

April 11, 2021

INTRODUCTION

As you know by now, this is an Anniversary Year for the **Congregational** Church in Candia – our local church family. Your 250th planning team's efforts, under Diane Philbrick's leadership, had great expectations for Special Events here. But as it is turning out, things have been pretty low key, thanks to Covid.

Thanks also to Covid, our national Spiritual Family, the Conservative **Congregational** Christian Conference has had to cancel plans to celebrate the 400th Anniversary of the Mayflower's voyage from Old England to New England. The sadness in the 4 C's is that not only people like us didn't get to be there to formally/officially remember the faith and practice of our Spiritual Pilgrim Puritan Ancestral Family in Plymouth, but we are also saddened that our nation (and the world ?) didn't get to learn more about the amazing beginnings of **Congregationalism** in America. The Pilgrim Puritan Fathers (and Mothers) in 1620 were the opening chapter of the **Congregational** Way of Faith and Practice coming to America.

What I'm trying to say now, for any of us in Candia who somehow may not know, is that our 250th Anniversary as a **Congregational** Church here, is connected to what began in Plymouth 400 years ago. As all of us probably know, the plans for the 400th Anniversary Year celebrations in the USA and England and Holland have been almost non-existent.

So what I am attempting to do in this paper titled "Our Journey of Faith Identity" is to bring the Faith History of 1620, 1771, 2017 and 2021 together for all of us at Candia **Congregational** Church. And, since there hasn't been, and probably will not be, much public celebration, we of the Candia **Congregational** 250th Committee ask you to pass the news to the people of your world.

Our Journey of Faith Identity

Edward A Whitman

“The early settlers of Candia were of Puritan descent; and though many of them were not interested in the Christian religion, as a matter of personal experience, yet they all regarded the institutions of the gospel as essential to the well-being of any community. Accordingly, one of the very first acts of the town, after its incorporation in 1763, and after the choice of the usual town officers, was to provide means to procure the preaching of the gospel. This they must have, at whatever sacrifice.” William T. Herrick (1856)

Candia Congregational Church has American roots of faith that go back 400 years to the arrival of the Puritan-Pilgrims in Plymouth. However, CCC’s true roots are really 500 years old, going back to the start of the Reformation in early 1500’s Europe. As a Congregational Church, CCC’s roots were explicitly shaped during the Protestant Reformation as it developed in England.

The Reformation of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was a complex mix of history and theology. For our purposes it is important to note that there are three basic issues for the early reformers, which included Martin Luther and John Calvin. These were: (1) justification by faith alone, (2) the authority of Scripture, and (3) the priesthood of all believers.

The Reformers’ original aim was to “reform” the Roman Catholic Church regarding these three issues, but their efforts were squelched. The reformers “protest” led to their being called “Protestants” and their movement was called the “Protestant Reformation.” The Reformation moved more slowly in England than on the European continent. Reformation elements gained ground in England during the rule of Henry VIII (1509–1547), Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603) and James I (1603-1625), but most English Reformers were unhappy with the results.

Two groups emerged from these developments: (1) Puritan Reformers who wanted to live lives of purity and “purify” the Church of England still further from Roman Catholicism, and (2) Puritan Separatists who wanted to “separate” from the Church of England altogether and meet in their own locally controlled churches. These Puritan Separatists wanted their local churches to be governed “congregationally” under the authority of Scripture alone and not by bishops or distant church hierarchies. As a result, they came to be called “Congregationalists,” and this term followed them to America.

Both the Puritan Reformers and the Puritan Congregationalists were persecuted, but the Separatist-Congregationalists were persecuted much more severely. One Congregationalist church in Scrooby, England, decided in 1608 to move to the Netherlands, where there was greater religious freedom. But the congregation never felt completely at home in the Netherlands. Therefore, in 1620, 102 Puritan Congregationalists, now seeing themselves as “Pilgrims,” set sail on the Mayflower for the New World. In this manner, the first church in New England was Congregational. The year 2020 celebrates the Quadricentennial of their arrival in what would come to be known as New England.

Other settlers soon followed from England, but they were mostly Puritans who wanted to bring a purified version of the Church of England with them to the New World. However, the reality of being 2,000 miles away from England soon changed their plans. The Boston area Puritans joined the Plymouth Congregational Pilgrims, and so it was that the Massachusetts Bay Colony became uniformly Congregational. The first college in the New World, Harvard University, was founded in 1636 to train pastors for Congregational churches.

Congregationalism Defined

“We are Protestants. We are so far Protestants of the Pilgrim and Puritan type, that we are no hero-worshippers, and do not canonize dead saints. We see wisdom in the ancients, only so far as they were right, and followed the Bible. Far be it from us to receive a practice, precept or principle, merely because it is old, and the elders taught it. Equally far be it from us to reject a doctrine for the same reason.” James H. Fitts (1903)

What does CCC’s name “Congregational” mean here in America? In the 50 years following the arrival of the *Mayflower*, Congregationalism was carefully defined by the church leaders of the day in both England and New England. Our Puritan forefathers concerned themselves with two main issues: Congregational government and Congregational Puritan faith.

