

Keepers

OF THE
COVENANT

FRONTIER MISSIONS
and the DECLINE *of*
CONGREGATIONALISM

1774 - 1818

JAMES R. ROHRER

KEEPERS OF THE COVENANT

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Printed in the United States of America
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*To my parents,
William and Doris Rohrer*

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Preface

This book began ten years ago while I was writing a master's thesis on revivalism and temperance in nineteenth century America. One day my adviser, Merton Dillon, suggested that there might be information about temperance activity in the microfilm missionary records which the university library had recently acquired. I spent the rest of the day straining my eyes, intently examining seemingly endless journals and letters penned by Congregationalist missionaries in the early republic. I found disappointingly little about temperance, but discovered a cornucopia of information about revivals, evangelism, and religious competition in the northern frontier. From that day I was "hooked" by the Connecticut Missionary Society (CMS).

I soon realized that the evangelists laboring in the new settlements under CMS commissions did not fit the image of the New England clergy which I had formed from reading secondary literature on American religion. It was also apparent that the standard portrait of post-revolutionary Congregationalism was based primarily upon a relatively small number of pastor/theologians in Massachusetts and Connecticut, men like Timothy Dwight, Jedediah Morse, and Lyman Beecher. The hundreds of Congregational ministers who joined the New England exodus to the frontier, the individuals most responsible for the fate of New England orthodoxy, had been all but forgotten by history.

I have written this book in an effort to fill this large hole in our historical consciousness. It is the first published monograph devoted exclusively to the home missionary efforts of the post-revolutionary Congregational clergy. During the past decade I have read all of the early publications of the CMS, as well as the thousands of letters and journals

written by the 148 men who received CMS commissions between 1798 and 1818. Wherever possible I have augmented this material with letters, diaries, sermons, and church records in other collections. My account of early republican Congregationalism is based primarily upon these manuscript sources, many of them previously unused.

This study challenges the standard thesis that Congregationalist leaders failed to adapt to the democratic impulses unleashed by the American Revolution. Instead, I argue that New England missionaries clearly recognized the need for change, and that they successfully adjusted themselves to the demands of frontier ministry. Far from being a marginal group of genteel theologians, this book presents them as aggressive evangelists who were fully capable of competing successfully with the Methodists, Baptists, and other emergent evangelical groups spawned during the early republic.

These findings necessarily raise the thorny problem of Congregationalist declension. If the Congregational clergy successfully adapted to change, why then did Congregationalism so quickly lose numerical dominance after the Revolution? Why were the champions of New England orthodoxy apparently—and decisively—bested by the Methodist and Baptist preachers?

This question has grown increasingly important during the last several years. Many scholars and church leaders, in an effort to understand the current declension of the Protestant “mainline,” have turned to history for clues. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, for example, in their recent book *The Churching of America*, point to the post-revolutionary Congregational clergy as Exhibit A in defense of their thesis that religious movements decline when they become too secular. In this study, I take sharp issue with the explanation for Congregationalist declension offered by Finke and Stark. In my conclusion, I attempt to offer an alternative way of looking at the problem.

This book is certainly not the final word on Congregationalism in the early republic. There is much more that needs to be done. I hope, however, that it succeeds in making readers more aware of the complexity of post-revolutionary Congregationalism, and of the historical importance of the missionaries who labored in the new settlements. I hope, too, that it contributes to the current, sometimes painful, debate about religious declension in America. Most of all, I hope that it encourages further research into an important and strangely neglected chapter of American history.

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Finally, I must thank my parents, William H. and Doris J. Rohrer, who have always been my biggest supporters. Long ago they instilled in me a love for learning, as well as a commitment to service. With inexpressible appreciation, I dedicate this book to them.

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CHAPTER
ONE

Historians and Congregational Evangelism

The American Revolution initiated a fundamental reorientation of Christianity in the United States. The egalitarian ideals of the revolutionary movement promoted dissatisfaction with traditional clerical authority and prompted Americans to seek greater freedom within their churches. “Let us be republicans indeed,” evangelist Elias Smith proclaimed to his followers in the early nineteenth century. “Venture to be as independent in things of religion,” Smith urged, “as those which respect the government in which you live.”¹ The separation of church and state and the triumph of religious voluntarism was perhaps the clearest manifestation of this independent spirit. Republican citizens bristled at coercion of any kind—spiritual as well as political—and were quick to assert their “rights of conscience” against anyone who would restrict them. In such an environment heterodox beliefs and movements flourished, new sects enjoyed the freedom to proselytize and expand, and long-dominant communions struggled to retain the loyalty of their increasingly independent flocks. In Robert Wiebe’s words, the young republic experienced a “revolution in choices” in the religious as well as the secular realm, presenting clergymen of the established colonial churches with an unpleasant alternative: compete for popular favor or perish.²

