The Theology of The Care and Cure of Souls
In Puritan Theology:
What They Did Then
And
What We Can Do Now

By

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Introduction

The focus of this paper is to explore the varied ways in which the Puritan and Pilgrim church sought to care for the people in the congregation as manifested in the Congregational tradition\(^1\). The phrase they used to describe this deep and necessary aspect of Christian life was "the Care and Cure of Souls." The concern for the care and cure of souls, being the primary concern of Puritans in Europe and in America is embedded into the writings, sermons and practices of the Puritan communities. Sources are plenty and there is a large variety, some particular, some not so particular. It is precisely the embedded nature of the concern that makes this topic at once interesting and challenging.

At the dawn of the Reformation, it was presumed that people, while having grown up in a Christian culture, really had no idea regarding the meaning of their faith. Anyone new stepping into a Reformation church, particularly a Puritan and Reformed church was considered to have had no spiritual growth and nor were they given any opportunity for such growth in pre-Reformation churches. The care and cure of souls was thus the nurturing of a person into the Christian life of prayer, worship and service. The care and cure of souls was the regeneration and sanctification\(^2\) of our "sin-sick" being into a more perfect reflection of the one responsible for our salvation, Jesus Christ. The defining and nature of the Care and Cure of Souls is the goal of this paper.

Before looking back into the Puritan practices, let us review what the Care and Cure of Souls looks like in our day and age. Today, the Care and Cure of Souls would fall under the umbrella of what is known as Pastoral Care. Pastoral Care is a product of the early 20th century where revolutions in psychology allowed us deeper insight into the workings of the mind and personality in the scope of a person's well-being. It is generally considered to be an outgrowth of the Social Gospel movement, spearheaded by Washington Gladden (1836-1918), senior pastor of

\(^{1}\) I refer here to the tradition received by the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches.

\(^{2}\) These terms are not the same, per William Ames in *The Marrow of Theology*. "Regeneration" is understood to be the moment of repentance or "the very beginning of a new life, a new creation, a new creature." (Bk 1, xxvi, 19). "Sanctification" is understood to be a condition which "involves a real change
Congregational Church of Columbus, Ohio from 1882 until his death in 1918. The Social Gospel movement sought on-the-ground help for the poor and sick as the industrial revolution left many behind in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

The pioneer in developing curriculums and focus on Pastoral Care was a Congregational pastor named Anton Boisen. After two psychotic episodes that had a profound effect on his sense of the presence of God, he formed the foundations of what is now called 'clinical pastoral education.' This coalesced as a full program in the Worcester State Hospital of Massachusetts in 1925. Boisen began bringing in theological students to work with mentally ill patients and this became the formula for pastoral training right up until today. As a result, Pastoral Care as a separate discipline became integrated into seminaries in the late 50's and early 60's, its primary practice being done in hospitals and clinics. Because of its psychological focus, Pastoral Care developed a medical focus, reflecting the specialization of our industrialized, and now technologized, culture.

To its credit, the Pastoral Care movement was a much needed and neglected aspect of ministry. By training pastors to recognize and understand the medical, psychological and systemic nature of the suffering of their flock, a great service has been done in providing avenues of help for those who need it. As Pastoral Care developed over the 20th century, however, its specialization created a "two-track" mentality in the education and training of pastors in mainstream denominations. One track is the theological, exegetical, Biblical studies required for good preaching, doctrinal understanding and how to speak about the nature of the Trinity and Jesus Christ to others. The other track is the Pastoral Care track, where the student learns the basics of psychological models, counseling skills and crisis management. Depending on the demeanor of the student and perhaps the requirements of denominations for their ministers, one track is usually neglected for the sake of the other. This results in underdeveloped pastors sent out

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3 Charles V. Gerkin, *An Introduction to Pastoral Care.* (Nashville: Abingdon Press. 1997) 61
to the field lacking either serious Biblical knowing, or lacking basic skills in the art of counseling others.

