

THE CHURCH

WHAT THE EVANGELICAL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH BELIEVES

The New Testament word "church" stems from a verb meaning a body of persons called to participate in the privileges of the Gospel (Romans 8:28, 30; 2 Timothy 1:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:24; Matthew 16:15-18). It is by this standard that the Evangelical Congregational Church began in 1803 under the leadership of a German farmer and tile-maker, Jacob Albright (1759-1808). Following his personal response to the Gospel in 1791, Albright, armed with the Bible and adopting the orderliness of the Methodist **Discipline**, gathered about himself a group of followers who took the name "Albright's People." These new converts felt called out from the moral decadence of their day, but even more so called out from the established churches whose heritage was Scriptural but whose life John Wesley had earlier portrayed as "wrong opinions and superstitious modes of worship."¹

Today that early, energetic association of believers continues as a worshipping, witnessing community in the Evangelical Congregational Church.

A Body Whose Doctrine is Scriptural

Twenty-five Articles of Faith describe the basic Biblical doctrine of the Evangelical Congregational Church. One of these, Article Nineteen, is entitled "Of the Church".

The Holy General Church consists of the great body of believers who confess the Lord Jesus Christ and have life in Him. The individual church is a congregation or society of Christian believers, in which the pure worship of God is maintained, His holy word is preached, and His commandments and ordinances are sacredly observed.

Admittedly, these "marks" of the church are recognized by other Protestant churches, but it is the individual interpretation given to them, in the light of God's Word, that makes one denomination distinct from another in its presentation of the Gospel.

A distinction of the Evangelical Congregational Church is its deep concern for bringing the lost into the church (2 Corinthians 5:19, 20; Romans 10:9, 10, 13). This thrust of evangelism is directed toward an experiential salvation expressed in personal confession of Christ as Savior and Lord. The methodology is familiar - evangelistic meetings, summer camp meetings, personal soul winning in crisis situations, etc. However, according to Article Nineteen, there is more to the Christian life than confession; it adds "and have life in Him". Nurture of the believer is a major task of the church since the Holy Scripture underscores the need for spiritual growth. We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head; into Christ. (Ephesians 4:15; see also 2 Peter 1:4, and Colossians 1:28, 2:6,7). Former Bishop E.S. Woodring (1926-34) wrote, "Purity of life must be the fruit of correct teaching."²

¹ A. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (Oxford, 1964), p. 314 in a sermon, "Of the Church."

² R.S. Wilson, *A Brief History of the Evangelical Congregational Church for the Enlightenment of*

Spiritual development of believers is aided through weekly Sunday School teaching and Bible study groups that meet in homes or in the church. Leadership and participation by the laity in these sessions provide an opportunity for sharing of personal needs, and united prayer places the believer in a caring relationship to others in that community of faith. We subscribe to methods like these, believing they lead to growth in the Christian. As part of that developing Christian experience, the Evangelical Congregational Church also teaches that a believer justified by Christ is to strive for sanctification, already made possible in his relationship of faith in Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:30). Sanctification is never self-induced, nor self-exalting. Loving God in Christ, and loving mankind for Jesus' sake, takes the attention off one's self and places it lovingly on others (1 John 3:17, 4:11, 19, 20; Galatians 6:1-3).³

Thus far, the Article "Of the Church" has been explained in complete dependence upon the Holy Scriptures which give the most complete and meaningful picture of the Church.

A Body Governed by the People

While we are participants in the Holy General Church, we function within the local congregation. That body is governed by the denominational **Discipline** which allows each church to determine its own membership, and own its own property. Hence, the term "Congregational" in our title.

On the other hand, despite the congregational nature of local church government, and since the New Testament never claims there is a solitary way to govern the Church, we have the episcopal form of government at the denominational level. A bishop serves as the "overseer" of the entire denomination (1 Timothy 3:1; Titus 1:7). He is selected from among the ordained Elders by the General Conference, a meeting of laity and clergy held every four years. While the local congregation maintains a relationship to the General Conference, it has a more direct involvement in the Annual Conference to which it sends a voting delegate as well as its pastor. This annual meeting, along with its many responsibilities, grants two levels of ordination, Deacon and Elder, as persons are set apart for pastoral ministry in the church (1 Timothy 3:8-13; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

We hold to the connectional polity described here in order to accomplish a united task for Christ, whereby the local church is engaged close to home as well as world-wide in benevolence, missions, higher education, Christian camping and church planting.

