

What is a Congregational Church?

It may seem as if a Congregational Church is so named because the “congregation” is in charge of the Church. That is not true. God is in charge of a Congregational Church and the members of the “congregation” work together to discern God’s plans for that Church.

Needless to say, this is a difficult task. But, Congregational Churches look to the Bible. They read about the first churches: at Corinth, Ephesus, Phillippi, Thessalonica, Colossae, as well as in the area that was called Galatia, in Asia Minor. They try to be as much like these early churches as they can be.

When Paul writes to any of these churches, he sends greetings from other churches. He does not send orders from other churches, and he makes no mention of any hierarchical structure. He does make reference to the “body of Christ,” which he thinks of as the Church Universal (Col. 1.24), but most often he refers to individual churches.

Also, Paul refers to the leaders that each church has chosen for itself. Trying to follow these Biblical examples, Congregational churches seek freedom from earthly authority so that they may follow the authority of Christ. And, seeking guidance from Christ, each church chooses its own individual leaders. But, each individual church member also retains the authority and responsibility to speak as Christ would have him speak, and to have an equal voice in the decisions the church makes.

Our experience and tradition tell us that the church leaders help build up the church, but they do not “rule” over a church. Again, only Christ “rules” over a church. The church leaders work hard to see that the will of the church, as revealed by Christ, is carried out. They also work hard to equip the lay people in the church to help in the work of the church.

In his letters, Paul mentions several house churches, including: Aquila and Priscilla’s house church (1 Cor. 16); a church that meets in Colossae (col. 4.15); and Philemon’s house church (Philemon 2). These churches are probably particularly illustrative of the Christ’s words in Matthew 18.20: “...where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.”

Paul talks often about Christians not being bound by the Law. So, what are they bound by? They are bound by an agreement to love Christ and seek to follow him together. The early churches looked to the Old Testament

covenants that God made with Moses, Abraham, and Noah, and they wanted to be a part of this covenant with God. But, as Jeremiah said, this new covenant was to be written on the hearts of people. This is why many Congregational Churches write their own Covenants.

A Covenant is a promise to God and to fellow church members that the members of the church will seek to do the will of Christ. This is often referred to as a promise “to walk together” according to the guidance of the Lord.

Where do we find that guidance? The first place we look for guidance is in the Holy Scripture. But, we also remember the words of the minister to the group of Pilgrims that first went from England to Holland, and then back to England on their way to North America: “There is yet more truth and light to come forth from God’s holy word.”

Holy Scripture is a road map. But, according to our covenants, we agree to travel that road together. Along the way, Christ will reveal yet more truth and light to us. Each church must work together to discern that truth and light. But, each individual also works out his or her own salvation, according to scripture (Philippians 2.12). That may mean that not all members of a church will agree on every issue. But, we must agree to walk together.

So, there may be members who disagree about a certain issue, but they nonetheless agree to follow what the church as a unit decides to do.

Does your church function in this way? If not, would you like it to function in this way? Would you like your church to freely join in fellowship with other churches that function in this way? Would you like your church, to be made up of faithful Christians, free from earthly authority so that its members may be free to “walk together” as Christ leads them?

Then the Congregational Way may be the way in which God is leading your church.

- We are a fellowship of churches that try to follow Christ as he directs each church.
- We are a fellowship of churches that freely maintain ties of fellowship with each other.
- We would like to know you and help you learn more about Congregationalism.

Please contact the Secretary for your geographical region, listed overleaf, or our Moderators, also listed overleaf, for more information, and for greetings from our churches. God bless you on your Christian walk.

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Our Shared Heritage

A

CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH



What does it mean to belong to
a congregational church?

This short paper, prepared for the
International Congregational Fellowship
by the *Rev. Dr Giovan King*,
attempts to summarise the key elements of
faith and tradition which define those
churches which are ordered in the “congre-
gational” way