

Wisconsin Congregational Theological Society

A Proposed Solution: The History of Creedalism within Congregationalism
With a Brief Excursus into the Nature and Purpose of Doctrine

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Introduction

Congregationalism is a denomination with deep roots. We trace our beginnings back to the English Reformation in the Sixteenth Century. However, the Congregationalism we know today is but a dull shadow of the great vision of our forefathers: Robert Browne, Henry Barrow, John Robinson and many others. It has been 430 years since Robert Browne ministered to a gathered separatist church in Norwich, and in that time Congregationalism has seen its ups and downs.

As a modern Congregationalist, I must say that I am disappointed in the state of our denomination/Associate today. Congregationalism began with such a wonderful vision and purpose, and yet, over the centuries our purpose and identity have been polluted and distorted, to the point where I shudder to think what our forbearers would say if they saw us today.

Especially troubling is our over-emphasis on freedom to the detriment of faith. By this I mean that freedom of expression and thought are valued above historical, Trinitarian, Orthodox faith. This is most disturbing not only because of how far we have strayed from our Congregational mothers and fathers, but because of how we have strayed from the historical and present Body of Christ, the catholic Christian church, by denying the need for a creedal unifying statement of faith. The modern misunderstanding of Congregational freedom has caused us to be blinded to our rich creedal history.

This paper will analyze the history of creedalism within Congregationalism, as well as discuss the major problem with modern Congregationalism – namely that we lack a sense of modern or historical identity – culminating in a proposed solution. To best serve this argument it will be necessary to briefly analyze theology and the nature and purpose of doctrine.

Theology

Theology is a natural part of life. Every person has a theology of some kind, even if they do not realize it. Our theology is our ultimate body of governing beliefs - specifically about God and matters of faith. These beliefs are evident in what we say, what we do, and how we act. It is, therefore, essential for any Christian to have a sound theological grounding when discussing matters of God, politics, sports, or anything else.

The term “theology” is often misunderstood or misused. Its meaning has become polluted and distorted. In this paper, I assume the word theology to mean, “the systematic study of the ideas of a religion.”¹ Theology does not stand alone; it exists in communion with doctrine. It is unwise to mention one without the other. “Doctrine implies a reference to the ideas of a community, whose members value and are committed to them. Theology more properly refers to the views of individuals, not necessarily within this community or tradition, who seek to explore ideas without any necessary commitment to them.”² Doctrine is, in essence, a compilation of faithful individuals’ theologies, but this does not mean that theology and doctrine are equal. The communal, traditional, and historical aspects of doctrine establish its primacy over an individual’s theology.

Centrality of Scripture in all we do

“Christian theology begins with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.”³ Theology is a response to God’s action in the world; its genesis is not in the human mind, but in the action of God incarnate in Jesus Christ, as recorded in the Holy Scriptures. Therefore, it stands to reason

¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 101.

² Alister E. McGrath, *Understanding Doctrine: Its Relevance and Purpose for Today* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1992), 56.

³ John H. Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 5.

that the ultimate source of Christian theology is the Bible. This means that any Christian theology must be Biblical. God's revelation in Jesus Christ is made known to us through the Bible. Or, as Martin Luther said, "Scripture is the manger in which Christ is laid;" therefore, it would be completely inappropriate to discuss Christian theology without keeping the Bible and the church at the center of all discussion.

That being said, the Bible is a complex mystery that cannot be solved by human logic. Thus, "prayer is the inseparable companion of theological inquiry."⁴ Any faithful reading of Scripture will involve prayer. The Scriptures are just words on pages without the inspiration and authority of the Holy Spirit. Our prayers are for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit to understand what we are reading and how it applies to our lives – to bring us into contact with the Almighty. Theology is an individual's unique approach to religion, but it cannot be handled recklessly. "Just as Christian faith is not a smorgasbord of beliefs, so Christian theology is not a disparate bundle of symbols and doctrines from which one can select at will or organize into any pattern one pleases."⁵

God came into this world in human flesh to reveal Himself to us in a way that we would otherwise never have known. This Special Revelation is only made known to us by God's Holy Scriptures. This means "there is no other access to the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ."⁶ With this in mind, we must remember that God's revelation to us in Jesus Christ is total. God was fully Himself in the person of Jesus Christ, but due to the limitations of our understanding,

⁴Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁶ McGrath, *Understanding Doctrine*, 26.

even when we encounter God in all His glory, we cannot fully understand God. Said another way, “God remains hidden ... even in His revelation”⁷ (cf. John 1:14).

God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Scriptures, is not God’s only revelation. Instead it is the objective revelation to which all other revelation must be held accountable. “Continuing revelation does not signify a new revelation, simply the clarification and illumination of what has already been disclosed definitively and conclusively in the sacred Scripture”⁸. God is still alive and at-work in our world, but the Scriptures must be our final authority regarding any revelation because “Jesus Christ is the revelation of God,”⁹ and it is primarily through Scripture that we have access to Him.

The Holy Scriptures are the final word in all theology for any faithful Christian. Scripture’s witness to the revelation of God makes it the central resource of Christian faith and doctrine. Christians must affirm, along with nearly every major Protestant theologian since the Reformation, the primacy of Scripture over dreams, signs, wonders, or any other human experience. It is essential to put our trust in the Scriptures and what they teach us. This would be a lot to ask if the Bible was ‘just a book’, but I stand firmly with the judgment of the historical and present Orthodox Christian church as stated by John Calvin, “that the Spirit worked through Scripture...and that the Spirit lent direct authority to Scripture by inspiring it.”¹⁰ Thus, I assert that “to believe in the inspiration of scripture is to believe in God whose witness it is”¹¹.

⁷ Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 75.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁹ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1992), 23.

¹⁰ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 135.

¹¹ Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine*, 275.

This also leads me to conclude that the Holy Spirit has made this revelation available to all who faithfully seek it. For that reason, I believe “every individual has the right to interpret Scripture as he or she pleases, subject to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”¹² This is not carte blanche authorization to approach the Scripture carelessly and without reverence. As Donald Bloesch says, “Just as the Bible only makes sense when it is illumined by the Spirit, so the Spirit only gives sense in and through the biblical witness.”¹³ The only proper way to approach the Scripture is prayerfully with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Bible can be read with malicious intent and used as a weapon to oppress others. This is certainly not God’s purpose in giving us His Holy word. We can only understand God’s word if we approach it with God’s guidance – which is most clear in the communal fellowship of a gathered body of believers. This fellowship can be seen in the discretion of the church militant, or in the historic doctrinal views of the church triumphant.

