

# Congregationalism

**Gordon W. Martin**

Principal, Scottish Baptist College, Glasgow

## Introduction

The topic given me is 'Congregationalism'. I take this to relate not simply to one particular church polity, but also and, more fundamentally, to the whole concept of the 'gathered community' which underlies the notation of congregationalism. Church groupings which historically have adopted a congregationalist form of government include the Mennonites, Congregationalists, Baptists, Plymouth Brethren, and most forms of Pentecostalism. All these groups adhere also to the underlying theology of the church as "a gathered community of believers".

Perhaps what is most obvious about these churches is their insistence upon the autonomy of the local church – its "competence before God to make its own decisions". It seems clear that historical and theological factors are intertwined in leading to this stance.

We need to spend some time examining the concept of local church autonomy. Even so, we should say now that, though historical factors have played their part, these groupings have themselves argued for that polity as a correlate of a particular theology of the Church – namely, the 'gathered community' view. Thus, the early English Separatists in the late 16th century had perforce to operate on the congregationalist model, since they were so isolated and since they were opposed to the notation of a State Church, which in England was Episcopalian in Character. Yet they saw their position as derived from a certain biblical understanding of the church.

With this in mind, I want first of all to deal with the basic issue of the notion of the church embedded in Congregationalism. From that base we will later examine the relation between that theology of the church and the polity of congregationalism. Finally, we will look at the difficult question of the extent to which evangelicals of any Church or denomination may be logically committed to the 'gathered community' view of the church.

In our judgment the issues raised by our subject go to the very heart of the evangelical quest, namely, to assemble a people, purified by Christ, to worship and to serve Him in our world.

## 1. The 'Gathered Community' Concept

In interdenominational or undenominational circles it is often found convenient to sidestep questions about the nature of the church. Since it is clear that we may disagree, it seems pointless to bring up these questions. This is as true among evangelicals as it is among persons of more liberal theology.

Even so, this is a great pity. If the Lord has important things to say in the Scriptures about God, about Christ, about sin and salvation, and so on, does He have nothing to say about the Church or the churches? Modern scholarship frequently assumes that Primitive and Early Church practice may have varied from area to area, and be unconvinced that the New Testament offers one model only of church polity. That, however was not the position of the Churches at the Reformation, neither Romans, nor Episcopalians, nor Lutherans, nor Reformed, nor Anabaptists. It is, of course, possible that varying understandings of the Church and of church government are to be found within the New Testament, but we should not glibly assume that all the old debates were "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing".

It is sometimes assumed that the less highly structured churches simply have 'no theology of the church'. This comment is not intended to be insulting: it is simply, I suggest, a mistaken perspective. One particular theology of the church may differ so radically from that held by others that it may not be recognised for what it is. If the stress falls upon the Church rather than the churches, or if the Church be thought of as a sacramental entity or a sacred institution, then the Church is clearly given a place of some centrality. This approach is signified at its extreme in the statement of Cyprian: "Outside the Church there is no salvation". By contrast with this, the Reformers were much more careful. The Church might be "the sphere of God's saving action" (Calvin), but personal faith in Christ was more important than the external participation in sacraments that bound one to the Church. Even so, the Reformers laid quite a stress upon the corporeal and social character of the Church, seeing it as the New Israel.

The 'gathered community' view looks quite differently at this whole issue. It stresses the individual's relationship with God through Christ, and views the church as the assembly of those with such personal commitment. It is not primarily a sacramental community nor is it a sacred institution. Rather the church is the living fellowship (*keinoia*), grounded in faith in Jesus Christ.

This is not to say that Baptism or the Lord's Supper are treated lightly by upholders of this view. Nor are all its advocates committed to Believers' Baptism, though a majority are. Thus, Congregationalists practice Infant Baptism. Even so, it was Congregationalists in America who advanced the concept of the 'Half-Way

Covenant', whereby they underlined their adherence at a fundamental level to the 'gathered community' notion.

