

What It Means to be a Member of a Congregational Christian Church



by
Henry David Gray

Published by the
Congregational Christian Churches
National Association

**What It Means to Be a Member of a
Congregational Church
by Henry David Gray**



National Association of Congregational Christian Churches
PO Box 288, Oak Creek, WI 53154

A CHURCH MEMBER

To be a Church member is to acknowledge our allegiance to God as He is made known to us in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. This act symbolizes the conviction that we want our character and conduct to be Christ-like. It is our way of "being counted" with those who are committed to build a more Christian community.

To be a Church member is to enter a concerned fellowship. Growth in Christian understanding, the sharing of each other's burdens and joys, and the service of others in Christ's spirit - these are all part of a living fellowship of those who follow Christ - and care.

To be a Church member is to give strength and encouragement to others through common worship, prayer, study, and service. Each adds his talent or time or money or prayers to the total work of the Church. Each ministers to the needs of all. There is inspiration in example, and joy in team work for a sacred cause.

To be a Church member is to put the ideals and love of Christ in practice in our lives, our homes, and our daily work. Our relationships with other people should be deeper and finer; we should be gladdened by goodness; we should be happy when others succeed; and we should rejoice in the triumph of right because we are members of Christ's fellowship.

To be a Church member is to find forgiveness, strength for life's tasks, and assurance of a destiny worth desiring. It is to know oneself a child of the living God!

If you are now a member, let these words reawaken in you the desire to serve the Master more sincerely.

If you are not a member - why not make this a call for re-consecration to the Christian way?

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A MEMBER OF A CONGREGATIONAL CHRISTIAN CHURCH

The main purpose of this little booklet is to make known more widely some of the chief facts about the origin, convictions, distinctive principles and inclusive fellowship of a Congregational Christian Church. It is hoped that many who read it will wish to join one of our Churches.

Congregationalism came to America on the Mayflower. The Pilgrim voyage to a new land was made necessary in order to re-establish a Church on the New Testament pattern - a fellowship of those who had chosen to be followers of Christ, spiritually competent to direct their own life and work. Because they had pledged themselves to live and worship in freedom according to the dictates of conscience, the Pilgrims were compelled to flee from their homeland. One of the abiding effects of their costly plea for liberty is that modern Congregationalists will not submit to a conformity which their forefathers resisted unto death.

CHURCH OF THE PILGRIMS

What the Pilgrims sought to establish in Plymouth was a Christian fellowship like that which gathered around Jesus Himself. The early disciples had little or no organization, but in the centuries after the Master's death, attempts to gain influence over all the Churches were made by leaders in centers like Rome, Antioch, Alexandria, Byzantium, and Jerusalem. By the year 1000 A.D., the bishop of Rome claimed authority over all Christendom, and many Churches throughout the western part of Europe submitted to his authority. The Churches of eastern Europe, all of Asia, and Egypt retained their independence. The Western or Latin Church became rich and powerful, until about one third of the land was owned by it, under the rulership of Rome. Corruption increased, and soon men like Peter Waldo, John Hus, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wyclif were protesting against the abuses. Reading of the Bible, the rebirth of interest in thought and in the fine arts, the emergence of science, and the era of global discoveries, all combined to lead men to think for themselves and, therefore, soon resulted in a desire to return to the simplicity and sincerity of the New Testament Church.

In England, the Roman system of church government was taken over by the king who declared himself to be the head of the Church. Robert Browne, Henry Barrow, John Greenwood, John Penry, William Brewster, and John Robinson were among those who dared to establish free Churches like those of New Testament days in defiance of royal command. The underground Churches in England and exiles from Holland provided the passengers of the 'Mayflower' which sailed from London, July 1620. They became known in history as the Pilgrim Fathers.

CONVICTIONS RATHER THAN CREEDS

A Congregational Christian Church of today is a Church of the Pilgrims, with convictions that emphasize faith, freedom, and fellowship.

Congregational Christians believe very deeply in God, in Jesus Christ, in the guiding Spirit of God, in prayer, in the worth of worship, in the value of the sacraments and holy rites, and in the power of God to triumph over all that is unholy and evil.

We do not accept any formal statement of faith as binding upon all members of our Churches. This is not because we think creeds do not matter, but because we think sincerity of conviction requires full opportunity for intellectual freedom and personal experience. Thus every Congregationalist possesses full liberty of conscience in interpreting the gospel. The bond of our Christian unity and the fundamental requirement for membership in a Congregational Christian Church are sincere Christian conviction and honest desire to live in fellowship with others as a follower of Jesus Christ.

In our Churches no statement of the Christian faith can be made binding upon the conscience of a Christian man. This means that there are differences of emphasis within and among our Churches. Every sincere conviction that exalts our Lord is honored among us. This inclusive basis of membership naturally attracts to the Congregational Christian fellowship men and women of genuine conviction, of adventurous faith, and of gracious and brotherly regard for each other's sincerity.