As a foundational belief of this paper, I have argued that the Holy Scriptures are the infallible Special Revelation of God to His faithful church and the authority from which our doctrines are formed. What I mean by infallible is that “there are no errors or contradictions in its substance and heart.”¹⁴ The Bible is not a history book and should not be read as one. The Bible should be read as the living Word of God that is essential in our understanding of and relationship to our Lord Almighty. I affirm that the Bible is not without error, but I humbly acknowledge that God used human beings to bring His Word to us and we cannot deny the human aspect of the Scriptures.

¹² McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 139.

¹³ Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, 53.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

Doctrine

Nature of Doctrine

Through my experiences with Congregationalists, it seems to me that doctrine has become a dirty word. I have heard it said jokingly, “as a Congregational pastor, if you want to lose your job in a hurry, start talking to your congregation about doctrines.” I believe this is the case because we have lost sight of what doctrines really are. We often see them as oppressive legislations of a Pope or church big-wig. Doctrines have been misused. Here I admit that the fallible church has done a wonderful job of corrupting one of God’s great gifts. Doctrines must always go hand-in-hand with love, else they be “a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.”¹⁵ Doctrines are not meant to be forced upon any individual – there is always a freedom to accept or reject that accompanies faith.

I must reiterate that doctrines are not the rules of an individual in power, they are a compilation of the theologies of the cloud of witnesses that has preceded us – doctrines are simply teachings. It has been nearly 2000 years since the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in that time, many very smart and very faithful individuals have struggled with questions of right faith. The doctrines we have today are the fruits of their struggles and solutions. It is only at our own peril that we ignore their contributions. Quite frankly, ignoring doctrine is both ignorant and arrogant. Why do we think we need to keep re-inventing the wheel? And more importantly, how highly must one think of oneself to believe that s/he is smarter or has better access to divine revelation than nearly two millennia of faithful believers?

I must admit here the fallibility of the human church. As humans we are prone to sinning, and this is certainly true even in groups of well-intentioned, faithful believers. By this I

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:1 (NIV).

mean that doctrines, divinely inspired human creation, can be in error (i.e., the cause of the Reformation) which is why there must always be *perichoresis* (an inter-twining dance) between doctrine and Scripture – which mimics the divine *perichoresis* of the Holy Trinity. This is a vital symbiotic circle. Scripture generates doctrine and doctrine interprets Scripture. This means that “doctrines will always continue to be judged on the basis of whether they reliably interpret the biblical witness to Jesus Christ.”¹⁶ Doctrine, like Scripture, is a living entity, not to be seen as a static rulebook, “it is possible to *know about* Christianity without being a Christian...doctrine is not just a description of what Christianity is.”¹⁷

“In order for anyone – Christian, atheist, Marxist or Moslem – to make informed moral decisions, it is necessary to have a set of values concerning human life. Those values are determined by beliefs, and those beliefs are stated as doctrines. Christian doctrine thus provides a fundamental framework for Christian living.”¹⁸ They must not be equated with the Scripture, as the Bible is the *sui generis* Special Revelation of our Lord; however, doctrines when rightly understood should have a place of authority in our lives. Here I have intentionally used another word that makes modern Congregationalists shudder, as we tend to see authority as the oppression of our freedom. But we must rightly understand the nature of authority. “Authority is not the opposite of freedom. Indeed, rightly understood, authority can actually establish freedom. The real contradiction of authority is *an absence of any accountability for our actions*. Authority is about being called to answer for one’s freedom.”¹⁹

¹⁶ McGrath, *Understanding Doctrine*, 36.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

As inheritors of the Congregational tradition, our forbearers fought and died for their freedom and our freedom to follow God as revealed in the Scripture, but it was never meant to be a freedom without authority. Our primary authority is Jesus Christ, made know to us by the Scriptures through the Holy Spirit. Next is the gathered covenanted body of believers, and finally is the authority of the full body of Christ – both the historic and present. As stated in the Cambridge Platform, a foundational Congregational document, “the Synod’s directions and determinations, so far as consonant to the word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission.”²⁰ While the Synod’s directions and determinations express the views of the church militant, doctrines express the same directions and determinations of the church triumphant, and therefore “are to be received with reverence and submission.” In summary, I can say confidently, along with Alister E. McGrath that “without doctrine, faith becomes shapeless, weak and vulnerable.”²¹

Purposes of Doctrine

Understanding the nature of doctrine, we can now turn our focus to its purpose. For this section, I will use the categories set forth by McGrath, that the purpose of doctrine is four-fold: “1. To tell the truth about the way things are. 2. To respond to the self-revelation of God. 3. To address, interpret and transform human experience. 4. To give Christians, as individuals and as a community, a sense of identity and purpose.”²²

²⁰ *Cambridge Platform*, XVI, 5.

²¹ McGrath, *Understanding Doctrine*, 110.

²² *Ibid.*, 10.

Telling the Truth

I believe that many of us have forgotten the words of the Master in John 8:31-32, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” To clarify this statement, Jesus says in John 14:6, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” Our Lord has told us that there is a real Truth - neither relative nor nominal. Jesus Christ is the Truth, our Scripture testifies to that and our doctrines help us understand it.

“Doctrine about Christ arises from the need to tell the truth about Christ; to explain who he is, and his significance for the human situation. To fail to develop doctrines about Jesus Christ is to reveal a dangerously shallow commitment to him, and to the unremitting human quest for truth.”²³ It tells us that there is a right way to read Scripture and live as a Christian and there are many wrong ways. “Doctrine thus defines who we are to obey. It draws a firm line of demarcation between a false church, which answers to the pressures of the age, and a true church, which is obedient and responsible to God, as he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ.”²⁴

In the history of the church, there have been many conflicts about the right and wrong ways to read Scripture. These conflicts are the genesis of the doctrines we have today. When false teachers have promulgated inadequate views of Scripture and Christian beliefs, the Church has responded by defining the truth.²⁵ In so doing, we have been handed the great traditions of truth in the church which we cannot ignore. It is not enough to simply believe in Christ, even the demons do that, but we believe certain quite definite things about Him, as expressed in our doctrines.

²³ Ibid., 5.

²⁴ Ibid., 13.

²⁵ I make this claim with confidence knowing that there are many who simply think Orthodoxy is defined by the winner. While this is true in many respects, it is also true to say that God is still alive and at work in our world today. It would be overly pessimistic to deny the working of the Holy Spirit in the Church throughout the ages, as we have attempted to understand the Scriptures through the creation and re-creation of doctrines.

