, administered by the priest who is appointed to his office by a bishop. In Congregationalism the fellowship consists of men and women who... have found personal contact with their Lord, and therefore claim to be able to minister in holy things to each other. Presbyterianism and Methodism recognize this same spiritual experience as the basis of fellowship, but each of them by its organization denies to the fellowship thus created the power to do the Lord's work in the way best suited to itself, and makes it part of a system which is governed from a centre.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sanders. *Church Government, Its Forms and Their Significance* (Out of print.)

## IV

### CONGREGATIONAL PRINCIPLES

CONGREGATIONALISM, as an endeavour to recover the New Testament ideal of the Church, rests upon three main principles: (1) The Church consists solely of Christian people. If this proposition seems self-evident to-day, it was not so in the sixteenth century. For at that time it was taken for granted that the Church is identical with the nation; every baptized person belonged to it, and everybody was compelled by law to go to church. Our Congregational fathers refused to admit that all citizens—good, bad, and indifferent—were members of the Church, for in that case the Church would be a secular institution not bound by the will of Christ. They therefore separated from the State Church

which acknowledged Queen Elizabeth as its Supreme Governor, and set up Churches which, being composed solely of men and women consecrated to the will of Christ, could fulfil His purposes without interference. The Church, they said, is a community of 'separated' people, who have freely surrendered themselves to Christ and are pledged to the service of His Kingdom.

(2) Every church, as an assembly of Christian people, is guided by Christ Himself, and is therefore entrusted with the right of self-government. Wherever Christian men and women meet together in the

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Name of Christ, He is there in their midst according to His promise. Therefore their decisions are His, and no civil or ecclesiastical body whatever may challenge them. The local church is independent of all external control. To interfere with a Christian fellowship from outside is to destroy its integrity as a church. It was this principle that brought our Congregational fathers into conflict with Queen Elizabeth. They denied the right of the Queen to determine the constitution, doctrine and discipline of the church, and they were hung as traitors for declaring that Christ and not the Queen was supreme in the church. They claimed for the Church the right to determine its own life, to work out its own expression of faith, and its own ideals of worship and of service under the guidance of Christ Himself.

(3) Every member of the Church has the right and the duty of sharing in its government. Since the Church is a family and a brotherhood, all are equally responsible for its welfare, and not even an Apostle may lord it over God's heritage. To be ordained as a minister does not give a man the right to *rule* the Church; he remains the first among equals, one whose gifts and whose office entitle him to lead but not to compel his brethren. He is called to his office by the members of the Church, who, under the guid-

ance of Christ, recognize in him those gifts of the Spirit which have already made him a minister of Christ. He is ordained not in order to convey a gift, but to acknowledge its presence. And in these and all other acts of the Church, each member has his own share of responsibility. For this reason Congre-

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gationalism has been described as a 'spiritual democracy'. This phrase implies that Congregationalism is more than the mere assertion of the democratic principle in church government. 'We meet as freemen, it is true, but only that we may be more than ever the servants of Christ, not to do our own will but His—not to assert our independence, but rather to manifest our loyalty, and we value our freedom from external control because it leaves larger room for the operation of the Spirit of God'.<sup>1</sup>

The Congregational polity thus outlined claims to lay special emphasis upon a truth that is vital to Christianity, viz. the abiding presence of the Living Christ in His Church. The Catholic Churches, of course, believe in the presence of Christ in the Church, but they teach that this presence depends upon bishops and priests in Apostolic Succession. There is nothing ill the teaching of Jesus or the experience of the Church to justify this limitation of His presence to Churches with an episcopal ministry. The Congregational polity is founded upon the promise of Christ, 'Where two or three are, gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them', and exists to bear witness to the fulfilment of this promise in the life of the Church. It lays upon every Church member the duty of realizing this promise by seeking in the Church, not his own will, but the will of Him Who is present in the Church as its Saviour and Lord. A Congregational church must either realize the presence of Christ, or cease to exist. And the solemn

<sup>1</sup> Francis Wrigley. *Congregationalism and the Church Meeting.*

(Out of print.)

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responsibility that flows from this fact constitutes the special contribution of Congregationalism to the witness of the Church as a whole.

The dependence of Congregationalism upon the presence of Christ in the assembly of the faithful comes out in its attitude towards Creeds. While always ready to give a reason for its faith, it believes that, inasmuch as the Living Christ is always present in His Church to lead it to the truth, Creeds as tests of Church-membership or of fitness for ministerial office are unnecessary and, indeed, harmful in so far as they lead to mental reservation, equivocation and insincerity. Most Congregationalists would accept the Apostles' and the Nicene Creeds as historical statements of the truth they hold; nevertheless, if called upon to state their belief they would prefer to do so in more modern terms, and they would by no means admit that whosoever does not think of the Trinity in terms of the Athanasian Creed, 'without doubt he shall perish everlastinglly'. In these matters Congregationalism stands for freedom of thought and expression; it refuses to bind any man's conscience. Each Congregational church is free to express its loyalty to the great truths of the New Testament in its own way. Years ago the Congregational Union of England and Wales put forth a declaratory statement of the beliefs commonly held among Congregationalists. But this was not intended to bind any Congregational church or any individual Congregationalist. There is no Congregational creed because Congregationalism depends upon the spirit of truth imparted to the Church by the living Christ, and is

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ready to follow the Truth whithersoever it may lead. It believes that so long as Christ is in the midst the Church can never go astray.

To some it will seem a perilous thing for a Church to commit itself solely to the guidance of the Spirit of God in its quest for truth. For human frailty has to be reckoned with. Nevertheless the Congregational faith in the spirit of truth has justified itself. For while the Congregational churches have been free to express the truth in their own way, there has been remarkable agreement among them, and they can justly claim that no Church has been more conspicuously loyal to the great Evangelical truths which others have sought to safeguard by their creeds. But the fact that there are no articles and no confessions to bind them leaves them free to accept such new truth as may be offered, e.g. by biblical scholarship or by natural science. Congregational principles involve respect for every man's conscience and for all forms of Christian faith.

In like manner Congregational churches have liberty in respect of their forms of worship. They are not bound by any rigid liturgical rules, but are free to adopt and adapt, from any source, whatever may enrich their devotional life.

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## V

### CONGREGATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

THE most fundamental of all Congregational Institutions is the church meeting, which is the highest authority under Christ in each church. The church meeting is the assembly of church members for fellowship and decision of church matters under the guidance of their living Lord. It is in the church meeting that Congregationalism bears witness to its reliance upon the presence of Christ. So fundamental is this that without a church meeting a Christian

community might be Congregational in name but not in fact.