Let us try to define the 'gathered community' view and to set forth what we see to be its biblical and theological basis. Essentially it is the view that the church is constituted by mutuality of faith in Jesus. Of course, all Christian Churches are concerned to bring people to faith in Christ, but the mainline Churches of Mediaeval Europe and of the Reformation have repudiated the 'gathered community' concept. Catholicism (Roman and High Episcopalian) has viewed the Church as constituted by God-given sacraments and by Apostolic succession of ministry. The Reformed Churches have viewed the Church as present when certain features are in evidence, viz. the preaching of the Word of God, the administration of the sacraments, and a properly ordained ministry. It is these features which *make* the Church the Church, not the faith of her members. In essence, the 'gathered community' view looks *back* to Jesus' assembling of the Twelve and others around Him (the 'little flock') and *forward* to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, when only those with faith in Christ will be received. That is, we believe that no-one should be deemed a Christian or a member of Christ's Church who will not be so acknowledged by Christ as His Coming in glory.

Where is the evidence for this view? We submit that it is found in the whole New Testament emphasis upon the declaration of the Gospel and the need for personal response to it. The perspective was admirably set out by Balthasar Hubmaier, a 16th century Anabaptist, who said the order was this: the preaching of the Word of God; hearing; repentance; faith; baptism; church membership, good works, and Christian witness. Among evangelicals there is little need to lay stress upon the need for personal response in repentance and faith. Yet clearly not all evangelicals see churchmanship as essentially subsequent to repentance and faith.

Such a passage as Matt. 16:18 seems to imply that the Church is founded upon the kind of faith that Simon had reached (unless one moves in a Romanist line of interpretation). The Acts of the Apostles tells of witnessing followed by response and living fellowship within Christ's Church. Acts 2:47 is a significant verse, which, we believe, gives Luke's perspective: "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." The Pauline Epistles are addressed to 'the saints' in Rome and elsewhere, and the way in which they are addressed suggests that they were persons who had responded in faith to Christ's Gospel, and required counsel in the Way.

We are aware, of course, that things can be said on the other side. If the Church be the New Israel, does this not imply that the Church is a more inclusive kind of entity than simply a gathering of believers? If the whole nation of Israel was in a covenant relationship with God, does this not indicate that children of Christians are somehow members of the church? It is also frequently urged that the 'gathered community' view is sociologically inept. It works with an excessive individualism, it is claimed, and loses sight of the organic character of the church. The Church is more than an aggregation of believers.

Clearly, this is a matter on which Christians, even evangelicals, are not going to be fully agreed, and my purpose in this paper is to present a case rather than to enter into detailed apologetic defence of it. Let me say simply, however, that the advocates of this 'congregation' view make much of the utter newness of what God has done in Christ. There is discontinuity, as well as continuity, between God's approaches under the Old Covenant and His approach under the New. A racial entity is a different kind of 'animal', we would urge, from a community called into being by a specific piece of News: that Christ died for our sins and was raised on the third day for our justification. As for the charge, which is sometimes made, that this view takes little cognisance of the social dimension of the Gospel, this, we would reply, is simply not true. Of course, the church is wider than the individual, but each must enter by the Door, Christ Jesus. In practice, churches based on this model and understanding have probably as rich a community life as those of the more institutionalized churches. Nor is it simply that the Church depends on human response: Christ has promised to be with those who are gathered together in His Name (Matt. 18:20).

## 2. Congregationalism as a Church Polity

In historical terms English Congregationalism (using that term in the widest sense) derived from two streams of dissidents which emerged within the Church of England in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, the Separatists and the Independents. Most Separatists reached that position via Puritanism, while Independency became a variant of Puritanism. Separatists repudiated the concept of a State-Church relationship, whereas Puritans (believing in presbyteral church government) and Independents (believing in congregational autonomy) approved the notation of a State establishment. We have not had a Congregationalist establishment either in Scotland or in England, but Massachusetts had a Congregationalist Establishment as late as 1930's. The important point is that, though having differing views of the appropriateness of an official link with the State, both Separatists and Independents believed that the local church should manage its own affairs.

In the England of the 17th century there was clearly no room for a Congregationalist Establishment. Accordingly, such groups were perhaps confirmed in their convictions, in so far as they were the butt of a persecuting agency.

Clearly, the scattered character of groups whose thinking was Puritan-Independent also contributed to the necessity of managing their affairs on a congregationalist line.

