

CHURCH COVENANTS: AN ANNOTATED COLLECTION

Since it is the mutual owning of the Church's Covenant that makes a Church, the presence of Confessions or Creeds is secondary and often do not appear in a Church's documents. When a "Statement of Faith" occurs in a Church's formative document it is a transient expression of the Church's substantive positions but is not a creed to which every member is expected to conform. The basis of the Christian Way of Congregationalists resides wholly in relationships (with God and with one another) and the living of Christian lives. To the extent that Congregationalists have a common faith expression it has resided in the Reformed tradition. Various faith expressions have been offered by national Congregational bodies over the years but none were anticipated to be detailed "creeds" which would gain the explicit adherence of every Congregational Church.

The essential principle of the Congregational Way was expressed by John Robinson, Pastor of the Scrooby/Leyden/ New Plymouth Church: "Every true church of God is joined with him in holy covenant by voluntary profession to have him the God thereof and to be his people."ⁱ

The covenant of the Salem Church (1629) was greatly expanded over the latter years of the 17th Century. Pertinent to the discussion of Creed/Confession, Salem's "Direction for a Public Profession" of 1665 contains a preface, taken from the Savoy Declaration of 1658, which continues to guide Congregational Churches.

The Genuine use of a Confession of Faith is, that under the same Form of Words they express the substance of the same common Salvation or unity of their Faith. Accordingly it is to be looked upon as a fit means, whereby to express that their Common Faith and Salvation, and not to be made use of as an imposition upon any.ⁱⁱ

Churches looking for assistance in drafting their own Church Covenants may find the following historical examples helpful. The spelling, in all cases, has been modernized; and the antique usages (saith, hath, taketh, etc.) have also been modernized. Otherwise, they remain in their original form.

THE COVENANT OF 1606

In the record of the Church founded in London by Henry Jacob, it is recorded that "They joined both hands with each brother, and stood in a ring: their intent being declared. H. Jacob and each of the rest made some confession or profession of their faith and repentance: some were longer, some were briefer.

Then they covenanted together to walk in all God's ways as he revealed or should make known to them.ⁱⁱⁱ

COVENANT OF GAINSBOROUGH – SCROOBY

We are told that early in the 17th Century, "they shook off the yoke of antichristian bondage, and, as the Lord's free people,

joined themselves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a church estate in the fellowship of the Gospel, to walk in all His ways made known, or to be made known to them, according to their best endeavors, whatever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them."^{iv}

SALEM COVENANT OF 1629

This simple Covenant which formed the Salem Church was to be expanded several times before the end of the 17th Century.

We covenant with the Lord and one with another; and do bind ourselves in the presence of God, to walk together in all his ways, according as he is pleased to reveal himself unto us in his Blessed Word of truth.^v

COVENANT OF THE FIRST CHURCH IN CHARLESTOWN - BOSTON, 1630

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in obedience to his holy will and divine ordinance, we whose names are hereunder written, being by his most wise and good providence brought together in this part of America in the Bay of Massachusetts, and desirous to unite ourselves into one congregation or church under the Lord Jesus Christ our Head, in such sort as becomes all those whom he has redeemed and sanctified to himself,

[We] do hereby solemnly and religiously, as in his most holy presence, promise and bind ourselves to walk in all our ways according to the rule of the gospel, and in all sincere conformity to his holy ordinances, and in mutual love and respect each to other, so near as God shall give us grace.^{vi}

DEXTER'S SUGGESTED COVENANT

We, who feel called of God to join ourselves into a church-state, having a deep sense of our unworthiness thereof, disability thereto, and aptness to forsake the Lord and our duty to Him and to each other, do hereby, in the name of Jesus Christ, and imploring His grace to supplement our weakness to the worthy performance of our vows—solemnly covenant and agree to walk in this church in all His ways, made known, or to be made known unto us, according to our best endeavors, whatsoever it shall cost us, the Lord assisting us.

And, particularly, we covenant and agree: to seek to live supremely for God; to consecrate ourselves, our households, our property, to Him; to submit to the gospel discipline of this church, and labor for its peace, purity and usefulness; to exercise and promote Christian fellowship with all sister churches of the common Head; and particularly to make ourselves by prayers, gifts, and service, constant coworkers with Christ toward the great end of human redemption, until His will shall be done on earth as it is in Heaven.^{vii}

BARTON'S SUGGESTED COVENANT

Acknowledging Jesus Christ to be our Savior and Lord, and accepting the Holy Scriptures as our rule of faith and practice, and recognizing the privilege and duty of uniting ourselves for Christian fellowship, the enjoyment of Christian ordinances, the public worship of God, and the advancement of his kingdom in the world, we do now, in the sight of God and invoking his blessing, solemnly covenant and agree with each other to associate ourselves to be a Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, as warranted by the Word of God.

