

Congregational Church

Congregational churches trace their origins to sixteenth-century England, where they were one part of a large and diverse effort to reform the Church of England.

After King Henry VIII parted ways with the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, as it was also called, kept the forms of Catholicism — the celebration of the Mass, ceremonial “vestments” for the clergy, and the hierarchy of archbishops and bishops — but under the authority of the English king rather than the Pope.

What began as a political change, however, ended up forever changing the landscape of religion in Great Britain and the United States.

The dissenters opposing Church of England were known as “Puritans,” at the time a derogatory reference to their uncompromising zeal for simplicity in worship and church organization. They preferred to call themselves “the Reformed,” people following the teaching and practice of the Protestant Reformer John Calvin.

The first Congregationalists were Independents, Puritans who believed each church should be a gathering of believers joined together under a covenant agreement, and with the power to choose their own minister. Beyond that, they disagreed about the likelihood of reforming the Church of England and the need for believers to be separated from its corrupting influences. (Congregational Library)

In all Congregational churches members held equal power, all of them responsible to each other under the covenant that formed the basis of their life together. In fact, ministers first became church members before he could be chosen and ordained by the church. Even then the minister’s power was subject to the will of the congregation — he led by their consent.

The roots of Congregational churches in America go back to the Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth in 1620 and the subsequent founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

The Pilgrims came from England to the New World seeking religious freedom at the time of the 16th century Protestant Reformation. The churches they established in New England became known as Congregational churches.

The connection with later events in New England, especially the American Revolution, does suggest that something important was happening in the Puritan Commonwealth ... democracy. But, not everyone had the right to vote — women had no official voice in church matters and dissenting Baptists and Quakers, when they were not being forcibly banished, still had to pay taxes for church support.

But in other very important ways, Congregational New England was unique in the seventeenth-century world. Ordinary citizens had unprecedented power to make decisions about land and property, and to hold their leaders in check.

Churches and church leaders played an important role in shaping New England society, but they had no direct political power. In Puritan theology, church and state had separate roles and responsibilities; however, magistrates and ministers worked together. (Congregational Library)

'Congregational Way' in England

The "Congregational way" became prominent in England during the 17th-century Civil Wars, but its origins lie in 16th-century Separatism.

Robert Browne has been regarded as the founder of Congregationalism, though he was an erratic character and Congregational ideas emerged independently of him. His beliefs were advanced by the Separatists (those advocating separation from rather than reform of the Church of England).

Many of whom were severely persecuted under Elizabeth I; three of them—John Greenwood, Henry Barrow, and John Penry—suffered martyrdom. A group of Separatists settled in Holland to escape persecution; some of its members later set sail for the New World on the Mayflower in 1620.

At the time of the Long Parliament (1640–53), many exiles returned to England, and the Independents, as they were then called, became increasingly active. They were particularly influential in the army because of their association with Oliver Cromwell.

They moved away from the Presbyterians, with whom they had initially cooperated, drawing closer to the Baptists and the Fifth Monarchy Men (a Puritan millennialist sect).

Their influence reached its peak during the Commonwealth in the 1650s, when their leaders, Hugh Peter, John Owen, and Thomas Goodwin, held positions of eminence. After Cromwell's death in 1658, however, they were unable to hold the country together, and in the confused period before the recall of King Charles II in 1660 their political influence collapsed.

The advent of Charles II was a disaster for Congregationalists, and the Act of Uniformity of 1662 was the first of several attempts to root them out of English life. "Black Bartholomew"—St. Bartholomew's Day, August 24, 1662, when some 2,000 Protestant ministers who denied the authority of the Church of England were ejected from their posts—was a great turning point in the history of English Dissent.

Although Nonconformists were subjected to severe persecution, John Owen and others produced important works on Congregational belief; John Milton produced his greatest poems; and John Bunyan, though associated more with the Baptists, imprinted some of the characteristic religious attitudes of the Dissenters on the English consciousness.

The accession of William and Mary in 1688 and the consequent Toleration Act of 1689 assured the survival of Congregationalists, though they still faced civil disabilities. Their situation worsened during the reign of Queen Anne (1702–14).

The Occasional Conformity Act (1711) forbade Dissenters from qualifying for public office by occasionally taking Communion at the Anglican parish church, and the Schism Act (1714) was directed against their schools. The death of Anne in 1714, before the Schism Act could be fully implemented, was considered providential by the Dissenters.