Response to God’s self-revelation

Doctrines have not been thought out as a framework within which Scripture must fit. The situation is exactly the opposite. God has revealed Himself to us in the Holy Scriptures, and doctrines are the response of the Christian church to that Revelation. “Doctrine aims to provide a springboard to propel us into a personal response to the truth and the love of God, revealed in Jesus Christ.”²⁶ As with all holy things in the Christian life, we must recognize that God is the initiator and we are the respondents. The Lord has blessed us with His holy Word, and with the empowerment of His Spirit, we are able to respond. In this way, we need to recognize that doctrine “is the response of the human mind to God, as love is the response of the human heart.”²⁷

Address, interpret, and transform human experience

Doctrine is not meant to take the place of human freedom of thought. I do not advocate that we all become mindless automatons incapable of higher thought. Quite the contrary – if doctrine is used properly it causes us to think very deeply about our own life experiences as they relate to Scripture and the experiences of others. “Doctrine aims to interpret experience, in order to transform it, through an encounter with the risen Christ.”²⁸ It challenges us to look at our story in light of the great many stories that have come before us. We cannot be so self-absorbed as to discard the wisdom of the historic church. It is unlikely that one individual’s experience will ever fully encompass reality; however, “*many* such individuals might, by pooling their

²⁶ McGrath, *Understanding Doctrine*, 6-7.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

experiences, give rise to a much more reliable picture of reality.”²⁹ To further expound on this point, I offer an illustration from Alister E. McGrath:

Suppose that you were to cross the Atlantic Ocean on one of the great liners that still work the transatlantic routes. You would probably find that you were overwhelmed by the immensity of that ocean – by its sheer size, by the sense of being totally insignificant in comparison with its vastness, as you spent day after day without seeing land. Your experience of the ocean would make a very deep impression upon you. Suppose that you subsequently were to pick up a map of the western hemisphere, and find the Atlantic Ocean reduced to nothing more than some printed lines on a piece of paper. You might be fortunate enough to find the ocean coloured blue, and the land masses of America and Europe green – but all that you would have in your hands would be a piece of paper. How would your own experience of the Atlantic Ocean relate to this small area of blue colour on that paper?

Two points may be made. First, nobody in their right mind is going to suggest that the area of blue colour on that map is meant to be an exact representation of the Atlantic Ocean. The map is not *identical* with that vast ocean. Rather, the map is an attempt to indicate how various things are related to one another – for example, where Europe and America are situated in relation to each other, and to the Atlantic Ocean. It is not even an attempt to scale down the ocean so that you can get the same sort of experience you once had, only on a smaller scale – it is meant to convey certain limited (but important!) information, rather than reproduce an authentic experience in all its fullness.

Second, the map is based upon the personal experience of countless others, as they also crossed the Atlantic. Whereas your experience is undoubtedly real and important to you, it represents a single, isolated and very personal impression of a much greater reality. Taken on its own, your experience of the Atlantic Ocean is unreliable, perhaps providing your friends with as much information about you as about the ocean itself.”³⁰

Our experiences are important. The Christian faith is grounded in experience. Our theologies are often formed by our experiences, as were the theologies of our predecessors that communally we now have as doctrines. To deny an individual’s experience is foolish, and yet, to elevate that experience above the doctrines of the church is arrogant and unwise. We must always remember that we are sinful creatures, and while isolated it is likely that we would misinterpret our

²⁹ Ibid., 42-3.

³⁰ Ibid., 41-2.

experiences and feelings. And so, doctrine helps us interpret our experiences and feelings, even to the point of contradicting them when they are misleading.³¹

Give Identity

The last purpose of doctrine is to provide the Christian with an identity. It does this by affirming what is unique about Christianity. “Doctrine is communally authoritative teachings regarded as essential to the identity of the Christian community.”³² This is the piece of doctrine that often stands out in the minds of Christians who hear this word. The identities given by doctrines are often divisive. “On the one hand, it unites Christians against non-Christians; on the other, it divides one Christian from another.”³³ It is this identity that makes the Body of Christ unique. Doctrine is the way the early church set themselves apart from the beliefs of the Jews and pagans. “Yardsticks – such as the canon of the New Testament, or adherence to the apostolic rule of faith, summed up in the Apostles’ Creed – were agreed to by which the claims of religious communities to be Christian churches could be checked out.”³⁴ Doctrine is how we today are different than the Moslems, Jews, Buddhists, or Atheists.

Doctrine is a great uniting force for Christians over-against non-Christians, but it is also the great dividing force within the church. Every denomination is set apart by their doctrines. In this way, doctrine is often seen as a terrible, schismatic, legalism that divides the Body of Christ. This is where it is helpful to remember that all doctrines are not of equal importance. There are a cluster of doctrines at the center of the Christian life recognized in modern ecumenical discussions, the denial of which involves setting oneself outside the Christian church (i.e., the

³¹ Ibid., 50.

³² Ibid., 57.

³³ Ibid., 65.

³⁴ Ibid., 59.

divinity of Jesus Christ, the humanity of Jesus Christ, the existence of God, the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith, the divinity of the Holy Spirit, and the Trinity).³⁵

There are also peripheral doctrines, which are usually the causes of disunity in the church, and it is at this point that I agree wholly with Richard Baxter when he says, “In necessary things: unity; in doubtful things: liberty; in all things: charity.” Though we are a Church divided, we continue to rediscover the central common ground amongst ourselves, in Jesus Christ, that unites us. In our differences we are becoming more understanding, and in our relationships we are beginning to recognize one another as a fellow integral part of the body of Christ. Though we may have differences, it is our commonality in Christ, expressed in our central doctrines, that unites us.

Problem with Modern Congregationalism

I must say from the onset that my aim for this section, although it may seem harsh at places, is to speak a prophetic word to a Congregational church desperately in need. Growing up in a Congregational church, my entire life as a Christian has been seen through the lenses of Congregationalism. I knew from a young age that my church was much different than that of my friends, and I could never articulate what that difference was. Whenever I told anyone that I was Congregational, the first response I would get was something like, “Is that Christian?” People just do not know anything about the Congregational church. As I got older, I learned better ways to express Congregationalism – like talking about the autonomy of the individual church, throwing around the vaunted “Freedom, Faith, and Fellowship” mantra, and announcing the proud heritage of Congregationalism tied to our Pilgrim forbearers.

³⁵ Ibid., 66.

These were all ways that I would explain the Congregational church to others, but it was never enough. There would inevitably come questions about faith. And whenever I was asked about what the church believes, like a well-trained misguided parrot, I would say, “we are free to believe whatever we want to believe.” When asked about fundamental aspects of faith (i.e., the divinity of Christ, the Trinity, the Resurrection, etc.) I was never able to provide a satisfactory expression of the Congregational faith. Some reading this paper will be nodding in agreement here because they will claim there is not a “Congregational faith.” The historical analysis section of my paper will show that this view is mis-informed and it has only been recently, that Congregationalists have used their freedom to break with their historically expressed Orthodox roots.

