

**ECCLESIASTICAL POLITY: THE
GOVERNMENT AND
COMMUNION PRACTISED BY THE
CONGREGATIONAL CHURCHES**

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Ecclesiastical Polity: The Government and Communion Practised by the Congregational Churches by Various

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VARIOUS

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ECCLESIASTICAL POLITY.

THE

Government and Communion

PRACTISED BY THE

CONGREGATIONAL CHURCHES *U. S. -*
National Council, Boston, Mass. 1865.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

*Which were Represented by Elders and Messengers in a
National Council at Boston, A. D. 1865.*

BOSTON:
CONGREGATIONAL PUBLISHING SOCIETY.
1872.

PREFACE.

IN the preliminary arrangements for the National Council of Congregational churches which was assembled at Boston, A. D. 1865, three pastors of churches, one each in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Ohio, were appointed to prepare a paper on "the expediency of issuing a Statement of Congregational Polity." One of the three was unable to participate in the work, but his colleagues presented to the Council their report on the subject assigned to them, and with it a form or draught of a statement of polity for the consideration of the assembled elders and messengers.

The statement thus prepared and submitted was carefully considered; and, having been approved in general terms, was left at the disposal of a large committee, with various suggestions of changes and additions tending to make it more complete, and with authority to publish it after such amendments as they should approve.

The Committee appointed by the Council was so numerous, and so widely dispersed, that any full

meeting for consultation was impracticable. But, after ample time for consideration and for advice from all sources, the publication being called for in various quarters, letters were addressed to the members of the Committee, appointing a time and place for their meeting, and requesting every one who could not attend in person, to communicate his views in a written reply. Thus, a careful revision of the proposed Boston Platform of 1865, was effected in the closest practicable conformity with the instructions of the Council; and the revised and amended statement of Congregational polity is now presented to the churches by the surviving members of the Committee.

The usefulness of that Council, great and various as it has been, would have been incomplete without some testimony from it concerning the principles of church government, and the usages in which those principles are applied. Congregational synods in former times have judged it necessary for them to give such testimony. The synod which assembled at Cambridge in 1646, and was continued by successive adjournments till 1648, and to which all the churches of the New-England colonies were invited, left, as a memorial of itself, that statement of Congregational polity which has ever since been called the Cambridge Platform. The synod of Congregational churches which was convened under the patronage of the English government in 1658, at the Savoy in London, issued a "Declaration of the Faith and Order Owned and Practiced in the Congregational Churches of England." Fifty years

later, a synod of the churches in the colony of Connecticut, at Saybrook, gave out that scheme of a modified Congregationalism, which, though never adopted elsewhere, has had its influence on the churches in almost all parts of our country. More recently, in 1833, the Congregational Union of England and Wales, though not properly a synod or council of churches, issued a careful and well-authenticated Declaration describing the faith and order of the Congregational churches in that country. Such precedents were enough to justify the giving of a similar testimony by an assembly of elders and messengers representing, for the first time since 1648, all the Congregational churches in a country which was then an almost unbroken wilderness, but has now become the United States of America.

Some such declaration, exhibiting with more authority than can belong to any individual or local testimony, the system of order actually held by these churches, is greatly needed. The churches need it for their own information and guidance. Pastors and home missionaries, and, indeed, all our ministers need it, that they may not be misled by unconscious imitation of systems incongruous with the first principles of the New-Testament polity. Our foreign missionaries need it, that the churches which they gather may learn to stand fast in the liberty with which Christ has made them free. Young men who are preparing themselves in theological schools, for the service of the churches, need it, that they may be qualified for that part of their expected work which relates to the rights

and functions of a church, and the administration of its discipline. Many whose ecclesiastical connection is with other portions of Christ's universal church need it, that their minds may be clear of misinformation or of prejudice. Especially is it needed in the new States and territories where ecclesiastical institutions are yet to be formed, and in those older States where all things are becoming new. Wherever devout and believing souls, weary of hierarchical and synodical governments over Christ's free people, are ready to unite in a church which shall be only Christ's, and in which they may joyfully learn and testify that where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty, some convenient manual is needed to show them how such a church may be constituted and governed.

No ancient document can be wisely referred to as being in all respects sufficient for the present need of these churches. The Cambridge Platform, though framed with much deliberation and much study of the Scriptures, was the work of a few men, who, in a wilderness remote from all the Christian world beside, were attempting to recover the church polity of the apostles; and it is now more valuable as a means of showing how little our churches have departed from their original principles and methods, than as a guide to the manner in which those principles are now applied and administered in the practice of these churches. Indeed, there are portions of it which, to readers not remembering its date and what questions of church polity were then under discussion in England, or not

familiar with the technical terms of a logic now obsolete, are hardly intelligible without a commentary. The Savoy Declaration, though more lucid than the Cambridge Platform, is less systematic; and, as it only touches, instead of exhibiting and applying the great principle of the communion of churches with each other, it is by no means an adequate representation of American Congregationalism. The Heads of Agreement, assented to by certain ministers of Dissenting churches in and about London in 1690, and incorporated into the Saybrook Platform, though it has been useful in Connecticut, and has had its influence in the ecclesiastical history of our country, can hardly be called a statement of Congregational polity. It was designed to mark out a way in which Presbyterian congregations and ministers, actually, though unwillingly, independent of a national church and of Presbyterian judicatures, might walk in amity and virtual unity with Congregational ministers and churches. No statement of polity that was framed in a former century or in another country can suffice for the Congregational churches of the United States, in their present relations to each other, to their country, and to the progress of the kingdom of Christ.

A polemic defence of Congregationalism, or a rhetorical commendation of it, is not what was intended in the original draught of the platform now submitted to the churches, nor what was approved and authorized by the National Council at Boston. Such expositions of our church polity may proceed more fitly from indi-

viduals than from any representative body. On the other hand, a simple statement of the two or three first principles which constitute the radical difference between Congregationalism and other theories of church government would not be sufficient. Those first principles are only the points of divergence between differing systems; and how wide the divergence is cannot be shown but by showing the application of the principles. A simple and perspicuous statement not only of the principles on which our polity is founded, but also of the usages and arrangements which those principles have established among us, and in which, by common consent, they are applied and made practical, will be, it is believed, of great use to our churches both in their internal administration and in their fellowship with each other. Such a statement is what has been attempted in the summary now offered to the churches for their approval, and to all who desire to become acquainted with the ecclesiastical principles and methods of the Congregational churches in the United States.

The authority pertaining to any exposition of Congregational polity, by whatever assembly, is wholly unlike the authority which is claimed for the canons enacted by the variously named assemblies of clergy and delegates which assume to govern the particular congregations under them. It is little more than a truism to say, that the National Council at Boston had no legislative power to ordain a new constitution for the churches, or to promulgate any new rules; and no