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THE EARLY

HISTORY OF CONGREGATIONALISM

IN

NEW JERSEY AND THE MIDDLE PROVINCES.

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It is proposed in this paper to give only an outline sketch of intertwined Congregational and Presbyterian history in New Jersey and the Middle Provinces, afterwards States. This outline relates to the origin and growth of the Congregational system in these regions, to its final absorption into another system of polity, and to the fruits which it there produced, or of which it was the innocent occasion.

Congregationalism in New Jersey dates back to the first settlement of the State, then an English province, by colonists from New England, mostly from Connecticut, a little more than two hundred years ago. The first church organization was at Newark, on the Passaic (now the first Presbyterian Church of that city), in 1666. Elizabethtown is said to have been settled from a similar source a little earlier, but no church was organized till shortly afterwards, so that Newark is the point from which our ancient Congregational history radiates.

The immediate cause of the numerous removals from Connecticut to New Jersey was the dissatisfaction that arose there from the union of the two colonies of what were known as New Haven and Connecticut. Many of the New Haven people were aggrieved at the union, for to them it betokened a lowering of their Congregational and Puritan standard. The Connecticut colony was evidently drifting towards English Presbyterian centralization. There was nothing except vital godliness which these people valued so much as the government of the church by its own membership; and nothing which their experience in England had taught them so to dread as the

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government of the churches by officers, civil or ecclesiastical, standing above and independent of the people.

When these colonies, therefore, against the protest of the New Haven people, were joined in one, the fears of many were such—and the subsequent history justifies them—that they were ready, as they had done before, to abandon their homes and go out pilgrims again into the unbroken forest, there to undertake once more the formation of their ideal church and society.

A portion of these aggrieved people removed, first to Long Island, and after some years' residence there, came over into New Jersey and Southeastern New York. They settled in Morris County and the surrounding region, where they organized Congregational churches and formed afterwards an association. This grouping of the churches was their protection; so that while they came from Long Island many years after the settlements were made on the Passaic, and while the oldest churches were abandoning the polity which they came to establish, these newer ones, drawn into closer sympathy by their association with each other, maintained for a long time their denominational integrity, and several of them in Morris and Orange Counties continue Congregational churches to this day.

Returning now to the Newark colony and its outgrowths, let us observe what sort of people they were and what sort of churches they organized. The first church of Newark was actually organized in the town of Branford, Conn., although, on its removal to New Jersey in 1666, other kindred spirits from Milford, Guilford, and New Haven came with them, and were members of the church from the commencement of the settlement. The following remarkable document was formally adopted and subscribed by sixty-four persons at Newark in the spring of 1667, clearly indicating the principles which they cherished and the sort of church polity which they came to establish:—

“ I. That none shall be admitted freemen or full burgesses within our town upon Passaic River, in the Province of New Jersey, but such planters as are members of some or other of the Congregational churches; nor shall any but such be chosen

to magistracy, or to carry on any part of civil judicature, or as deputies or assistants to have power to vote in establishing laws, and making or repealing them, or to any chief military trust or office. Nor shall any but such church members have any vote in any such elections. Though all others permitted to be planters have right to their proper inheritance, and do and shall enjoy all other civil liberties and privileges, according to all laws, orders, grants, which are or hereafter shall be made in this town."

"2. We shall with care and diligence provide for the maintenance of the purity of religion professed in the Congregational churches."

Upon this basis the First Church of Newark was organized and administered substantially for more than sixty years, under the successive pastorates of Rev. Abraham Pierson from Branford, Conn., his son, afterwards president of Yale College, Rev. Abraham Pierson, Rev. John Pruden, Rev. Jabez Wakeman, Rev. Nathaniel Bowers, and Rev. Joseph Webb. These pastors were all from Connecticut, and were all settled by councils from sister churches regularly convened. It is probable that, some time during the pastorate of Mr. Webb, which extended from 1722 to near the middle of the eighteenth century, the church became permanently attached to Presbytery; although how this was done, or when it was done, or as to whether there was ever any vote taken on the subject by the church, so far as I can learn, it is impossible to determine.