Comment [Comment1]: this needs to be changed because of single ordination

A Body on Its Knees

Blending old and new forms, the Evangelical Congregational Church worships in the "free" tradition. And yet "free" worship is never irresponsible (1 Corinthians 14:40; John 4:14)! It is both creedal and creative (1 Corinthians 15:3-4; 2 Corinthians 3:17); incorporates stately hymn with gospel song (Ephesians 5:19); and may include personal testimony or group prayer. Worship always centers in God and Christ each Lord's Day, and the Word is expounded with conviction. On occasion there is that solemn moment of remembering the Lord's death "til He come"; or the joy of infant or believer baptism administered in the beauty of holiness.⁴ Worship is not something the clergy man, organist, and choir "perform", but is rather a participation of "the body of believers" co-mingled in praise and

her Pastors and People (Myerstown, 1953), p. 80.

³ See Pamphlet, "Sanctification. What the Evangelical Congregational Church Believes."

⁴ See Pamphlet, "The Sacraments. What the Evangelical Congregational Church Believes."

petition, listening, and obeying. It is an experience that welds together a worshipping family, and makes glad the people of God.

As a Scriptural body of Christ, the Evangelical Congregational denomination, in both its polity and worship, is a mixture. Growing up on the North American continent since 1803, it combines the personal involvement of a free democratic society (our congregationalism) with the Old World churchly traditions formed during and after the European and English Reformations. This combination of precepts and practices is most acceptable to both denominational leadership and the believers within the local congregation. Christ is the Head, and we are the body, His people.

A Body of Servants, Not Spectators

Furthermore, again in accord with Scripture, the Evangelical Congregational Church sees its role as an obedient servant of the Lord. To achieve this standard, the Apostle Paul projects a vibrant picture of the church in Ephesians 4:7, 11-16 with this goal: *"Until we all attain...to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ"* (v. 13). This is possible in each believer because *"grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift"* (v. 7). The function of the pastor-teacher and evangelists within the visible body of the church is to equip the members to function as servants in the world. This is done as the leaders model the bond-servant role of our Lord Himself (Philippians 2:3-11). The local leadership in a congregation is never to be self-serving (1 Corinthians 3:1-9). The members, in turn, have also been provided with spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:11), whereby they contribute to this on-going work of "making disciples" (Matthew 28:19). Grace, sacrifice, and spiritual guidance will equip the "saints" to go beyond Sunday-spectator habits to vital everyday witness and service for Christ.

Already being a part of our evangelical heritage, the small group concept (class meeting, prayer meeting or Bible class) continues to provide a convenient framework within which to equip the members for their servant role. In such a setting the process of growing into Christ-likeness takes place. *"Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ"* (Ephesians 4:15). The impact of believers acting as "salt" and "light" (Matthew 5:13-14) upon the home, school and community will be felt.

The local Evangelical Congregational Church equips the saints for ministry when the Biblical portrait of the servant church is practiced.

Christ's Body - What of Its Future?

The present age in which we serve will pass all too quickly. With the Church in every age we, too, speak of the consummation of the ages. Not only has God *"delivered us from the domination of darkness and transferred us to the Kingdom of his beloved Son"* (Colossians 1:13), but we confidently look forward to the Kingdom's full manifestation in the new heaven and the new earth (2 Peter 3:13). Articles of Faith fifteen through eighteen deal with the doctrine of last things including Resurrection, the Final Judgement, Heaven, and Hell. The events described in these articles will affect individual members as well as the corporate body as we share in the grand climax of history.

Once a person has acknowledged *"Christ (is) the Son of the living God"* (Matthew 16:16), he receives all the positive blessings promised to believers. Anyone who rejects God's invitation already has his reward (John 3:18b). Until the time of personal resurrection and judgment there is a continuing task for the regenerate: service, work and study, which are far better than merely "belonging". *"Nourish her and cherish her..."* (Ephesians 5:29) is Paul's valuable directive to our Church. "Nothing

on earth can ever take the place of the Church to do God's work until Jesus comes."⁵

Therefore we are brought back full circle to the original intention of Albright and his followers - to testify that God has done something about the sins of men. Our role as fellow servants in the Gospel is quite clear, as we continue to look at Jesus Christ whose Body we are.

⁵ The Threshold of the Church. A Catechetical Manual of the Evangelical Congregational Church. Third edition (Myerstown, 1971), p. 112.