

Reclaiming the Christian Covenant Way

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As I pulled the brass arm of the glass doors, and climbed up the marble steps of the Congregational Library in Boston, I realized that I was walking on holy ground. This is a special place, a sacred space; which contains the very foundational writings of those saints that marched before me; those who marked this pilgrimage called the Congregational Way. As I put on the white gloves, and gently turned the pages to read the form of covenant of the Old South Church in Boston, MA, on the 12th and 16th of the third month, May 1669, tears welled up in my eyes.

We people of the Congregational Way have behind us numerous maps and charts upon which we have marked either precisely or undecidedly, our journey towards our Creator. Our lineage, our faith journeys, known as covenants both written and unwritten, render us nomads between beacons. One beacon is bright and sends light to all in every direction. The others function as searchlights, held up endlessly by all those humans who seek the Creator's light. Our journey continues through the centuries, continuously seeking to mark the spot upon the map where God shall always be found. To date there are many such markings though the search continues.

To be sure, our journey is not accidental, not always chaotic, not always administratively arrogant or even strong with purpose; for we sometimes are at our best when we are at our weakest. For in our weakness, we often listen better. As humans, however, we also face many entrapments; those of human nature and our predisposed human condition, the dark side of our sinful nature. However, there is something that has always existed, even in the harshest of circumstances and as long as a breath of air sustains life. We Congregationalists have had faith in our God's Promise. This promise comes forth as an ideal that has survived not just for centuries as a faith, but as a sustainer

for life itself, it is our way. For the purpose of this paper, I appeal to Harry Butman's words and those of our ancestors of Isaiah.

We will not be saved by intellectuality, though our idea is clear and strong. We will not be saved by organization, though orderly methods are needed. We will not be saved by a belated legacy of great wealth from some favorable lawsuit, though money can do much. Our salvation is elsewhere. Lean times may lie ahead for the Congregational cause; but we can endure aridity, stress, mockery and indifference from without; and master the hazards from within- smugness, sloth, and lost purpose- if with honesty of mind and sensitivity of heart we hearken unto the voice. God's promise to Israel we claim as our own:¹

Though scant and scarce may be your bread and water from the Lord,
Yet he your teacher never leaves you now; you see your teacher for yourselves,
And when you swerve right to left, you hear a voice behind you whispering,
"This is the way, walk here." (Isaiah 30: 20-21)

Ecclesia

A starting point is the word "congregation", or synagogue-ecclesia.

The subsequent history of these terms in the Jewish and early Christian churches is of considerable interest. Later, Judaism, as Schurer has shown, began to distinguish between synagogue and ecclesia, in the direction of applying the former in an empirical sense, the latter in an ideal sense. One signifies the religious community in a particular place. The other, "the community of those called by God to salvation," the ideal Israel.²

This starting point, if placed upon a map of our Creator's relationships and history with the very people that embrace and live out their faith, does not mean the beginning. However, it does hold that at this "point" in history, our lineage of the faithful, be it Separatists or Puritans, this creature with the human face embraces a new relationship

¹ Butman, *The Lord's Free People*, p.198

² Hastings, *Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 153

with God. This relationship or ideal was not yet tested. Embraced and followed, even lived out in life and death, it marked a new direction upon this map. This new mark upon the map is seen clearly within the hearts of those saints called before us, and even still today, pilgrims leave their mark upon the journey, gathered as a free people in Christ.