Between 1666, when the First Church of Newark was established, and the opening of the eighteenth century, a large number of churches, all of them on the Congregational basis, had been organized throughout Eastern Jersey, on Long Island, and in Southeastern New York. Among the early Congregational churches of New Jersey, what are now known as the First Presbyterian Churches of Newark, of Elizabeth, of Orange, of Bloomfield, of Morristown, of Mendham, of Caldwell, of Shrewsbury, of Piscataway, of Woodbridge, and of Connecticut Farms, stand prominent. I am not now able to give, as I hope to be in the future, a complete list of all these ancient churches, but comparatively it was large. At that time there was not a Presbyterian church, nor any other,

except possibly a few Dutch and Episcopal churches, in all this extended region. No Presbyterian church existed in the city of New York till 1716. Our Congregational polity extended, at that time, southward into Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Virginia.

Indeed, Congregational churches began to be established in Virginia within four years from the landing of the Pilgrims on Plymouth Rock. Rev. Henry Jacob, a Congregational minister of England, and an acquaintance of John Robinson, emigrated with thirty members of his congregation, in 1624, to what was known as Upper Norfolk, Va. Several churches were organized, and so important had their work become that, in 1642, Richard Bennet, Daniel Gookin, John Hyll, and about seventy other persons wrote to the ministers of New England, telling them of their churches and of their need of ministers, and asking aid in that respect. In response to that appeal, and another sent afterward, Rev. Mr. Knowles of Watertown, Rev. Mr. Thompson of Braintree, Rev. Mr. James (formerly of Charlestown), and probably others, went to Virginia, arriving late in 1642. On the 2d of March, 1644, Virginia passed a law which obliged them to leave, and they sailed for New England on or about the 18th of April of that year. At this time the Episcopal Church was the established religion of the province, and under its leadership the work of persecution commenced there, in like manner as it was being carried on in New York, and continued till these feeble Congregational churches of Virginia were either broken up or greatly weakened and scattered. Still, several of them maintained a feeble existence during all these years of intolerance, and the traces of their influence continue to this day. At the close of the persecution there were not less than a thousand Congregationalists in that sparsely settled region. And to-day new churches are being organized there, on those old foundations, and from the old stock.

Thus we find that, up to the opening of the eighteenth century, except in a portion of New York, Maryland, and Virginia, where episcopacy and papacy had sway, the Congregational polity throughout all these middle colonies, as they were called, was the prevailing one, and, if we except a few Dutch

churches in the vicinity of New York, was the only form of church organization that existed. And yet we find that, in the next fifty years, nearly all the Congregational churches extending over so vast a territory dropped the polity on which they were founded, and which many of them came into these regions to establish, and adopted the Presbyterian system of church government. Indeed, they were the chief material of which the Presbyterian Church at that time consisted. They were more important to it than were the Scotch or Irish.

What, now, is the explanation of this remarkable change? Let us first consider the circumstances that were favorable to such a change, and that acted as preparatives to it, and then note the direct processes by which it was brought about.

As for the favoring circumstances, they were mainly these:—

1. Our Congregational churches scattered over this extended region were rather Independent than Congregational. They had no organized associations by which they were brought together once or twice a year for mutual consultation and Christian fellowship. Some of them belonged to associations in New England, but these were too far away to be of much practical use. The churches were isolated, needing mutual sympathy, counsel, and stimulus. Our Congregational system provides fully for this, but these early churches were too busy to avail themselves of it; and probably some of them were so jealous of their rights as to fear the influence of even an advisory association of pastors and churches. Had local and general associations existed here then, as they did in New England, and have since in all parts of the land where our churches have prospered, it is scarcely possible that they should not have held to their original polity to this day, and possessed the land. The fact that in Morris and Orange Counties, where there was a local association, several of the churches yet retain their original form, is suggestive of what would have taken place had they all been similarly associated.