This view is just beginning to change, but its effects will be with us for quite a while. The main effect, in contrast to the traditions of Care and Cure of Souls of the Puritans, is the bifurcation of the practice of the Christian pastor into a specialized field of either Pastoral Care or Biblical expertise. Pastoral Care is now understood, incorrectly, to be something a pastor does only with those who are suffering in the hospital or having psychological difficulties. It is now the pastor's responsibility to be able to distinguish what is potentially physical and thus something to be referred out and what is the purview of the community of faith. There are good reasons for this, one of the primary being getting the best care for the person possible. And it would be remiss to not recognize another reason: malpractice and omissions and errors insurance liability.

It is only in recent years that mainline seminaries have attempted to reintegrate the learning of Pastoral Care into the totality of what a pastor does in a church with the congregation. This reintegration is deeply important and I believe we can find sources and models of how to integrate these disciplines by looking to our Puritan and Pilgrim forefathers. At the outset, it is important to recognize the Puritans, and most other denominations, did not see the care and cure of souls as separate from the command of pastors in the Congregational tradition, namely "to Administer a word of Wisdom...attend to Doctrine...& to administer the Seals of the Covenant." These commands were inclusive of the demand to care for the flock and seek to comfort and assure them in accordance with Christ's commandment to "cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons" (Mt 10:8) and again, in Christ's confirmation of his calling, when he says, "...he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free..." (Lk 4:18). The

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4 My use of "forefathers" is intentional, reflecting the lack of documentation of women's activity in the area of early Pastoral Care. The topic warrants research, since the Puritans sought the literacy of women, who were encouraged to participate in discussion of theological issues. Congregationalists bear the honor of being the first to ordain a woman in America: Antoinette Brown in 1853.
6 All Biblical references are from the New Revised Standard Version of The Holy Bible (1989)
Puritans took their ministry seriously and many developed ways of caring for their flock that allowed them to meet with and counsel both "churched" and "unchurched" in their parishes.

This paper will explore how the Puritans in the Congregational tradition did those things and what we can pull forward and use in the 21st century. We will seek to integrate these findings into the present church as reflected in the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. I also believe the conclusions will be reflective of the "militant-visible-church" as well. It is my contention, which should be reflected by the end of this paper, that the 'continuing Congregationalist' tradition we hold dear to our hearts in the NACCC is the best structure for the reintegration of the care and cure of souls in our day and age. Our forbearers were at the forefront of thinking and practice in this area. I also believe the care and cure of souls is an unspoken desire of those who are "church-shopping", who consider themselves "emerging" or "post-modern"—those who reject the institutionalized, perceived authority problems with the "modern" church, and those who wish to find a sense of community in our crowded, busy world.

The NACCC, small though we are, stand in a unique position to welcome precisely those who are spiritually adrift in the "post-modern" world we live in. The NACCC reflect the concerns of the post-modern world, namely a place that is intentional through its emphasis on covenant relationships, and that offers a place of fellowship and mutuality. The NA holds both of these concerns at its center and it is also what we have to offer to the world. First, we will look at the theological foundations that led to the care and cure of souls in Puritan thought. Then we will look at three avenues whereby the care and cure of souls expressed itself: through the preaching.

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7 The terms are admittedly academic and jargon—"Churched" loosely refers to active, baptized participants in the Faith. "Unchurched" loosely refers to those baptized as infants but have no experience in the Faith, or those who have never been to church at all. The Puritan terms for the same categories would have been "Regenerate" and "Unregenerate", respectively.

8 Walker, The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism. From the Cambridge Platform, 1648. Chapter 2. "Militant-visible-church" simply means the active, earth-bound, particular church; as opposed to the "triumphant-invisible-church", which is the universal Church "in respect of their relation wherin they stand to Christ."

9 Both terms—"emerging" or "post-modern"—are loosely defined and fluid. At its core, however, is a determined attempt to redefine Church and Theology outside the failures of Modernity. Those failures include, but are not limited to, the promises of science, the abuses of power in government and in ecclesiastical practice and the promises of capitalism. This is a very limited and personal definition, therefore qualifying as completely post-modern.