Even so, these groups worked with a definite theology of the church which led to congregationalism as a polity, the 'gathered community' concept. It was further developed, especially among Independents, along the lines of a covenant between the local church and God. This helped to set the local church over against other Churches. Moreover, it was claimed that a scrutiny of the New Testament documents revealed the priority of the local church.

It is impossible here to go into the historical factors in detail. We do wish, however, to show the lines of continuity between the 'gathered community' theology of the church and the notion of 'autonomy'. For some may imagine that the stress upon the autonomy of the local church owed much to post-Renaissance ideas about the dignity of the individual and about liberty. In reality, the basic point may be made very simply. If you have a church where two or three are gathered together in Christ's Name with Him in the midst, that fellowship must be competent to manage its own affairs. That does not mean that it despises fellowship with other congregations, but such links will not cut across its autonomy.

The whole theology of the 'gathered community' stresses the immediacy of Christ's Lordship within the local congregation. For example, it is often said that a Baptist principle is the Lordship of Christ. This may seem very arrogant. Don't all Christian Churches recognise the Lordship of Christ? And, of course, they do. But the point is that, on this particular theology of the church, Christ's Presence and Lordship are such that the authority of a whole group of possible 'powers' within the church are set aside: Pope, bishop, presbytery; State, Parliament, Royalty; even elders and deacons. On this understanding, Christ moves within the fellowship by the Spirit to reveal His will. Obviously, congregations make mistakes. But that may be attributed to human failure to discern the mind of the Spirit. Nor are gifts of wisdom or counsel despised, but all are subject to the 'church meeting'.

It may be asked whether this is not to substitute one kind of tyranny for another, and it has to be confessed that sometimes that is precisely what has happened. Moreover, there tends to be a heavy emphasis in current congregationalism upon the democratic character of this process of government. Some of us may prefer a democratic form of government to another, but that preference has probably more to do with social and political notions than with interpretation of the New Testament. It requires to be said, however, that the founding fathers did not rest their case upon general democratic social ideas, but upon a particular understanding of the nature of the church.

Another plank in this construction was the notion of the covenant. It requires to be said, though, that this by itself would not necessarily lead to congregationalism. After all, Puritans, with their belief in a State-Church relationship and their adherence to presbyteral government, also talked in terms of a covenant relationship: the covenant was, however, between a Christian nation and God.

Clearly, the New Testament does not say in so many words that Christ's Church is to follow an episcopalian, a presbyteral, or a congregational form of polity. It might have saved a lot of ink and time if it had! Congregationalists, however, would point to the view of the church as set over against society – islands in a sea of paganism. In the situation of the Primitive Church distance alone demanded a measure of congregational autonomy. Congregationalists usually favour the view that *presbuteroi* and *episcepi* are to be equated, and cite Acts 20:17,28 in support. Any leadership or authority the apostles may have had is interpreted as spiritual in character, not that of one 'power' set over against another.

It has to be confessed that among Christian groups which practice congregationalism some power has at times been given to particular offices within the local church. Thus, a Brethren fellowship may not approve the external authority of a bishop but it may accept that of an internal elder. This is because the language about elders has seemed to suggest that deep respect, if not actual obedience, is to be given to them. Even so, the most characteristic pattern within 'gathered community' churches is to abhor any kind of power structure, be it internal or external.

A number of brief general observations may now be made.

a) Congregationalism lays stress upon the *dynamic* elements of church life rather than upon the *structured* elements. To many of us this seems a gain. Functions replace fixed offices. If the church is the fellowship of kindred hearts in Christ, then offices do not constitute the church as such and they must surely be subject to the mind of Christ through it rather than delivering decrees to it.

b) Congregationalism carried within it opportunities to implement the participation of members within worship and service, something which is being rediscovered today. We talk about 'the rediscovery of the laity', but, of course, in the New Testament, the *laos* is the *whole* people of God. No one is claiming that congregationalists always take these opportunities. Nor are we denying that in episcopalian and presbyterian churches a real implementation of the use of the gifts of the people is taking place. But congregational polity is, in its theory, ideally suited to acceptance of this contribution. For congregationalists 'the priesthood of all believers' has meant not simply the priesthood of the whole church, in which each has a share, but the priesthood

of every believer.

c) Congregationalists, like other evangelicals, are perhaps today in danger of succumbing to movements that lay great stress upon the authority of the Spirit in certain gifted leaders: this, we believe, is a retreat from their essential stance. On the other hand, this outlook on the nature of the church is peculiarly open to an emphasis upon the rôle of the Spirit of God that moves from the grassroots upwards.

