

The price of gifts A Congregational inheritance¹

Bernard Thorogood

One of the more depressing moments in ecumenical discussion arrives when the representatives of a denomination start speaking of what they might lose in any union scheme. Fears begin to take over. We might lose our tradition of ministry. We might lose our independence. We might lose our prayer book – and so on.

The opposite point, the moment of hope, is when those participating have enough confidence to suggest what they might bring and offer. It is in that spirit that I want to comment on the gifts that Congregationalism, that small segment of the church universal, has brought into the Christian family. It has always been a small segment, and has never had the big battalions. Yet I am thankful to have been brought up within that tradition and ordained to ministry within it, and now to know that it has contributed to the life of the Uniting Church in Australia. In looking at this tradition I have to be very selective. But I am also critical, because the riches and gifts all come at a cost; there are no unalloyed blessings in churchmanship; there is no free ecclesiastical lunch. So I am pointing to some of the outstanding and gracious gifts in our background story and the price we have paid for them.

Trust the local

We know that the early Independents in England were radical in their day because they could not accept a church life that was nationally ordered and commanded and regulated. And yet that had been the common mode of being church. From the early days of the post-Constantinian church the assumption had been that royal conversions and group conversions and tribal conversions were the mode of the Holy Spirit, so that group or tribal churches resulted. Conformity was the general expectation and practice right through the hard centuries. So during the Reformation the mainstream of Lutheranism carried forward the same conformity, still revealed today in the remnants of state tax support for the church in Germany and Scandinavia. This was very clearly the assumption of the English churchmen of the 16th century.

“If you will have the Queen of England rule as monarch over all her dominions, then you must also give her leave to use one kind and form of government in all and every part of the same, and so to govern the Church in ecclesiastical affairs as she doth the Commonwealth in civil... For the effect of dissent is to divide one realm into two and to spoil the Prince of one half of her jurisdiction and authority.”²

This was how the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Whitgift, put it in 1574. That was the very common opinion in Europe at that time and the radicalism of the early Independents was the total rejection of that assumption. The realm is not the church. The tribe is not the church. The nation is not the church. The church is the gathering of those who are committed to Christ and under the rule of Christ; and wherever that gathering may be, there is the church of God. The primacy is with the local. This was not a departure from the main Reformation emphasis on salvation through grace and faith. Indeed it was said in the 17th century that most Independents could subscribe happily to 36 of the 39 articles of the Church of England – which was more than many Anglican clergy could. But it was a revolt against the *Volkskirche* – the national church. The concept of national uniformity was so deeply embedded that even after the Commonwealth and the proliferation of sects (which Cromwell took to be a sign of spiritual vitality), kings and bishops still determined to get back to one legal state form of Christianity.

This ultimate respect for the local has stayed with us. It is a dynamic understanding of the nature of the church. It often took as the motto the text that where two or three are gathered together in the name and spirit of Christ, there is Christ in the midst (Mt 18.20). If that is true, then the local gathering is the vital presence of the risen Christ in the world. If that is true, then belonging to that local fellowship is a most serious and creative event in any life. And if that is true, then the local gathering has within it all the gifts and graces needed for salvation. God has trusted each local fellowship to represent the way, the truth and the life that visited us in Jesus Christ.

We can see that the emphasis on trusting the local fellowship meant also a rejection of the superior authority of popes and bishops, just as it pushed aside any thought of the king or queen or civil government having authority over the church. If subject to Christ, why allow the church to be subject to human rulers who are not at all holy; or to synods that have no greater access to the Holy Spirit than does the local congregation? In those early years of Independency the local fellowships were at great risk, and many paid with their lives, and it appears such an unequal struggle. On one side all the powers of the state and the state church, the laws of the land, the judiciary, the military, the bishops, the court and the wealthy – and on the other these little gatherings meeting in the most insignificant houses with nothing to defend them except conviction. Yet the theme lived on and lives still, for it holds a treasure – the local congregation is where we are loved, where we are prayed for, where we are healed, where we sing praise, where we serve the community, where we are baptized and receive the bread and the wine.

