

Centralization of Denominational Government:  
Do We Need More or Less?

Statement of Conditions

Round Table Conference, No. 1

Earl C. Davis

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The problem with which we are concerned in this Round Table Conference is one of the administrative organization under a pure congregational polity. To be sure, these three hours together are but a moment of pause in the long process of which we have become a part, and with which we are constantly occupied. The value of our discussion will be influenced by the extent to which we realize that the nature of the whole process may be implicit in the moment. Great care and acumen are demanded. The surface currents, at least, of our entire social environment indicate a strong trend away from the principles underlying the Congregational order and a democratic society. Dictatorships and force, in industry, state and church, are manifest facts in regions remote, and threatening possibilities, if not incipient realities, in our own social order. Perchance our greatest contribution to the era into which we are moving may be made by the intelligence and fidelity with which we adhere to these principles in our cooperative efforts.

We are not here concerned with the content of belief commonly accepted in an earlier day, nor with the current beliefs commonly held, nor with variants in belief that appear from time to time. We are dealing with the principles involved in the Congregational method of Freedom and Fellowship as applied in the voluntary organization of individuals into [a] body called a church, and, secondly, the further organization of such free churches into

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<sup>1</sup> This round table took place at a conference in Cincinnati in November, 1935.

associations for mutual aid and the furtherance of a common purpose.

How deep into the soil of history we may trace the roots of the principles is a very interesting question. At least one may say that, if there is any meaning to the historic process of the Western World, the emergence of these principles within the revolutionary period of the past four hundred years is the most important development of the era. Certainly this statement holds true with the field of religious thought and practice. The process has been difficult, the obstacles have been most overwhelming, the way has been involved and tangled. Yet the movement towards a clearer understanding of these principles and deeper insight into their implications has been steady and persistent.

As we re-trace the trail over which our forbears have traveled from the medieval world of Authority, Revelation and Obedience to the modern world of Freedom, Discovery and Assent, we begin to understand how insistently these principles of Freedom and Fellowship have been involved in the process, and how pervasive have been their influence. They are the counterpart in the field of religion of what has come to be called the method of science. However threatening may be the surface currents of reaction and opposition to these principles today in every aspect of society, the fact remains that they commend themselves as the basic principles in terms of which the constructive forces of the future will operate. What Prof. Bury says concerning the principle of Freedom of Thought applies with equal cogency to these allied, if not identical principles, "That conclusion," (that coercion of opinion is a mistake), "so far as I can judge," says Prof. Bury, "is the most important ever reached by man."<sup>2</sup>

As we discuss these practical problems we may bear in mind that we are dealing with a very profound principle. We ought not to enter upon a discussion of these matters without recalling one or two of the concrete events where these principles were

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<sup>2</sup> J. B. Bury (1861-1927) was an Anglo-Irish Historian and Philologist and Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University. This quote is from his 1913 book, *A History of Freedom of Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 7.

involved. When the Separatists organized themselves into a church at Scrooby, and met in the house of William Brewster about 1606, we have one of the important incidents of our background. We cannot overlook the fact and the implications thereof which Bradford's records concerning the Church at Salem.

Mr. Higginson, with three or four of the gravest members of the church, laid their hands on Mr. Skelton, using prayer therewith. This being done there was imposition of hands on Mr. Higginson also.<sup>3</sup>

How simple! How revolutionary! What centuries of conviction and tradition this act swept into the discard. We must not forget Thomas Hooker's pungent sentence, "The Church as *Totum essentiale* is and may be before its officers."<sup>4</sup> Then we move on through conflict and controversy to the founding of the Brattle Street Church in 1699, and the choice of John Leverett as President of Harvard College in 1705. In 1787, James Freeman was ordained minister over King's Chapel by the Senior Warden, representing the congregation. The inauguration of Henry Ware as Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard College in 1805 was another milestone that marked the increase in influence of what was coming to be called the Liberal Party of the Congregational Order. This last incident, introduced into the very midst of the controversy, that [sic] proved to be more divisive than the then Congregational Order of New England could stand. The result was the break in the order into the orthodox branch, which moved into the new century with a decided limited conception of the principle of freedom, and the liberal branch, which insisted on the congregational principle. Profound as were the differences of opinion, the essential issue was that of polity. At this point I quote two passages from Channing as expressing not only his attitude, but the attitude of his party, and the attitude that gave rise to the organization whose nature and character concerns us here today. In 1820, concerning Congregationalism, he said:

Our fathers maintained the independence of Christian churches. This was their fundamental principle. They taught that every church or congregation of Christians is an independent community, —that it is competent to

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<sup>3</sup> William Bradford's (1590-1657) paraphrase of the Covenant in *Bradford's History "of Plimoth Plantation" From the Original Manuscript*, Boston: Wright and Potter, 1898, p. 317.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Hooker, *A Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline*, London: John Bellamy, 1648, p. 90.

its own government, has the sole power of managing its own concerns, electing its own ministers, and deciding its own controversies, and that it is not subject to any other churches, or to bishops, or synods, or assemblies, or to any foreign ecclesiastical tribunal whatever. This great principle seemed to our fathers not only true, but infinitely important. ...

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Congregationalism is the only effectual protection of the church from usurpation, the only effectual security of Christian freedom, of the right of private judgment. As such, let us hold it dear. Let us esteem it an invaluable legacy. Let us resist every effort to wrest it from us. Attempts have been made, and may be repeated to subject our churches to tribunals subversive of their independence. Let the voice...<sup>5</sup>

[Here, unfortunately, the manuscript ends, incomplete.]

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<sup>5</sup> This text from William Ellery Channing can be found in William Henry Channing's *The Life of William Ellery Channing*, Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1896, pp. 223-224.