So it is here that Congregationalism as we have come to know it, born of an ideal, engulfed in Spirit, and swept away in salvation, has progressed as to be known as *faith, freedom, and fellowship*. Congregationalism, then, born of the humble ideals of a gathered free people, anchored to the Word, reached even above the earth to the heavens. Yet today, many of our congregational pews remain vacant. Those seats that are filled are blessed with lives that near their final destination; our older generation. Fundamental questions such as “who are we?” and “why are we here?” can still be read between the lines of our church bulletins and are made visible in our rote approach to our hymnody. Do we truly hear the words, the meanings, which flow from our lips? It often seems that many of our pastors do not remember the fire of the Holy Spirit, or wish to speak of it. It is not that they are uneducated or that they are not called to serve, for they are. But where is the voice from behind, guiding us along the way? Perhaps Gabriel Fackre gives us a vantage point from which to answer these pressing questions. Consider these words about his wife, his life partner: “What I know about theology as partnership and conversation I have, finally, learned from her. To have theological will is one thing, to have the way is another.”³ We struggle for our footings, too often alone, ashamed, or in denial that we need each other. We forget our covenants! “It is part of our heritage. It is there to be recovered. And we ignore it at our peril.”⁴ For sure, our covenant ideal is

³ Fackre, *The Christian Story*, Vol. 2, p. 11

⁴ Rouner, *The Congregational Way of Life*, p. 42

illusory in this regard. It is the will we understand, the way, which we seek, but lose. Perhaps we are just spoiled children of the covenant. Being that we live in the period of God's time that places us here, in 2003, a freer people than the history of the world has ever seen, or known. Yet, we continually neglect reflection upon our Congregational past. This neglect is significant precisely because a strong understanding of our past is the only way to better live out our future.

This neglect of our past is well illustrated in Arlin T. Lawson's critique of Oberlin College:

The effects of these trends on church-related institutions can be seen in the changing of self-understanding of Oberlin College (where I served as a campus ministry intern). In 1851, its' second president and leader of the Second Great Awakening, Charles G. Finney, could tell the graduating class, "you have been educated as God's cadets, to be leaders in his 'sacramental host' (meaning they were duty bound as evangelists and abolitionists)".⁵

By 1891 the new president, W. G. Ballantine, would characterize Oberlin as an institution devoted to "liberal culture" embracing "everything that belongs to human character..." By 1927, however, when Ernest Hatch Wilkins became president, religious and moral rhetoric was largely forgotten as Oberlin became a "university college," i.e., training ground for the elite's postgraduate education, where a good teacher's "... chief concern is for the stimulation and guidance of his ablest students."⁶

Oberlin College's historical foundation reflects one of the most spiritually rooted of academic institutions and its purpose reflected the Congregational Way. This history has been long-forgotten at Oberlin, where my youngest daughter graduated this past May (class of 2003). President Nancy Schrom Dye spoke (after Zalmans M. Schatcher-Shalomi prayed words of hope and restlessness) on diversity and freedom. While President Schrom Dye's address reflected Oberlin's staunch commitment to peace and

⁵ Peay, *A Past With a Future*, p. 90.

social justice, it left unspoken Oberlin's rich spiritual heritage and Congregational foundation. I am not advocating that Oberlin return to its past to become a religious institution. But there is much to be said for acknowledging and understanding one's roots. We, as Congregationalists, are the caretakers of our past and we must not let our spiritual heritage be eclipsed by the intellectual or rote. What we call spiritual freedom is far from today's truth or yesterday's Mayflower voyage. I fear we may once again be aboard the Speedwell.

In Harry Butman's book, *The Lord's free People*, Butman declares Robert Browne as the "intellectual father of Congregationalism."⁷ He goes on to point out that Browne's words from the book *Reformation without Tarrying for Any* were clearly linked to the original separation between Church and State. "The magistrate—the civil power—must stay out of civil affairs. This principle of the separation of Church and State, startling and heretical in his time, was to be given first place in the Bill of Rights of the Constitution of the United States some two centuries later."⁸

The Congregational Church is the foundation of our American political system. There is no ecclesiastical authority, rather there is a priesthood of all believers—the gathered free church. "The secular textbooks of today blandly ignore history; the American democratic way of life was born in the Church meeting of early Congregationalism."⁹ What was present in early colonial government and central to American democracy for almost four hundred years, were the religious morals and values of just and equal treatment, characteristics given to the faithful, and used as guides in

⁶ Ibid, p. 90.

⁷ Butman, *The Lord's Free People*, p. 18.