That is where it happens – this life of faith. If there is no spiritual life there, no synod or assembly or church office can create it; and if there is spiritual life there, no one can squash it.

Trust the local.

My own experience of all this as a boy and a teenager in a Sussex country town formed my own introduction into the life of discipleship. The seriousness of becoming a church member when I was 14 stayed in my mind. The power of the great hymn writers has touched me ever since. And for me the model of what pastoral ministry is all about was the man who led me from childhood acceptance to teenage commitment – George Douglas Evans, rosy cheeked, upright, rather slow in speech and judgement, tireless in cycling around the countryside. He put up with all the arrogant opinions of teenagers and commended me for ministerial training.

Trust the local – the theme has travelled widely and came to us in Australia to form part of the mix that is now the Uniting Church. The constitution of the church as it developed from the 1977 act of union was a considerable shift away from the congregation as the final place of spiritual authority. The Methodist and Presbyterian orders regarded the councils of the church regionally and nationally as having major authority, and that tradition was very largely adopted. So we have lived with the pattern of interrelated councils – elders, parish councils, presbyteries, synods and assemblies. But more recently the Congregational principle seems to be creeping back and the local church council today has a very broad range of responsibility for the ministry and mission of the church, and, it seems to me, that range has increased. I am not sure whether our synod³ really means this to happen, but I think it is evident.

There is another dimension to this theme. There is today a willingness to trust the local in the field of theology, a trust that is new. When I was going through my own training Barth and Brunner and Bultmann were the great Protestant authorities and in college were often referred to as the “holy trinity”. We thought that they brought to us a universal theology, just as Roman Catholics had thought of Thomas Aquinas as the universal doctor of the faith. But of course we were blinkered in our view and now we can see that across the globe the people of Christ are forming their own theological understandings of what Christ means, what he reveals, and what he calls us to do. We are at the end of a hegemonic theology. We see now that the European theologians from whom we learnt and to whom we are all deeply indebted were fashioned partly through the European concept of individualism. The whole massive emphasis on individual salvation that we find in all the evangelical preachers from Wesley to Billy Graham derives not only from the tradition of Paul but also from the European development of the Enlightenment that stressed individual rights. From other parts of the world we are today being corrected or balanced by local theologies and so in a fresh way we are led to trust the local.

Obviously there is a down side to all this and it is best that we acknowledge it. To place all our confidence about the nature of the church in the local congregation is to conceal or to minimize the wholeness of the fellowship.

Perhaps I may put it this way. The body of Christ has Christ as the head and many members with different functions – but there has to be a skeleton and a nervous system if those members are to work. A few toes lying around don't help anyone! The body needs connectedness. Independent congregations may have the very heart of the matter but they will surely miss the necessary functions of the whole and may, all too easily, set out on a path that leads away from apostolic faith to some local product. So to trust the local for Christian doctrine is a high-risk strategy.

I saw one aspect of this in my own ministry in the Pacific Islands. We had been remarkably successful in stressing the local church but we failed – and I failed – to bring an equal stress on the unity of the church in the world. We had been good Congregationalists, and the price was paid. I see that today in Australia. The islanders who come here to live and become part of our Australian community have had very little thought about joining the church that is here. They do not see that the church that is already here is in any way their church. They have been intent and devoted in bringing with them their own island church and establishing it – and so we are seeing not only a Samoan, a Tongan and a Cook Islanders church, but churches that are the offspring of individual islands like Penrhyn or Aitutaki – tiny communities but carrying with them their very own church. They have been Congregational in spirit and in form. So we see the price that is paid – it is the disjointedness of the family of Christ.