We agree to maintain the institutions of the gospel, to submit ourselves to the orderly administration of the affairs of the Church, and to walk together in brotherly love.

And this we do depending upon the aid of our heavenly Father, who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son for our salvation, and of Jesus Christ, who has redeemed us with his blood, and of the Holy Spirit our Comforter and Guide.^{viii}

MAURER'S SUGGESTED COVENANT

Maurer's recommended bylaws for a Church embrace the Covenant in a section entitled "Doctrine". The language is directly from statement of faith adopted by the National Council of Congregational Churches in meeting at Kansas City, Missouri, in 1913.

We are united in striving to know the will of God as taught in the Holy Scriptures, and in our purpose to walk in the ways of the Lord, made known or to be made known to us. We hold it to be the mission of the Church of Christ to proclaim the gospel to all mankind, exalting the worship of the one true God and laboring for the progress of knowledge, the promotion of justice, the reign of peace, and the realization of human brotherhood. Depending, as did our fathers, upon the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth, we work and pray for the transformation of the world into the kingdom of God; and we look with faith for the triumph of righteousness and the life everlasting.^{ix}

ABERCROMBIE'S SUGGESTED COVENANT

This covenant is included in Dr. Abercrombie's small book but, as he notes, is the Church Covenant of the First Congregational Church of Tacoma, Washington.

We declare our belief in the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of all men. We promise to do the will of God as we know it or shall hereafter learn it. We recognize in Christ the way, the truth, and the life. We confess our purpose to learn of Him, to become like Him, and to advance His power in the hearts and lives of men. We recognize the Churches as fellowships of those who love Christ's way and are joined together for mutual encouragement and increased power in working at the common task of building the city of God here and now. We covenant with this Church as our Church; desiring to love its members; being eager to sustain its worship and work; seeking its peace, purity, and increase; and promising to do what we can to share its part in transforming the world into the kingdom of God.^x

GRAY'S SUGGESTED COVENANT A

In the freedom of love and truth, and in the spirit of Jesus the Christ, we unite to worship God and serve humanity.
^{xi}

GRAY'S SUGGESTED COVENANT B

We covenant with God and with one another:

- To worship the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ
- To witness to the power of His love and truth

- To dwell in harmony with God’s universe, and
- To serve humanity in Christ’s Name and Spirit.^{xii}

GRAY’S SUGGESTED COVENANT C

Trusting in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ for vision and wisdom, courage and perseverance, insight and understanding, we promise to walk with each other in the fellowship of this Congregational Church—in worship, in prayer, in study, and in service, according as God shall be pleased to show us His truth and His Way in the Holy Scriptures both now and through the years to come.^{xiii}

ⁱ Barton, William E.; *The Law of Congregational Usage*; Boston: The Pilgrim Press; 1915 p 394

ⁱⁱ Walker, Williston; *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*; Cleveland, OH: United Church Press; 1991 p 119

ⁱⁱⁱ Barton, William E.; *The Law of Congregational Usage*; Boston: The Pilgrim Press; 1915 p 394

^{iv} Bradford, William; *Of Plymouth Plantation*; New York: Alfred A. Knopf; 1984 p 9

^v Walker, Williston; *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*; Cleveland, OH: United Church Press; 1991 p 116

^{vi} Bacon, Leonard Woolsey; *The Story of the Churches: The Congregationalists*; New York: The Baker & Taylor Co.; 1904 p 47-48

^{vii} Dexter, Henry Martyn; *A Hand-Book of Congregationalism*; Boston: Congregational Publishing Society; 1880 p 145

^{viii} Barton, William E.; *Congregational Manual and Rules of Order*; Oak Park and Sublette, IL: The Puritan Press; 1910 p 231

^{ix} Maurer, Oscar E.; *Manual of the Congregational Christian Churches*; Boston: The Pilgrim Press; 1951 p 142

^x Abercrombie, A. Vaughan; *How to Gather and Order a Congregational Christian Church*; privately printed from the office of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches ; 1966 p 24

^{xi} Gray, Henry David; *Congregational Worshipbook*; Hollywood CA: Hollywood Congregational Center for Study and Service; 1978 p B17

^{xii} Gray, Henry David; *Congregational Worshipbook*; Hollywood CA: Hollywood Congregational Center for Study and Service; 1978 p B17

^{xiii} Gray, Henry David; *Congregational Worshipbook*; Hollywood CA: Hollywood Congregational Center for Study and Service; 1978 p B17