The church meeting is usually held once a month and is presided over by the minister. All questions of administration, policy and discipline are under its control. Its functions include: (1) Election of church officers. A Congregational church has the right to choose its own minister, or, rather, to call to its service, as its leader in spiritual things, the man (or woman) whom God has chosen to be its minister. The church meeting also appoints a number of deacons to assist the minister in the spiritual oversight of the church and to serve at the Lord's Table. The office of deacon is justly honoured throughout Congregationalism. It is open to every adult member of the Church, and from the beginning has been

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served by a succession of noble and consecrated Christians. The choice of minister and deacons is a very grave responsibility, for everything depends upon a wise judgment determined by the surrender of every mind to the guidance of Christ. In this matter Congregational church members possess a privilege that is denied in most churches, where the laity have little or no effective voice in the choice of their pastors.

(2) Mere routine details of finance and so forth are usually left to the deacons or to a special finance committee responsible to the church meeting, which is thus left free to discuss the larger questions of the Kingdom of God in its midst. These questions include all that concerns the various organizations of the church, such as the Sunday school, the brotherhood, the young people's societies, and so forth. All these organizations come up from time to time for sympathetic review, so that the programme and policy of the church finds expression in all branches of its work, while its inspiration goes out to all its workers.

(3) The church meeting provides opportunity for Christian fellowship. We are saved, not for ourselves alone, but for one another. We need the sympathy, encouragement and guidance of our fellow-Christians, and they need ours. The Christian life is not easy, and it is good for us to meet in fellowship with others who are fighting the same battle in the service of the same Lord. Young Christians especially find it an immense advantage to have the sympathetic guidance of older and more experienced believers. And

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all whose hearts are lonely and whose burdens are heavy find blessing in the church meeting, for it is a good deal more than the discharge of a few items of routine business; like the Methodist class meeting it is a fellowship of loving hearts seeking to realize the 'Communion of the Holy Spirit'.

(4) The church meeting is the seal of our churchmanship. We come together as those who have entered into a sacred and loving covenant with the Lord who is there in our midst. It is that which makes us a Church. 'When meeting with Christ in communion with fellow-believers, we receive gifts and rise to the possession of powers not possible to single and separate saints. We then become a Church, endowed with the presence and unction of the Holy Ghost, charged with the stewardship of the Gospel, entrusted with the sacred heritage of the Christian sacraments ... and called to mutual oversight and edification in the Lord ... Churches are the creation and instrument of the Holy Ghost. Christ in the heart of each, Christ in the midst of all is the spiritual factor which translates a mere human association into a Christian Church.'<sup>1</sup>

Hence church members are called to the high and holy privilege of realizing their churchmanship through the church meeting. And the privilege carries with it a very solemn responsibility. Every member owes it to Christ and the church to regard every church meeting as a binding engagement; no

excuse for absence which will not stand the scrutiny of conscience in the presence of Christ can ever be adequate. For it is the equal responsibility of all to

<sup>1</sup> Dr Chas. A. Berry. Address to the Congregational Union, 1897.

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ascertain and carry out the Master's will in the assembly of the faithful.

With all its insistence upon the autonomy of the local church, Congregationalism has learned how to combine with it that larger fellowship of the churches which is so marked in the New Testament. This larger fellowship finds expression: (1) In the county unions, which are associations of the churches in their respective areas with a view to fraternal fellowship, the support of the weaker churches, and the work of evangelization and church extension. They usually meet once a year in an assembly consisting of delegates from all the churches in the area. Their work is carried on by officers and committees appointed by the assembly. (2) In the Congregational Union of England and Wales, which exists to promote these and similar objects on a larger scale. It meets once a year in full Assembly of delegates from all the churches. Its executive is a council, consisting of upwards of three hundred persons appointed by the county unions. The council works through numerous committees, which deal with such matters as maintenance of the ministry, ministerial training, superannuation, church extension, work among the young, education, temperance and social service. Most of these committees work in conjunction with similar committees in the counties. Through the council and its committees the Congregational Union of England and Wales is enabled to initiate and carry through comprehensive policies for promoting the efficiency and the well-being of the churches. Nevertheless, like the county unions, it possesses no legislative

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authority. It is a voluntary association with no power to override the autonomy of its members. (3) In many of the larger centres of population, the churches of the city combine their forces for various common ends. These Congregational associations or councils encourage fraternal intercourse by means of regular gatherings, and in some cases further the efforts towards Church maintenance and extension in their own areas. They have frequently been able to maintain the services of a 'down-town' Church in a difficult area after its former congregation has departed to the suburbs.'

It should be remembered that Congregationalism is by no means confined to this country. There are Congregational communities across the seas, in the British dominions, and especially in the United States of America where there is a considerable body of Congregational churches, tracing their origin to the Pilgrim Fathers and their early successors in New England. Contacts between American and British Congregationalism became very close during the nineteenth century and led to the convening of an International Congregational Council in London in the year 1891. The Council has met six times since then, alternately in the United States of America and Great Britain. Much has thus been done towards creating and maintaining in Congregationalism a consciousness of world responsibility. Two meetings of the Council have been held since the Second World War, at Wellesley, Mass., in 1949, and at St Andrews, Scotland, 1953. In passing it should be noted that the small but influential group of Congregational

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churches in Canada now form a constituent part, along with the Methodists and Presbyterians, of the United Church of Canada. It is also affiliated with the

Remonstrant Brotherhood in the Netherlands, and with the Swedish Mission Covenant Church.

(5) Congregationalism takes its share in the task of world-evangelization through the agency of the London Missionary Society, which was founded in 1795 to preach the Gospel in heathen lands. The Society has a notable and honourable record as a pioneer in many fields, and its roll of missionaries includes names with a world-wide reputation, e.g., Morrison, Moffat, Livingstone, Griffith-John, Chalmers, and many more. To-day, the Society is responsible for work in India, Malaya, South and Central Africa, Madagascar, Papua, and the South Seas. It is administered by a board of directors appointed, some by the county unions, and others by local groups of churches which are organized for the support of the Society under the name of Auxiliaries.

(6) In like manner Congregationalism has played its part in the building up of the Church of Christ in the British dominions, by means of the Colonial Missionary Society, whose object is to keep the flag of the Church abreast with the frontiers of Empire. It helps to maintain Congregational churches in those parts of the colonies where the population is increasing too rapidly for local resources. It sends its missionaries up to the lonely outposts to keep the families of pioneers in touch with religious life. It welcomes young people in the great seaports abroad

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and endeavours to surround them with the helpful influences of the Christianity of the homeland.

It is the duty and privilege of every Congregationalist to support by his prayers and his gifts, the splendid work of our two missionary societies.

**VI****THE CONGREGATIONAL MINISTRY**

**I**N Congregationalism the ministry does not constitute a separate priestly class. We have learned from the New Testament that all believers are priests unto God, that Christ is the great High-Priest and that there is no other priesthood. The minister may be a medium of divine grace in a greater degree than his brethren but not in a different sense. He is a leader among brethren and stands among them as minister because first he has been called and chosen by God for this sacred office. A church that calls him to be its minister does so under the guidance of the same divine Spirit that called him inwardly to become a minister of Christ. All that the church's action does is to acknowledge and ratify the call of God.