CHRISTIAN CONDUCT

The attitude of the Congregational Christian Churches toward daily life is determined by the fundamental principle of freedom of conscience. There is no book of discipline, no canon law (church law), and no set rules and regulations, such as are found in the Roman Catholic Church, Episcopal Church, Methodist Church, or Presbyterian Church. The educated conscience of members of the Church is our sole guide to conduct. If a person honestly believes, as in the presence of God, that his conduct is proper, then the Church accepts that conduct.

Because of this attitude toward freedom of conscience under Christ, many, who for years have felt that they could not join a Church which told them what to do and what not to do, welcome the opportunity to join a Congregational Christian Church. They recognize the fact that the only ultimate creed we have is that which is shown in our conduct and that this conduct must be determined freely by us or else it is not acceptable to God. We believe that the development of individual conviction and conscience is the essential way to produce real Christian manhood.

In preaching from the pulpits of Congregational Christian Churches, the centrality of conscience is fully recognized. This means that our ministers feel free to preach the truth as God leads them to see the truth, without any dogmatic insistence as to the conduct of the Church members. The appeal is to conscience under Christ and to the reasonableness of the viewpoint proposed. This attitude lifts the whole matter of Christian conduct out of the realm of controversy and personalities and draws together into one body of truth seekers all who sincerely seek to live according to the pattern of Jesus Christ.

AN OPEN BIBLE

Congregational Christians stand for an open Bible in the fullest sense; a Bible that is open in our Churches, in our homes, in our schools; open to be read in our own language with all the insight that reverent study, prayerful mediation, and Christian living can bring to bear upon it.

We believe that the Bible contains rich spiritual guidance for every person and for every family and that devotional reading and study of the scriptures in the home will foster inner unity and outer strength.

It is our conviction that the Word of God which is to be found in the Bible will inspire and direct the Church and will yield fresh light and truth for each new age.

We cherish the aim that each person shall be able to read and interpret the Bible for himself with trust, confidence and affection, and that he shall be able to experience its power to build him up into a strong, courageous, and intelligent follower of Jesus Christ.

CHRIST - CENTERED

Christian Churches throughout the world are organized in five ways:

1. Monarchial, with one final authority and ruler. Such is the Roman Pontiff.

2. Episcopal. The word comes from the Greek meaning "bishop." Episcopal and Methodist Churches in the United States have bishops who are elected for life, to whom are given certain powers over the Churches. Bishops usually claim to be ordained in direct line from the apostle Peter. Canon law or a book of discipline rules in these bodies.

3. Presbyterian. A nationally organized church body, with power to govern committed to area presbyteries, state synods, and finally to the national General Assembly, which is supreme over all and which makes the law of the Churches.

4. Congregational. A fellowship of self-governing churches voluntarily working together in area associations, state conferences, and various national council and mission bodies, with control and authority reserved to the local Church.

5. Independent. Bodies of Christian people with no denominational connection, each functioning independently.

The Congregational Way was the seed bed of American constitutional government and has been in the forefront of democratic endeavors through the years.

Each of our Churches is autonomous and self-governing and entirely free from external control. A Congregational Christian Church is a body of people who have pledged themselves to follow Christ, and who, because they seek to order all of their life and work according to His leading, cannot accept as authoritative the decisions of any other body, since to do so would be to avoid the responsibility of finding God's way in their own right. The authority within a Congregational Christian Church is the authority of Christ, exercised under the scriptural principles of persuasion, example, contagion, and inspiration. All decisions of bodies outside the local Church are simply by way of recommendation and advice; they have as much worth as there is in the wisdom of them, and no more.

In Congregationalism there are no superintendents, or bishops, or popes, or presbyteries, or national councils with any authority to dictate the policies, programs, finances, forms of worship, pastor-people relationships, or other affairs of the individual Church. Congregational Christians feel that this form of Church organization is closest to the New Testament example, and offers by far the greatest flexibility in dealing with the changing demands which each age or locality makes upon the Church of Christ. Congregational insistence upon the absolute rule of Christ within His Church is the basis of all our cooperation with other denominations. When you join a Congregational Christian Church you accept the comprehensive view that all believers are one in Christ, regardless of their denomination.

It is clear that the Congregational Church conception of the Church places on every Church member great responsibility for reverent and thoughtful decision and action in accord with the will of Christ.

It is equally plain that the individual Church must carry grave responsibilities for the care of sister Churches. When we speak of "Congregational Christian Churches," we do not mean primarily an organization, but a voluntary fellowship of equals in which each Church has a concern for the wellbeing of every other Church and in which all the Churches have a concern for the well-being of each Church. The fellowship of the Churches leads us to create

organizations through which our Churches can effectively carry on their work in missions, national affairs, education, publication, and in such other ways as the Churches may from time to time determine to be desirable.