I believe the problem within Congregationalism is three-fold. First, we do not truly understand Congregational freedom. Second, we have privatized and relativized a necessarily corporate truth-based faith. And third, our fellowship reflects more the ideals of American culture than it does the vision of our Congregational forbearers.

Misunderstood Freedom

Freedom is a wonderful sentiment. Freedom has been the cause of and solution to many wars through history. Freedom is the ideal upon which America was founded. Freedom is the underlying assumption of the Declaration of Independence when it reads “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Being American, these ideals have been engrained in us from our very childhood. We should be proud to live in a free country. This is the land of the free and the home of the brave!

This is the freedom that Americans know. This is the freedom that has invaded the church. This is the poison of evil that courses through our veins. We think that we are freed for

freedom's sake. Scripture tells us that our shackles have been removed and we are free – but we are freed so that we may serve Christ (cf. Gal. 5:1, 13). We are not free to do as we please, act as we please, or believe whatever pleases us.

Congregationalism has long been associated with the idea of freedom, which is historically accurate, to a point. The Puritans (Separatists and non) were seeking freedom. They were seeking the ability to govern themselves and worship as Scripture guided them.

Here is the big distinction: They were seeking freedom to, not freedom from. They were not seeking freedom from the Church of England. They were not seeking freedom from doctrines of the church. They were not seeking freedom from an oppressive polity. Instead, they were seeking freedom to follow Christ as they saw Him in the Bible. This has always been the Congregational ideal. We are a free church, meaning that we must follow Christ as we see Him revealed in the Scriptures under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, working in us and in our sisters and brothers of the faith (both historical and present).

I want to be absolutely clear about this point. Never, in the history of Congregationalism – aside from the Unitarian controversy – until the mid 20th century, has Congregationalism ever claimed a freedom for an individual to believe whatever he/she wanted. The great history of the church will show that Congregationalists have always been a people of Orthodox faith, expressed corporately, in statements and creeds. It is presumptuous and erroneous to make any claims to the contrary.

Misunderstood Faith

Modern Congregationalists show a surprising misunderstanding of freedom, especially as it related to faith. We claim to be a people of faith – it is one of our “Three F’s.” But what do we mean by this faith? Do we mean that we are an institution of people that have a general

faith? What do we have faith in? Do we have faith that the sun will continue to shine? Do we have faith that gravity will keep us on the surface of the Earth? Do we have faith that the pews in which we sit will hold our weight? Or do we profess to have faith in the One, true, Triune, God who took on flesh in the man Jesus of Nazareth and died on the cross in our place, and was subsequently raised in triumphant victory from the grips of death?

Today society uses the word faith as a vague and general term, and I believe that its use is wanton and inconsistent. Congregational churches today are faced with a problem that should have been resolved in 1825 when the Unitarians broke from the Congregational church. Unfortunately, this separation has not cleansed the Congregational churches of their Unitarian tendencies. We are more concerned with everyone getting along than we are with speaking the prophetic Truth of our God expressed in His Scriptures. Too often, I hear that Scripture is open to the faithful interpretation of the individual, and yet, there is never a qualification about the truth of every individual's interpretation. Not all readings of Scripture are correct. Many people who say that we have no right to tell someone else how to read the Bible, thereby disqualifying any normative judgments about Scripture, will turn around and say that Scripture speaks against slavery, the oppression of women, the mistreatment of the marginalized, and so on. In itself, this sentiment is oxy-moronic – to say that there is no correct way to read Scripture is a normative judgment about the correct way to read Scripture.

It also seems to be common sense that nobody truly believes in Biblical or moral relativism. If this was the case, we would not have laws. If someone did truly believe that matters of faith (and thereby morality) are relative, I would invite them to join the Nazi party in America, or Al-Qaeda because neither way would be wrong. McGrath says it best: “to allow

‘relevance’ to be given greater weight than truth is a mark of intellectual shallowness and moral irresponsibility.’³⁶

We are saved by grace through faith. This is the basic belief of every Orthodox Protestant Christian. Our faith is what defines us, and we, with the guidance and empowerment of Christ through the Holy Spirit, are what define the church. If our faith is nominal, our church will be nominal. If our faith is relative, our churches will be relative. If our faith is not clearly defined and stated, our church will be an unidentifiable conglomeration of people who believe something – even if they cannot tell you what it is they believe.

Misunderstood Fellowship

Lastly, I believe our churches have failed miserably in the area of fellowship. I must admit that within Congregational churches, I have seen great fellowship – some of the best I have ever witnessed. But inter-church fellowship is usually the extent. It is indeed rare for a church to be seeking the wisdom and counsel of another church or a group of churches.

In historical documents about Congregational polity, the recurring theme is this: there is no authority greater than the local covenanted community; however, each church should take seriously the advice of its sisters and brothers. No church is an island. Although each church is an autonomously covenanted gathering of believers, the Body of Christ is so much bigger than any one church congregation. For a church to attempt ministry in isolation – while ignoring or failing to seek the council of other churches – is like removing the kidneys of Christ and expecting them to perform the tasks of the whole body.

When we break fellowship with our sibling Congregational church, by not seeking, or even worse, ignoring their advice, we desecrate the Body of Christ, and send the resounding

³⁶ Ibid., 12.

message that we, an isolated unit, certainly know the will of Christ better than the rest of the Body combined. The same is true when we ignore the doctrines of the brothers and sisters that have gone before us. Just as a synod or council can speak to us the Word of God from a present perspective, the great Creeds of the church can provide us with a voice outside of our own culture that speaks prophetically from a time closer to the life of Christ.

Misunderstandings Lead to a Lack of Identity

The modern Congregational misunderstanding of “Freedom, Faith, and Fellowship” has contributed to the great problem in Congregationalism today: a lack of identity. Many will assert that our identity is that of freedom, faith, and fellowship, or will draw on our Pilgrim roots, or will point to what we are not. None of these things will provide a modern Congregationalist with an identity that is so desperately needed.

Freedom, faith, and fellowship are not identities because we have no idea what they really mean, and we refuse to define them beyond our catch-phrase. Our Pilgrim roots do not provide an identity for us, because most of us are unfamiliar with the truth of our origins (i.e., the historical beliefs of the Puritans) and the few that do know the truth are often silenced by the loud voices of false prophets (mis-informed clergy and laity). We cannot continue to define ourselves by what we are not – even though this is our proud Protestant tradition.