2. A second circumstance favorable to the change was the anomalous attitude that Congregationalism was assuming at that time in Connecticut, and which had its influence upon these scattered flocks in the wilderness, with whom they were so closely connected. In speaking of the reasons that induced

the Newark colony to leave Branford, reference was made to the uniting of the New Haven and Connecticut colonies, which had taken place some years previous ; and to the objections that the strict Congregationalists felt to it, because the Connecticut churches were inclining towards a Presbyterian centralization, and to a laxity of discipline, such as then prevailed in Great Britain and Continental Europe. Their fears were more than realized. "From the date of the absorption of the New Haven colony," says Dr. Bacon, "the dominant political influence in Connecticut had been steadily intent upon the suppression of Congregationalism, and the substitution of something in the place of it that should be better suited to the purposes of an ecclesiastical establishment. As early as 1669, the legislature gave out a very serious intimation that a new system was to be expected, and that Congregationalism might remain without disturbance *until* better light in an orderly way doth appear." Then followed the Saybrook platform constitution, a two-faced instrument, which was imposed upon the churches, and made them for near a hundred years more Presbyterian than Congregational. During this period the churches of Connecticut were generally spoken of as Presbyterian churches. They have long since thrown off that yoke, for in 1784 the Saybrook platform was repealed. It was during this anomalous state of things in Connecticut that the Congregational churches of the middle provinces became Presbyterian. Doubtless the example of Connecticut, and to some extent of Massachusetts, had a powerful influence in producing the transition. The influence was positive. Leading ministers of Connecticut, claiming to be Congregationalists, came to New Jersey to urge the churches here to give up the principle of self-government, and become Presbyterians.

3. Another circumstance that favored the change was the general impression which prevailed at the time that between the two systems, the Presbyterian and the Congregational, there was really nothing of importance. There was much to favor this view, for in England Presbyterianism — what of it had not gone off into fatal heresy, Unitarianism chiefly — had become in fact Congregational. The Rev. Dr. S. J. Baird, good Presbyterian authority, says when the articles entitled

"Heads of Agreement" were signed in London in 1690 by the Congregationalists and Presbyterians, "that this act constituted a final and entire surrender of Presbyterian principles by the ministers of that name"; and he adds that "the example at London was speedily followed throughout the kingdom."

But while the Presbyterians of England were becoming Congregationalists, in the New England colonies there was, as we have seen, a leaning of the Congregationalists towards a classical or Presbyterian government.

As our New Jersey churches were in close correspondence with both Old and New England, the natural effect produced on their minds would be that the two systems are not materially unlike. As to their doctrines, this view was correct; but as to their polity, the difference was then, and is still, just the difference between self-government and government from without. But all this mattered not, for so long as the impression prevailed that the two systems were virtually alike, it was easy to pass from one to the other.

4. Yet another circumstance that favored the change wrought in our Congregational churches was the necessity that existed, and the desire that prevailed, for co-operative effort. Churches of that day had no time nor strength to spend in contending against one another. Their great aim was to supply the new settlements and the country with the gospel. It has been characteristic of the Congregationalists from the beginning till now, to go out from themselves and co-operate with others. From their very constitution they cannot be narrowly sectarian; they have not been; instead of this they have expended far more both in men and money in promoting by missionary labor the general interests of religion in other denominations, than in building up their own. With such a fraternal, confiding, and liberal spirit, our Congregational fathers were in the most favorable circumstances to be led out from the polity which they preferred into another different from their own. Having gone into co-operation with others, they naturally passed into consolidation with them.

Such, then, were the favoring circumstances which prepared the way for the subversion of the ancient Congregational churches in these central colonies. Let us now sketch the direct historical process by which it was brought about.

The apostle and founder of Presbyterianism in America was Rev. Frances Makemie, an Irishman from Donegal County, Ireland. He came to this country about 1683, and organized a church at Snow Hill, Md., and preached for some time on that narrow neck of land between the Chesapeake and the ocean. He visited New England, and especially Boston, to obtain aid for his mission, and in 1703-4 went to England, and laid the wants of that poor and destitute and persecuted region before the Union Society of the Congregationalists and Presbyterians of London. This was the society already referred to, which had adopted those "Heads of Agreement," by which the Presbyterians of England became in effect Independents. One purpose of this society was to provide and support missionary labor at home and in the American colonies. So far as this society had any denominational character, it was Congregational. Makemie presented his wants to this society. It agreed to send him back with two other missionaries, John Hampton and George Macnish, and promised to add two others the following year. Of course it was with no expectation that Makemie would devote himself to the special work of establishing Presbyterianism. About the same time persecutions in the North of Ireland induced several other Presbyterian ministers from there to come to the New World, who settled in the region of Philadelphia. There were also in Eastern Pennsylvania at that time several churches organized, and presided over by English and Welsh pastors, that were Congregational if they had any denominational character. In Philadelphia, also, a church had just been organized, composed of Independents and Baptists, with a few Scotch, Welsh, and Swedish settlers, under the pastorate of Rev. Mr. Andrews, from Massachusetts. Against the claim that has been set up that this was from the first a Presbyterian church, we need only note the facts just referred to as to its origin and constituents, and also another fact, — that not till seventy years from its organization did this church, now the First Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia, elect a board of ruling elders.