'The relation between minister and Church is a beautiful fellowship in divine things; the Church makes it possible for a man to be set apart, that he may, by a life devoted to the study of God's message, and by a communion with God on his people's behalf, help his brethren to maintain their spiritual warfare in true and worthy manner. Church and minister exist for the Master's service; and together they do the Master's will, none daring to make them afraid, no power of priest or dictate of human authority coming between them and their Lord.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Granville Sharp. Our *Spiritual Heritage*, p. 87. (9d., Independent Press, Ltd.)

The normal mode of entrance into the Congregational ministry is through a special course of training at one of our Theological Colleges. These colleges are sustained by voluntary contributions from

churches and individuals and are under the control of committees appointed mainly by the subscribers. Young men (or women) who display the requisite gifts and show evidence of an inward call of God to the ministry, are recommended to one or other of the colleges by their own church meeting, with the support of the county union or the province (see p. 38). The governing body of the college, after satisfying itself by examination or otherwise as to the candidate's fitness, admits him to the prescribed course of study, which covers from four to six years. When this course is completed he is free to accept a call from a church to become its pastor, and it is this call which constitutes the recognition on the part of the church of the inward call of God in the soul. Then follows ordination. A college course alone does not qualify for ordination. It does not make a man a minister. It is the pastoral relation to a church, constituted by a call, or by an appointment to the mission field, which qualifies for ordination and entrance into the ministry.

If a man who has been trained for the ministry is appointed to the mission field, or is called to a teaching post in a theological college, or undertakes some other work of Christian service for which a full ministerial training is required, appropriate arrangements are made for his ordination. But normally a minister is ordained *by the Church with which he*

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enters for the first time into the pastoral relation. He is ordained, not by a bishop, nor by elders, nor by the county union, nor by the Congregational union, nor by anyone acting in its name, but by his own people acting in the name of Christ. Those who conduct the ordination service do so as representing the local church and at its invitation. Representatives of other Congregational churches are invited to take part in token of fraternal fellowship, and to emphasize the fact that a minister is a minister of Christ and of the

whole Church as well as of his own church. But the ordination is by the local church itself, which thus assumes a solemn responsibility in which all church members share. It should be added that in ordaining a minister a Church does something which affects all other Churches in communion with it, and consequently no Church is right in assuming this responsibility without the concurrence of those other Churches, as expressed through their responsible representatives. When a minister passes from one church to become pastor of another, he is not ordained a second time. He enters upon his new pastorate with a solemn service of Induction.

Ordination does not convey any powers or rights which do not belong to the Christian believer as such. There is no ministerial function, from preaching to the administration of the sacraments, which may not be discharged by any Christian when invited by the church to act in its name. Women may be ordained equally with men. In all these matters the church is responsible for its acts solely to Christ.

It is clear that Congregationalism can recognize

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no ministerial office superior to that of the pastor of a congregation who, in Apostolic times, bore the title of 'Bishop'. Individual ministers, on account of personal qualities or because they hold important offices in connection with the county or Congregational Unions, naturally acquire great influence among the churches. But they are on that account neither more nor less ministers than their brethren. They do not constitute a higher hierarchy with authority to command obedience.

In recent years the Congregational Union has instituted a new type, though not a new order, of ministry by setting apart nine moderators to act as advisers of churches and ministers, each within a distinctive geographical area called a province, which consists of one or more county unions. Their intimate

knowledge both of the churches and of the ministers enables them to render valuable service in many ways. They are a concrete manifestation of the fellowship that exists between the Congregational churches. The moderators however are helpers and not controllers. They have no power to interfere in any way with the spiritual autonomy of any church, nor have they any authority over their fellow-ministers. Their function is to serve and advise. They have no power to ordain, though it is recognized as fitting (not necessary) that they should be present at ordinations. They are in no sacerdotal sense bishops. They are appointed to their office by the Assembly of the National Union, on the nomination of a special committee representing the counties in the province concerned. Thus, in the institution of moderators,

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Congregationalism, humbly dependent upon the leadership of the ever-present Christ, has learned how to enlarge and strengthen its organization without disloyalty to its fundamental principles.

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## VII

### FREE-CHURCHMANSHIP

OUR fathers were called Dissenters and Non-conformists because they dissented from the principle of State control over the Church and refused to conform to the requirements of the State in matters of religion. For generations they were proud to bear these names, which were flung at them in contempt. To-day, preferring positive to negative designations, we speak of ourselves as Free Churchmen, thereby emphasizing our contention that the Church is responsible solely to its Lord and Master for its

discipline and its life, and must therefore be free from all secular and priestly control.

The Free Church witness is still needed. The Anglican Church, in spite of the fact that it includes less than half the nation, claims to be the national Church. It stands in close connection with the State, and enjoys privileges not accorded to other Churches. This State connection is what we mean by 'establishment', and we oppose Establishment, not because it involves privileges denied to ourselves, but because it involves control of the Church by the State. The Acts of Supremacy of 1534 and 1559 which abolished the authority of the Pope, claimed for the Crown the sole right to rule the Church.

It was against this subordination of the Church to the secular power that our Congregational fathers fought so stoutly. They claimed that the

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church should be free to follow the will of Christ without interference either from the State or from the Papacy. For this they were imprisoned; many of them done to death, and others driven into exile beyond the seas. At the revolution of 1688, Non-conformists won for themselves the right to assemble and worship in their own way. The Church of England, however, did not secure its freedom. It remained under the control of the State—a control none the less real in that the tyrannical methods of Henry and Elizabeth disappeared. Hence Anglicanism has to endure certain restrictions in endeavouring to bear its witness in accordance with the will of Christ. The laws of the Church cannot be altered, nor can a single word in the Prayer Book be changed, without the consent of Parliament—a purely secular body including men of all faiths, and some of none. The highest officers of the Church of England are appointed, not by the Church itself, but by the Crown, on the advice of the Prime Minister, who, as frequently happens to-day, may not even be a

member of the Church of England. In like manner, an Anglican congregation rarely has the power to choose its own minister. It must accept a clergyman nominated by the owner of the living, who again, need not be a member of the Church of England, or even a Christian. In recent years, thanks to the witness of the Free Churches, Anglicanism has won a certain measure of freedom. The Enabling Act has given it power to set up parochial councils to act with the clergyman in the administration of the parish church, and a representative assembly which may

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*initiate* legislation for the Church. Nevertheless the parochial councils have no control over the clergy, and Parliament still retains a veto over the acts of the assembly.

Our loyalty to Christ demands from us a steadfast witness against the control of the Church by the State. Not in any spirit of denominational jealousy or of sectarian bitterness, but solely because we are jealous for the rights of Christ in His Church, we cannot accept establishment. We believe that the Church, in accordance with the promise of its Master, has the right to make its own laws and elect its own officers. It should be noted that disestablishment has been effected in Ireland and in Wales with gain rather than loss to the spiritual effectiveness of the Church.