Historical Congregationalists believe there is really only one church. It is the Church made up of all believers, and Jesus Christ is her Head. Her true membership is known only to God alone. As such, the true Church is “invisible” to the human eye.

According to Congregationalism, the local church is a community of individuals, “gathered” together by a church “covenant,” who profess to be—and give reasonable evidence of actually being—members of God’s one true Church. They make up a local congregation which is, in miniature, a complete church in itself. As Christ is the Head of the one universal Church, so He is also Head of the individual church, like ours in Candia, NH.

Early Congregationalists looked to the Scriptures alone not only for essentials of faith and spiritual growth, but also for examples/directives of Church polity/governance. Both in England and New England, Biblical passages like the following were the source for ordering local church life:

-Jesus is Head of each local church, all members have direct access to God through Him: Hebrews 10:19-22, I Timothy 2:5

-Leaders are answerable to those who chose and may depose them: Acts 6:1-6, 14:23, Romans 16:17.

-Local congregations have the responsibility and are the final court of appeal in church discipline: I Corinthians 5:6, II Corinthians 2:6-7, Matthew 18:15-17. -A

local church can commission / review missionary ministry and may give counsel as well as

material
Corinthians 16:1-4.

support with sister congregations: Acts 11:22, 14:27, 15:1-35, I

CCC therefore has a heritage of being independent of any human government and accountable to Jesus Christ alone. As a Congregational church, we can call our own pastor and appoint elders, deacons and church officers. As a Congregational church, we administer our own spiritual and temporal affairs. And as a Congregational church, we should fellowship and consult with other churches while always bearing in mind that we are ultimately accountable to Christ alone.

In 1648, Congregational leaders in New England assembled in Cambridge, Mass., to more fully establish the form of Congregational government. They did so by creating the Cambridge Platform, which became the definitive statement of congregational polity as the early Congregationalists envisioned it. One important take-away from the meetings was that there is great freedom in a Congregational church, but with great freedom comes great responsibility.

As members of a Congregational church, we are obliged to be very careful that we conduct ourselves as Jesus Christ would have us live and govern ourselves. We must be a “people of the Book,” meaning we are Christ followers who root decisions in Scripture and we are a people who pray—open to the work of the Holy Spirit—in order that we may know the mind of Christ in all we do.

Developmental Changes Within Congregationalism

“It was stated in a previous chapter of this work that the majority of the early settlers of NH were Calvinists and Congregationalists. It may now be stated that a majority of the first settlers in Candia inherited their religious beliefs from their ancestors in England, who were rigid Calvinists, and these doctrines were stoutly maintained and defended at every point by the members of the Congregational church in the town, almost without exception, for a hundred years. It may be added, however, that, during all that time, there was always a small number of people belonging to congregations who were openly opposed to some of the most prominent doctrines of the Calvinists.” J. Bailey Moore (1893)

Churches are dynamic institutions. No matter how carefully one generation may define its beliefs and faith, the next generation may define for itself what it will do with the faith passed on to it. This is exactly what happened within Congregationalism.

Many of the first generation of Congregationalists came to this country for religious reasons. They wanted freedom to worship. Thus, the first generation was a zealous and devout people. Their children, however, did not always share the convictions of their fathers. By the late 1600’s, the Congregational leaders were lamenting the spiritual condition within the churches. People were far more interested in the temporal affairs and opportunities of the rich and abundant New World than they were in spiritual matters. The First Great Awakening of the early 1700’s turned things around for a while. This was the Revival encouraged by the

preaching of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, who held open air evangelistic meetings to great crowds along the coastal towns of NH. However, Congregationalism soon faced other challenges.

More damaging to Congregationalism than the atrophy from within was the influence of European Unitarianism. The central ideas of Unitarianism include the following: (1) God is revealed through various men and sacred books throughout history; (2) the writings of Buddha, Mohammed, Confucius, etc., are all sources of divine revelation equal to Scripture; (3) Jesus Christ is not the divine Son of God in any unique way; (4) the historic creeds of the Church are outdated; and (5) Reason is the final authority for humanity. These ideas are obviously incompatible with historic Christian beliefs.

Unitarianism began to get a foothold at Harvard University, and soon many pastors of Congregational churches held Unitarian convictions. By the late 1700's, many ministers had led their churches to reject their own Biblically founded Confessions of Faith and to adopt Unitarian beliefs. By 1860, almost all of the older Congregational churches in eastern Massachusetts became Unitarian and only one true Congregational church was left in Boston. In general, the influence of Unitarian thinking at Harvard was so strong that it pushed its graduating pastors and their churches to adopt far more liberal theological positions much earlier than other denominational groups. Thus, Congregationalism has had a much longer and deeper experience with liberal Protestantism than any other denomination in America. In fact, because of its history, many people automatically associate Congregationalism with Protestant liberalism.