Out of elements like these Makemie succeeded in organizing what was called the Presbytery of Philadelphia, in the year 1705 or 1706. It was called a presbytery, but it was, in fact,

only a Congregational association with another name. There is reliable authority for saying that the Congregationalists who joined the organization made with Makemie this compromise: "We will accept your name of presbytery, provided the body, when organized, shall assume no authority over the churches. We care not for the name, but we do care for the freedom of the churches."

With this understanding, the first so-called presbytery on the western continent was organized, consisting of only six or seven members. Where it was organized, or when, or how, it is impossible to say, for the first leaf in the old book of records is torn out. Congregationalists would be glad to know why and by whom that leaf was destroyed, and just what it contained!

Of this much there is a positive certainty, that for over twenty years from the first organization, and after the one presbytery had grown into four, which constituted the synod of Philadelphia, there was not, as yet, any written constitution, nor any established creed, nor any prescribed form of discipline, having authority over the synod or the presbyteries, or the churches connected with them. Up to 1736, when what was called the "Adopting Act" was passed, all the churches of the so-called Presbyterian body in America were as absolutely free to regulate their own affairs in their own way as the Congregational churches of New Jersey and Pennsylvania are to-day. Some attempts were made by the Irish and Scotch ministers, at different times, to secure a stricter government, but they were promptly put down.

During all this time the utmost endeavors were made to induce the Congregational churches to join the Presbyterian bodies, and it is more than once admitted, by quotation, in Gillett's *History of Presbyterianism*, that the reason why the Presbyterian bodies did not establish a constitution, creed, and discipline, was that they might be more acceptable to the Congregational churches, and so bring them into their connection. Still our Congregational churches were slow to connect themselves with the presbyteries, even though they were yet such only in name. The pastors often joined while the churches for a time refused.

The period during which the nominally Presbyterian bodies of America became Presbyterian in fact extended from about 1720 to 1736. The first attempt to invest a synod with ecclesiastical authority was in 1720, but it was strenuously resisted by the Congregational, English, and Welsh ministers, and was finally settled by a compromise which still left them their desired freedom. But the struggle went on, and in 1729 the "Enabling Act" was passed, which respected both the Westminster Confession and the Book of Discipline. As to the first, by a singular two-faced paper, it was both adopted and rejected as the standard of faith in the Presbyterian churches. Those who chose to adopt it did so, and those who chose not to adopt it, except in some general sense, and with just as much of specific repudiation as they desired to express, provided they kept within the range of historic orthodoxy, had that privilege. As to the *Directory of Worship and Discipline of the Church*, they simply recommended it to the churches as Scriptural and proper to be followed, if they saw fit to adopt it.

The passage of these measures, mild as they were, wellnigh rent the church into fragments.

Seven years after the "Adopting Act" was passed, another paper was adopted that made both the Confession of Faith and the Book of Discipline binding on synods and the Presbyterian churches; and from that period, 1736, and not earlier, the present system of Presbyterianism was established on the western continent.

