

This general broadening of confessional ideals was opposed by many and was one of the factors leading to the dismissal of Increase Mather from the presidency of Harvard in 1701 (and the founding of Yale as a more evangelical response). The Massachusetts Proposals of 1705 suggested a union of churches that would allow tighter control of the ministry and help to keep out liberalizing factors. But this was thought of by most as a non-congregational act and it did not succeed although many of its ideas were utilized in the Connecticut Saybrook Platform of 1708.

(e) The famous "witch trials" although perhaps not an expression of congregational enthusiasm, were, nonetheless, part of the development of the system and its theology in New England. Between 1688 and 1692 there were more than twenty executions and there had been a few two decades earlier. The trials were halted by the judicial action of the state and later both Increase Mather and Samuel Sewall delivered penitential confessions with regard to the proceedings. I must note that during a similar period of time there were thousands of such things in Europe...many thousands. This does not expunge the record of the New England theocracy but if things are seen in proportion it makes it look small in comparison. For further details see H. Trevor-Roper: THE TRIALS OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY (in Europe).

(f) 1734 saw the beginning of the Great Awakening thought the ministry of Jonathon Edwards. (Revival fires were burning in Pennsylvania through the work of the Tennants and in New Jersey in the ministry of Frelinghuysen) At Northampton, Mass., Edwards saw more than 300 conversions in a period of about six months...many of these dramatic public confessions. The movement eventually split the New England congregationalists into an "Old Light" "New light" division and after the initial successes were accomplished the creeping universalism that had shown itself became more apparent. The "New England Theology" developed from this and is best expressed in the teachings of Samuel Hopkins...a modified Calvinism particularly with regard to original sin and the Adamic curse.

(g) By 1776 the congregational churches of just about all parties were ready for the Revolution. Timothy Dwight at Yale and Samuel Langdon at Harvard called for it in loud terms. Samuel Adams is probably best representative for the congregational laity and his attitudes were reflected strongly in the clergy both by sermon and example.

What probably needs to be seen is that Congregationalism was more of a movement than a church per se. It developed no hierarchy other than that of prominence and developed no structure. The latter would prove a definite handicap in the next phase of American history but in the colonial period it allowed a dissemination of ideals without a proliferation of bureaucracy.