

We have previously noted the quick development of congregationalism and the course of history is that following the Halfway covenant the body grew weaker although some conservative elements were very pronounced through the 19th century. Its failure to grow was largely due to a lack of concerted effort and agreement within the body. The statistics are given in Gausted: HISTORICAL ATLAS OF RELIGION IN AMERICA.

b. 1801 saw the Plan of Union (renewed in 1837 and 1852) in which the congregational bodies worked with the Presbyterian and other reformed bodies. The plan did little for congregationalism...it had no machinery to take advantage of any sort of gain. The Plan was the result of several years of cooperation between congregational and presbyterian churches for expansion on the frontier and strengthening bodies at home. Although the bodies had variant polity structures, the essential theological position was that of the Westminster confession and the doctrinal cooperation was possible. But whole areas of congregational churches began to associate with the presbyterian bodies and found themselves more comfortable in a loose structure...the result being that the presbyterian side grew while the congregational side actually shrank. The plan was discontinued in the middle of the century somewhat due to doctrinal queries in the presbyterian circle and polity loyalty in the congregational side.

c. Congregationalism was also bothered by doctrinal problems within. Basically two positions developed: those in the train of Edwards and his interpreter Hopkins, and those in the liberal camps that favored a form of unitarianism. (There was a third, more remote party, but I think of its influence as being minimal in this setting.) This division of opinion resulted in more educational works being founded to promote particular sides. Andover Seminary in 1808 became the bastion of the more orthodox, Bangor in 1814 and Hartford in 1834 were also founded to stem the liberal tide. Most historians note that this doctrinal argument as well as the structural matters and the New England orientation all served to limit the growth of the congregational bodies in the earlier part of the National period.

d. In 1820 the Dedham case was decided in Massachusetts in which it was determined that the ecclesiastical properties belonged to the community, not just to the worshippers of the local churches. This allowed the total community the voice in ministerial appointment, etc., and made matters of faith less important than matters of simple popularity. It is perhaps an overstatement but this decision certainly set the stage for the growth of the unitarian takeover of much of the former congregational property to the liberal causes.

e. 1826..the American Board of Home Missions was formed. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions had been founded in 1810. Added comments in our missions section.