At this time most, but by no means all, of the Congregational churches of New Jersey had become associated with Presbyterian bodies, but the connection from that date was not one of harmony. Some of them, of which the First Church of Newark was prominent, so far withdrew from the synod as to have no representation at its meetings for many years. Even in the contest between what was called the new side and the old side, which resulted in the first great division of the Presbyterian Church in 1741, numbers of the most important of the Congregational churches and pastors absented themselves, and took no active part. The *immediate* cause of that division was the great revival and the irregularities that grew out of it in 1739 and 1740. I do not say that absorbed Con-

gregationalism caused the division ; but the revival was largely in the Congregational churches, and their sympathies were with the new side. The complete division of the church in 1741, and the subsequent formation of the New York Synod on liberal principles, not only saved the Congregational churches of New Jersey to the Presbyterian Church, but it kept some, the Tennants, *e. g.*, father and sons, who preferred a mild Presbyterian system, from becoming practically Congregationalists. After the organization of the New York Synod most of the Congregationalists of East Jersey and of Long Island joined it. But when, eighteen years later, the two bodies were reunited, the old restiveness revived. Still at this time and later, the Congregational churches of Connecticut, under the constitution of the Saybrook platform, had become so nearly Presbyterian, that their influence and the desire for harmony prevailed to prevent any important rupture till after the close of the Revolutionary War.

In 1779 Rev. Jacob Green, of Hanover, N. J., and three other neighboring ministers, all able men, withdrew from the New York and Philadelphia Synod because, as they said, "that body had such notions of Presbyterial power and church government as are not agreeable to our free institutions." "They organized an ecclesiastical body on the principle of the independency of the local church," and called it the "Associated Presbytery." But it was simply a Congregational association of the radical sort. Such was the growth of this body that in the next twenty-five years their one little Associated Presbytery had not only greatly increased in numbers and influence, but four or five others like it had been organized, extending from New Jersey up the Hudson River into Northern New York. The churches and ministers belonging to this new Congregational development were more numerous at the opening of the nineteenth century than was the whole Presbyterian Church of America at its first division sixty years before.

But this development of Congregationalism, commencing in New Jersey, has also, for the most part, passed away. It was swallowed up, as hundreds of other churches have been throughout the land, by what was known as the "Plan

of Union," another of the compacts entered into by the so-called Congregationalists of Connecticut and the Presbyterian Church. The "Plan of Union" was formally adopted in 1801. It was this: that the Congregationalists and Presbyterians should work together in all their home-missionary enterprises with this understanding, — that Congregational churches might come under the care of Presbytery and have Presbyterian ministers, and be represented in the General Assembly, and yet, in their local church capacity, retain their Congregational freedom; and that Presbyterian churches having Congregational pastors should yet retain the eldership and other Presbyterian usages. This seems fair, but what was the result? Nearly every Congregational church west of the Hudson River had Presbyterian ministers, and most of them were brought, sooner or later, to be themselves Presbyterian; while there has not been from that day to this, and from the rules of their church never can be, a Presbyterian church with a Congregational pastor. Under this singular arrangement, the Congregationalists furnished half the men and at least half the money for over fifty years to build up Presbyterian churches. They did this largely through the American Home Missionary and the American Education Societies. But with this arrangement the Southern and old-school wings of the Presbyterian Church were not satisfied. They insisted upon having church societies under church control, they represented portions of their own church as being Congregationalized and not strict in their adherence to the doctrinal standards and Book of Discipline; they tried their own members for heresy, of whom Albert Barnes and Dr. Lyman Beecher were conspicuous examples; and finally, without formal charge or citation or trial, excommunicated four synods and about thirty presbyteries, comprising together a body of ministers and churches four times as large as the whole Presbyterian Church at the time when the Plan of Union was established. Nor was this all. Nearly every synod and presbytery in the Northern and Border States was immediately divided, those who sympathized with the excised synod withdrawing, and joining themselves to what was afterwards known as the New School Presbyterian Church. All this was the fruit of bringing Congregationalists into organic

compact with Presbyterians. The two elements, as stated by Dr. Fowler, May 19, 1870, just after the late Union at Philadelphia, in his opening sermon before the reunited General Assembly, could not be made harmoniously to combine.

He thus significantly speaks of the causes of the division in 1837 :—

“The division was an eruption. Every country of Europe and every State of the Union were represented in us, but Scotland, Ireland, and New England contributed most largely to us. The Scotch and Irish were rigid in adherence to doctrines and strict in the observance of rules, and the New-Englanders claimed and allowed latitude and independence. Thus discordant, they could hardly shun collision, and three occasions for it were presented.