From their inception, Congregationalists have gathered in formal and informal fellowship groups beyond the local church. In 1871, the National Council of Congregational Churches was formed. Merger talks were carried out in 1890 and again in 1923 with the Christian Connection. This led to a merger of the two bodies in 1931 when they formed the General Council of Congregational and Christian Churches. In 1938 a union of the General Council with the Evangelical and Reformed Church was proposed with the purpose of creating a "United Church of Christ".

In his 1893 History of Candia, NH, J. Bailey Moore identified the challenge and changes to historic Congregational faith in pre and post-Civil War years in Candia as "Progressive Orthodoxy." Truth be told, CCC has had some pastors over time who came under its influence, but there were many who have held true to the historic basic principles that distinguished the early Congregational churches. Over the decades since 1771, many pastors have preached the truth from the Bible and during times of low ebb God sent many "revivals of religion" to return CCC to its beginning faith. Revivals happened many times during CCC's first century.

To explain more fully, revivals of heart-felt religion were profoundly evangelical in character, but sadly created local area rifts due to the fact that significant numbers of Congregational clergy opposed revivals, thus seriously dividing Congregationalism into liberal and evangelical wings. As the rift grew, it profoundly affected American religious and political life in general and our denominational heritage/family linkage in particular.

In 1957, as the United Church of Christ was in the final stages of formation, it appeared to CCC leadership that the UCC did not find its authority in the Bible and was concerned with things that truly unite Christians. After prayerful study, CCC voted to affiliate shortly after the denomination became an established reality in 1961. However, in the years following, many UCC churches, including CCC, began to move away from the gospel of Christ and the absolute authority of Scripture. By 1982, some within the Candia area would define CCC as a “cultural meeting place” of the community.

That was the same year that David Runnion-Bareford began to reestablish the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He would eventually give strong leadership within the UCC hoping to renew / reform what was now becoming the most theologically liberal of America’s denominations. According to a recent Church Profile, the hope was that “similar to the example of the Puritans remaining in England in an effort to help bring reform to the Church of England, there was a push to stay in the UCC for the potential to influence and have a voice at the table in hopes of holding Scripture as the standard for the position of the UCC.”

After his faithful 25-year tenure at CCC and, concurrently for 14+ years of valiant, energetic efforts as Executive Director of the Biblical Witness Fellowship within the UCC, David concluded his ministry in 2007. In America today, there are some followers of denominational history who believe that only one denomination has ever been returned / reformed to its starting point of a Biblical worldview—The Southern Baptist Convention.

A New / Old Direction

“From the close of the French War in 1761, when fears from the savages ceased, during a period of ten years, permanent settlements were commenced in nearly or quite one-third of the towns in this State. Emigrants from the parts of Massachusetts and Connecticut, where the influence of Edward’s theology, and of Whitefield’s preaching was most strongly felt, were united in the settlement of in the interior and western parts of the State, and in the formation of many of the churches. The doctrinal belief, and the spirit of revivals which characterized the older churches at that period, were transplanted into the new towns of this State.”

Robert F. Lawrence (1856)

Since Pastor David’s departure, our Elder Board recommended in 2017 that CCC withdraw its membership with the NH Conference of the UCC. After prayerful study, the Elders recommended that CCC consider affiliating with the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference. CCCC’s early history is similar to BWF in that during the 1930’s and 1940’s, they were a formal fellowship of evangelical Congregational pastors within the General Conference of Congregational and Christian Churches looking for a better, more true affinity to the principles of historic Orthodox Congregationalism identity. Like BWF, they wanted to maintain a Biblical witness within the General Council. But unlike the BWF, in 1948, with the talk of ecumenical merger in the air, they decided to leave. They became, in effect, pilgrims and

formed the CCCC. At a special meeting on September 21, 2017, CCC voted to apply for membership in the CCCC.

Within the CCCC the word “Conservative” is not used to reflect a certain political point of view, nor a reactionary or static spirit. This term simply reflects the desire of the associated churches and pastors to conserve or maintain the doctrinal standards of evangelical, biblical Christianity. “Conservative” indicates a whole-hearted and unalloyed commitment to the great historic doctrines re-emphasized through the Reformation—the trinity, the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, the vicarious atonement, the bodily resurrection of Christ, His personal return, the personality of the Holy Spirit, the need for regeneration, etc.

The CCCC maintains that they are a fellowship of true Congregational churches. An early CCCC publication states: “True Congregationalism is a heart-felt loyalty to New Testament principles. A true Congregational church is made up of born-again believers. A true Congregational church is loyal to the written Word of God. A true Congregational church is under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. A true Congregational church is autonomous. A true Congregational church seeks fellowship with those of like precious faith.”

CCC has solidly proven roots that have born good fruit for 250 years. May our church be blessed by our Lord to continue His Mission to “Love God, Love people and Make Disciples.”

Primary Resource

Beyond the localizing to Candia, the major historical/theological overview within this essay is by Peter Murdy, taken (with permission) from his article “Historic Congregationalism” within the book *Modern Day Pilgrims: The First Fifty Years of The Conservative Congregational Christian Conference*, George Allen, Editor, Foresee Publications, St Paul, MN, 2000.

Other Resources

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