10 Rev. Dr. Steven Peay. Lecture at The Boston Seminar, August 14, 2006.
of the Word; self-reflection in prayer, journaling and meditation; and pastoral care as expressed in pastoral visits. After this historical review, we will explore what does and what does not apply in today's world, and what can be reclaimed from our Puritan forbearers. All the people and ideas we will be exploring throughout the paper are foundational and deeply influential in the Congregational tradition.

Theological Foundations of Puritan Care and Cure of Souls

The Covenant

It would not be an overstatement to say that all Puritan reflection on the care and cure of souls must begin with an exploration of Covenant Theology. The Puritans, and particularly those who considered themselves to be Congregationalists, looked back through the Old Testament and saw that God's action with God's chosen people was always framed in the context of a covenant relationship. A covenant is simply a promise made that is bound by an oath. It "implies the strongest possible mutual and intentional pledge"\(^{11}\) between two parties. When God participates and initiates a covenant with God's people, there is expressed an "essential mutuality of a negotiated bond"\(^{12}\), suggesting that our relationship with God is something in which we are deeply involved participants.

What is being bound by promise and oath is a relationship with God. At the same time, "covenant is the node whereby God restores relationship"\(^{13}\) with us. What is key to understand, and what the Puritans sought to achieve, was a sense of reciprocity with God. By that, they meant the mutual and intentional bond of covenant required a response. Put another way, God's covenanted with His chosen people requires participation in the relationship God has freely and willingly established with God's people. God "calls out" His chosen people through the covenant

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\(^{11}\) Ibid.


\(^{13}\) Ibid. pg 47
relationship and, by covenanting with them, seeks to restore relationship with Himself to follow and worship God.\(^4\)

The restoration of our relationship with God through Jesus Christ leads directly to our relationship with others. Our fellowship with one another is mediated through the covenant we have been gifted from God and to which we have committed. To put it another way, our covenant with God is best expressed in our active covenanting with other people, in fellowship with fellow believers. It is this fellowship in Christ, mediated by covenant, which the Puritans understood to be the foundation of the church. Confirmation of this view came primarily in the Gospel of Matthew, under the context of the discipline of believers: "For wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (Mt 18:20) They also looked to Acts 2, where the ideal expression of a community is put forth: "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need...they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad, generous hearts, praising God and having goodwill of all people." (Acts 2:44-47)

It is in this covenantal framework that Congregationalism developed. The covenant with God and with one another is the governing and organizing principle of the church. The church itself is the gathered people, under covenant, one with another, with Christ as their head. There is no greater authority than Christ in the Congregational church, thereby establishing the free, autonomous status of each individual church. The Puritans who attempted this sought to understand the nature of church with this principle in mind. One of the requirements that derives out of this understanding is the fellowship of believers, within the church and with other churches. With this principle active and moving amongst the people, the intentional nature, via the covenant, expands into a widening circle of mutuality and relationship. This movement is vertically into greater relationship with God, and horizontally with believers, outward into the greater community.

\(^4\) The Congregational tradition for most of its history would affirm a masculine designation for God. I perceive a God that is fully masculine and fully feminine. For the purposes of this paper I will risk offense
In this context we will explore the care and cure of souls, which becomes a community action and concern. Thriving, healthy-minded, "regenerate" Christians was the goal of the early Puritan church, but to the Puritan mind, the task was daunting.

**Historical Considerations of the Covenant**

It is important that we put the Congregational church and the covenant in historical perspective. The attitudes and concerns of the Puritans have their source in the Reformation, which was inaugurated with Martin Luther (1483-1546) posting his 95 Theses on the Wittenburg Church door in 1517, on October 31st. With remarkable rapidity for the day and age, urged on by the relatively recent invention of the printing press, Luther's ideas swept Europe, igniting latent Reformations throughout the Western world.

