

About the Author

Rev. Steven A. Peay, Ph.D. is Senior Minister of the First Congregational Church of Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. Educated at Greenville College, IL (A.B.), Saint Vincent Seminary, PA (M.A., M. Div.), University of Pittsburgh (M.A.), and Saint Louis University (Ph.D.—Historical Theology) he was engaged in graduate theological education and administration until coming to the Congregational Way in 1995. Steve continues to write and has served on the faculty for the Congregational Foundations for Theological Studies' Boston Seminar since 1997. He serves as the Joint Coordinating Secretary and Financial Officer of the International Congregational Theological Commission, is the President of the Institute for Congregational Studies, serves on the Board of Directors of the American Congregational Association, which operates the Congregational Library and is the convener of the Wisconsin Congregational Theological Society.

Thy Will Be Done: The Pilgrimage Continues was the theme for the 2008 Annual Meeting of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches in Plymouth, Massachusetts. It is also the basis of a new series of articles and brochures on the Congregational Christian way of life past, present, and future; and that we are still Christians on a pilgrimage in the 21st century.

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

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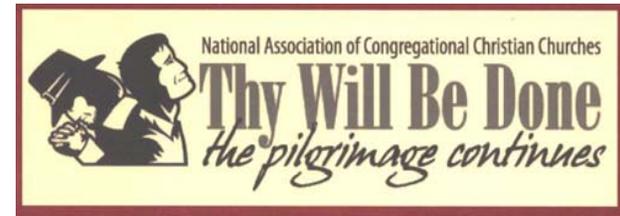
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What Do Congregational Christians Believe?

by
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What Do Congregational Christians Believe?

The Congregational Christian tradition is descended from the English 'Reformed' tradition. Congregationalists share their faith-roots with those in the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches. As a consequence, the 'Congregational Way' assumes the perspective of classical Christian faith.

Classical Christian Faith

What, then, is 'classic'? A classic is that which serves as an enduring paradigm. Thus 'classical Christian faith,' as one contemporary theologian has pointed out, is that which is derived from Christianity's normative texts and traditions (that is, the Bible, the creeds, and other writing). Those who have followed the Congregational Way have used the same texts in developing their position as those who have argued for episcopal or presbyterial forms of church government.

Essentially the Congregational Churches have held to:

- One God in three distinct Persons (the Holy Trinity): the Father (Creator, the Son (Redeemer), the Holy Spirit (Sustainer).

- The redemptive work of Jesus Christ as the source of salvation.
- The Church as divinely instituted, comprising both an invisible and a visible reality, headed by Christ and made present by believers joined in covenant. The local church is seen as complete in itself.
- The authority of the holy scriptures as the rule for faith and life.
- Two Sacraments ('Seals of the Covenant') Baptism and the Lord's Supper — other 'holy ordinances' or 'rites' (such as marriage) are not seen as having the same place as the sacraments or as biblically instituted.

Great emphasis is placed upon the individual believer's relationship to a God who relates in a personal manner. Tied with that relationship is the need for the individual to inform his/her conscience and act freely in accord with it; developing a spirituality that is, at once, personal and communal. This understanding reflects very strongly the emphasis and orientation of the Church during its earliest period.

The Covenant

The Congregational Way places stress on the covenant as the binding force by which the Church is gathered. Through both the Old and New Testaments God made covenant with his people and it is in "owning the covenant" that Congregationalists believe they become a part of God's "gathered people." Within the congregation there is a fundamental equality of believers, not, however, because the Church is a democracy. Rather, the understanding is that of Scripture, Christ is the head of the Church.

What we attempt to do here and now is to carry out God's will expressed in Christ by the grace and operation of the Holy Spirit. The Covenant also marks the distinction between a Congregational Church being 'autonomous' as opposed to being 'independent.' Since the covenant implies fellowship with other bodies of covenanted believers, the local congregation is self-governing, but it is not independent.

What Are Congregationalists?

Congregationalists are 'classical' Christians who hold to the idea that the local congregation of covenanted believers is the most authentic way to approach the task of being Christ's body in the world. Within the gathered people, then, Christ is seen as the head of the Church (his body) and the members work together in equality and charity.

For Further Reading:

Steven A. Peay, "For a time like this—One Truth, One Salvation, One Church...Joined in One Profession?" in *The Church Born for a Time Like This: Proceedings of the Fifth Congregational Symposium* Steven A. Peay, ed. (Oak Creek: Congregational Press, 2006)

Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1991)