In the antiauthoritarian climate of post-revolutionary America, “sectarian innovators” appeared to be more effective evangelists than ministers of the old religious establishments. Preachers of every denomination, Martin Marty has written, engaged in “a Soul Rush that soon outpaced the Gold Rush.” The race to harvest souls, Marty observes, was “a textbook example of free enterprise in the marketplace of religion, a competition in which the fittest survived.” If we measure success solely in

terms of converts, the Methodists and Baptists clearly proved to be the “fittest” churches in the young republic. On the eve of the Revolution the Methodists, only recently established in North America, could claim barely ten thousand adherents. But after the war Wesleyan circuit riders demonstrated a remarkable ability to win Americans to their standard, and by 1840 Methodists outnumbered all other denominations in the United States. Baptist numbers also swelled during the early nineteenth century, particularly in the northern frontier of New England and in western settlements, where (like the Methodists) they sometimes constituted the only significant Christian communion. Presbyterians, in contrast, enjoyed only modest growth, while Episcopal and Congregationalist leaders proved unable to capture popular favor.³

The relatively rapid decline of New England Congregationalism represents a watershed in the history of American evangelicalism, and presents us with a paradox. At the outbreak of the Revolution the Congregationalists claimed more communicants than any other denomination in the colonies. Unlike their Anglican counterparts, New England’s orthodox clergy typically saw the revolutionary struggle as a redemptive battle against evil, and gave overwhelming support to the patriot cause. After the war evangelical Congregationalists energetically engaged in evangelism, and many participated enthusiastically in the revivals which swept across New England and the northern frontier repeatedly during the 1790s and early decades of the nineteenth century. Yet orthodox clergymen were unable to attract new communicants in significant numbers, and by 1840 the Congregationalists stood only fourth in overall membership. In the New England states they continued to be the largest communion, although they now shared social and political influence with members of other denominations. But outside of New England they trailed the Presbyterians and Baptists and lagged far behind the Methodists. Even among the New England migrants who settled the “burned-over district” stretching from Vermont to Connecticut’s Western Reserve in northern Ohio, Congregationalists waged a losing battle against “sectarian” proselytizers. During the early republic tens of thousands of migrating Congregationalists abandoned the church of their fathers and embraced “innovation.”⁴

Why did Congregational influence decline so rapidly after the American Revolution, while Methodist and Baptist numbers soared? Although various answers have been proposed, all underline the inability of Congregational clergymen to understand the social, political, and cultural changes triggered by the rebellion against British authority. The Congregational churches, it is generally agreed, could not or would not adjust to life in a democratizing society.

During the mid-nineteenth century Methodist publications delighted in contrasting the rustic simplicity of early Wesleyan circuit riders with the aristocratic pretensions of Congregational ministers. Popular autobiographies of pioneer Methodists like Peter Cartwright and James B. Finley portrayed orthodox Yankee missionaries as genteel snobs who were totally unsuited for work among the common people. Most Americans, Peter Cartwright observed, wanted preachers who could “mount a stump, a block, or old log, or stand in the bed of a wagon, and without note or manuscript, quote, expound, and apply the word of God to the hearts and consciences of the people.” In short, they wanted simple, spirit-filled Methodist exhorters.⁵

Congregational evangelists, the Methodists insisted, had been spoiled by genteel surroundings and too much formal schooling. They could endlessly dispute points of doctrine but could not bring perishing souls to Christ. “They would come with a tolerable education,” Cartwright observed, “and a smattering knowledge of the old Calvinistic system of theology.” Well-stocked with “old manuscript sermons, that had been preached, or written, perhaps a hundred years before,” the “very forward and officious” New England evangelists headed for the frontier, longing for a chance to display their “superior tact and talent.” Likening the Congregational system of ministerial training to a greenhouse, Cartwright dismissed these “hot house” parsons as “profoundly ignorant” of the needs of the American people, and altogether ineffective. He wished that the people “down East . . . might keep their home-manufactured clergy at home, or give them some honorable employ better suited to their genius, than that of reading old musty and worm-eaten sermons.”⁶