In France, a young man, a brilliant humanist in the French university, named Jean Calvin (1509-1564) was inspired by the Reformation writings of Luther. He endeavored to regain a more holistic understanding of the Christian faith from the primary focus of Luther, namely that we are saved by grace alone, not good works. His explorations were written into a large volume of 4 separate books called *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin initially published the *Institutes* in 1536 and continued to revise the books until the authoritative publication was issues in 1559.

In the *Institutes* we discover the groundwork for the theology of the Puritans and the foundations for the need of the Care and Cure of Souls. The covenant framework brought forth by Calvin is what roots the entire theology of Puritanism. There are essentially two covenants given forth by God - a Covenant of Works and a Covenant of Grace. At its most simplistic, a Covenant of Works is what God puts forth to Adam and Eve, and is solidified in the Law of Moses. The Covenant of Grace is what God provides for us in the assurance of salvation and the cleansing of sin in Jesus Christ - a free gift, which, upon acceptance, erases our past and presents us holy and

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at using the Biblically (generally) common "He" with the understanding that gender designation of the word "God" does not imply the gender of the thing itself.

15 There are clear antecedents to the Protestant Reformation throughout Europe. In England, movements were already underway to translate the Bible into English. Luther articulated the core concerns that led to the Protestant split with the Roman Church.
pure in the temple of the Lord. (Heb 10:19) Calvin, however, recognized great difficulties (promulgated by many new Protestants) in this simplistic expression and was hesitant to assign the Covenant of Grace exclusively to the works of Christ, rather he would say the Covenant of Grace reaches its fullest expression in Jesus Christ.

Puritan theology reacted to the rejection of human free will (human free will is so corrupted by sin that it is useless to proclaim 'free will') by John Calvin and developed the covenant understanding more extensively. The Puritans would be best understood as religious experimentalists, given their willingness to re-envision theology and practice of faith. The Covenant of Grace is at once a free gift given of God's own free will, not because of any merit or behavior on our part, and to this Calvin would agree fully. At the same time, the acceptance of this gift is dependent upon our acceptance and it is thus conditional, in the sense that we do not participate in the Covenant of Grace unless we respond to it. Without our acceptance of the Covenant of Grace through Christ, we are completely subject to the Covenant of Works. Under the Covenant of Works, our acceptance by God is completely dependent upon our capacity to follow the Law without fail.16

**Election and Predestination**

Out of the foundation of the Covenant of Grace and on the basis of Biblical evidence, Calvin brought to the forefront an understanding of Election and Predestination. Election is, quite simply, the act of God choosing particular people and nations, and setting them apart to enact God's special plan for the world. God's election is the way God acts throughout Scripture, setting aside individuals and His people to: fulfill the mandate to populate the world and to covenant the future care of the world to Noah (Gen 7); become the father of all nations in Abraham (Gen 12); continuing the promise of the covenant through Isaac and Jacob (Gen 21--); setting apart Moses, a murderer it should be noted, to bring the Law to all peoples and to rescue Israel from slavery (Exodus 3); establishing the kingdom of David and promising its continuance throughout time (2 Sam 7); speaking through the Prophets to call Israel to repentance, bring judgment and promise
hope. The preeminent example of Election is shown in the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Thus it is that Election becomes the mode whereby a Christian is set apart by God to further the Kingdom of God now. In our state of election, it was made clear that faith is not our doing, but rather the result of our election: It is a sovereign act of God. The temptation is to proclaim that our election is because of our holiness, our good behavior, that we are chosen and set apart. But this attitude belies the sovereignty of God and grants to the individual far more than s/he is capable of due to the weight and presence of sin. Calvin insists, therefore, with the Puritans, that faith is the result of Election and good behavior and holiness reflect our Election, not the other way around. "...whatever virtue appears in men is the result of election."\textsuperscript{17}

Election leads directly to the idea of Predestination. If God is setting people and nations apart to further God's plan, it makes logical sense that God knows beforehand whom he will choose. It is in this understanding that Predestination arises. Paul states the logic clearly in Ephesians 1:4-5: "just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will."