⁸ Ibid, p. 18

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social issues. We must not abandon this history of gathering and democracy, of shared and lived values inspired by our Creator.

At the start of a new millennium, we enter a new century dismayed by our current world climate. At the very least, these chaotic times are a challenge for the scholars, thinkers, theologians, and historians. Perhaps their efforts will again fill our churches with members who have found their way. As Jesus said, “those who are not against me, are for me.” (Luke 9:50) It is times of turmoil, war, and despair that we reach out to our Creator and fill our houses of worship.

This year of 2003, marks the hopeful completion of my Master of Divinity degree from Andover Newton Theological School and my training at the Congregational Foundation for Theological Studies through the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. It is telling that this developmental milestone, a six-year journey, is marked by my completion of Congregational History and Polity. It is a particularly meaningful time to be drawn ever closer to the roots of my faith. I leave this institution of spiritual thought filled by the work of this century’s holies and their writings; Max Stackhouse, George Peck, Eddie O’Neal, Bill Holladay, Meredith Handspicker, Maria Harris, Gabe Fackre, Mark Heim, Se-Kar Wan, Roberta Heath, let me not leave out Harry Butman, John Alexander, Arthur Rouner, Dewey Gierke, Steven Peay and Phil Jackson.

This historical journey, however, has led me to ask how we might move closer to our past? What might bring us closer to the ideal that our brethren marched, many to early martyred deaths or death by the very elements that honed their beliefs? For these beliefs brought forth a clear movement of spirit, free of death, counseled in Christ, while deeply surrounded by a covenant community in communion.

But before we covenant anew, perhaps we should recognize an opportunity that is upon the Congregational Church. Our churches are low in numbers as our membership itself is being redefined. There are communities of successes, but to imitate or follow those successes brings us disappointment, and an admission of failure. Too many doors are closing in all of our communities of the faithful.

That CONGREGATIONALISM WORKS is important information in a time when any number of established denominations seem to be suffering poisonous, internal conflict over everything imaginable: Biblical interpretation, theological issues, and social ethics, thus strewn the landscape with bruised, angry drop out congregations, agitated and contentious to the point of being badly sickened.¹⁰

Our seminaries are sometimes called cemeteries; not because of the lack of learning, or even a shortage of students, as we finally reclaim the feminine leadership, the family of God, once knew. The world of electronics has allowed us more information, more published works, and greater accessible communication than ever before. It all sounds so familiar, doesn't it? Twenty four hours each day, seven days a week, the electronic congregation is bringing the Word forward on not just one, but dozens of channels, via satellites around the world in a multitude of languages.

The Covenant Ideal often seems so distant from the current world which we inhabit. How can we gain from experiences such as the clink on the Thameside, Scrooby Church, or other humble beginnings aboard a tiny ship not fit for a good day of fishing? Perhaps, however, we do have something of value; to brother together and sister together our way forward, entrenched still in covenant and listening always for that voice that calls from behind, "*This is the way, walk here.*" Whether it was Holland or the clink on the Thames, or adrift on the sea, a voice called forth so loud as to be an anchor. Today,

¹⁰ Schutjer, *The Congregationalist*, Vol. 162 #4. Oct-Nov 2002, "No Dry Bones Here", p. 16.

we still can hear “The New England Version,” “Here, I stand; God help me.”¹¹ Even these words that give us anchor would not have survived without the testing of Roger Conant, John Cotton, and our misunderstood, Anne Hutchinson.

What is it about the brass arm of the glass doors, those marble steps, the white gloves, the form of covenant of the Old South Church? What came over me as I no longer felt alone in Boston, but felt together, with those before me? My tears were tears of joy! It was not the past alone that spoke the way, but I heard the voice! Should I hear no other voice, my faith, freedom, and fellowship has found the way. This is the power my ancestors bestowed upon me. This is the freedom to walk with Christ. This is the voice we all seek. Listen well!