Scholarly assessments of Congregational evangelism have supported Cartwright’s acerbic observations. According to Methodist historian William Warren Sweet, the Congregationalists typically possessed a “smug provincialism which led directly to a decided superiority complex.” Their leaders often were “more or less indifferent as to whether or not Congregationalism was planted west of the Hudson River.” While acknowledging that Congregationalists did attempt to evangelize the West, Martin Marty claims that they could not compete with Methodists or Baptists because they “were too half-hearted in their adjustments to the rough frontier.” A “spirit of phlegmatic complacency,” Clifton Olmstead observed, “unfitted” Congregationalists for evangelism beyond settled New England. Unable to appreciate the unique challenges posed by a burgeoning society, “the Congregationalists sentenced themselves to remain essentially a sectional body during the formative stage of the country’s history and to play a relatively minor role in the building of the West.”⁷

The alliance between Congregationalism and Federalism is often cited as the Congregational clergy's greatest liability. According to Sweet, the Federalist sentiments of most orthodox Congregational ministers "tended to alienate the rural sections and played into the hands of the Baptists, Free Baptists, and Methodists particularly." Even Congregational missionaries sent to the frontier, J. F. Thorning observed, were more concerned "with promoting party interests than in furthering the gospel." In his classic analysis of American denominationalism, H. Richard Niebuhr observed that after the Revolution the "provincial New England denomination" appealed only to the "middle classes of established communities" and "remained aloof from the religious movements of the West." The Congregational clergy, Niebuhr argued, "allied politically with the Federalism against which the West revolted" and in the process seriously jeopardized their standing in society. In the early republic "political and religious conservatism combined to do battle with political and religious radicalism," and inevitably the radical "Western Methodists and Baptists" gained the victory.⁸

Several historians have cited the decentralized Congregational polity as a further obstacle to the denomination's expansion. Unlike the highly organized Methodists, it is suggested, Congregationalists lacked any centralized authority that might effectively coordinate missionary efforts. More than a century ago the Congregationalist author William W. Patton noted that "our system, as bequeathed to us by the early fathers of New England, was poorly equipped for anything beyond parish-work." Following this line of reasoning William Warren Sweet thought it was significant that the most aggressive Congregational missionary efforts were launched in Connecticut, where the Saybrook platform had created a more centralized polity which closely resembled Presbyterianism. Connecticut Congregationalism, however, was no match for the organizational genius of the Methodists, whose ever-expanding network of classes, circuits, and conferences, Donald Mathews has observed, became a model for nineteenth century social movements of all types.⁹

Recently numerous scholars have stressed the limited appeal of Calvinist theology. "Structurally," Robert Wiebe maintains, Congregationalists "were geared for expansion; doctrinally they were not." During the half-century after the Revolution, as Americans experienced what Gordon S. Wood aptly calls a "democratization of mind," common people felt drawn toward churches which articulated a populist theology. In Nathan Hatch's words, "the new republic witnessed a revolt of substantial proportions against Calvinism" as Americans sought to reconcile their Christian faith with the egalitarian ideals of their revolution. The God of the Puritans, whose seemingly arbitrary and immutable eternal

decrees held an entire universe in absolute subjugation, held little appeal for a society that defined itself in terms of opposition to tyranny. Many Americans found it easier to believe in a deity who left the human will free to choose salvation, and who benignly invited all his people without distinction to approach the throne of grace.¹⁰

Hatch and others also find evidence of a grass roots reaction against the clericalism of the Congregational clergy. After the Revolution Americans preferred churches which conferred spiritual authority upon all believers, regardless of their social or educational attainments. Despite their theological differences the most successful communions in the early republic all “endowed common people with dignity and responsibility.” Methodists, Freewill Baptists, Universalists, Christians, and many other post-revolutionary sects relied heavily upon untutored preachers and lay exhorters, who drew upon the natural idiom of the common people to proclaim the word of God. These growing communions affirmed the ability of common folk to accurately discover for themselves the meaning of scripture without the guidance of man-made creeds, abstract theologies, or college-trained clergy. “People,” Hatch writes, “gladly accepted a theology that addressed them without condescension, balked at vested interests, and reinforced ideas of volitional allegiance and self-reliance.”¹¹

Orthodox Congregational ministers, the standard interpretation maintains, failed to appreciate the power of the egalitarian impulse among the people. As well-born community leaders they expected a degree of deference that their society could no longer give them. Clinging to the outmoded belief that a gentlemanly elite ought to govern both church and state, they vainly set themselves against the “ignorant demagogues” and “sectarian dividers” who delighted the average citizen. In their desperate effort to breathe life into a dying tradition the Congregationalists only succeeded in further distancing themselves from the American people.