Further, Congregationalism stands for liberty from the bondage of sacerdotalism. By sacerdotalism we mean the conception of exclusive priestly powers as belonging to a special order of men whereby they bestow spiritual blessings upon their fellows. This is the special feature of Roman Catholicism, which teaches that we can only be saved through sacraments dispensed by authorized priests. The emphasis upon Apostolic Succession has this sacramental theory in view. Only bishops in due succession from the apostles can bestow that mysterious grace which transforms a man into a priest, with

power to pronounce absolution and to convert bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. The sacraments become magical acts performed for our benefit by men who possess powers denied to the ordinary Christian, and their mysterious character is

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heightened by the use of special vestments and elaborate ritual.

The sacerdotal element is sufficiently manifest in the Anglican Prayer Book to enable the Anglo-Catholic party in the Church of England to go a long way in the Romeward direction. The Church of England is divided in its witness. On one side there is the Evangelical party, which minimizes sacerdotal claims and regards faith in the redeeming power of Christ as the sole condition of salvation; on the other side there is the Anglo-Catholic party; which lays stress upon sacramental acts performed by an exclusive priesthood as essential elements in Christian life. Hence the Church of England speaks with an uncertain voice. The cause of Protestantism is unsafe in her hands.

Congregationalists are committed by their fundamental principles to whole-hearted repudiation of sacerdotalism and sacramentalism. They believe that faith brings about direct access to -God through Christ, and that we need no other priestly mediator. They believe that the grace of God cannot be confined to any human channels whatsoever, and that the power of the sacraments to nourish our spiritual life depends not upon any priestly 'order' but upon the presence of Christ to faith. Hence they hold that any Christian man or woman, duly authorized by the Church, whether ordained or not, may preside at the Lord's Table. For all the Lord's people are priests and none have exclusive powers.

Hence our Free-Churchmanship is based not upon prejudice, or the desire to be peculiar, but upon

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spiritual principles which we have learned from the New Testament. What others call our Non-conformity is our loyalty to Christ as we have learned of Him, and our zeal for the Church as the fellowship of Christian believers depending upon the living presence of their Lord.

We Congregationalists also claim to be free in that we are not bound by the standards of the past. We have liberty to develop our Christian thought and practice in dependence upon the Spirit of Christ who dwells in the Church. Our fathers did not bind us by any theological fetters. They believed that they and their successors were free to follow the spirit of truth. As John Robinson said, ‘The Lord hath more light and truth to break forth from His holy word’. In their covenant-fellowships they pledged themselves to Christ and to one another ‘to walk in the ways of the Lord according as He hath revealed them unto us, or *shall* reveal them unto us’. They committed themselves in a courageous venture of faith to the ever-growing revelation of Christ in His Church. They refused to bind themselves to creeds, not because they believed less than others, but because they believed more.

The men of 1662 refused to declare their ‘unfeigned consent and assent’ to the contents of the Prayer Book at the bidding of the State. They went out and established Congregational churches, which for more than 250 years have borne their witness to freedom of conscience. We, like them, gladly recognize that the Prayer Book contains much that is beautiful and helpful. We are glad to enrich our own

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worship by its means. But we believe that the Spirit of God is free to express itself in other forms of worship, especially in view of changed conditions involving needs not contemplated in the Prayer Book.

Among our Anglican brethren to-day there is a widespread demand for the revision of the Prayer Book so as to bring it into line with modern needs. In point of fact, after years of preparation and discussion, an alternative book was approved by Convocation and submitted to Parliament for authorization in 1928. It was twice rejected by the House of Commons—a crucial instance of the control of the State over the Anglican Church—the reason for the rejection being the fear lest the use of new liturgical forms should undermine the Protestant character of the Church. Nevertheless, the Book is used in many parishes as a supplement to the authorized Prayer Book. But even so, Congregationalists, while grateful for any new help that may come in this way, will still refuse to bind their consciences by the acceptance of doctrinal tests.

Congregationalists cherish their freedom because it makes for spiritual progress. In view of the changing thought and widening outlook of our day they cast themselves humbly upon Him who leads the church in the way of truth. They believe that Christ is ready to give to His people the light they need. Hence the freedom they claim is freedom to think the thoughts of Christ, freedom to act in accordance with His will, freedom to shape a Christian policy and programme to meet the needs and the challenge of our own day and generation.

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## VIII

### CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

**I**N common with the great majority of Christians throughout the world, Congregationalists practise the rites of baptism and the Lord's Supper, which, as being specially symbolic of the great truths of the

Gospel, are called sacraments. They are both founded in the commands of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> Further, in common with most Protestants, Congregationalists confine the term ‘Sacrament’ to these two observances, and reject those Roman Sacraments which are not founded in the teaching of Jesus.

In the New Testament, baptism symbolizes the cleansing of the soul by Christ with the forgiveness of sins. In modern times Roman Catholics and many Anglicans believe that the rite of baptism itself cleanses the soul and makes it a participator in the blessings of the Gospel, so that without baptism, no soul can be saved. This is the doctrine of Baptismal Regeneration. Those who hold it believe that from being children of the devil we become children of God through baptism, that it is baptism that makes us Christians, and that therefore no unbaptized person should receive Christian burial.

Congregationalists, together with Evangelical Christians in general, both Free Church and Anglican, reject the doctrine of Baptismal Regeneration. We believe that it is faith and not baptism that makes

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<sup>1</sup> Matt. xxviii. 19; Luke xxii. 19.

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us members of Christ and heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven. We hold the New Testament view of baptism as a symbol rather than as a vehicle of the divine grace that forgives and cleanses the soul. In our Lord’s command to baptize,<sup>1</sup> baptism is connected not with regeneration but with teaching. Similarly in Acts ii. 38, baptism is connected with repentance, and does not itself convey remission of sins but looks forward to it. Throughout the New Testament, baptism is the sign or symbol of an inner change wrought by Christ, and does not of itself produce that change in us or alter our relation to God.

Congregationalists, in accordance with the traditional practice of the Church from the early cen-

turies, baptize children, whereas our Baptist brethren, who share our views as to the nature and government of the Church, confine baptism to adults, on the ground that in the New Testament baptism follows confession of faith as its sign and seal. In like manner Baptists hold that baptism is not properly administered without a complete immersion in water, whereas Congregationalists follow the more usual practice of sprinkling with a few drops of water, on the ground that the quantity of water is a matter of indifference, since sprinkling equally well with immersion symbolizes the inward cleansing, which is the first great gift of the Gospel. The Baptists do not suppose that any special virtue attaches to the manner of baptism; they adhere to immersion simply on the ground that it was the primitive practice. Congregationalists however point out that there

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<sup>1</sup> Matt. xxviii. 19–20.

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is no proof that immersion was universal in Apostolic times. They believe also that too great insistence upon the manner of baptism is apt to over-emphasize its material aspect at the cost of the symbolical.