Congregationalists have been very aware of this high price. So they compensated. Even in the early years they sought fellowship between local congregations. In England and in Australia this led to the forming of Congregational unions as state and national bodies with care for what we might call external relations with other churches and with governments, care also for the oversight of ministerial standards. But there was watchfulness that the unions had no authority over the church meeting in each locality. In Britain the process went further, to form the Congregational Church in England and Wales – almost a contradiction in terms! – in order to create a parallel body with other churches negotiating for union.⁴ Internationally we had the International Congregational Council (1891-1970), a body for fellowship and mutual assistance that came into its own during and after the tragedies of the second world war.

And everywhere around the world Congregationalists have been at the heart of church union development – in America, Britain, South and North India, China, Madagascar, Jamaica, Zambia, Australia, Papua New Guinea. Why is this so? Partly because we recognized the price of our gift. We brought to the table this golden gift of the responsibility of the local church and we sought the medicine for our deficiencies in new connectedness, new shapes of the body, new life for the whole. But we were there at the inauguration of unions for another reason and that brings me to gift number two.

No credal closure

It was a common jibe against Congregationalists that they believed anything or they believed nothing. If asked, "What is the doctrine of the Congregational church?", many would not be able to reply. That was the accusation. And it had a little grain of truth in it. For from the early years there was a great reluctance to confine faith to a single set of words that all members had to accept. It was not then, and never has been, that the creeds were rejected as wrong. As I noted above, those early Independents were not at all revolutionary in their basic doctrine. But they were doubtful and critical about using a creed as the measure of Christian discipleship, and this stayed in the Congregational spirit through the centuries.

The logic went like this. In scripture we are given the word of God, and that has authority to guide us in all matters of faith. The creeds of the church are not of that same character; they are products of the church in language that is limited by the culture of the time; they may be beautiful expressions but they are not binding, not final, and certainly not infallible. It would therefore be wrong to impose a creed as a test since Jesus never imposed such a thing; he only sought the commitment to follow the Christ-way. So many of us with that tradition behind us would still say that the historic creeds of the church are witnesses to the faith but should not be used as the final expression or the test of faith.

Indeed, the more I read about the formation of the Nicene Creed, the more it seems to me the production of an immediate situation in the fourth century. The council was an arena for polemics; those gathered there heard threats and counter-threats; they all trembled under the gaze of the emperor Constantine in the chair, sitting in his purple robe and scarlet boots. He required agreement. So agreement on the text came; there were only two dissenting votes in the 300 – and those two brave dissenters are never heard of again.

Now out of all that comes a creed that is wonderful and has meant much to Christians across the world. But it is just one way of expressing what we believe. It is written in terms of Greek thought we cannot fully share. Yes, we love it as one witness to faith; but no, it is not the final statement for ever and ever.

There is thus a great deal of intellectual freedom in the Congregational tradition, much theological exploration. Some of it moved away from the central western tradition, in the United States towards Unitarian understandings, and in England towards a woolly liberalism; and then we had to be called back towards the central Christian tradition by theologians like RW Dale, PT Forsyth and RS Franks, by Nathaniel Micklem and John Whale, by George Caird and CH Dodd – all standing firmly in the theological mainstream. Such continuing debate between orthodoxy and adventure seems to me essential for the liveliness of the Christian tradition. From time to time Congregationalists betrayed this liberty, for example in parts of New England in America where they held much

political power and could become as intolerant as the regime from which their grandparents had escaped. But in the 19th and 20th centuries it is a reality, this live theological discussion that is not captive to any written authority other than scripture.

This is a gift that we have brought to the ecumenical table. At times when Anglicans might have had to refer to the creeds or the 39 Articles or the Lambeth quadrilateral; or when Methodists had to turn to Wesley's sermons or the minutes of conference; or when Presbyterians felt bound by the Westminster Confession – then Congregationalists could meditate on the gospels.

It was rather smug. It could be the conjurer declaring, "Look, no hands." For such freedom has a cost.