They supported the new regime of George I (1714–27) and the Whig ascendancy, and for the next 50 years they enjoyed modest prosperity. Most of them belonged to the economically independent sections of society and lived in London and the older provincial towns. (Britannica)

Congregationalists in America

American independence presented Congregationalists with obstacles as well as opportunities. By the late 1700s, the New England clergy, sometimes referred to as the Standing Order, had become thoroughly used to their social privileges, especially tax support from their local communities. Outlawed by the First Amendment to the US Constitution, religious establishment lingered on in Massachusetts until 1833.



Suddenly, the Congregational churches faced a new world, one in which they would have to support themselves through the voluntary gifts of members. While they were still weathering the effects of losing some of their most prominent churches to Unitarianism, they would also face competition from other “upstart” denominations, the Methodists and Baptists.

Despite these obstacles, Congregationalists soon took the lead in “voluntary religion,” as it was called. In 1801 Congregationalists signed a Plan of Union with the Presbyterian church, an effort to pool the resources as both denominations moved westward. A good idea in theory, the sharing did not work well in practice, especially as denominational competition heated up and Presbyterians fell into controversy and a brief schism.

They also sponsored an impressive array of voluntary organizations, including some of the earliest on behalf of foreign missions. The American Board of

Commissioners for Foreign Missions (1810), the American Home Missionary Society (1826), the American Education Society, and other similar outreach groups began as cooperative efforts with other Protestant churches, but spearheaded primarily by Congregationalists.

Congregationalists like the Beecher family and schools like Ohio’s Oberlin and Lane Seminaries also led the way in social reform, especially women’s rights and abolitionism. The American Missionary Association, formed in 1846, joined the denomination’s antislavery zeal with its commitments to education and evangelism, and in the post-Civil War years established elementary schools, colleges, and theological seminaries across the South for newly-freed slaves. (Congregational Library)

Congregationalists in Hawai’i

The Second Great Awakening spread from its origins in Connecticut to Williamstown, Massachusetts; enlightenment ideals from France were gradually being countered by an increase in religious fervor, first in the town, and then in Williams College.

In the summer of 1806, in a grove of trees, in what was then known as Sloan’s Meadow, Samuel John Mills, James Richards, Francis L Robbins, Harvey Loomis and Byram Green debated the theology of

missionary service. Their meeting was interrupted by a thunderstorm and they took shelter under a haystack until the sky cleared.

That event has since been referred to as the “Haystack Prayer Meeting” and is viewed by many scholars as the pivotal event for the development of Protestant missions in the subsequent decades and century.

The first American student missionary society began in September 1808, when Samuel Mills and others called themselves “The Brethren,” whose object was “to effect, in the person of its members, a mission or missions to the heathen.” (Smith) Mills graduated Williams College in 1809 and later Andover Theological Seminary.

In June 1810, Mills and James Richards petitioned the General Association of the Congregational Church to establish the foreign missions. They then established the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missionaries (ABCFM) at Farmington, Connecticut. (Wesser)

ABCFM accounted for 80% of all missionary activities in America; reformed bodies (Presbyterians and Congregationalists, in particular) made up nearly 40% of the participants.

Inspiration for the ABCFM Mission to Hawai’i and Establishment of Congregational Churches in Hawai’i

“A few months after (the death of ‘Ōpūkaha’ia) a book appeared in New England – a thin, brown-covered volume of a hundred small pages. It told, in his own words and the words of those who had known him the story of the boy’s life and death.”

“The printer who set the type, struck off the sheets and bound them together did not know it, but that book was to launch a ship and a movement that was to transform Hawai’i.” (Albertine Loomis’ Introduction in Memoirs of Obookiah)

“Memoirs of Henry Obookiah by Edwin W Dwight is the story of a young Hawaiian man from 19th century Hawai’i who lived for only 26 years, and yet whose brief existence changed the course of a nation and the people of Hawai’i.” (Lyon)



“For the boy was ‘Ōpūkaha’ia (his American friends spelled and pronounced it Obookiah), and his life and early death and his hope of taking Christianity to his people were the inspiration for the Sandwich Islands Mission. The ship launched was the Thaddeus, which sailed with the pioneer company from Boston in October, 1819.”

“In the long run, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions sent eighty-four men and one hundred women to Hawaii to preach and teach, to translate and publish, to advise, and counsel - and win the hearts of the Hawaiian people. ...”

“Slender and simple as it was, this book shaped the future of Hawai’i.” (Albertine Loomis’ Introduction in Memoirs of Obookiah)

“How could such a tiny book containing the biography of a young Hawaiian who died at the age of 26, in 1818, so compel a foreign nation to send its young people thousands of miles to a distant land to be committed to missionary service?”