### 3. Evangelicalism and Congregationalism

I do not intend to say much more about the polity of congregational government, though I believe in it and see it as derived from the 'gathered community' concept. Rather I want to address myself, more briefly than in the preceding two sections to the way in which the 'gathered community' concept affects us all as evangelicals.

Very starkly I want to suggest that evangelicalism naturally and properly leads to a 'gathered community' view; that the cutting edge of our evangelism is removed when we do not follow this line; and that often evangelicals do give a lukewarm reception to the notion but are impeded from following it through because of their particular denominational affiliation. Such a statement is not intended to be offensive. It is an honest statement of how I see it. Only by saying so can the real issues emerging from the 'gathered community' concept be revealed.

a) Apart from the specific reasons given earlier for adherence to a 'gathered community' view (interpretation of Matt. 16; the Acts sequence: repentance, conversion, baptism, membership, etc.) there appears to be an interior logic connecting a stress upon conversion and this view of the church. Thus, God deals with the individual soul in conversion. 'God has no step-sons'. That leads very easily, if not inevitably, into the view that true churchmanship follows conversion. By its logic it calls in question the effectiveness of sacraments or any other predisposing factor (such as having Christian parents) to place us within the church.

At a very practical level, do not many evangelicals feel that there is a 'church within a church' in many of the situations to which they belong? If evangelicals do see real fellowship as bound up with common living faith in Christ and His Cross, then is not the experience of belonging to an entity that is more institutionalized different from belonging to the church in the New Testament sense?

Let me again make it clear. This is not merely the question of the appropriate subjects for baptism, it is the problem of whether a church that has unconverted people within it is a church at all, insofar as they are present. If there are 40 converted persons in a church of 400, is not the true church in God's eyes the 40 and not the 400?

One recognizes, of course, that in a sense all evangelicals would wish the church to be composed only of truly converted persons (plus the children of such, where Infant Baptism is approved). It is indiscriminate baptism, in part, that has produced the present situation, and no responsible Christian approves of that. I would wish to urge, however, that where the Church is seen primarily as a sacramental institution or (in Reformed fashion) as constituted by preaching, sacraments and ministry, rather than by conscious personal commitment to Christ, the proportion of converted persons within the 'churches' is almost bound to decrease. It is difficult therefore, for me to see why evangelicals can support such systems.

b) The practical results for evangelism are also very grave. If persons are taught by their churches that they are in some sense Christians through sacraments or through their belonging within a church that has the true objective marks of the same, is it surprising that much of our evangelical witness and preaching falls on deaf ears? If one is a Christian already, why does one need to be converted?

We would also claim that there are very serious results also for the development of Christian lives. People are converted, join a church that is not evangelical and does not insist upon personal spiritual experience, and their spiritual lives can wither away. Of course, it is perfectly possible for a church with the 'gathered community' pattern to become liberal in its theology and also to insist less upon conversion. Tragically, this has often happened, but it happens less, we submit, than in churches which repudiate the 'gathered community' notion. Why? Because an insistence upon personal faith and commitment is the basic platform of these churches.

### Conclusion

Congregationalism as a church polity has much to commend it in general terms. It makes for the participation of the lowliest church member; it lays stress upon the interaction of persons in Christ; and it seems to accord with New Testament practice. Much more important, however, is the theology of the church embedded in it. Evangelicals long for the fellowship of truly born-again persons. The best human way of guaranteeing that is to accept and implement the 'gathered community' notion.

The biblical basis is, we believe present. Parallels with Israel do not appear to us to be germane: 'Grace does not run in the blood.' The stress upon heart-experience seems to demand, as its corollary, a 'gathered community' view. Two major practical benefits are that it helps to restore the 'cutting edge' of evangelism, and it provides a warm supportive atmosphere for growth into the Christian maturity. We rest our case!