Making the Way

The Congregational Way is a thing of mingled flesh and fire: common men and women incarnated it, and walked it, but they were informed with a spirit no less real than the flames of Pentecost; its’ poetry and drama should not go unsung while its theology and polity are set down with scholarly exactitude.¹²

This passionate statement introduces Butman’s book, *The Lord’s Free People*. He immediately makes no excuse that his book is not fully footnoted, but he promises to set forth a case for Congregationalism with passion, and that is a promise he keeps. His commitment to the Congregational Way is unfaltering and his work primes us again with reminders of our beginnings. Let me share just a few of his thoughts;

¹¹ Butman, *The Lord’s Free People*, p.32.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 9.

We who have stood for classical congregationalism have often been accused of wanting to walk the paths of the past: we have been told that we cannot go back again to Plymouth. And this is of course true. But this has never been our contention. While we have honored the brave band that weathered the nightmare winter by Town Brook, and have remembered those who died in the damp of the clink or by rope in Norwich, we have never been naïve enough to suppose that we could turn back the clock. What we have said, and do maintain, is that there is a timeless quality in our conception of the church as the Lord's Free People, covenanted together under the Headship of Christ, free save for the intangible bonds of the spirit, in general linked in a free relation of affection to all believers everywhere, and in particular to the sister churches who walk with them in the same path.¹³

For me, these words are a passionate call not to the past, but perhaps to another place we have moved so far from, our spiritual roots. Even our brothers and sisters who brought forth the Congregational Way struggled with power and organization. Perhaps, however, we should consider a clever and insightful thought from Steven Peay: "There are no accidental Congregationalists—at least there should not be!"¹⁴ Peay's work on Congregationalism firmly links the past and the future, bringing together works on Congregational history with essays of Church renewal and hope. Like Peay, I also see a promising future for the "gathered" church, an opportunity to return to the Congregational basics of faith, freedom, and fellowship. Even our Jewish friends have had their covenants and laws leave them struggling for a future often bound to the past. But being bound to the past does not necessarily leave Congregationalism an exercise in nostalgia.

As we read our covenants and pledge anew our faith, there is light and there is hope for a back-to-basics approach to congregation and fellowship, to the Way. Listen

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Ibid, p. 10.

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Peay, *Congregationalism Covenant and Community*, "Finding the Keys to the Kingdom: The covenant and the Principle of Authority in the Congregational Way", p. 118.

well to the voice from behind: *this is the way, walk here*. Harry Butman reminds us of the basic problems that we, as Congregationalists, have always faced. To forget his work is to lose in our numbers of pilgrims who remember and still listen.

Our Failure *in* Fellowship

Note that I did not say the failure of fellowship. Fellowship has not failed in the NA (National Association) because it has not truly been tried. The word fellowship is part of our organizational trinitarianism; faith, freedom, and fellowship, but we have forgotten it. And when I say forgotten, I mean that literally.¹⁵

In the beginning of this paper, we looked at the simplicity of a word, congregation. We see a movement in this word that portrays fellowship as synagogue, or assembly. But let us focus on the Congregational Ideal. For we find our way back to basics, by the people who purposefully sought out other like-minded souls; whether we admit it now or later, it does not matter; they heard the voice. God's Spirit, our Promised Helper, was at work. People became alike in belief, not by accident.

The Christian community that the Pilgrims and Puritans formed was rooted in this understanding found in early Christianity. They hoped to reconstitute the earlier models of Christian life found in the New Testament where care and a sense of belonging and cooperation were the ideals for which to aim.¹⁶

As the Puritans learned, the place where care was exhibited was the ecclesia (ekklesia) from kaleo (call) and BK (out); to be "called out," a Greek word for church.¹⁷

These little communities nurtured individuals and spread the good news of new life and new freedom found in Jesus Christ.¹⁸

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Peay, edited *Congregationalism Covenant and Community*, Butman, "Prologue and Prophecy", p. 31.

¹⁶ Ibid, Berry, "Covenant and Community in the 21st Century: A Vision For A New Meetinghouse", p.44

¹⁷ Ibid, p.44.