“(A) young Hawaiian in a foreign land he was instrumental in befriending the very agents who became the cornerstone for the modern Protestant missions movement in America.”

“What had started on the other side of the Atlantic, through the persuasive works of William Carey and the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society in 1792, had now spread to America through a student-led movement by Samuel Mills Jr. and others, culminating in the formation of the ABCFM in 1810.”

“The brief life of Henry Obookiah was attributed to his being a catalyst for the founding of the Foreign Mission School in Cornwall, Connecticut. ‘The interest he [Henry Obookiah] aroused led the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, of Boston, to establish a Missionary School at Cornwall, Conn., for “the education of heathen youth’.” (Lyon)

“(T)he intended audience of the Memoirs was the Christian community of New England, and that part of the book’s purpose was to stir the hearts of New Englanders towards the cause of missions in order that they would give both financially and materially to the Foreign Mission School.”

“The final chapter of the Memoirs is divided into three sections. The first section establishes Henry Obookiah as the most promising student at the Foreign Mission School and a model of both scholarship and Christian character.”

“The second section is short and is comprised of two letters written by Obookiah himself. The third section is an account of the sickness and death of Obookiah.” (Lyon)

“The Memoirs tell of the life of Henry Obookiah, how his family was killed by tribal warfare in Hawai’i, and how his life was miraculously saved. The Memoirs go on to describe Obookiah departing from Hawai’i at the age of 16 and arriving in New England.”

“The major portion of the Memoirs traces young Obookiah’s progress and chronicles the fact that he studied and boarded with a succession of Congregational ministers in New England. The effect of his studies and the living arrangements with such pious Christians had a most profound effect upon Obookiah, leading to his conversion to the Christian faith.

At the opening of the final chapter of the Memoirs, young Obookiah is a model student at the Foreign Mission School and the hope of the mission to the Hawaiian Islands.” (Lyon)

“If the churches of New England, knowing the purpose of God concerning Obookiah, had chartered a ship and sent it to Owhyhee, on purpose to bring him to Christ, and fit him for heaven; it would have been a cheap purchase of blessedness to man, and glory to God: ...”

“... and were there no expedients now to rescue his poor countrymen, for whom he prayed, the end would justify the constant employment of such means, to bring the sons and daughters of Owhyhee, to glory.”

“But besides his redemption, God by his Providence towards him, has illustrated his government of the moral World, and added new evidence to the truth of the declaration, ‘All that the Father hath given unto me shall come.’” (Portion of Eulogy at the Funeral of Obookiah, Rev Lyman Beecher)

Ōpūkaha’ia Inspired the American Protestant Mission to Hawai’i

Ōpūkaha’ia, inspired by many young men with proven sincerity and religious fervor of the missionary movement, had wanted to spread the word of Christianity back home in Hawai’i; his book inspired missionaries to volunteer to carry his message to the Hawaiian Islands.

On October 23, 1819, the Pioneer Company of missionaries from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) from the northeast United States, set sail on the Thaddeus for Hawai’i.



There were seven couples sent in the Pioneer Company of missionaries to convert the Hawaiians to Christianity. These included two Ordained Preachers, Hiram Bingham and his wife Sybil and Asa Thurston and his wife Lucy (note: “It was on September 29, 1819, that people interested in the starting of the Sandwich Island mission gathered in the Goshen Congregational church to witness the ordination of Hiram Bingham and Asa Thurston.”); two Teachers, Mr. Samuel Whitney and his wife Mercy and Samuel Ruggles and his wife Mary; a Doctor, Thomas Holman and his wife Lucia; a Printer, Elisha Loomis and his wife Maria; a Farmer, Daniel Chamberlain, his wife and five children. They landed at Kailua-Kona, April 4, 1820.

Among the other Hawaiian students at the Foreign Mission School were Thomas Hopu, William Kanui, John Honoli’i and George Prince ‘Humehume’ (son of Kauai’s Kaumuali’i).

By the time the Pioneer Company arrived, Kamehameha I had died and the centuries-old kapu system had been abolished; through the actions of King Kamehameha II (Liholiho), with encouragement by former Queens Ka’ahumanu and Keōpūolani (Liholiho’s mother), the Hawaiian people had already dismantled their heiau and had rejected their religious beliefs.

“Memoirs of Henry Obookiah is a truly significant work in relation to both the history of the nation of Hawai’i, which later was annexed by the United States, and the profound impact that it had upon American evangelical Protestant missions. It is rare that an individual such as Henry Obookiah would be a vessel chosen to affect two nations so profoundly.” (Lyon)

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the Mayflower, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young