

Congregational Distinctives & Sacraments

Fight The Urge To Fit In

Summary: We stand within the evangelical and Congregational traditions. We believe in two sacraments ordained by Christ to be observed by his people until he returns: Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Scripture: Romans 12:1–2; John 13:31–35; John 17:20–26

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As we come to this final part of our series on essential beliefs of Christian faith and lifestyle, this part is the least 'sexy' topic; yet, as we will see, it too is absolutely essential in helping us to fight the urge to fit in with the beliefs, values and behaviours of a sinful and fallen world.

If you want to know what is the good, pleasing and perfect will of God, then we will find that out together, in unity, in spirit and in truth.

Distinctives

Unity With Diversity

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus taught his disciples,

I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:34–35)¹

then he prayed,

I pray not only for these, but also for those who believe in me through their word. May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me. (John 17:20–21)

As the first disciples shared the good news about Jesus, far and wide, new people joined the movement Jesus started.

Jesus' prayer for this growing community —of which this local church is an expression— was they would be "one" in the same way the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are united.

While distinct, each person of the triune godhead loves and submits to the others. Each are equally committed to the mission of sharing this love, submission and unity with others so that they will respond to the call of our creator God.

Jesus' was and is convinced it is our unity that will convince the world Jesus is who he said he was and that what is written about him is true. Then they will come to know his love for the world and respond to his call to salvation.

Are you going to tell Jesus he was mistaken?

It is really important for us to note each person of the Trinity is distinct and yet united. There is a unity in their diversity.

This truth is important to understand for when we come to such other passages as

There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

In Christ there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all. (Colossians 3:11)

These passages speak of the unity of the friends of Jesus but it does not mean their distinctions are lost, as if those distinctions are a weakness and to be avoided. No! Our unity despite our diversity is our greatest asset because it is the most beautiful reflection of God's created order.

Western cultures are becoming more and more polarised, fueled by governments, media, businesses and activists who benefit from our fear and ignorance of our neighbours.

When a local church and the Church is able to achieve unity in diversity, it speaks powerfully to a world and a people that are desperate to belong, to find meaning and their identity in community.

The Place of Distinctives

Sadly, there is not very much unity to be found in the diversity of local churches. More and more, everyday, local churches are being split apart by factions and friction caused by divergent viewpoints. Hear me when I say: it is okay to disagree and to be different! (do I need to say it again?)

How we deal with our disagreements and our differences, which threaten to erupt into conflicts, is the 'sweet spot' of our witness. When the world looks at us and sees a group of happy, smiling faces, they are right to be suspicious. If instead they see the exhaustion that comes with the struggle of working out our disagreements and differences, our unity in diversity is much more natural and the hardest thing to achieve.

Luckily, as Steph Curry, who plays for the Golden State Warriors in the NBA, is fond of saying,

I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:13)

Those disagreements and differences are exacerbated at the level of traditions and denominations. The Congregational Churches are different than The Salvation Army, who are different from the Quakers and the Roman Catholics and the Pentecostals and, don't even get me started on those weirdos in the Orthodox Churches with their manly beards and dresses! ☺

There are basically three historical Christian traditions that exist today: Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant. Within those traditions are a wide variety of denominations —and, yes, even the RCs have over 20 official denominations (some of them are called Orders, like the Jesuits).

Each of those traditions and denominations were created because someone, somewhere, came to an insight of faith and/or practice that so consumed them, they convinced others to break away and form a new church. As the number of churches committed to the same insight or practice grew, they formed a new denomination, sharing resources, governance, etc, being the full expression of their distinctives.

Let me map out for you the broad strokes of Christian history: As the first Christians spread throughout the Mediterranean, they formed house churches. The house churches within any city eventually were overseen by a bishop. As those cities grew in influence, and the number of churches within them grew in number, the bishops of capital cities started vying for prestige among themselves. Because of the apostles Peter and Paul's ministries and deaths in his city, according to legend, the bishop of Rome tried to argue he was preeminent among bishops, an argument not at all convincing to the other bishops. Long after the capital of the Roman Empire had moved to Constantinople, in 1054 AD, the Eastern and Western churches made their schism official, leaving the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox churches distinct from each other.

As the centuries rolled on, a reform movement broke out within the Roman Catholic church. This movement came to prominence with Martin Luther, who nailed his 95 Theses—in other words, “complaints”—to the door of Wittenberg Castle on 31 October 1517. That is the date commonly seen as the start of the Protestant Reformation.

Breaking from Roman Catholicism, Lutheran churches formed under Luther's leadership and theology in Germany; Ulrich Zwingli started Reformed churches in Zurich, Switzerland; and, to secure a divorce, Henry VIII brought Protestantism to England, resulting in a to and fro until the Anglican Church finally settled in.

Which brings us to the origins of Congregationalism.

The Origins of Congregationalism

The early Protestant Reformation churches were state churches, meaning they were set up in cooperation with local monarchs and civil governments to reform society alongside reforms in the Church.² In England, Anglicanism remains to this day very much intertwined with the state political.

The Puritans were a reform movement within Anglicanism. Within this movement, the Separatists are most important for us. They challenged state and denominational authority over local churches. In 1582, Robert Browne published *A Treatise of Reformation*, which called for local churches to be free to govern themselves, taking “the priesthood of all believers” to its logical conclusion. *The Savoy Declaration* of 1658 laid down the Congregational polity, giving full expression to Jesus' declaration,

For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them. (Matthew 18:20)

Thus, our statement reads,

We stand within the evangelical ... and Congregational traditions. One of the key distinctives of Congregationalism is the autonomy of the local church. We maintain that, through the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, all churches govern themselves and are independent, separate to any ecclesiastical authority.