We see this first in frequent failure to teach the faith systematically and comprehensively. With no creed and no catechism, each local church and each minister could plan Christian education as they wished and as they were able. In a few cases this was splendidly done. But in many, it was a rather casual affair, depending entirely on who happened to be available and what their talent might be. The second risk was always that a strong voice in the locality could skew the direction of the local fellowship, and that voice might be biased in a very personal direction. It is surely proper to claim that the local church is under the rule of Christ but wholly improper that it should be under the sway of the person who can talk longest and loudest in the church meeting. A third risk has been that Congregationalism has often appeared to those in the Catholic tradition as being a fringe body, only barely within the circle that Catholics call church. For if it does not give full assent to the ancient creeds, how do they know it is fully Christian in faith?

Congregationalists were very aware of these risks and they compensated. They wrote statements of faith, and some of them were very fine. Just for a taste, here is a passage from a declaration of faith published by the Congregational Church in England and Wales in 1967:

No Christian is holy as Christ is holy; freedom from sin is not yet complete in Christian experience. In themselves human beings are not worthy of life in full fellowship with God, nor capable of it. They need continual forgiveness and renewal as their means to freedom. They need power from God, sufficient to transform what they are, to sustain what they become and to strengthen them for new deeds of faith and obedience. Through God's grace these needs are met, not once only but again and again in the lives of those actively committed to Christian discipleship. Christians therefore share that joy in living which the eternal God has in himself.⁵

When the need was clear, Congregationalists could write down a statement of faith as biblical and persuasive as in any part of the church. Even so, it was only offered to the local churches as one expression of faith, and never as a test

of faith. I believe this is the right position to hold. There is no credal closure, for all our creeds are human expressions and never contain the breadth of the mystery of God's revelation.⁶

Membership is ministry

One of the radical positions of the early Congregationalists was a revolt against the type of priesthood that had for centuries become a closed and privileged class in the Roman tradition. They claimed that just as the church as a whole is the body of Christ, so the individual members within the body are the servants or ministers of Christ's gospel. This gave membership its high status in Congregational thought. If you are ready to become a member, then you are also becoming responsible for the life and mission of the local fellowship, you share in all its work and its decisions. Of course there are different talents and callings within the whole, and there are some called to become ministers or pastors as their whole life work; yet they are distinguished by their gifts and the character of their training and their function rather than by status; they remain members of the church. I still remember that when a new minister was called to our local church – I suppose around 1940 – he was received by the deacons as a member on transfer from his previous church, and not until that had happened did he preside at the communion table. That confirmed the classical Congregational position. Membership of the body is the great privilege. This has repeatedly been crystallized in the principle of the priesthood of all believers.

The radical nature of this position is seen best if we contrast it with a statement from the conservative wing of the Roman Catholic Church. Here is a 1905 pastoral letter from the Prince Bishop of Salzburg:

Most beloved, where is there in the whole world a power to equal this? How high, how sublime, how altogether wonderful is the power of the priest in forgiving sins. The Catholic priest, I say once more. Protestant pastors have not the priestly ordination through which their great power is transmitted according to the ordinance of Christ... Where in heaven is there such power as that of the Catholic priest? With the angels? With the Mother of God? Mary conceived Christ the Son of God in her womb and bore him in the manger at Bethlehem. Yes. But consider what happens at Mass. Does not the very same thing happen, so to speak, under the consecrating hands of the priest, at the moment of consecration? Once did Mary bring the divine child into the world. But lo! the priest does this not once but hundreds and thousands of times as often as he celebrates.⁷

Set the Congregational tradition alongside that eloquence and the gulf separating us becomes apparent. We have never for one moment believed in a priesthood with such distinctive spiritual powers. Our ministry was given the training and the authorization to fulfil a pastoral and teaching office, but no

sublime powers flowed through our fingers. We know ourselves better than that.