THE CONGREGATIONAL MINISTER

The Congregational minister is a man or woman who has felt an inward call from God to be a minister of Christ, who has prepared himself for his calling (usually by four years of college and three years of theological training), who has been invited to become the pastor of a Church or to perform other ministerial duties (such as chaplain), and who has been ordained by the Church of which he is a member, with the cooperation of sister Churches.

The minister is the chief spiritual leader of the Church and normally preaches, teaches, counsels, presides at the Lord's Supper, Baptism, Covenant/ Confirmation or reception of members, Marriage, Burial, and other special services of the Church. Often he is the Chairman of the Prudential Committee or "Church Board," presides at Church meetings, and administers the affairs of the Church. His most important task is to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ both in relation to those who are not active Christians and in regard to those in the Church who need guidance and help.

Mature Christians with wide experience and education often times seek special training in the Bible, the ministry, and church history and polity in order to present themselves to their Church for Ministerial License or Ordination.

In a Congregational Christian Church, all members take unusually large responsibilities because we look upon everyone as having the privilege and duty of sharing the good news of Christ and of exercising within the Church those spiritual functions for which God has endowed them with special talents.

SACRAMENTS - NOT MAGIC

It may be useful at this point to say something about Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the Holy Rites. Inevitably, in a free fellowship, there are differences of interpretation, but there is one spiritual understanding; namely, that through these means God helps us to experience His Presence, and seeks to lead us into ways of dedicated living. We do not regard the sacraments as magical; with grape juice being transformed into "the blood of Christ" or water becoming "holy water." All sacraments and holy rites are essentially spiritual experiences.

We observe the common practice of Infant Baptism in which the Christian family dedicates itself to the nurture of its child, in which the Church accepts responsibility for the provision of Christian nurture for the child, and in which God's Presence is made known. With us baptism for those who are mature is an outer and visible sign of their desire to seek cleansing of life from sin, and, as such, is the usual accompaniment of joining the Church. The method of baptism may be sprinkling (our most common custom), pouring or immersion; whichever will mean most to the person who is to be baptized.

We observe the Lord's Supper in most of our churches every month or every other month. Deacons receive plates of bread from the minister and pass them to the congregation. In like manner also the trays of tiny glasses of grape juice are distributed. By the reverent repetition of the acts and words of the Supper, we are reminded of our Lord's life and death and resurrection, assured of His spiritual presence, and united in fellowship with Him and with our fellow Church members. We invite all followers of Jesus to join with us in our services, regardless of their denominational affiliation.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF MEMBERSHIP

Each of our Churches would phrase, in its own way, the responsibilities, duties and privileges of membership. But in every instance the list would be likely to contain the following responsibilities of a Church member:

- To have a sincere Christian faith.
- To attend the services of worship and Church meetings.
- To pray regularly, particularly in the family.
- To participate in the life and work of the Church, according to talents God has given.
- To give systematic financial support to the Church's work at home, and to its program of missionary, social, educational, and medical service.
- To seek and follow the guidance of God in the affairs of daily life, particularly business.
- To show a friendly care for the poor, struggling, lonely, weak or sick.
- To promote the spirit of harmony within the Church, seeking always to follow the way of the Master with restraint, understanding, and love.
- To maintain a strict watch over one's personal character.
- To seek to bring the love of Christ and the joy of fellowship to others.

THE WORK OF A CHURCH

The work of a Church in the modern world is more varied than it has been for centuries. Today a church is a center of service for all who live within automobile distance of its doors.

Throughout the year, Sunday after Sunday, the services of worship are the center of Church life. To these are added the celebration of "holy days" which mark the peak of each season. The mood of a beautiful building, the inspiration of congregational singing, the uplift of great music,

the words of holy writ, the strengthening of common prayer, and the sincere searching of sermons; all these are the work of the Church.

The educational task is never done. It begins in preparation for the baptism of a child, is continued in Church School and parents' councils, broadens into the enthusiastic program of youth, matures in many adult groups, lectures and classes. Yes, it even follows those who cannot come to Church service - to their homes, their colleges, to Asia, to Europe or to the mission fields. Through the printed page, the educational work of the Church reaches the readers of leaflets, pamphlets, books, magazines, and newspapers and through radio and television.

The fellowship of the Church is one of its finest functions. This is partly made real on the mission field, in relief, in social services, in stands made for civic righteousness, and in the contributions made by good Christian people to community life and leadership. It is also the interweaving of world life through the personal relations of those who come to or go forth from the Church across international lines. This is one of the most significant services a Church can render in our time.

Personal care, soul-nurture is, above all else, the chief concern of the members of a modern Church. This is a concern of each for all and all for each. It entails an enormous amount of counseling and visiting, with special thought for the key points of life - high school graduation and college selection, marriage, vocational choice, tragedies, sins, child nurture and the ultimate facing of death.

All these and more are the work of a Church in the modern world. They are the work of our Church; they are our work for Christ.