¹⁸ Ibid, p.44.

Our age is vastly more complex. Nevertheless, we can learn lessons and adopt and expand the model of the meetinghouse offered by our Puritan brethren and sisters to meet the needs of today.¹⁹

Within the Congregational faith, fellowship is truly a common theme, a meeting of shared beliefs bound by love. Such freedom was first given to the disciples and followers of Christ only to be rediscovered by a small group of believers. We may think that much of what we “do” as work in our small churches are mere business and distractions. Bake sales, holiday sales, covered dish suppers, even church clean-up day, are often viewed, especially by the pastor, as wasted time. It is here, however, shoulder to shoulder, lives are shared, dreams are spoken, and views of community are shared. People become real, people become attached, people become invested and responsible for one another during these shared times. Fellowship is everything today, just as it was yesterday.

It is then, that amazing thing, that comes about in a congregation when in totally open fashion, we take each other (and each others faith) seriously, truly listen to each other, and expect in that shared experience, to be touched by GOD.²⁰

Faith, freedom, and fellowship should not be taken independently, but rather interdependently. “Being truly human and living in community are truly inseparable. This wisdom is beautifully captured in an African Proverb: “I am human only because you are human.”²¹ Migliore eloquently captures the necessity of community: “We are created for life in community with others, to exist in relationships of mutual fidelity and mutual freedom in fellowship.”²² We cannot fellowship, commune, or be in communion

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 48.

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Schutier, *The Congregationalist*, “No Dry Bones Here”, p. 16.

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Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p. 126.

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¹⁹ Ibid, p.126.

with our Creator unless we are free to do so. In Christ, this small band of Pilgrims came to find freedom. They heard the voice: *This is the way, walk here.*

Let Freedom Sing, Let the Church Bells Ring

“Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:32 NIV)

Freedom is the catchword of Congregationalism. Freedom of the Congregational Way is perhaps the most misunderstood, abused and confusing characteristic of both our forefather’s faith and of our own. There are those who misinterpret the Congregationalist notion of freedom to mean that as each member is free to believe what (s)he want to believe.

Unlike a secularist version, the Congregationalist reading of the word “freedom” yields a different meaning. The Pilgrims wanted freedom from the King to follow their desire to pursue God and country, landing quite smartly on the shores of America, and stepping out onto Plymouth Rock. “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17, NIV). Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians speaks of the Lord as Spirit, and objectively connects freedom to the Spirit of Christ:

True liberty is not the freedom to do as we like; it is the power to do as we ought²³

Paul sees the true purpose of Liberty in the service of others. You were called to freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants to one another.²⁴

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather, serve one another in love.”(Gal 5:13 NIV)

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Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 10, p. 311.

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²¹ Ibid, p. 311

Freedom to choose their master was complicated for these men and women of faith. They did not have full economic or religious freedom. They found themselves overwhelmed when they heard the voice: *This is the way, walk here.* A new understanding of the word freedom took over their lives. This new understanding pulled at their hearts, even unto death. As many experienced political and religious injustice, they were simultaneously set free in Christ. Finally, they had the freedom to choose their master, or as the Apostle Paul says, they become slaves in Christ.

The defining role that Martin Luther played in the birth of Congregationalism must also be given recognition. Martin Luther, the father of the Reformation, and the translated Word, suggested that the just shall live by faith alone. These important events and persons are responsible for creating and cultivating the seeds and soil that allowed new life in Christ to be resurrected. The Christ disciples and now the new Pilgrims share lineage and inheritance in freedom. The latter shared the written Word and the former shared the spoken Word. The written Word becomes a strong thread that binds together faith, freedom and fellowship. The strength of the written word stands true today, “wherever two or three are gathered in His Name, He was in the midst of them”(Matthew 18:20). Freedom is Christ delivered first through the Word, consummated by the Spirit, through which our inheritance comes to life. We owe immeasurable gratitude to the Separatists and Puritans alike, were it not for their maturity and understanding of the Word, freedom in Christ might still be lost. With this freedom, however, comes a choice, and it is this choice that marks a shadow on humanity. “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the

Spirit, you are not under the law. (Gal. 5:17-18 NIV) The Spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

Having finally found a community for spiritual growth, the Puritan heart and soul always remained not just aware of the desires of the flesh, but likewise preoccupied with the invisible.