The main criticism of our stance has been that if the priesthood is of all believers then the likelihood is that it will be lost: everyone's business becomes nobody's business. Our claim is that we have not abolished priesthood but we have broadened it to cover the dedication of the whole people of God to their calling. But in fact we have to admit that sometimes the priestly nature of the church had indeed been lost. It was quite possible for a local church to discover that its ministry no longer dealt with the reality of sin and confession and had forgotten the cure of souls. Congregational ministry could be encouraging, enlightening, and caring without being sacramental. It was the great theme of PT Forsyth to remedy this, and in this respect he was a Barthian before Barth, although his writing, as someone said, is like fireworks in a fog. We need the priestly element in ministry for the full expression of Christ's healing presence.

Yet the basic proposition stands. It is one of the convictions that is borne out in my experience that in each congregation there are people who are far better models of Christ than I am; they have ministered to me. And it was largely out of this understanding that the Congregational church was able to move into the ordination of women ministers of word and sacrament as long ago as 1917, well ahead of the field. For if women could be members, teachers and deacons, there was no reason that could hold back ordination. I am thankful that in the last half-century the opposing Catholic and Protestant views have come just a little closer to each other. It was Vatican II that brought forward the main meaning of "church" as the people of God and not the hierarchy. That is a considerable shift. On our side and within the united churches, I think we have come to see that the calling to give the whole of life to ministry does set people apart to a particular discipline of life, service and prayer. We shall, I believe, come closer still to one another when we all recognize that it is not the hierarchy nor the congregation nor the synod that makes a person a minister; it is God alone who gives the faith and the talents and the inward call to a member of the church. The church, through all of its organs, can only recognize and train and authorize and support what the Spirit is doing.

Over the horizon

The last of the gifts that the Congregational tradition brought to the common table was the world reference and application of the gospel of Christ. Here, as you would expect, I pay my tribute to the London Missionary Society.⁸ It preceded the Congregational unions in England and in Australia; and it was a midwife to both. It was fuelled by networks of volunteers in the congregations. From its birth in 1795 it was courageous, pioneering and not diverted by failures or by successes. Its Fundamental Principle reveals a sound grasp of Congregational churchmanship.

It is not the object of the Society to send Independency, Presbyterianism, Episcopacy, or any other form of church order and government (about which there may be difference of opinion among serious persons) but the Glorious Gospel of the Blessed God to the heathen, and... it shall be left, as it ever ought to be left, to those whom God shall call into the fellowship of his Son, from among them to assume for themselves such form of church government as to them shall appear most agreeable to the Word of God.

There is a clear “trust the local”, there is “no credal closure” but continuing debate, and there is “membership is ministry”, for all believers share in great decisions. It was a principle that stood soundly for 150 years and gave me personally much strength in my own life among Island churches of the Pacific as they found their way to autonomy. Yet it is a curiously naive principle, and in two ways. Can the gospel be so neatly divorced from churchmanship? No one in the Catholic tradition would think so. Theology is all of a piece, and what we believe about the church has to conform to what we believe about the Bible, the Christ and the kingdom of God. We are no longer able to offer the gospel without the church, and I doubt if in practice the missionaries ever were able to do so.

Then it is naive also in imagining that the western missionary would not be the kingpin, the person who would in fact decide the shape of the new churches that would be formed. This was the person with knowledge, experience and the Bible. So while the principle gave a hearty vote for the local church it also gave untrammelled power to the missionary. In most places it was the missionary who chaired every meeting and whose voice carried the day. Many were very careful about this, but the LMS had its oddities and its autocrats too.

But it was through this agency of a missionary society that the Congregational churches had a vision of the world reach of the gospel. Reports from overseas and personal deputation speaking by missionaries formed the imagination of young people. I think we can say that the LMS saved Congregationalism from the narrow vision and parochialism that independency could easily encourage. Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians shared the same kind of broad horizon through their own societies; what made the LMS distinctive was the rejection of any denominational empire. I can only say from my experience that I found in the great LMS family many of the finest spirits of Congregationalism – liberal and evangelical, practical and thoughtful.⁹