I do not eat at Burger King because it is “not McDonald’s.” In fact, I do not even eat at the independently owned Burger Kings because they are not franchised. I eat at Burger Kings because I know what I am going to get, and I trust the quality of their food. Their identity is affirmatively stated – they serve hamburgers.

I go there to get a Whopper, but what happens if I get a taco?³⁷ If I have never eaten at a Burger King before, and I don't know anything about them, I assume all Burger King's serve tacos. Therefore one renegade Burger King has damaged my view of all Burger Kings. When I am in a new town, I will not go to Burger King seeking a hamburger, and if I ever go there for a taco I will be sorely disappointed. This is the violence that one heretical Congregational church does to the reputations of all Congregational churches. To prevent this, we need to take an affirmative stance as to who we are and what we believe.

We attempt to define ourselves by our individual church covenants, which are in accord with the history of Congregationalism, but our covenants are no longer undergirded by an assumed Orthodox theology. As a body politic, we have an identity in our polity, but we completely lack a doctrinal or theological identity. Even now, it is becoming a stretch for us to claim "Jesus is Lord." This has been the sad resting place of Congregationalism for half a century. We claim, some with timid voices, choking on the words as they come out, that Jesus is Lord of our church. Even now, this is being contested as a doctrinal statement, and on that basis, some want to see even this affirmation removed from NACCC³⁸ church membership requirements.

At some point, we must open our eyes to the tyranny of Satan and realize that Christ drew a line. He came to cause division (cf. Luke 12:51) – and He is the dividing line. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."³⁹

There is now only one line: the faithful who one are in Christ and the heretical that stand against

³⁷ In this analogy, the Whopper represents the Orthodox Christian beliefs, and the taco represents everything that lies outside the boundaries of Orthodoxy.

³⁸ The NACCC is the National Associate of Congregational Christian Churches. It is one of four modern bodies that claims a Congregational heritage. It is also the Associate to which I belong and to which this paper has been submitted.

³⁹ Galatians 3:28 (NIV).

Him. Why is this message not preached? Why have the Orthodox Trinitarian voices of our churches been silenced and overridden? They have no modern Congregational ground to stand on, because they have no basis to make any theological claims about the truth of Christianity, because modern Congregationalism has been theologically neutered!

The prophet Isaiah tells us “If you do not stand firmly in your faith, you will not stand at all.”⁴⁰ If we cannot rightly say, as Steven Peay reiterates from a long line of Congregational thinkers (including, Henry Martin Dexter, William Barton, P.T. Forsyth, Cotton Mather, and others), “that which is generally believed among us,”⁴¹ or the universal church for that matter, then we have no basis to claim that the theology of any individual or church is not in harmony with our own. The Congregational church must affirm a doctrinal identity – we must state that which is generally believed among us, so that we can, at the very least, have a place to start discussion. I fear that if a theological identity is not established, the Orthodox in our churches will leave because they are sick of fighting the redundant battles of basic Christianity. I am aware that the NACCC has had to tread on egg-shells since its inception, because it has feared further schism. In light of the split with the UCC, it is easy to see why our churches have been so hesitant to make any affirmative declarations, but now is the time for the body corporate stand up for Christ and declare in loud - clear voices the common faith that unites us.

History of Creedalism in Congregationalism

The purpose of this section is to illustrate that Congregationalists have, from our inception, been a people of expressed common faith. Here I must note that Congregationalists

⁴⁰ Isaiah 7:9b (NIV).

⁴¹ Steven A. Peay, *The Church: Born for a Time Like This*. The International Congregational Journal, Vol. 6.2 Summer 2007, 111.

have never used creeds or statements of faith as “litmus tests” for what it means to be Christian.⁴²

Every individual has always retained the right and ability to read Scripture under the Spirit’s guidance. However, in the early American Puritan churches, anyone applying for membership:

has to submit to a searching private examination by the elders of the church both as to “their knowledge in the principles of religion, & of the *experience in the ways of grace*, and of the *godly conversation* amongst men.” And the evidence is ample that this “knowledge” implied familiarity with and assent to the main doctrines of the Scripture as expounded by the Calvinism of the period.⁴³

The statements of faith used by Congregationalists have been a way of expressing beliefs that are common amongst us. As I said about doctrine above, statements of faith should never be forced on any individual. In order to truly own a statement of faith, an individual must make a conscious un-coerced decision. This section of the paper will analyze some of the foundational and monumental documents of Congregationalism – especially faith statements contained within each. Most of the information gathered for this section comes from the book *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, written by Williston Walker.

1582 – Robert Browne’s *Booke Which Sheweth the Life and Manners of All True Christians*

Walker describes Robert Browne as “the first Englishman to proclaim Congregational principle in writing.”⁴⁴ In his early life, Browne was a Puritan who sought the reform of the Church of England. That is, until the conviction came to him “that the all-inclusive membership of the Church of England was well-nigh fatal to real piety. The only course for those who would seek a full Christian life was to separate from it and unite among themselves.”⁴⁵ When Browne

⁴² Ibid., 108.

⁴³ Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1960). 106-7.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 9.

had fled to Holland, he wrote three tracts, “designed primarily to further his views in England,”⁴⁶ one of which is the work titled above.

Browne’s book contains 185 Questions, each with an answer, counter-questions and definition. Of the 185 Questions, the first 34 “related to the knowledge of God by men [sic.], His nature, attributes, providence, the fall of man and salvation by Christ. These doctrines are treated in the usual Calvinistic sense, and present nothing peculiar to Browne.”⁴⁷ This is a powerful testimony about the place of doctrine and statements of faith within the earliest Congregational movement. Of utmost importance to Browne were matters of Orthodox faith, so much so that a sixth of his work is dedicated to matters of faith and doctrine.

1629 – The Salem Covenant

We Covenant with the Lord and one with an other; and doe bynd our selves in the presence of God, to walke together in all his waies, according as he is pleased to reveale himself unto us in his Blessed word of truth

This is perhaps the most famous of all Congregational covenants, and it tends also to be seen as the ideal of all such covenants. The congregation of the Salem church differed in kind from the Brownist Puritan Separatists previously mentioned – instead were true Puritans who wished to remain united to the church and change it from the inside out. However, as Walker notes, “doctrinally there was little difference between the two parties. Both were Calvinists of a pronounced type and both believed that in the Bible is to be found a sufficient rule for faith and church practice.”⁴⁸ This is an interesting piece of truth that is worth remembering by those who look to the Salem church as a Congregational role-model.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 97.

