

**A HAND-BOOK OF  
CONGREGATIONAL  
ISM**

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A Hand-Book of Congregationalism by Henry Martyn Dexter

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**HENRY MARTYN DEXTER**

**A HAND-BOOK OF  
CONGREGATIONAL  
ISM**



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TO  
THE SETTLED PASTORS AND TEACHERS  
OF THE  
Congregational Churches of the United States:  
MORE ESPECIALLY  
TO THOSE HONORED OF GOD IN BEING CALLED TO APPROVE  
THEMSELVES AS HIS MINISTERS BY ENDURING  
HARDNESS IN MUCH PATIENCE,  
—AS POOR, YET MAKING MANY RICH—  
THIS LITTLE BOOK,  
DESIGNED IN SOME THINGS TO LIGHTEN THEIR LABOR,  
Is Affectionately and Reverently Dedicated.

As for our selves, wee protest  
with simple hearts in the pres-  
ence of God, and his holy  
Angelles, unto al men, that  
wee doe not wittingly and  
willingly maintaine anie one  
error against the word of truth  
(though wee doubt not but  
as all other men wee are

liable to error, which our God wee trust will in mercy forgive  
unto vs) but hold the grounds of Christian Religion with all  
Gods ancient Churches . . . and with all faythfull people at  
this day. . . . Let him that readeth consider and the Lord  
gve him vnderstanding in all. Weigh all things vprightly  
in the ballance of the Sanctuarie, and iudge righteous iudg-  
ment. Bee not offended at the simplicitie of the Gospel,  
neither hold the faith of our glorious Lord Iesus Christ,  
in respect of mens persons. Gods cause shall stand when

al that handle yt amisse  
shall fall before yt. Wee  
offer heere our faith to the  
view and tryall of all men.  
Try all things and keep  
that which is good: and yt  
thou shalt reape anie frute  
by these our labors (gentel  
Reader) gve God the glory.

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FOR two reasons, mainly, I have written this little *Hand-Book*. One, that, in nearly thirty years of connection with a Congregational newspaper, through contact with hundreds of committees, and the reading of thousands of letters, I have found that a popular and as I judge growing need and demand exist for some cheap and compact manual, adapted both to easy circulation and comprehension; and which may especially offer to an unaccustomed population some brief yet clear idea of our Congregational ways, with the reason that underlies them. The other, that since publishing fifteen years ago a treatise which, in spite of its disadvantages of size and cost, has gained gratifying circulation now through five editions, I have learned much of which I was ignorant when it was written, and so am naturally anxious to revise its unconscious inaccuracies, by bringing, in another form, my statements into better accord with what I now believe to be the truth. I have taken special pains to cite every passage in the New Testament which refers to polity, and also to place indirectly in my readers' hands the means of resolving as many as possible of those continually emerging practical Congregational questions, the just solution of which may not instantly suggest itself to minds not specially accustomed to our fundamental principles and usual methods of thought.

Without doubt some person will allege this as a new endeavor to "control" the churches. Such an allegation will be as true—and as false—as previous intimations of the same sort have been. He who waits to be insured that his good will not be evil spoken of before doing any, will earn neither thanks for to-day, nor remembrance from to-morrow.

H. M. D.

*Editorial Rooms of THE CONGREGATIONALIST,  
Corner Beacon and Somerset Streets, Boston,  
1 September, 1880.*



## CHAPTER I.

### THE HISTORY OF CONGREGATIONALISM.

**T** SPEAK here solely of its history since the Reformation, inasmuch as the discussion of that original Congregationalism which is taught and exemplified in the references of the New Testament to the subject of polity, and which characterized the Apostolic churches, can be treated more naturally under a subsequent head in the examination of those references themselves.

The immediate result of that transfer of the headship of the Established Church of England from Pope Clement VII. to King Henry VIII., which it is common to call the Reformation, was Episcopacy. A secondary result was the Presbyterianism which those who were exiled for conscience' sake during the brief subsequent reign of the bloody Mary were taught by the disciples of Calvin at Geneva, Frankfort, and elsewhere, and brought back with them on their return ; of which Thomas Cartwright was the most illustrious champion. The spiritual needs of England remained so serious under Elizabeth as to lead the godly who longed for a more thorough and purer reformation to cast about for some greater relief than had yet been gained ; and the majority of these — who soon came to be, not unnaturally, called Puritans — looked toward Cartwright and the new discipline which he advocated, as best offering

to supply a demand which every month seemed to them to render more pressing. But this Genevan plan contemplated a State Church still. It proposed indiscriminately, by their baptism, to receive all the baptized to its fellowship. And it waited for the Queen to move as its leader and head — which, to some whose hearts burned within them, seemed to threaten a weary waiting for a doubtful blessing; yet while the little light which they saw in this direction was scarcely more than darkness, they saw none at all else-wise.

Such being the condition of affairs, in the year 1568, or thereabouts, there went up to Cambridge — where the Puritan influence then especially centered — a young man named Robert Browne, of a good family in Rutlandshire, to become a scholar of Corpus Christi (or Benet) College. Leaving Cambridge after a few terms of study, he taught school for three years, apparently at Southwark; but the plague of 1578 broke up his school, and he went home. On the subsidence of the pest he returned to Cambridge for further research and training, and soon became a member of the family of Rev. Richard Greenham, an eminently devout Puritan minister resident in the near vicinity, and studied theology with him. Mr. Greenham encouraged him to preach, and he did so with so much acceptance as soon to be pressed to accept one of the Cambridge pulpits. After considerable anxious thought he declined the invitation, on the ground that he could not in conscience ask, or receive, ordination from the Bishops. He passed through, at this time, a mental conflict which for a season seems to have broken down his not robust bodily health. In his own language:

"he had no rest what he might do for the name and kingdom of God: he often complained of these evill daies and with manie tears sought where to find the righteous which glorified God, with whom he might live, and rejoyce together that they put away abominations."

After his recovery from severe illness and regaining of strength, while beseeching the Lord "to show him more comfort of His kingdom and church than he saw in Cambridge," it came to his ears that there were believers in Norfolk who were "verie forward" in that good work of spiritual reform for which his soul longed, and he thought it his duty to "take his voiage to them." He accordingly went to Norwich, where, spending some months in prayer, the study of the Bible, and meditation in the open fields, he came, at last, into the conviction that the only way to untie the knot was to cut it, and that such persons as desired to walk with God and with each other without waiting for prince or people, should separate themselves from the world and from all who walk disorderly, and join themselves together into local companies, each one of which — being rightly confederate of true believers — would be a true church of Christ. And so soon as his mind found rest in this position, he proceeded to labor with others, until — at some time in 1580, as it would seem — he, with a few associates of a kindred spirit, at Norwich formed by mutual covenant what I believe to have been the first Congregational church since the last of those founded in the days of the Apostles yielded up its life under the superincumbent weight of an intolerable hierarchy.

Browne thoroughly elaborated his new system. He