

## A "Congregational" church? What's that?

A short answer: Christians who have joined themselves together to worship God and encourage one another to live according to Christ's teachings. A longer answer . . .

A Congregational church is a church within the Protestant Christian tradition. Historically, they are most closely associated with the Pilgrims and Puritans who settled on this continent in the 17th century. Theologically, they have ties with the great Genevan Reformer of the 16th century, John Calvin.

In the late 1500's, the church reform that was sweeping through most of Europe (commonly referred to as the Reformation) reached England. Out of that encounter with the forces of change was birthed the Church of England: a church divorced from its ties with the pontiff in Rome and struggling to find its own identity. There was a strong movement to keep the church closely tied with the powers of the crown, as they had been under the church of Rome. There was also the desire to keep intact the extensive hierarchical structure that the church had inherited from its predecessors. Some, however, dissented.

Part of the problem, as the dissenters saw it, was that explicit, personal faith in Christ was not required for church membership. That virtually everyone in England was "Christian" was assumed. In addition, these "members" were organized by geographical boundaries ("parishes"), much as they were under the Church of Rome, and not by allegiance to a particular gathering of Christians.

The dissenters sought to establish churches whose members could give personal testimony as to their faith in Christ and which were at liberty to order and manage their affairs free from hierarchy and in ways they understood were in keeping with biblical mandates. These ideas, however, were not well received by those holding the reins of power. Such dissenters were considered enemies of the crown. Consequently, many of them fled first to Holland, and then to the New World, settling in what came to be called New England.

Soon after the arrival of those first "Pilgrims" there came a second wave of immigrants from England. These did not see themselves as needing to separate from the Church of England. They sought rather to "purify" it. But very quickly after their arrival, due to conviction and context, the ties to the institutional church in England grew tenuous. They gathered their own churches, and established centers of learning for their ministers (Harvard and Yale were two such institutions).

What came to be known as Congregational churches believe in the biblical teaching that Jesus Christ is the Head of His Body (the Church universal; made up of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ from every generation and from every "tribe and tongue and people and nation" Revelation 5:9) and of each local church. We believe that each local church is in itself a complete church, is self-governing and possesses all rights and responsibilities of the Church by the Holy Spirit as set forth in the Bible.

We believe that each local church is subject only to Jesus Christ, and not to any human association or ecclesiastical body or hierarchy. However, we believe it is proper and beneficial for each local church to seek voluntary fellowship and counsel of other such local churches (in fact, we enjoy warm relations with other Congregational churches). Furthermore, we believe it is God's desire for us to strive to be in fellowship with all evangelical Christian churches. We are voluntarily and officially in fellowship with the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference, a nationwide organization of churches that profess historic, biblical Christianity.

As is evident from what has been stated, much of what makes a Congregational church a Congregational church is how it is structured and governed (what church people call "polity"). But Neighborhood Church also sees itself as an inheritor of the theological teachings of the early proponents of congregationalism. Following are some of the biblical truths that they, and we, affirm: the Triune Godhead, of Father, Son and Holy Spirit; the inability of sinful human beings to enter into eternal life with God apart from faith in the atoning work of Christ; the necessity of a "new birth" by the Spirit of God in order to believe in this gracious gift of God; that those who possess such saving faith are members of the true church and, as such, are qualified to be members of a local church; that the Lord Jesus has commissioned and empowered the church by the Holy Spirit to carry on the work of God's kingdom until his return in glory to judge the living and the dead.

Any other questions?