From the outset, it should be understood that the idea of Predestination, the foreordaining by God of who will be saved and who will be damned was not a central element in Calvin’s theology (Luther rejected, or at least, omitted any mention of damnation, whereby we understand Calvin’s sense of predestination to be called "double predestination"). Calvin’s discussion comprises just 3 relatively short chapters in Book 3 of his \textit{Institutes} (Chaps 21-23). It rose to higher prominence, however, in the Puritan mindset as a way of assuring the Elect, those who were members of the "militant-visible-church"\textsuperscript{18}, that they were in fact part of the Elect. (This issue will be explored more deeply later on in the paper.) For now, it should be understood that

\textsuperscript{16} These ideas come primarily from John Von Rohr, \textit{The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought}. (Atlanta: Scholars Press) 17-19
\textsuperscript{17} John Calvin, \textit{Institutes of the Christian Religion}. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1989) Bk III, xxii, 2. pg 214
\textsuperscript{18} See footnote 8. Reference is from the Cambridge Platform.
Election and Predestination function for the Puritan more as a pastoral sensibility than as a thoroughly worked out theology. By that I mean, Calvin (and Luther) saw predestination as an element that assured the believer that s/he was part of the Elect. It was a theological aspect of the Covenant that solidified and affirmed "the confident assurance in things hoped for, and evidence of things not yet seen." (Heb 11:1)

Through the process of Election and Predestination, God is seeking to restore God's relationship with a broken humanity and a suffering world. Around these ideas, in England, a small group of Puritans started meeting with one another. They were called Separatists because they didn't want to wait around for the English church to change and they rejected the "papist" heresy of Catholic Rome. Through the lenses of Election and Predestination the Puritans sought to restructure the church. In Scrooby, England, just outside Norwich, several men gathered, among them William Brewster, John Robinson and William Bradford, all formative in the establishment of the Plymouth Colony in America. They modeled a church that erased hierarchy, established fellowship amongst one another and fellow believers, and rigorously followed the discipline model in Matthew 18. They shared a vision of the church that mirrored what they saw in the early Christian church, a vision mirrored in Acts 2 (quoted above). Almost immediately the English authorities responded and imprisoned the offending group. Amongst these men were William Brewster and John Robinson. When followers were beginning to be executed, they moved with their families and fellow believers to Leyden, Netherlands in 1602.

The Netherlands were a safe haven for various renegade Protestant groups from throughout Europe, and the Puritans who lived there had the freedom to worship as they pleased, but were now forced to work at menial jobs and struggle for their survival. Even so, the community thrived. In 1620, Brewster and Robinson arranged a trip to America through a Virginia contract. Robinson stayed behind in the hopes of establishing new relations with the British church, and William Brewster and William Bradford joined about 120 people on the Mayflower to come to America. In November, the Plymouth Colony was established and
organized under the Mayflower Compact, with Brewster as the elder of the church and William Bradford as the head of the civil government of their small community in the New World.

After a difficult first year, the Plymouth community thrived. In 1628, a new charter was established with England and the Salem settlement was established. On June 20th, 1629, the 1st Congregational Church in America was established in Salem. Soon after, because of the business opportunities and the freedoms being established in the New World, many people began to emigrate from England to America. Between 1630 and 1640, almost 20,000 people immigrated to America from England, almost all of them Puritans. Boston became the seat of Congregationalism and many churches were established during this time. America was thriving and so was attendance in churches.

Some Difficult Realities

It is important to disclose some realities of the early Congregational church and its Calvinist leanings in these early days of America. After the relatively peaceful experience of the Plymouth Colony, the newly arrived Puritans were eager to create "a city upon the hill". Founded as the Puritans were upon strict discipline and upon the reflection in life of one's election, many of these churches came to be characterized by what the Reverend Dr. David Fisher called "unchecked meanness".20

This led to the all too common activity of the formerly persecuted now persecuting others. Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643), for example, was ejected from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for heresy. In 1637, when she held her own against the best theological minds in America after 24 hours of questioning in Roxbury, Massachusetts, she claimed to have received direct testimony from the Holy Spirit. This was cause enough, aside from her valiant stand against slavery and racial prejudice, for her to be sent to that theological wasteland called Rhode Island.

