

the times, which means that today issues such as euthanasia, cloning, abortion, sexual preference, civil rights, and the environment can be and are actively discussed and addressed in Congregational circles.

This progressive, ever evolving perspective grounded in a rich tradition persistently prepared to engage the future with courage and intelligence is the genesis and the genius of the Congregational Way.

The perspective that been always distinguished Congregationalism is that of open

engagement with contemporary thought grounded in affirmation of a covenantal relationship with God, the ground of all being.

Congregationalism has changed, is changing, and will always change as it continues its commitment to taking seriously a progressive approach to dealing with religious outlook in relation to the issues God presents to each generation. This progressive, ever evolving, perspective grounded in a rich tradition persistently prepared to engage the future with courage and intelligence is the genesis and the genius of the Congregational Way.

About the Author

Steven H. Ware Bailey is an alumnus of Carleton College, Harvard University, and the University of Chicago. Steven has served on several boards and divisions of the association, including being a chairman of the Executive Committee. He also served as the Moderator of the 2003 Annual Meeting of the National Association held in Milwaukee, WI.

The NACCC is an association of autonomous Churches bound by our belief that Christ alone is the head of the local Church. With this in mind, we express and discuss theological issues respecting different positions. There is no one document which directs all our Churches, rather clergy and laity are encouraged to establish their own understandings of scripture and congregational life in Christ. This piece represents the views of one of our respected leaders and is submitted to the larger fellowship of Churches for consideration and/or edification.

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Congregational Way Series

The Congregational Way

by
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*"Congregationalism is a
distinctive religious
tradition."*

The Congregational Way

Congregationalism (with an upper-case C) is a distinctive religious tradition that has had and should continue to have a valued place in American culture, including a particular importance and significance that extends beyond the commonplace (and often trite) trilogy of "faith, freedom, and fellowship," which are generic articles of affirmation shared by many other religious bodies.

Congregationalism in America began in the seventeenth century as an English Puritan movement within the larger Reformed Calvinist tradition. The Congregationalists of early New England took seriously their resolve both to purify the church and to transform the whole of society to reflect the model set forth in scripture. To address their mission those Congregationalists assessed the religious and secular situation in which they found themselves and, trusting in God's providence, acted accordingly.

The Congregationalists' response to ecclesiastical and secular concerns was one that stressed an intellectual and affectional approach that included openness to the

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philosophical, scientific, and social issues of their day, which meant that education was emphasized and led to the founding of Harvard and Yale Colleges and the establishment of the first printing press in the New World. Social responsibility was equally embraced as a new civil commonwealth was ordered.

Addressing Concerns of the New World

This progressive approach to religion demanded that Congregationalists not fail to address new developments in scientific, philosophical, and social thinking. Lockean philosophy, Newtonian physics, and modern medicine (as evidenced by Cotton Mather's early advocacy of smallpox vaccination) were all eagerly embraced. New approaches to religion generated by both the Great Awakening and the rational theology of the Enlightenment were advanced by Congregationalists, who in the early nineteenth century reevaluated Calvinist doctrine to adapt it to the concerns of the modern world in the New Divinity theology of New England.

Later abolition, the social gospel, and liberal theology, including both modern biblical criticism and evolutionary theory, were causes promoted by Congregationalists. Likewise, attention

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was focused upon the education of women, for whom Congregationalists founded institutions like Wellesley and Smith Colleges to provide schooling equal to that offered men at Harvard and Yale, while in the South Congregationalists founded schools and colleges for newly emancipated African-Americans. Moreover, acknowledging the equality of the sexes, Congregationalists were among the first to ordain women to the ministry.

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When a sometimes too vapid liberalism was called to confront the presence of evil in the world more earnestly, Congregationalists were among those who saw much merit in the Neo-Orthodox critique of religion and society. Always Congregationalists have strived to be on the vanguard in response to changing conditions in the church and in the culture. A progressive perspective within the mainstream of American Protestant thought and action has characterized this distinctive tradition as Congregationalists have constantly been pioneers endeavoring to relate faith in God to the circumstances of