Like ourselves, Baptists hold that forgiveness and regeneration come through repentance and faith, but inasmuch as they regard Baptism as a sign that sins have *already* been washed away, they restrict it to those who are old enough to make confession of faith and are ready to take upon themselves the obligations of church-membership. They point out that, in the New Testament, baptism is connected with belief,<sup>1</sup> with repentance<sup>2</sup> and with acceptance of the word of God.<sup>3</sup> Congregationalists, however, urge that adult baptism was the normal rule in Apostolic times simply because the Apostles preached as missionaries among the heathen. Their hearers were adults, for whom there could be no question of baptism until they were ready to submit themselves to

Christian teaching. As in heathen countries to-day, conversion and baptism followed one another naturally. But the case is different when we are dealing with families already Christian. The Old Testament rite of circumcision and its doctrine of the solidarity of the people of God would suggest that the children of Christian households already have their place in the Kingdom of God. The words of Peter in Acts ii. 38, 39, would certainly suggest to his Jewish audience that baptism as well as the promise ‘is to you and to your children’. Hence in those cases where it is recorded in the New Testament that certain persons

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<sup>1</sup> Mark xvi. 16. <sup>2</sup> Acts ii. 38. <sup>3</sup> Acts ii. 41.

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were baptized *together with their households*,<sup>1</sup> it may be assumed that children were included. Further, it does not accord with the teaching of Jesus to suppose that children are outside the saving purpose of God, or have no relation to the Kingdom; and to leave them without any formal recognition of their place in the Kingdom until they are old enough to claim it for themselves seems to slight the Lord’s word, ‘for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven’.

Hence Congregationalists believe, in accordance with Matt. xxviii. 19, 20, that it is not believers who are to be baptized but disciples, i.e. those who are going to be instructed in Christian truth with a view to faith and forgiveness. They regard the rite as declaring the free offer of cleansing grace to all, and they hold that the grace of God is most signally proclaimed when the subjects of baptism are little children regarded already by God as potential inheritors of the divine blessings.

On the Congregational view, baptism is a solemn covenant entered into between God on the one side, and parents and Church on the other. For His part God, as the Giver of life, makes His claim upon the child and sets His name upon it. He requires the

parents and the Church to teach the child ‘all things whatsoever I have commanded you’, and at the same time promises the grace that forgives and sustains. The parents for their part, acknowledge that their child belongs to God and that it is their duty to bring it up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. humbly depending upon the Holy Spirit to make

<sup>1</sup> Acts xvi. 15.33; 1 Cor. i. 16.

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their teaching effective. Moreover the Church joins with the parents in this solemn act of dedication and acknowledgment of duty, and pledges itself to aid the parents so to train the child that in due course it shall come to claim the divine promise for itself. Hence it is the practice in many churches to enter the name of every baptized child upon the Cradle Roll, thus connecting it with the Primary Department from the very beginning.

Since baptism does not itself convey regeneration, it is not of primary importance. It is not essential for salvation. Jesus did not Himself baptize,<sup>1</sup> and in Paul’s view preaching is more important than baptizing.<sup>2</sup> Baptism nevertheless is to be cherished and maintained because of the precious promise it contains and the solemn appeal it makes. Young people who hesitate to commit themselves to Christ should be encouraged by the fact that they were surrendered to God in their early days. God has already put His claim upon them; the Church has already instructed them in the truth; they are not outside the Kingdom; God has already promised it to them as their spiritual birthright and has offered all needful grace. Let them not despise their birthright, but rather make it their own by honouring the vow of their parents in a solemn self-surrender. Ever since their baptism they have been in the Church as members of the family of

God. And now in loyal gratitude for all that the Church has done for them, let them take their rightful place in its responsibilities and its service.

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<sup>1</sup> John iv.2. <sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. i. 14-17.

## IX

### THE LORD'S SUPPER

OUR observance of the Lord's Supper is based upon the words and acts of Jesus on the night when He was betrayed. Breaking bread as the symbol of His broken body, and taking wine as the symbol of His blood shed for His disciples, He gave both to them that they might understand that His death was to be the source of life and of power. He bade them repeat this simple act in remembrance of Him, so that, whenever they took bread and wine in fellowship, they might realize afresh all that His death meant for them. Hence Christians ever since have remembered the Lord's death by partaking of bread and wine. It is a simple but suggestive rite, creating a vivid consciousness of fellowship among Christian brethren united in their love for the Master who gave Himself for them, and creating a vivid consciousness of the presence of Christ in the midst of His people.

In the course of centuries this simple rite suffered from the invasion of superstitious ideas. It was believed that the bread and wine were not merely symbols of the broken body and the shed blood, but that in some mysterious way their substance was changed in the sacrament into the actual body and blood of Christ, so that what the communicants received was no longer bread and wine but the physical substance of the Lord Himself. This is the

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Roman doctrine of Transubstantiation, which was also held with some modification by Martin Luther, and is held in more or less refined form by the Anglo-Catholics in the Church of England. It is taught that after consecration by a priest the bread and wine are miraculously transformed; they become the body and blood of Christ sacrificed once more for our sins. Thus the Lord's Supper becomes a sacrifice, the communion table an altar, and the minister a priest, who has special authority from God to perform this miracle and this sacrifice on our behalf.

Further, it is taught that inasmuch as the bread and wine have become the actual body and blood of Christ, they may and ought to be worshipped. Hence in Roman and Anglo-Catholic Churches, consecrated bread and wine are placed upon the 'altar' and remain there for the people to worship. So deeply rooted is this idea that some Anglicans cannot realize the presence of Christ in the church at all, unless they know that the consecrated elements are there: they cannot worship in a building which does not reserve the 'body and blood of the Lord' upon the altar.

These strange doctrines sprang out of a genuine spiritual experience. Christians felt so vivid a sense of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper that they tried to explain it as a physical fact, and they were helped towards this by a crudely literal interpretation of the words of Jesus, 'This is my body'. Nevertheless, the spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper can be, and is, realized among large numbers of Christians without any need of miraculous and physical

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accompaniments; and further, if these words of Jesus are to be taken literally, why not also such sayings as 'I am the door', 'Ye are the salt of the earth', and so on? The Bible is full of metaphor and symbol, and it

it is the most natural thing to take these words of Jesus at the Supper as symbolic. Hence we believe that the bread and wine are memorial symbols of the one Sacrifice offered once for all and needing no repetition. The body and blood of Christ are the life of God poured out through Christ into the lives of believers. Christ is present spiritually and not physically. The New Testament has nothing to say about any priestly miracle or sacrifice in the Lord's Supper.

For Congregationalists the Lord's Supper has a threefold significance.

(1) It is a Commemoration. It looks to the past. It is a vivid and solemn reminder of the redemption wrought for us by the death of Christ. We come to it in joyous remembrance of all that He was and all that He did for us. Our thoughts centre in the Cross, whose meaning is brought home to us afresh in this simple way. 'This do in remembrance of Me.'