What I am saying, by way of defense, is that the invisible world was terribly real to the Puritan. Beyond the seen and normal things, he saw the dark figure of the Devil, furious at the mighty deeds of Christ in America, and striking from behind the veil of the forces of righteousness.²⁵

This shadow, still present today, is a confusion and misunderstanding that many criticize within Congregationalism. The word freedom, as I stated earlier, is where others become confused and believe it to mean we are free to believe what we want to believe. Real freedom, however, charges his people to live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed. Stewardship in Christ includes utilizing our gifts and talents to maximize Christ's Kingdom here on Earth as it is in Heaven. By misunderstanding the differentiation between free will and Freedom in Christ, we fail self, and in turn, each other. Failure trickles from the pulpit to the pew, from the teacher to the classroom, and from the parents to the children. There is no escaping this honest critique of our failure to be *free*. I know that I am not amongst the first to make this quote a modern example: "freedom's just another word for nothing else to lose."²⁶

We *fear* letting freedom have its way, not allowing the Christ to inhabit our worldly identity. It is what has allowed the kings, the dictators, the CEO's, the politicians, and the majority of Christendom, to occupy a significant part of our freedom.

²⁵ Butman, *The Lord's Free People*, p. 122.

²⁶ Joplin, Janice (recording artist)

Perhaps we Baby Boomers are the worst offenders because we once stood in the face of generational authority, and thumbed up our noses, telling the establishment that they were not, in fact, free themselves to love. This allusion of authority however was a strong test for the freedom sought in Christ by the early churches. The Pilgrims, however, tied their tiny ship to a mighty anchor. Jesus called them together and said:

You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:42-45 NIV).

The Pilgrims experienced and served in their new community with horizontal authority, they served each other and helped each other. They held tightly unto the Word. William Perkin's summary of Puritan conviction clearly illustrates this: "the Word of God must be our rule and square whereby we are to frame and fashion all our actions."²⁷

As I mentioned earlier, our disciplines of faith, freedom, and fellowship are interdependent, as is the tie that binds them; love of Christ, the Word, the always present Spirit, the Promised Helper. These, of course, are not just documented as covenants of word but covenants of action.

Faith

Actions speak louder than words:

Although the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, your teachers will be hidden no more; with your own eyes you will see them. Whether you turn to the right or the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "*This is the way; walk here.*" (Isaiah 30: 20-21).

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Peay, *A Past With A Future*, p. 122.

The Christian Pilgrim, those men and women of Plymouth, are perhaps most importantly and significantly remembered for an attribute that is still critical for our survival today; their faith. They are defined by their faith. If actions do speak louder than words, then our ancestors trumpeted their voices to speak volumes. In fact, in every script of words used to describe our Pilgrims, their faith, and faith alone, set them apart in the covenant way.

The history of the covenant was a stepping stone for the spread of faith to more and more congregational communities and settlements. We must pause, however, and give recognition to their tremendous importance. The faithful so believed in God's Promise and Word that they entered into covenant with God and promised to be God's people. "We covenant with the Lord and with one another, and do bind ourselves in the presence of God to walk together in all his ways, according as he is pleased to reveal himself unto us in his blessed Word of truth."²⁸

The covenant was established not in some theophany of nature, but rather in the humble gathering of a small group in an upper room. The covenant is not a mystical process but a historical event whereby the disciples are bound together with their Lord as the New Israel—the new kingdom of God. "The new stipulations of the covenant are not a system of law to define in detail every obligation in every conceivable circumstance, but the law of love."²⁹ "We covenant with the Lord and one another, and do bind

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The Salem Church Covenant 1629.