Roger Williams (1603-1684), the founder of Rhode Island, was banished a couple years earlier in 1635 from Massachusetts for insisting on religious liberty and the rights of Indians.

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19 Steven Bailey. Lecture at Boston Seminar, 8/14/06
20 Reverend Dr. David Fisher. Conversation at 5th Congregational Symposium, The Church for a Time Like This. 1st Congregational Church, Wauwatosa, WI. 11/4/2006
among other theological difficulties, namely his insistence on adult believer baptism. The execution of Mary Dyer, a Quaker and follower of Anne Hutchinson, in 1660 and the Salem Witch Trials in 1692, are other examples of theology run amok.

While excommunication, banishing and even execution were not unusual in church practice in any point in history, it is worth noting these events, given the Puritan insistence on freedom of worship and personal freedom. This "meanness" led to exclusion from the church itself for many. If one was able to get into the church, perhaps on the basis of baptism, they may have still been excluded from participation in the Lord's Supper, since, being baptized as infants, they had no conversion event to justify their Election and thus full membership was denied them. This led to strange doctrines like the oddly named "Half-Way Covenant", which made allowances for baptized adults to have their children baptized but the adults could not be full members because they did not commune. It bears noting, however, that the early Congregationalists learned quickly from these errors. As an example, in 1696, Judge Samuel Sewall stood in front of his congregation and repented for his part in the witch trials after several Congregational ministers stepped into the situation and stopped the persecution. He set aside a day a year in which he fasted and repented of his participation in the corporate sin of the witch trials.  

While these abuses of power are not the scope of this paper, it is important to acknowledge the areas where Congregational and Puritan theology has failed on a great scale to care and cure souls. It is part of our history, and a dark part at that. The recognition I intend to make in speaking of these things is that I am focusing on the meaningful, useful and effective aspects of Puritan and Congregational ministry. It can go wrong and it has gone wrong, but we have learned from these things as well.

Avenues for Care and Cure of Souls — Preaching the Word

We begin with the preached Word, for it is within the sermon that the congregation hears the teaching of God and is given the urging to reflect and deepen their knowledge of the Scriptures. As a result, the responsibilities of the preacher were large and manifest. The shepherding of the congregation into relationship with God was then and still is a field with hidden pitfalls at almost every turn. But this shepherding is nonetheless the charge of every Christian preacher, and the Congregational preacher took the charge very seriously. The expectation in the New World was that every preacher would be well-educated and in the late 1600s and early 1700s almost every preacher received his education at Cambridge in England, Harvard, or Yale. The preacher is called by the church to preach the Word and deliver the sacraments, and by that call they are yoked with the responsibility of caring for and curing the souls of the parish.

With regard to the sermon, the Puritans recall Peter speaking to Cornelius, who says that Christ "commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead." (Acts 10:42) First and foremost, then, the sermon is meant to be a testament, a testifying to the presence of Jesus Christ as ordained judge. It became the responsibility of the preacher to discern and define the nature of that judgment and that which we will be judged. And under that command, the Christian preacher is not compelled to just say whatever justifies that end in judgment for he himself "will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." (Mt 12:36-37)

The judgment of God and Christ as judge was the starting point for many Puritan preachers. There is good reason for this. The preacher wanted to show his congregation that, without the saving grace of Christ, they are under the Covenant of Works Righteousness. Reverend Peter Bulkeley made it clear that the Covenant of Works did not disappear with Christ. Christ, however, offers a New Covenant that requires our acceptance and reception of it. Because

we are still "in the estate of corruption, no man attains life by the covenant of workes, yet this so comes to passe, not because the covenant is changed, but because we are changed, and cannot fulfill the condition, to which the promise is made." In other words, the conditional status of the Covenant of Works means we must live up to all its standards. However we are utterly incapable of doing so. Through Christ, we are changed and thereby, by Christ's work and sacrifice fulfill the Covenant. It is thus that the Covenant of Grace is made with Christ, who then extends the realities of that Covenant to us.