“*First.* New England activity applied itself to the abolition of slavery, and antipathy to New England quite naturally resisted it.

“*Second.* New England activity also applied itself to theological inquiries, and just at the time when the principal constituents of our church were most sensitive, new views of truth were promulgated. The New England element assimilated to them or kept quiet with them, while the Scotch and Irish element was repellent of them.

“*Third.* New England activity is individual. Its ecclesiastical polity is one of isolation and voluntary co-operation. Scotch and Irish Presbyterians were trained under ecclesiastical organizations for the promotion of religion and benevolence. With them it was the work of the church, and hence the zeal for boards of the church. The two systems could not harmoniously co-operate.”

It would seem that the experiment of trying to harmonize the Presbyterian and Congregational polities had been sufficiently tried and would now be abandoned. The division did have the effect to bring Connecticut, that had always been foremost for union, back to her old Congregational foundations ; but as for continued co-operation in the Plan of Union, and in the union societies, it was argued that now, as the new-school Presbyterian Church was freed from the restraints of the old school, all would move on smoothly. The experiment was therefore continued, and on a broader scale than ever. Large numbers of Congregational churches that had previously refused to come into Presbytery under the Plan of Union now consented. The union societies increased their efforts, and Congregationalists contributed more largely than ever to sustain them. For a time the new experiment seemed likely to succeed, for a large

part of the new-school Presbyterian Church was of New England origin and training ; but after a few years the old inherent incompatibility of the two systems reappeared. Congregational churches multiplied, and Congregationalists became more and more disposed to sustain them ; the new-school Presbyterians became more and more conservative, more jealous of the growth and influence of the Congregationalists, and revealed a strong desire for reunion with the old school. Gradually they broke their connection with the union societies in which they and the Congregationalists had ever co-operated. They withdrew from the American Evangelical Society, from the American Missionary Association, from the American Home Missionary Society, and the Tract Society was resolved back to its original elements ; only the Plan of Union and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions remained to hold the two denominations in close co-operative effort ; and when, six or seven years ago, the new school was received back into the embrace of the old, these last ties had to be sundered.

The Congregationalists were left to retire from those abnormal and complex relationships, which have so hindered their own growth, however much they may have helped that of others, and to fall back upon their simple polity of self-government, recognizing no authority as above that of the local churches, except the authority of Christ.

It was perfectly natural and fitting that the Congregational and Presbyterian Churches of two hundred years ago should attempt to harmonize, and even consolidate. One, substantially, in their doctrinal beliefs, drawn together by persecutions in which they mutually suffered, and not themselves apprehending the exact points of difference in their own systems of polity, and anxious alike to carry the gospel to all regions of this vast and rapidly settling country, it was natural that two such denominations should strive to be practically one. The effort was most Christian and most thorough ; but for reasons beyond their own control, for reasons inherent in the two systems of polity, after an experiment of two hundred years, made in every possible form and under the most varying circumstances, we find the Presbyterians and Congregationalists of America distinct and separate denominations of

Christians. They are yet one in spirit and purpose, but their two polities cannot interblend and harmonize. Our system exalts the individual and the local church, theirs the Presbyterian body and its legislative judicatures.

I have thus endeavored briefly to outline the rise and history of Congregationalism in the middle provinces — afterwards States — of America. We have seen why and how they were planted, why and how they were afterwards, like steel filings between powerful magnets, drawn from their original principles and purposes. Enough has been said to make it plain that when Congregationalists come back to this territory, as some of its representatives are now coming, after one hundred and fifty years of exile, to build again on the old foundations of our fathers, that they do not thrust themselves upon a region where they have no claims. The churches now built are monuments to the Congregational fathers who lived and toiled on the same ground centuries ago. Those churches were all planted in the true martyr spirit, and cost greater hardship and sacrifice than it is possible for us, in these days of luxury, to realize. They meant to make their institutions permanent. What they failed to do, those who have come later are set to accomplish. As new temples are reared in place of the old ones, may the builders have wisdom and grace to lay the foundations deep and strong, so that they shall not slide again from the grand and simple polity that has always distinguished the brotherhood of Congregational churches!