This nurture of the universal church has been a very major gift: what is the price of the gift? There was a very obvious and personal price in human lives – our martyrs, and the many cut down by sickness, facing loneliness and long family separation. The LMS history is peppered with heroism and salted with tears. But there is a more inward and widespread cost for the church as a whole – it is that the parent-child relationship set the mental reference for both the

sending and the receiving churches, and that assumption became set in concrete. Many faith communities around the world were brought to birth through the agency of the missionary society, and this was a wonderful work of God. But those churches were treated as infants. The parents supervised and fed them and sent them to school. As I look back it seems extraordinary that a society with these principles should have tutored the Polynesian churches for 100 years before ensuring that they had fully indigenous leadership. What were we doing all that time? It could not be said that among Polynesian Christians there were no skilled leaders, or that there were none with grace and courage, or that the people did not know the Bible. They were as well informed as any average English or Australian group of church members. But during such a long period this had become the mindset. We, here in the western world, have the wisdom and the spiritual gifts; they are receptive. It is now hard to reverse that image but it has to be done.

I think it can only be done in the broader frame of church relationships, in which we meet those from other continents as equals and setting aside all financial power. We must not lose the broad horizon – that is also a present risk for the Uniting Church – but we can be useful to the churches around the globe only if we recognize that all are givers of spiritual insights, all have talent to share, all are needy, all are fragile, all are sisters and brothers given to us by God. We are therefore necessarily within the ecumenical fellowship. We trust the local and embrace the universal.

I am not a Congregationalist today. But I am not an ex-Congregationalist either – like an ex-serviceman who has become a civilian. Rather I am a post-Congregationalist. I have travelled on with this tradition as it has flowed into united churches. We are thankful for the gifts that have come to us in this stream. Are they worth the price that has been paid? For me they are, for I believe these gifts are offered on the ecumenical table to become fruitful in the whole of Christ's church.

In the end it is not given to us to make the judgement. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, whether we build with gold, silver and fine stone, wood, hay or straw, all will be revealed in the fire of judgement of God at the end.¹⁰ But I believe that on the table of the Lord there will be some shining Congregational gold.

Notes

1. Based on a paper presented to the historical society of the Uniting Church in Australia in New South Wales.
2. John Whitgift, *Works*, ed J Ayre (Parker Society, 1851-3), volume I, p.388.
3. The synod of New South Wales.
4. In 1972, the Congregational Church united with the Presbyterian Church of England in the United Reformed Church.

5. "A Declaration of Faith" in David Thompson, ed, *Stating the Gospel: Formulations and declarations of faith from the heritage of the United Reformed Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), pp.197-247, at p.245. Cf Lukas Vischer, ed, *Reformed Witness Today* (Bern: Evangelische Arbeitsstelle Oekumene Schweiz, 1982), pp.114-160, at p.158.
6. It is worth comparing the paragraphs on the creeds in the basis of the United Reformed Church in the UK, where Congregationalists were in a majority, to the similar paragraph in the basis of the Uniting Church in Australia, where Congregationalists were a small minority. URC 18: "The United Reformed Church accepts with thanksgiving the witness borne to the Catholic faith by the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds." UCA 9: "The Uniting Church enters into unity with the Church through the ages by its use of confessions known as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene creed. The Uniting Church receives these as authoritative statements of the Catholic Faith, framed in the language of their day and used by Christians in many days, to declare and guard the right understanding of the faith." I wonder what sort of authority is implied there? That we all believe the virgin birth as historical fact?
7. Quoted by JS Whale, *The Protestant Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), p.260.
8. Bernard Thorogood, ed, *Gales of Change: Responding to a shifting missionary context: the story of the London Missionary Society, 1945-1977* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1994).
9. If I think only of Australians, what remarkable people were Eleanor Rivett, Mac and Nan Partridge, Frank and Nina White, Harold Gaze, Eric Ure, Norman Cocks, Maynard Davies, Hedley and Peggy Bunton and many more.
10. 1 Cor 3.11-15.

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