Preaching from the perspective of the Covenant of Works was designed to instill a deep discomfort about a person's current spiritual state - we are subject to the Covenant of Works and we have no way of fulfilling it; God commands obedience and knows we cannot obey; salvation is ours for the taking, but only God extends to us faith and salvation. Anxiety and distress were intentionally maximized in order to increase the desire for the salvation that Christ brings to us and by deliberately creating this double-bind in the minds of the hearers "the preachers fully expected the covenant to agitate their hearers, inducing affections of fear, enmity and fright." This was an art form that, as we now know in modern psychology, can go horribly wrong if not used wisely. Neurosis and psychosomatic problems can rapidly develop without some sort of release from the internal contradictions deliberately created. This is why the expectation of Congregational pastors for centuries was that they had personal experience with and sensitivity to the travails and conditions of the soul. The pastor thus becomes, among other things, a guide through the miasma of the difficulties of the soul into deeper faith and understanding. The pastoral goal in creating a double-bind was to provide enough anxiety that the desperate need for the work of Christ was clearly known to all. All this was in the interest of caring for and curing "sin-sick souls." The awareness of crisis in one's spiritual life, even for the reasonably devout, acted as a reinforcement of the Puritan's belief and piety relative to prayer, meditation and fellowship with other believers. This negative reinforcement inherent in this intentional anxiety

Nov. 31st, 2006)
22 Cohen, God's Caress. Quoting Peter Bulkeley. Pg 62
23 Ibid; pg 62
had the effect of helping people take seriously those Christian virtues of prayer, meditation and worship. This awareness of personal difficulty, trouble and agitation is echoed even into the 20th century by the great Congregationalist theologian PT Forsyth, who said, "The way to the soul's final greatness lies through its misery rather than through its success."²⁴

What was intended, in part, by focusing on the Covenant of Works was to highlight precisely our failure to live up to that covenant, "that seeing our own disability to perform what the law requireth, we may be forced to the new covenant of grace."²⁵ This is what is known as the 'first use of the Law.' Calvin explains the intent of the Law saying, "By exhibiting the righteousness of God - in other words, the righteousness which is alone acceptable to God - it admonishes every one of his own unrighteousness, certiorates, convicts and finally condemns him. This is necessary, in order that man...may be brought at once to know and to confess his weakness and impurity."²⁶ Quite literally, then, the pastor sought to shepherd his wayward flock into a corral whereby each person must look into a mirror (Calvin's image) and realize her or his absolute inability to live right by God. In our recognition and submission, we free ourselves into the Covenant with Christ.

Most Congregational preachers had a strong sense of God's judgment and drew heavily from the Prophets, Jeremiah being a favorite (the foundation for the word 'jeremiad' - flaming excoriations of the sin of the people), along with Daniel, Hosea, Amos and Isaiah. Judgment also was drawn from the New Testament. In John 12:31, Jesus says, "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out." We are living now, at this very time, under the judgment of God, the preachers would say. The judgment of God was held out to the congregation as not only a threat, but a straightforward expression of absolute dependence. The greatest example of this is Jonathan Edward's famous sermon "Sinners in the hands of an angry God." Our dependence is pictured as God holding each of us by the thinnest of threads over the

²⁴ Forsyth, PT. *PT Forsyth and the Cure of Souls.* Harry Escott, ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin, LTD. 1970) pg 32
²⁵ Cohen. *God's Caress.* Quoting Sibbes. Pg 63
²⁶ John Calvin. *Institutes of Christian Religion.* Book II, vii, 6. pg 304
fires of damnation. 27 To be clear, most of Edwards' sermons reflected on the glory of God's creation and our unworthy part in it redeemed by Christ.