(2) It is a Communion. It looks to the present. In the first place we have fellowship with one another. We are not alone at the Lord's Table. Our brethren share the feast. We come to realize our oneness in faith and love not only with those who participate with us, but with the whole Church of God from the beginning until now. And in this glad fellowship our faith and love are strengthened. But more than this, we have fellowship with the living Lord. We realize His presence according to His promise. He is present

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in gracious redeeming power to forgive our sins, to heal our sorrows and to strengthen us against temptation. He imparts Himself to us; He bestows His own life upon us; we come to share His thoughts and His passion for the souls of men. We keep the feast, not only with one another, but also with Him. Hence the Lord's Supper is a supreme act of that creative faith in the presence of Christ upon which the Church is founded. It is not merely a commemoration on the believer's part; it is a communication on Christ's

part,<sup>1</sup> a pouring out of the life of God upon every believing heart. Thus we receive Christ as well as bread and wine. For He is present to equip the Church for its great tasks and ourselves for our personal witness. Hence we come to the Lord's Supper in faith, not relying upon the sacrament to do something for us by our mere presence, but receiving Christ in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving.

(3) It is also a Consecration. It looks to the future. It proclaims the Lord's death 'till He come'. It reminds us that the work of Christ is not yet complete and bids us look forward with eager confidence to the coming of the Kingdom in power when at last the purpose of the Cross is fulfilled. Our Lord is not dead, but living; He is working in His Church, and He invites us to work with Him for the salvation of the world and the establishment of His Kingdom. Hence we approach the Lord's Supper in a spirit of consecration. The word *sacramentum* was applied originally to the oath of loyalty given by the Roman soldier to his Emperor. In like manner we pledge our-

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. x. 16.

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selves to Jesus Christ our King in the Lord's Supper. We renew our vows to live for Him and to be more worthy by His grace, of the love that redeems us.

It follows from this that we cannot rightly observe the Lord's Supper without preparation of mind and heart. The value of the sacrament for ourselves depends upon what we bring to it. If it becomes a mere routine act that challenges no thought and arouses no expectation, we receive very little. Participation in the Saviour's presence can be theirs alone who bring a reverent mind and devout spirit. Therefore we ought to prepare for the Lord's Supper by self-examination,<sup>1</sup> by quiet meditation and by prayer. Prayerful review of our life in the light of the commands of Jesus, and meditation upon such passages

as the Sermon on the Mount and 1 Cor. xiii, will greatly help to produce in us that receptive condition which is necessary for the full appropriation of the blessings of the Supper. If our heart is set upon Christ, though we have sins to mourn, these should not keep us back from the Table where Christ gives Himself to faith in cleansing and renewal.

The spiritual presence of Christ can be realized in other ways besides the Lord's Supper. Nevertheless this sacrament has special claims upon our observance: (1) Because it was our Lord's own request that we should do this in remembrance of Him; (2) because for nearly 2,000 years Christians have found in it a powerful appeal to faith and a perennial source of spiritual nourishment; (3) because it holds the Church together in obedience to Christ and promotes

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. xi. 28.

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loving fellowship in the common life which we receive from Him; and (4) because it sets forth, in an unforgettable way, the central truths of the Gospel, viz. the love of God made manifest in the Incarnation and in the Sacrifice of Christ for us, and in the gift of eternal life through Him. These Truths can never die so long as the Lord's Supper is observed.

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## X

### CHURCH MEMBERSHIP: (*a*) ITS BASIS

THE Church, as we have seen, is the divine society which exists to further the interests of the Kingdom. It is the Body of Christ, wherein He dwells as the vitalising Spirit and continues His redeeming work. Hence only Christians can be members of the Church, and by Christians we mean

believers in Jesus Christ, persons who stand for the Kingdom, having surrendered themselves to the leadership of Him who is the Head of the Church and the Saviour of all.

In Congregationalism, therefore, the basis of Church membership is confession of faith in Christ. When Peter said to Jesus, ‘Thou art the Christ the Son of the Living God’, Jesus accepted that confession and declared that He would build His Church upon it.<sup>1</sup> It is a confession of faith in Jesus as Christ, i.e. the anointed King. This means that we accept Him as the supreme authority in our life. We pledge ourselves to obey Him at all costs as sole Lord of conscience. But it is also a confession of faith in Jesus as Son of the Living God. By this we acknowledge that God approaches us more nearly in Jesus than in any other way. Jesus has brought to us, as no other can, the power and the love of God to bless and to

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<sup>1</sup> Matt. xvi. 13–19.

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save. And so we confess Him as our Saviour as well as our King. Not only does He show us the way of God; He gives us power to walk therein.

It is this confession of Christ as King and Saviour that declares a man to be a Christian. We are not made Christians by any external rite, nor by belief in any particular doctrine, but by the inward surrender of our soul to its Lord. And this is what Congregationalism requires of its Church members. They pledge themselves to follow Christ in all things and commit themselves to the divine ends for which the Church exists.

Further, every Christian *ought* to be a member of the Church by open confession. Some people neglect this, and are content to remain in association with the Church without identifying themselves with its membership. ‘Why should I become a member of the Church?’ they say. ‘I can be a Christian without

that.' To which we must answer that no one can adequately discharge his duty as a Christian so long as he refuses to take upon himself the privileges and obligations of Church membership.

(1) The Christian should become a church member *for his own sake*. By taking that step he commits himself publicly to Jesus Christ. So long as we are not church members we are apt to shelter behind the excuse that we are not pledged to the service of Christ. We are free to serve Him or not just as it suits us. Hence the absence of open confession does not encourage strong Christian character. If, on the other hand, the confession has been made, it helps us to stand by our pledge when temptation comes. We

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have faced the issue once for all and made our choice, and we do not mean to go back upon it.

(2) The Christian should become a church member *for the sake of the Church*. Instead of asking 'What good will church membership do for me?' he should ask 'What good will my membership do for the church?' We strengthen the church by joining its membership. The task of the church is so great that it needs the help of every Christian; it needs his witness, his encouragement, his service. The church can only exist at all by uniting together those who are in earnest in the cause of Christ. And it has the right to expect from us, whom it has helped so much, that we shall join its fellowship, shoulder its burdens, and identify ourselves with its interests.

(3) The Christian should become a church member *for the sake of Christ*. Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for it. The Church is His Body and gives to Him what no other society can give, viz. a visible presence on earth and an organism through which He can work. He expects us, therefore, to love and serve the Church. He looks to us to play our part in making the Church all that it should be for Him.