There is a tendency to see this covenant as a testimony against the doctrinal or creedal acceptance of early Congregationalists. This kind of thinking shows a clearly uninformed bias. Does the covenant have within it a specific statement of faith? Clearly not. When the covenant was written, was there a need for a written statement of faith? Absolutely not. We must always remember that our ancestors were Calvinists. They broke from the Church of England because of differences in polity, not because of differences in theology. “This agreement with the Puritan-Calvinistic portion of the English establishment was so entire that their doctrinal position could be taken for granted, and was not therefore at first formulated.”⁴⁹ In fact, the first Separatists went to great lengths to show that they still maintained in doctrinal harmony with the Calvinist Church of England. There is absolutely no evidence to suggest that any early Congregationalists were anything but Calvinists. There was no need to spell out a statement of faith because it was assumed that every Congregationalist maintained a Calvinist theology.

As pressure against the Congregational church began to rise - from Quakers, Anabaptists, and the Church of England, and even from within - and others regarding our doctrinal orthodoxy, it became necessary for the Congregational church to “make the doctrinal positions which they had held from the beginning more evident to the world.”⁵⁰ At this point, in 1648, “we see the Westminster Assembly’s Confession heartily endorsed by the representatives of all our churches as a substantially adequate doctrinal expression.”⁵¹

⁴⁹ Ibid., 106.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 108.

⁵¹ Ibid.

1648/9 – Cambridge Platform

In the midst of this unrest, the Congregational church in America was evolving. The church continued to grow in power and influence.

It was no longer the polity of small and isolated congregations, like those of Amsterdam or Scrooby. It was now substantially the established church of New England...as yet this essential unity had had no expression. Its features had been delineated in many works of recognized value, but they had found no authoritative statement. There was no standard by which the relations of one church to another could be determined; none which decided whether a certain course of action was Congregational or not.⁵²

These changes necessitated a response, and in true Congregational fashion, a Synod (or Council) was called. This worried many, as they saw the Synod becoming an authoritative ruling body. The magistrates supporting the Synod reassured the deputies of the towns “the proposed Synod would have no power to command, but only to counsel.”⁵³ This synod was not attended by every Congregational church, but a vast majority sent representatives.

The *Platform of Church Discipline*, was the product of the Synod’s many meetings and discussions. It was penned primarily by Richard Mather and John Cotton (two of the most integral and influential American Congregationalists in history). Of the Platform, Walker notes, “They had put the churches of New England, by formal declaration, where they had always been in fact, at one in doctrine with the Puritan party in England, whether Presbyterian or Independent.”⁵⁴ Their orthodoxy could not be impugned.”⁵⁵ The Synod had succeeded in writing a universal statement of polity for the Congregational church in America.

The importance of the Cambridge Platform cannot be overlooked, it is “the most important monument of early New England Congregationalism, because it is the clearest

⁵² Ibid., 166.

⁵³ Ibid., 168.

⁵⁴ The name preferred for Congregationalists in England – although entirely rejected by American Puritans.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 185.

reflection of the system as it lay in the minds of the first generation on our soil after nearly twenty years of practical experience.”⁵⁶

The Platform begins with a preface that outlines the purpose, result and position of the American Congregational churches. The following are the very first words of the Platform:

*THE setting forth of the Publick Confession of the Faith of Churches hath a double end, & both tending to publick edification. first the maintenance of the faith entire within it self: secondly the holding forth of Unity & Harmony, both amongst, & with other Churches. Our Churches here, as (by the grace of Christ) wee believe & profess the same Doctrine of the trueth of the Gospell, which generally is received in all the reformed Churches of Christ in Europe: so especially, wee desire not to vary from the doctrine of faith, & truth held forth by the churches of our native country...soe wee, who are by nature, English men [sic] doe desire to hold forth the same doctrine of religion (especially in fundamentalls) whieh wee see & know to be held by the churches of England, according to the truth of the Gospell.*⁵⁷

These opening remarks show the clear priority correct doctrine and expression had in early American Congregationalism. The remainder of the Platform deals primarily with matters of polity and organization. But the entire document is meant to be read as a lived-out expression of the Orthodox-Calvinist faith spoke of in the preface.

It is interesting to note, under Chapter VI, section 5, which describes the duties of the Pastor and Teacher in a Congregational church. “The *Pastors* special work is, to attend to *exhortation*: & therein to Administer a word of *Wisdom*: the *Teacher* is to attend to *Doctrine*, & therein to Administer a word of *Knowledg*.”⁵⁸ Although I am sure that in most of our churches the duties of the pastor are still carried out, I wonder how many still employ the services of the teacher? And if the teacher is not there, have these duties fallen to the pastor? And if so, has the pastor realized their Congregational obligation to teach proper doctrine?

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 194.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 211.

1658 – Savoy Declaration

This paper is primarily concerned with the development of American Congregationalism; however, it is prudent also to consider aspects of Congregationalism in England. Simply said, the Savoy Declaration was the Congregational version of the Westminster Confession.

Congregational leaders “in & about London” were called together to discuss matters of polity and faith for the Congregational church. The title of the resultant document should be sufficient to see why it is of importance to this paper: *A DECLARATION OF THE FAITH and ORDER Owned and practised in the CONGREGATIONAL CHURCHES IN ENGLAND*. This declaration contained within it chapters titled as follows:

Ch. 1 *Of the holy Scripture*, Ch. 2 *Of God and of the holy Trinity*, Ch. 3 *Of Gods Eternal Decree*, Ch. 4 *Of Creation*, Ch. 5 *Of Providence*, Ch. 6 *Of the fall of Man, of Sin, and of the Punishment thereof*, Ch. 7 *Of God’s Covenant with Man*, Ch. 8 *Of Christ the Mediator*, Ch. 9 *Of Free-will*, Ch. 10 *Of Effectual Calling*, Ch. 11 *Of Justification*, Ch. 12 *Of Adoption*, Ch. 13 *Of Sanctification*, Ch. 14 *Of saving Faith*, Ch. 15 *Of Repentance unto life and salvation*, Ch. 16 *Of good Works*, Ch. 17 *Of the Perseverance of the Saints*, Ch. 18 *Of the Assurance of Grace and Salvation*, Ch. 19 *Of the Law of God*, Ch. 20 *Of the Gospel, and of the extent of Grace thereof*, Ch. 21 *Of Christian Liberty, and Liberty of Conscience*, Ch. 22 *Of religious Worship, and the Sabbath-day*, Ch. 23 *Of lawful Oaths and Vows*, Ch. 24 *Of the Civil Magistrate*, Ch. 25 *Of Marriage*, Ch. 26 *Of the Church*, Ch. 27 *Of the Communion of the Saints*, Ch. 28 *Of the Sacraments*, Ch. 29 *Of Baptism*, Ch. 30 *Of the Lords Supper*, Ch. 31 *Of the state of Man after Death, and of the Resurrection of the Dead*.⁵⁹

The titles of these chapters should be self-evident to show the extent that the Congregational churches in England were in doctrinal agreement. Every major theological concern is addressed in this declaration, and even more importantly, there was a harmony and unity of thought regarding these doctrines within the church.