We believe then that our church, Narellan Community Congregational Church, stands in the Apostolic Succession, yet what makes us distinctive, the insight we are particularly animated by, is a commitment to congregational governance, where ‘the will of Christ is found in the congregation’ working together to deliberate, discuss, debate and discern God’s good, pleasing and perfect will for his mission to be fulfilled in our ministry.

Each insight, that becomes a distinctive somewhere, adds to our shared understanding of God, his work in Christ Jesus and human nature. This distinctive of Congregationalism rallies us together, but should not be the point from which we rail against other Christians holding to their distinctives. Rather, our statement continues,

While we are autonomous, this does not mean we are isolated. Instead, we fellowship with each other for accountability, encouragement, and further equipping for gospel ministry. This co-operation finds expression in the Fellowship of Congregational Churches’ Annual Assemblies, its committees, camps, conferences, and other events.

Our local church is a part of the Fellowship of Congregational Churches denomination, yet we are a local expression of the universal, Christian, “catholic” Church.

Sacraments

Nowhere are the disagreements and differences more acute among Christian traditions, denominations and local churches than when it comes to the issue of sacraments.

There are four words which are important to this discussion: *sacrament*, *ordinance*, *ordained* and *instituted*.

The word “sacrament” is the English rendering of the Latin word *sacramentum* that refers to, “religious rites that confer special graces”.³ They are like oaths taken by a worshipper which then become a channel through which they receive an invisible grace from God, be it salvation or something else.

In modern times, Roman Catholic churches practice seven sacraments and Protestant churches practice two, being *The Lord’s Supper*/Communion/Eucharist (it goes by different names) and *Baptism*.

On a side note, the original Greek word is actually *mysterium*, which translates in English to “mysteries”. When the Greek Bible was translated into Latin, it was translated as *sacramentum*. In Orthodox churches, they are still called mysteries.

Now, stay with me: Christians disagree on whether grace is dispersed automatically through participation in the sacraments or whether our practice of them is merely obedience to what Christ commanded. In that case, the sacraments are called *ordinances*.

So, in a sacrament, a participant receives a spiritual grace; in an ordinance, a participant is being obedient and merely symbolising a grace already received.

With me so far? Three words then are used to describe these special ceremonies: sacrament, ordinance and mystery.

Our observance of these rites comes from such instructions of Jesus as these:

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19)

And he took bread, gave thanks, broke it, gave it to them, and said, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” (Luke 22:19)

The next issue is that Christians either believe these ceremonies were *instituted* by Christ Jesus—as in, “I want you to do these”—or they were *ordained* by Christ Jesus—as in, “I am appointing these to be special for you”.

I am sure you can already appreciate that when different people and groups use different words to talk about the same things, confusion is usually the result! Which is why historical discussion around the sacraments has either split Christians or kept already split Christians apart.

That was never the intention of these sacraments! The first Christians did practise them, in their worship gatherings, but with a much more open mindset.

An early document, *The Didache* or *The Teaching Of The Twelve Apostles*, provides loose instructions for conducting Baptism:

With regard to baptism, here is the teaching:

You are to baptize in this way.

Once you have gone back over all that is in the Two Ways, you baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living water.

However, if you do not have access to living water, then baptize in some other water; and if you do not have any cold water, then you can use warm water.

And if you cannot get access to either [running or still water], then pour water three times on the head in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, before the baptism takes place, let both the person baptizing and the person who is going to be baptized fast—along with as many others as are able to do so. Indeed, you must instruct the person who is going to be baptized to fast for one or two days before the baptism.⁴

In other words, do what you can with what you have. It is the faithful intention of the worshippers, rather than the words and gestures, that makes the ceremony effective. When we get wrapped up in the ‘proper’ conduct of the sacraments, they become ‘magic’, ‘superstition’, and far removed from being a faithful response to the grace of God.

For our part, our statement follows the lead of the Fellowship of Congregational Churches and straddles the various interpretive options:

We believe in two sacraments ordained by Christ to be observed by his people until he returns: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

With this statement, we are basically stating these rites were appointed as special for us by Christ Jesus because they confer a grace to us when we practice them—in the case of Baptism, it is a sign that points to AND a seal that secures for us the Covenant of Grace.

The Lord's Supper is a perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of Jesus that provides spiritual nourishment to believers AND is it a sign of our communion with one another.

Our statement then is a way of straddling the various options for interpreting how these rites work for our worship and discipleship. It is an attempt to take a position on a great mystery, to express that our faith is not merely something we believe but is also how we live. We may not completely understand how these sacraments work for us, but they are special to us because they help us both claim our faith and remember in whom we have faith.

Conclusion

If you appreciate the mercies of our creator God, have placed your faith in Christ Jesus and living a Christian lifestyle, then you will want to know what is the good, pleasing and perfect will of God.

That insight only comes after you pledge your allegiance to Almighty God with your whole self—heart, soul, mind and strength. That is our spiritual practice, our worship. And in our worship and fellowship and community, the Holy Spirit renews our mind from that trained in us and promoted by a sinful and fallen world. Then we are able to discern the truth and the will of God and we will find that out together, in unity.

Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 2 Aaron M. Moldenhauer, "Reformation," in *The Essential Lexham Dictionary of Church History*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022).
- 3 Paul J. Achtemeier, *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco, CA, USA: Harper & Row, 1985), pg 890.
- 4 Thomas O'Loughlin, *The Didache: A Window on the Earliest Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Baker Academic, 2010), pg 166.]