But at this point other difficulties arise in your minds. (1) You feel that you are not good enough for church membership. Far better you should feel than imagine for a moment that you can be 'good enough' for Christ. No one is good enough in the sense that he is a perfect Christian. But church membership is not a profession of goodness but a confession of faith. It does not mean that we have already attained or are already perfect. It means we have got

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out faces in the right direction. We are looking unto Jesus in the confidence that our desire to serve Him in loyal devotion will issue in some measure of that goodness which now seems so far beyond us. You remain outside the Church because you are afraid of inconsistent conduct. But surely, if you really love Christ and desire in your heart to serve Him, you are greatly inconsistent when you refuse to stand for Him in public. And the Church fellowship is there to help you to live worthily of your profession. Intimate association with Christian people in the fellowship of the Church will strengthen you both by sympathy and by example.

(2) Or again, you hesitate because you cannot believe all that other Christians believe. But no one expects that you should. There are many points on which Christians differ without ceasing to be Christians, and there are many things that will become clearer to you as your experience develops in fellowship with those who are older and more mature. Suffice it for the present that you are willing to pledge yourself to Christ, to do His will as far as you understand it, and to learn of Him as the years go by. That is all the Church requires of you, for that is all He requires Himself.

Therefore do not be afraid. You will not be examined as to your creed, nor will there be any demand for a particular form of religious experience, but simply for faith in Jesus Christ. Are you willing to

take Him as your Saviour and your Lord, trusting in the help that He has promised? If so, you should become a church member.

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The mode of procedure varies slightly in different churches and may vary according to the age and experience of the applicant. But in any case the first step is to get into touch with the minister, and to tell him that you desire to join the Church. He may ask you to attend a candidate's class, he may give you some books to read, or he may have a long personal talk with you. When he is satisfied as to your faith and the sincerity of your desire to serve Christ, he will nominate you at the next church meeting. The church meeting may appoint one or two who know you well and to whom you can speak without timidity, to visit you and assure themselves of your sincerity and of your understanding of the step you propose to take. At the next church meeting the report of the visitors is presented and the vote of the church is taken. Then, either at the church meeting or at the next Communion service, you are received into membership by the right hand of fellowship.

The fact that we are thus received by the vote of the church is a great encouragement to us. The confidence of the church in us and the fact that in receiving us into its membership it pledges itself to help, advise and encourage us in our Christian life, strengthens our faith and our will to follow Christ. But above all we are helped by the presence of Christ in the fellowship of His people, and we ought never to forget that our trust is in Him and not in the Church. It is our faith in Christ and not our membership of the Church that saves us.

## XI

### CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

#### (B) ITS OBLIGATIONS

By joining the Church you have publicly committed yourself to Christ. Henceforth the Church and its interests will occupy a very large place in your thoughts and affections. For the Church is not a society formed by the will of men, but is founded in the will of Christ, who is the source of its life and its authority. Hence neglect of its interests is disloyalty to the Master, to whom the members of the Church are responsible for the discharge of their duties. What are these duties?

(1) *Regular attendance at Public Worship.*—It is our duty to contribute to the worship of the Church both by our presence and by our sympathetic participation. Spiritual slackness on our part, worldliness of mind or demeanour, will tend to lower the spiritual tone of the service and hinder the fullness of blessing that should accrue to all. We should make a point of being present Sunday by Sunday with mind and heart prepared, and where possible we should also attend the week evening service and such other meetings as we can most regularly and profitably attend.

(2) *Our full share in the work of the Church.*—It is a good thing for young church members at the very

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outset to take up some definite work in the church. The nature of the work will depend upon our own gifts and tastes. If we are musical we may join the choir; if we are interested in children and have some

gift for teaching we may find work in the school or in the scouts or guides. Or we may serve on the missionary committee, or undertake the task of collecting subscriptions for some object in which the church is interested. In any case there is room for all and work for all, and we cannot expect to realize the full blessing of Christian fellowship if we leave all the work to others.

(3) *Our full share in the government of the Church.*—It is our duty to acquaint ourselves with the affairs of the church, and to count regular attendance at the church meeting as a sacred obligation. We are full citizens of the Kingdom of God and cannot leave it to others to discharge the obligations of our citizenship. The well-being of the church is just as much our responsibility as anyone else's.

(4) *Financial support of the Church up to the full measure of our ability.*—Consecrated giving plays an important part in Christian service. In this respect we never can do too much for Him who has done everything for us. We need to cultivate method in our Christian giving, setting aside, if possible, a definite portion of our income for the work of the Lord, so that our giving may grow as our power to give grows. A fair contribution when our income was small is no longer a fair contribution when our income is larger.<sup>1</sup> And further, we need to cultivate

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. 1 Cor. xvi. 2.

wide vision in our giving. We have not completed our Christian duty when we have paid our contribution to our own church. There is the London Missionary Society, and the county unions, and the colleges, as well as the numerous calls upon Christian generosity that come from outside the church, e.g. orphanages and other philanthropic agencies. All these claims should be remembered by the church member, and if he is to do his duty all round, he

should review his circumstances year by year, and determine how much he can afford to give to each as well as to the church.

(5) *Cultivation of habits of private devotion.*—To join the church is only the beginning. If our membership of the Body of Christ is to be real, and if, in consequence, we are to receive from the church all that its fellowship can give, we must maintain our own spiritual life at the highest possible level. We must dwell much with God, allowing nothing to interfere with our morning and evening devotions, and snatching moments, even in the busiest days, for quiet thought and prayer. And we must pray for others as well as for ourselves, and especially for the Church and its concerns throughout the world. We cannot expect to live unselfish lives if our prayers are self-centred. And besides prayer, we need to be constantly using our Bibles. The hasty reading of a passage every day is not enough. We need to ponder over it, to submit ourselves to its rich suggestiveness, until it becomes the very word of God for us. We shall find much help too in the great religious classics. And above all, we shall find great nourishment for

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our spiritual life in the Lord's Supper if we approach it in the right spirit.

(6) *Cultivation of a brotherly spirit among our fellow members.*—The practice of Christian love must begin somewhere. Let it begin with our own church as a body of people among whom we are bound, under all circumstances, to show kindness, patience, thoughtfulness and courtesy even towards those who attract us least. If a fellow-member is overtaken in a fault, it is our duty not to cold-shoulder him but to restore him in a spirit of meekness.<sup>1</sup> Anything that leads to quarrelsomeness and division among Christian brethren is a breakdown in the spirit of love. In the church we have the opportunity of basing every relationship in mutual love, and it is clear that unless

we can make love mean everything among our brethren, we shall never be able to make it mean much in the world outside.

(7) *Maintenance of our Church-membership on removal to a new district.*—When we join a church, we join *the* Church. Hence when we leave the neighbourhood of the church to whose fellowship we belong, and can no longer share in its life and service, it is our duty to unite ourselves in fellowship with some church nearer at hand. For this purpose we receive from our former church a letter of transfer which is accepted by the new one as full proof of our membership in the Church of Christ. Hence we do not join the Church for a second time but simply continue our membership by transferring it to a new fellowship. Whenever removal necessitates a break

<sup>1</sup> Gal. vi. 1.

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in our active membership of a church, we should apply at once for a letter of transfer. To neglect it may lead us to forget it altogether and thus drop out of church-membership through sheer carelessness.

