

By Freedom's Holy Light

Royal Davis
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Photo date and location unknown

When Rev. Sun Myung Moon told a capacity audience at George Washington University that America needs to return to the sort of religious faith represented by the Pilgrim Fathers, members of First Congregational Church may have been surprised, yet must have been pleased. As custodians of the Mayflower heritage for three centuries, Congregationalists have long believed the United States has a unique role in the Divine drama.

Repeatedly, colonial preachers in white-steeped Yankee meetinghouses described America as the third Israel. Consequently their faith made an impact upon national history far greater than one might otherwise expect. Among early Congregationalists of note were President John Adams who once thought of becoming a clergyman, Paul Revere who warned the colonists of coming imperial militia, John Hancock who was the son of a minister and the first signer of the Declaration of Independence, Pastor John Wise whose pamphlet on religious freedom was reprinted as an ideological defense of the 1775 Revolution, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, a Congregational deacon who proposed the happy compromise between big states and small written into the Constitution. One historian once even argued that Pastor Thomas Hooker of First Church, Hartford designed the fundamental plans for the U.S. government more than a century before the meeting in Philadelphia which gave us political freedom.

Self-government

Because Congregationalists believe every member in the local church has an equal vote and each congregation the right of self-government, it is easy to see how such ideas influence political life. The town meeting by which New Englanders rule themselves duplicates the church meeting. In fact from 1620-1820 the table used by deacons for Communion was employed by selectmen to discuss town problems, road repair, or snow removal. For two centuries Yankee towns included financial support of the Gospel ministry in their annual report to the voters.

Not until secularists rewrote American history was the religious dimension of our national existence ignored. Alexander Hamilton, a New York Presbyterian whose pastor was a Connecticut Congregationalist, proposed the clergy should unite with Federalist politicians to guarantee continued Constitutional government. President Adams, whose brilliant wife Abigail was a parson's daughter,

always insisted that the political drive for freedom flowed from an earlier religious commitment to the liberty of the Christian man. Dr. Gaius Glenn Atkins called the Congregational story an adventure in liberty.

What Mayflower Pilgrims stood for permeated American life. Among those who took their New England patrimony seriously were Benjamin Franklin, Daniel Webster, Dr. Henry Ward Beecher who went to England to drum up support for the Union cause during the Civil War, Nobel Prize winner Jane Addams so famed for her settlement house work in Chicago, Ralph Waldo Emerson whose father preached at First Church of Boston, poet Edwin Arlington Robinson, poetess Emily Dickinson, Senator Arthur Vandenburg of Michigan who made internationalists out of isolationist Republicans, social critic Vance Packard, and painter/inventor Samuel F. B. Morse.

Outstanding Pilgrim leaders

For three hundred years Pilgrim preachers won wide acclaim: John Cotton and Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards and William Ellery Channing, Horace Bushnell and Lyman Abbott, George A. Gordon and S. Parkes Cadman. Laymen have been no less influential: Noah Webster who gave us the dictionary, Marcus Whitman the medical missionary who saved the Oregon Territory for the United States, Harriet Beecher Stowe writing about *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Dwight Moody the shoe salesman turned evangelist, Sanford Ballard Dole the only President of the Hawaiian Republic, Professor Katherine Lee Bates composing the hymn "America the Beautiful," Senator Hiram Fong the first Chinese elected to the upper House, Walt Disney, movie star Charlton Heston, Congressman Walter Judd who does so much to keep the anti-Communist spirit alive around the world.

Because Congregationalists believe self-reliant men can remain free only if they are well-educated, they have been attached to the cause of colleges and universities. Among their gifts are Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, Bowdoin, Smith, Wellesley, Oberlin in Ohio, Grinnell in Iowa, Middlebury in Vermont, the University of California, Robert College in Istanbul, Doshisha in Japan, American University in Beirut, Lebanon.

Though early Congregationalists in Washington, D.C. included our first Vice President and our first Postmaster General, a church was not gathered until the Civil War with the aid of Senators from Kansas, Massachusetts and Maine plus Congressmen from Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts and Ohio. The building was financed by contributions from all over the country, but until it was completed church services were held in the House of Representatives, where more than 2,000 worshippers gathered to hear Rev. Dr. Charles Brandon Boynton.

Among the regular attendants was Vice President Wilson. Among the famous Washington Congregationalists one cannot overlook General Oliver Otis Howard, the Union veteran and Indian fighter who gave his name to the black university, Secretary of State James G. Blaine who created the Pan American Union, as well as those regular worshippers President Calvin Coolidge and his popular wife, Grace.

Since Congregationalists respect the importance of individual liberty of conscience and local church autonomy, they have produced children who vary greatly: Trinitarian and Unitarian Congregationalists, Baptists, Quakers, Universalists, New School Presbyterians, Congregationalists inside the United Church of Christ, National Association Congregationalists. Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, and Joseph Smith of the Mormons came out of Congregationalism. What is wrong with variety? one asks.

Distinguished ministers. In recent years First Congregational Church of Los Angeles has been the largest and most influential local parish, especially because of the long and distinguished ministry of Dr. James W. Fifield, Jr. (1935-67), a theological liberal, an advocate of continuing Congregationalism and a stalwart free enterprise anticommunist. National Association people publish a monthly magazine *The Congregationalist*.

Rev. William Moremen came from California to First Congregational Church of Washington, D.C. (United Church of Christ). A product of theological studies at the University of Chicago, he well represents the liberal stance and broadmindedness of most Congregationalist clergy. United Churchmen distribute a national journal called *A. D.* jointly with Presbyterians.

Despite certain marked differences in theology and practice between Congregationalists and Unification Church, Rev. Sun Myung Moon could see that the two agree on the idea of continuing revelation, a spiritual interpretation of the Scriptures, concern for reasonable religion, practical devotion to the Divine Kingdom here and now, an alliance of patriotism and piety plus an innovative approach to Christian faith.

To the guardians of the Pilgrim inheritance, he says, Thanks. To their new-found heirs he sings:

"We're His pride in the Heavenly war, Unified soldiers... we shall march on."