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Mendenhall, George, "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition", *Biblical Archaeologist Reader*, Vol. 111, p. 52.

ourselves in the presence of God to walk together in all his ways.”³⁰ The Christian Covenant Way, this faith that is so incredible for us to comprehend, does have ample justifications. The written Word was their authority, Jesus was their heart and soul, and the Holy Spirit was their guide; that voice from behind calling forth, *this is the way, walk here*. And walk, they did.

This faith that grew from such small beginnings, this faith that survived an Atlantic crossing, but also, numerous injustices and persecutions in England, unlocked a lineage of new authority. That Word of God, rule and square, would shape a new Christian who would finally find the keys to the kingdom. “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven (Matthew 16:19 NIV). Perhaps to some, the word *find* implies luck, coincidence, or another word for good fortune. For our brothers and sisters, however, these keys of the kingdom came from faith. They trusted in the Lord as few have ever trusted. Today, we still struggle to understand the depth of their faith. We marvel at them and their beginnings. I do believe that they, themselves, would be the first to deny any such claim to this greatness. That is not the Congregational Way. “The church gets its power from Christ, who gave to his disciples the keys of the kingdom of heaven.”³¹

Steven Peay lays out well the triumphant successor of the keeper of the keys of the kingdom in his lecture at the Third Congregational Symposium in Los Angeles. I was

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Salem Church Covenant 1629.

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Butman, *The Lord's Free People*, p. 67.

privileged to attend the symposium as a CFTS student. Peay shared the importance of being *as* communion with God and humanity.

Thus the church becomes Christ Himself in human existence, but also every member of the church becomes Christ and Church. The ekklesia hypostasis exists historically in this manner as a confirmation of man's capacity not to be reduced to his tendency to become a bearer of individuality, separation and death. The ecclesial hypostasis is the faith of man in his capacity to become a person and his hope that he will indeed become an authentic person. In other words it is faith and hope in the immortality of man as a person.³²

Conclusion Words of the Christian Covenant Way

This paper started as a research paper, but nothing could be further from the truth. It all changed with the brass arms, the glass doors, the marble steps. It happened through an enlightenment that I have tried to put to words. It is never enough to describe the Covenant Way in words. Actions explain more clearly the journey of today and the journey of tomorrow. Yes! It is a difficult path to maintain!

The Way cannot and should not ever be taken for granted. Another thought even more revealing to me is that we never truly arrive at a finish point on our Congregational pilgrimage of faith. We are all, however, travelling and maturing along the path. Perhaps we hear the voice from behind, or perhaps we hear the voice from the wilderness. In Luke, just as it is written in the book of Isaiah, the words of the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the desert prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him" (Luke 3:4)

³² Zizoulas, John, *Being As Communion*, p. 59.

John the Baptist tells us to clear the path or widen the road. Both interpretations give the same message. We are on the road, and we have not yet arrived. We are still on the journey, and there is still much work to be done.

In discussing this paper with my husband, we came to look at this work as a “back to basics” approach. We decided that this does not mean a retreat to the past. Quite the opposite is true. What this means is revisiting the tools of the Way, the keys to the kingdom. In almost any human enterprise or event, there exists a certain amount of training; starting with basics, the tools of the trade. This method of learning the basics exists in sports, school, and various job opportunities, even driving a car. Every teacher or coach depends upon these basic learning tools for teaching and training. This is the “back to basics” approach. Learning the fundamentals over and over, keeping our skills and passions sharp and ready for use. Our ancestors understood this concept and what was required of them. This should be one of our goals as we travel along the path, it is the “clearing the way” for the Lord. This paper places upon the Congregational map another starting place for our Way to be explored. This point is chosen by following the example of the first disciples who followed Christ, who said: “therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).

I close this paper, knowing that I have been blessed by God’s grace to be on the path. I choose to follow Christ, to edify my brothers and sisters with whom I share this journey in Christian fellowship, and to listen to the voice: *”This is the way, walk here.”*

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