(8) *Loyalty to our own denomination.*—As members of the Church we are bound to honour the whole Church of Christ; there should be nothing of sectarian narrowness or bigotry in our attitude towards our fellow-Christians. Nevertheless we ought to manifest a special loyalty towards Congregationalism. The Congregational churches have a great history of which we ought to be proud; it is good for us to learn as much as we can about that history in order that the story of the past may quicken our fidelity to the witness of the present. Moreover, we ought to interest ourselves in the doings and the problems of Congregationalism to-day. Religious journals like the *Christian World* and the *British Weekly* will keep

us informed from week to week, while the *Congregational Monthly* and the *Congregational Quarterly* will keep us in touch with the best minds in our Churches. And finally the L.M.S. *Chronicle* and *News from Afar* will tell us about the work of our Congregational missionaries in foreign lands.

Further, our loyalty to Congregationalism will embrace its institutions. We should interest ourselves in the work of our county unions, of the Congregational Union of England and Wales, of the London Missionary Society and the Commonwealth Missionary Society, of our colleges and schools. All these are playing their part in building up the Congregationalism of the future, and if we are loyal

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Congregationalists we shall be proud of them and solicitous for their welfare. Thus we shall realize our fellowship, not only with the members of our own Church, but also with all our fellow-Congregationalists in this land, and indeed throughout the whole world. Together with them we shall rejoice in our goodly heritage, and work and pray that it may be handed down to those who come after, not merely undiminished and unimpaired, but more adequately equipped than ever for the work to which God has called it.

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## XII

### THE CHURCH CATHOLIC

**W**HILE emphasizing the spiritual autonomy of the individual congregation of faithful believers, Congregationalism is well aware of its obligations and responsibilities as part of that Universal Church of Christ which includes all Christian people of every denomination and of every land. It holds that those

who become members of a Congregational church thereby become members of the whole Church, the Body of Christ, from which no true disciples of Jesus Christ can ever be excluded; and inasmuch as the term ‘Catholic’ in its primitive sense means ‘Universal’, Congregationalism claims to be part of the Catholic Church and refuses to acquiesce in the limitation of the term to anyone particular denomination whether Roman, Anglican or Eastern. The most truly Catholic Church is that which gladly and fully accords to all professing Christians their rightful place within the one Church of Christ, and from that point of view Congregationalism may truly claim to be more Catholic than the Churches which seek to abrogate the title to themselves.

(1) Hence Congregationalism is ever responsive to the need for close co-operation between the various churches at home and abroad. It has played an honourable part in the work of the Free Church Federal Council, which enables the Free Churches to collaborate locally and nationally in presenting their

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united witness, in maintaining their common concerns, and in taking action in matters where their principles are involved. In its present form the Council dates from 1940, but it is in unbroken succession from the first Free Church Congress of 1892. The Council is composed of members appointed by the various Free Church denominations and by the local Free Church Federal Councils throughout the country. It meets in Congress once a year, and continues its work in the intervening period by Council and committees. A moderator is elected annually, and there is a permanent headquarters staff.

(2) One of the most significant advances in the direction of closer co-operation among the Churches has been brought about by the Ecumenical Movement. The word ‘Ecumenical’ derived from the

Greek means ‘world-wide’, and the significance of the Movement lies in the growing realization of the fellowship of Christians of all denominations in what we are becoming accustomed to call the ‘world-church’. The Movement has found its expression in a series of World-conferences in which Christians from all the Churches have met together on an international scale to consider such crucial subjects as Faith and Order, and the life and witness of the Church as a whole in the world of to-day. The discussions have led to the clearing away of many misunderstandings; they have confirmed the realization of a common purpose, and have furnished through fellowship in prayer and thought an indispensable basis for united action.

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An important outcome of these Conferences was the foundation in 1948 of a World Council of Churches which is surely destined to play a significant part in the future, as the voice of a united Christendom. In close co-operation with the world Council is the British Council of Churches, formed in 1942, which includes Anglicans along with Free Churchmen, and up to a point has the sympathy and support of the Roman Catholics. Its aim is to further co-operation and united action on the part of the Churches of our own land.

Congregationalists have played and are playing their part along with the rest of the Churches in this highly significant movement. Their very freedom enables them to co-operate in the World-Church more readily perhaps than others who are bound by tradition or order or creed and do not find it easy to surrender their institutional claim in favour of a wider conception of the Church and its witness.

(3) The vision of a World-Church, united in spirit in spite of differences of tradition and emphasis, owes its origin very largely to experience on the Mission field. The Missionary Societies, as well as the

native churches which have arisen as a result of their labours, are increasingly realizing the futility of the narrow denominationalism which is the heritage of historical conditions in this country that have no counterpart in the lands now in process of evangelization. For many years now Missionary Societies have grown accustomed to work together in such institutions as hospitals, schools and colleges and thus to secure a greater measure' of efficiency than could

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possibly be attained by each denomination working alone. Moreover, the Missionary Societies have played a leading part in the Ecumenical movement referred to above. The first international gathering of Christians in modern times was provided by the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910, called to consider Missionary problems in relation to the non-Christian world. Out of it sprang the International Missionary Council with its headquarters at Edinburgh House, which acts as a clearing house for the Societies which are its constituent members. The solidarity of the movement was attested at the International Missionary Conference that was held at Madras in 1938 where delegates from every country in the world spoke and worked together in the completest harmony and made plans for the winning of the whole world to Christ.

But now, going beyond medical and educational co-operation there is a growing demand for the sweeping away of denominational barriers so far as the younger churches are concerned. This demand is entirely consonant with the aim and policy of the London Missionary Society as maintained throughout the century and a half of its history. At the very beginning, in 1796, it was declared to be a fundamental principle of the Missionary Society (i.e. the London Missionary Society) 'that its design is not to send Presbyterianism, Independency, Episcopacy, or any other form of Church order and government

(about which there may be difference of opinion among serious persons), but the glorious Gospel of the blessed God, to the heathen; and that it shall be

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left (as it ought to be left) to the minds of the persons whom God may call into the fellowship of His Son from among them to assume for themselves such form of Church government as to them shall appear most agreeable to the Word of God.' Thus it is open to Congregationalism not merely to co-operate most fully with other Missionary agencies, but also to enter into the most intimate relations with them. Thus, in the Church of South India, we have an organic union consisting of Congregationalists, Methodists, Presbyterians and Episcopalians. In like manner the Congregational missions form a constituent part of the Church of Christ in China. Thus the younger churches are pointing the way to the realization of the unity of all Christ's people in the bond of peace.

Finally, it should be noted that the New Advance movement initiated by the London Missionary Society in connection with the Triple Jubilee (1945) has opened up new avenues of service to the sadly battered churches on the continent of Europe, and also to the Jews whose evangelization has never hitherto called forth from Congregationalists anything like the enthusiasm which has been so manifest in their work among the heathen.

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