In short, the standard characterization of Congregational evangelists presents them as arch-conservatives—even reactionaries—in a society which gladly embraced radical change. Their relationship to republican culture is nearly always described in terms of opposition. Faced with the constitutional separation of church and state the Congregational clergy upheld New England’s standing orders. In a society becoming inexorably democratic they denounced democracy. In an era that exalted simplicity and the commonplace, they affirmed gentility and “high culture.” They maintained a dogmatic tradition when the people rejected rigorous theology. They clung to the communal ideals of New England’s past while Americans elevated individualism to a sacred principle.

Even the revivals which quickened dozens of Congregational churches

in the 1790s and early 1800s have been interpreted as reactionary events. With a few notable exceptions historians of the Second Great Awakening place the New England revivals within the context of a battle between Calvinist orthodoxy and democracy. The Congregational clergy, led by such redoubtable conservatives as Timothy Dwight and Lyman Beecher, supposedly instigated the revivals in an effort to revitalize their besieged followers and inspire them to greater exertions against the forces of secularism and democracy. William McLoughlin describes post-revolutionary Congregational revivalists as “nativists” who attempted “to call America back to the old-time religion and traditional way of life that were inevitably fading.” The distinction between the “conservative New England phase” of the Awakening and the “democratic” southern phase is sharply drawn: Methodist and Baptist revivals constituted mass popular movements *in favor* of change, while Congregationalist revivals were feeble reactions *against* change.¹²

The standard portrayal of Congregational evangelists in the early republic can perhaps best be described as a caricature. Like all caricatures it resembles reality up to a point, but is far from being a realistic representation. It is the essence of caricature to exaggerate selected features of reality while softening or ignoring other aspects. Thus the caricature suggests something truthful while distorting the truth. In the case at hand, the standard portrayal of the Congregational clergy captures unmistakable aspects of reality: these were conservative men who felt deeply uneasy about the direction their society was going, and, to be sure, most of them could accurately be described as members of an educated elite by the standards of their age. But the one-dimensional “genteel parson” lampooned by Peter Cartwright and dismissed by historians is a straw man that had very few actual historical counterparts.

This study is an extended essay about Congregational evangelism in the early republic. It argues that the Congregationalists clearly recognized the changes occurring in their society, and saw the need to adjust their ministry in order to survive and to respond to the needs of their people. As we shall see, they were neither complacent nor half-hearted in their efforts to expand beyond New England, nor too arrogant to learn from the successes of others. Despite their social and theological conservatism, Congregational missionaries proved resourceful and innovative in their response to the challenges of “the rough frontier.” In their efforts to adjust their ministry to a rapidly changing society, they were being molded by the same revolutionary forces that transformed other Americans. Indeed, to the extent that they openly embraced change, they were as much a part of the revolution in American Christianity as the Methodists and other more democratic evangelical groups.



New England's Congregational establishment had always been Janus-faced; it confronted the future while staring into the past. The core of Puritan belief, "the New England Soul" as Harry S. Stout has called it, was an unshakable conviction that New Englanders were a special covenanted people who occupied a vital position at the center of redemptive history. Although events challenged this conviction many times between the 1630s and the Revolution, at the birth of the American republic most Congregational ministers continued to see New Englanders as God's chosen people. They were certain that God would never forsake them nor revoke their liberties so long as they remained loyal to the faith of their fathers.¹³

The belief that they were a special people placed a unique burden upon Congregational evangelists after the Revolution. Along with members of other denominations, they confronted a dilemma which has challenged Christians for nearly two millennia: how can the church's teachings be kept relevant and effective as society changes? What traditions must be jettisoned, what compromises can safely be made, and what fundamental values cannot be compromised without abandoning the faith itself? The problem, never an easy one to resolve, becomes most pressing when societies undergo revolutionary change. In the wake of the American rebellion no communion could avoid confronting the dilemma, although some denominations resolved it more easily than others. Emerging churches like the Methodists adjusted to revolutionary change most readily, while long-established communions such as the Anglican wrestled under the weight of their cherished colonial traditions. The dilemma proved especially painful for orthodox Congregational ministers, who viewed themselves as the guardians of a sacred covenant that did not rest upon the shoulders of Anglican priests or sectarian exhorters. As they attempted to adjust to a radically changed society, they could never forget their obligation to keep faith with their hallowed forefathers.¹⁴

The sense that they were the keepers of the covenant—chosen guardians of everything that was best in the Reformed tradition—limited the Congregational clergy's openness to change even as it compelled ministers to innovate. No orthodox clergyman, surveying the stream of migrating New Englanders and the growth of dissenting communions, could fail to recognize that a new age had dawned. If they were to preserve the faith of their fathers they would have to learn new ways of relating to parishioners and forge new weapons to combat error and uphold truth. But unlike their more democratic countrymen, orthodox clergymen