The significance of the Savoy Declaration to American Congregationalism cannot be over-looked. Ten years after the Cambridge Platform stated that American churches were in full agreement with the churches of England, this document is produced that fully outlines the

⁵⁹ Ibid., 367-400.

common proclaimed faith of the English Congregational churches. By inference, we can assume the Congregational churches in America subscribed to the doctrinal unity presented in the Savoy Declaration. In addition, the Savoy Declaration was adopted in Massachusetts in 1681, and became incarnate as the Saybrook Platform in 1708.⁶⁰

1865 – Burial Hill Declaration

During an especially trying period in American history, Congregationalism pressed on toward the goal of church unity. In 1864 the idea was proposed by the various Congregational state organizations that there be a national council of Congregational churches. This idea was received favorably in all but one state, and so a date was set for a meeting of delegates from every Congregational church in America. The meeting was held in Boston in June of 1865. This was to be a historic moment for modern Congregationalism, as the first National Council of Congregational Churches was founded. The two most important topics of discussion before the council were, “the expediency of issuing a statement of Congregational church polity,’ and ‘the expediency of setting forth a declaration of the Christian faith, as held in common by the Congregational churches.’”⁶¹ The declaration that came from this council reaffirmed the historic faith of our Congregational forbearers, especially as it was spelled out in the Cambridge Platform and the Savoy Declaration!⁶²

The text of the Declaration is longer than can be afforded space in this paper, but below is a significant portion that begins the section of the faith statement:

⁶⁰ From comments by Steven Peay.

⁶¹ Ibid., 555.

⁶² Ibid., 562.

With them [the church universal] we confess our faith in God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, the only living and true God; in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, who is exalted to be our redeemer and King; and in the Holy Comforter, who is present in the Church to regenerate and sanctify the soul.⁶³

The text continues to affirm the faith of the church in human sinfulness, the expiatory death of Christ, in the grace of the Holy Comforter, the visible and invisible church, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the authority of Holy Scripture, and the 'one faith, one Lord, one baptism' of the one Catholic Church. After these affirmations, the Declaration concludes by saying, "*we declare that we will cooperate with all who hold these truths. With them we will carry the gospel into every part of this land, and with them we will go into all the world, and 'preach the gospel to every creature.*"⁶⁴

Our predecessors declared with a loud united voice, the faith of the historical, orthodox, Western Church. Unashamedly, they brandished their faith in a shared faith statement, to declare that which was commonly believed among them. In a time of great turmoil in America, the Congregational church stepped up. Realizing that the South would be a new mission field at the conclusion of the war, the Congregationalists saw a need to define the Truth of God and their own identity before they were able to mission to others.

1913 – Kansas City Statement of Faith

We believe in God the Father, Infinite in wisdom, goodness and love; and in Jesus Christ, His Son, our Lord and Saviour, who for us and our salvation lived and died and rose again and liveth evermore; and in the Holy Spirit, who taketh of the things of Christ and revealeth them to us, renewing, comforting, and inspiring the souls of men. 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.

⁶³ Ibid., 563.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 564.

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.

This is the last official statement of faith for the Congregational church, adopted in Kansas City on October 25, 1913. “The opening sentence of the Constitution of the National Council declares ‘the steadfast allegiance of the churches composing this Council to the faith which our fathers confessed, which from age to age has found its expression in the historic creeds of the Church universal and of this communion.’”⁶⁵

This statement was widely used by Congregationalists to define who they were. At the Congregational Library are a plethora of different pamphlets from 1913 and beyond that use this statement of faith to define what a Congregationalist believes. Even in the midst of the great storm of Liberalism within the church, Congregational churches were still willing to stand up and say, “this is what we believe.” Very clearly, things were not relative. Our faith was not just a different flavor of another faith – it was unique and God-ordained.

Contained within this statement of faith are the four purposes of doctrine. This statement tells the truth about God, it is an acknowledged response to God’s revelation in Scripture, it aims to address and interpret human experience, and it provides an identity for the Congregational Church. This statement of faith shows me just how far some of our churches have fallen, if less than 100 years ago we are able to clearly articulate what we believe about Christ and being a Christian. The temptation is to write off this statement of faith, as well as all the others by calling our forbearers simplistic, restrictive, oppressive, or unenlightened. To this I must enquire, is it the history of the Universal Church and the Congregational church that have erred in expressing their faith, or are we in error for refusing to define the faith that Christ has trusted to us?

⁶⁵ William E. Barton, *Congregational Creeds and Covenants* (Chicago: Advance Pub. Co., 1917), 205.

Proposed Solution

Perhaps it is time we pruned the tree of Congregationalism.⁶⁶ Our growth, our purpose and our faith are stagnating because we are so concerned with keeping all the branches on the tree – even the dead ones. We believe in a God that died and rose, why are we so unwilling to allow our churches to die or separate? Christ has warned us of the dangers of the leaven of the Pharisees – how just a little bit effects the whole church. The same is true for the false prophets and deceivers amongst us, whose preaching and teaching of non-Orthodox theology effects the entire church. In a free church, doctrinal fellowship is especially important. We must listen to the guidance and wisdom of our sister churches – it is the basis of Congregational fellowship.

Right now, I feel that the NACCC is like a child whose hand is caught in the cookie jar. We reached in to grab the apparently delicious cookies that we were told not to eat, and our hands got stuck. And like children, we do not realize that all we must do to free our hand is let go of the tempting cookies. In order to free our hand from the cookie jar of wickedness and sinfulness, we must simply let go of that which is not good for us. The devil thrives in obscurity and non-confrontation. It is about time we remove the devil from his playground.

I realize that this is a difficult message. Breaking fellowship is practically sacrilegious within Congregationalism. The removal of fellowship from a sister church is a last means of rectification, and certainly not something that should be done without a great deal of prayer and Scriptural meditation. My proposed solution is a first-step to assuring that we can have ongoing discussions about faith within the NACCC, so that we will not have to resort to these extreme measures.

⁶⁶ By this I mean that we must be ready and willing to let go of those who do not profess the faith common amongst us. I do not mean this as an active dissolution of fellowship, but simply that we must not compromise our own beliefs to appease those among us who do not share a commonality of expression with us. In as much as we should not waiver in our identity to entice others to join, we should also not waiver to try and force a “round church” into a “square hole.”

The first thing we must do is establish our identity. We need to reclaim our Congregational heritage, and state clearly the Biblical, Orthodox faith that is common amongst us. Scripture is greater than the interpretation of any one individual. Our faith must be based on Christ as He is revealed in the Holy Scriptures. As faithful inheritors of two thousand years of church history and tradition, we would be fools if we did not give full weight to the views of those who have gone before us in the faith. It would be unwise to ignore the great traditions of the church, remembering that “tradition, rightly understood, is not a source of revelation in addition to Scripture, but a particular way of understanding Scripture which the Christian church has recognized as responsible and reliable...in other words, there was a traditional way of reading and interpreting Scripture, reflected in the creeds.”⁶⁷

Thus far, I have argued that the Congregational Church has historically maintained Orthodox theological beliefs, and expressed those views in statements of faith and creeds. We do not use creeds as tests of how Christian someone is. A creed does not make a person a Christian. Instead, it is Christ that comes into our lives and transforms us into Christians. The place of creeds is to inform the transformed Christian about the historical Orthodox faith that has been passed down in the traditions of the church. Therefore, as is commonly said, the creeds are not tests, but testimonies. They are the communally expressed beliefs of two millennia of faithful Christians.

⁶⁷ McGrath, *Understanding Doctrine*. 24.

My proposed solution to the lack of Congregational identity is to go back to the basics, and proclaim, with the church universal – both militant and triumphant – the faith that unites us in the body of Christ – which has found historical expression in the Apostle’s Creed.⁶⁸

Apostle’s Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
 maker of heaven and earth;
 And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord:
 who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
 born of the Virgin Mary,
 suffered under Pontius Pilate,
 was crucified, dead, and buried;
 the third day he rose from the dead;
 he ascended into heaven,
 and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
 from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
 I believe in the Holy Spirit,
 the holy catholic church
 the communion of saints,
 the forgiveness of sins,
 the resurrection of the body,
 and the life everlasting. Amen.

These words are familiar to many who will be reading this paper. Nearly every mainline Christian church recites, or at least, claims the Apostle’s Creed as an authoritative statement about basic Christian beliefs. “The creeds are the classical expression of what Christians believe about God and Jesus Christ.”⁶⁹

The Apostle’s Creed is one of the earliest corporate statements of Christian belief we have. “The Apostle’s Creed had its origins in the early church as a profession or confession of

⁶⁸ I propose using the Apostle’s Creed instead of a uniquely Congregational document because it is a foundational historical expression of what the church universal professes. My intention here is to keep Congregationalism in conversation with the wider Body of Christ, lest we become tempted to think of ourselves as isolated from our modern brothers and sisters, or cut off from the great history of the church.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 124.

faith made by converts at their baptism.”⁷⁰ During this time, baptism took place when an individual joined a church. This moment was one of the most important moments in the life of a believer. It is important to note that at this point, the person had already encountered the risen Christ, and had experienced a transformation in their lives. To give adequate voice to their experience of their Lord, in their lives and especially through Scripture, they were taught these words by the church.

What is listed above, or some slight variation of it, is still used in our churches today. We are not sure of the exact origins of the Creed, or how it read in its original form, but “by the fourth century, the Apostles’ Creed as we now know it has assumed a more or less fixed form; what variations did exist were slight, and were finally eliminated in the seventh century.”⁷¹ The Creed was not an extensive list of every doctrine. Its purpose is not to systematize and fully explain the Christian faith. Instead, it “provides a *brief summary of the main doctrines of the Christian faith*,” through which, “the creed allows us to *recognize and avoid inadequate or incomplete versions of Christianity*.”⁷² In a world of uncertainty and relativity, the Apostle’s Creed helps us step outside our own perspective to see how the faith has been expressed for nearly 1700 years.

The history of the Creed is impressive, but it is not simply a historical document. Many churches believe this Creed still has significance in our expressions of the faith today. “In 1920, the Lambeth Conference recognized the Apostle’s Creed as one of the four pillars of Christian unity. In 1927, the World Conference of Faith and Order, meeting at Lausanne, declared that

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 126.

this creed could be used wholeheartedly by Christians of all persuasions. Whatever may divide one group of Christians from another, the creeds provide a summary of the points which unite them.”⁷³ As the universal church has used the Apostle’s Creed as an expression of its unity in belief, so too should the Congregational church express its unity in the one faith, of the one Lord.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to show that the Congregational church, from its inception, has been an Orthodox, creedal church that has expressed its common beliefs through statements of faith. Our identity is supposedly a church of “freedom, faith, and fellowship,” but modern Congregationalists do not fully understand those concepts, especially within their historical context. As a church of freedom, faith, and fellowship, we have lost our identity and heritage as Congregationalists, and some even as Christians! The solution to this problem is to re-establish a conversation and covenantal intentionality about the Congregational identity through a statement of faith. In this paper, I have proposed that we use, as the universal church has continued to use, the Apostle’s Creed as a uniting statement of faith to describe that which is commonly believed among us.

To re-find our identity, we must begin the discussions about what it means to be a Congregational Christian. In this struggle for identity, we do not stand alone. The church triumphant has offered us guiding lights to understanding, interpreting and applying Scripture. Today, we call these lights doctrines, and they are the foundation of any healthy church. A church without doctrines will be a church that withers and dies. A church that cannot acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is just another non-profit (or should I say non-prophet) organization. It is the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness

⁷³ Ibid., 121.

faithfulness, and self-control of Christ given by the Holy Spirit from God the Father that strengthen and empower the church. Without Jesus Christ, we are nothing – apart from Jesus Christ we can do nothing (cf. John 15:5).

My hope for this paper is to further a discussion within the NACCC about the nature and necessity of doctrines and faith statements. I know many will disagree with the ideas put forth in this paper – and to those, I welcome the beginning of a dialogue. I have seen a vision for the future of the NACCC, a future in which we connect with our past. In this future, we better understand our own history, and begin to live as our forbearers imagined – as a church united in polity and doctrine, sovereign in our own rights, yet gladly willing to submit to the direction of our sisters and brothers, who are watching over us in love. We will be a church that does not spend our time and money arguing about the basic matter of the Orthodox faith, but we will be working in the world, to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, care for the orphans and the widows, and in everything we do, preach the Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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