Once the disease of sin and judgment was established, once the fact that our capacity to be cured lays outside our hands, the Puritan preacher would then bring in the solution to the Covenant of Works and the double-bind -- the grace of Christ. As was stated before, covenants are the node, the locus whereby God restores the relationship broken by humanity with God through the reality of sin. The preacher made clear in his attempt to bring this understanding to the congregation that we are under a Covenant that we cannot fulfill. Paul puts it clearly in Romans 3:20: "For no human being will be justified in his sight by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes knowledge of sin." It would be a mistake to misread what the Puritans were saying about the Covenant of Works however. We tend to place category judgments upon both covenants - Covenant of works as 'bad', covenant of grace as 'good'. But Puritan theology would have us see the Covenant of works as a work of grace as well. For it is in the Covenant of Works that we see our own helplessness. Only by acknowledging our inability and brokenness in the face of what God has given us is grace possible. And we can only know our helplessness by knowing what we are not measuring up against. God recognizes our helpless state and sends Christ to redeem us. Our Helplessness and acknowledgment of it is precisely the point at which grace is given by God. "By successfully performing the law and by sacrificing himself under the curse, Christ wholly discharged the Covenant of Works, and because he did so for the Elect's sake, Christ redeems them from the Law and its penalty." 28

Christ thus becomes the great mediator, reconciler and intercessor. Now, through the grace of Christ, good works are a result, not a fulfillment of a demand. "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." (Eph 2:10) The focus on failure, on Forsyth's "misery" of the soul, and impending and acting judgment of God is turned inside out through Christ. Our knowledge of Christ and the


28 Cohen. *God's Caress*. Quoting Robert Rollock. Pg 64
workings of God is a result of the awareness of suffering. Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887), the Congregational reformer pastor of Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims in Brooklyn, New York, states, in his sermon *The Moral Teaching of Suffering* (Nov 23, 1873), "The heroic forms of moral truths which rise...these come still later, and with yet greater difficulty."²⁹ It is precisely through the failure, misery and judgment that we come to know truth and are redeemed through Christ, and it is that redemption that becomes the foundation for good works, rather than good works being a foundation for our redemption.

Christ’s work expressed in the Puritan sermon was always directed to the Elect and as an assurance of the Elect’s salvation through Christ. It bears reflection here to say that the Elect are so defined because of God’s free will and choice, not because of their faith. In other words, the Elect have faith because they are the Elect. They are not the Elect because they have a self-willed or generated faith, and are therefore noted as worthy by God. In the Puritan and Calvinist vision, this would be an absolute impossibility, since by sin none are worthy. The reason Christ’s work was directed to the Elect was that, in accordance with Calvinist doctrine, the atonement through Christ’s work on the Cross was limited to only those whom God has already chosen. To put it another way, Christ has conquered sin and death throughout time for all, but it is only effectual and redemptive for those whom God has already elected.

It is precisely here, in this doctrine of Election and thus Predestination, in Christ’s limited atonement, that cracks begin to appear in the pastor’s goal of caring and curing souls. Much was made in American Congregational theology about who was included and who was not in the Elect. This is not to say that Congregationalism was reactionary or even rigid in its determination of the Elect. Pushed to the limits, however, those who began to doubt the Trinitarian expressions of the faith found an expression for their views in the Unitarian ideals in William Ellery Channing. His sermon on Unitarian Christianity in 1819 provided the basis for the eventual formation of the American Unitarian Association in 1825.³⁰ In their view, Election and

³⁰ Steven Bailey. Lecture given 8/17/06 at Boston Seminar.
Predestination became an excuse for exclusivity and partiality within the church. The Unitarian controversy directed its critique of Congregational doctrine precisely at this issue, and from there became a platform for the denial of the divinity of Christ, the presence of the Divine in all sacred literature and a focus on human reason.

Part of this controversy arose out of a simplification of Calvin's writing in both Congregational and Unitarian thought. Calvin is clear that Election and our assurance of it is not meant to be a source of conflict. Once convicted of such a thing in our awareness of Christ in our lives, we are not to doubt it. It is precisely in our sense of Election, of having been graced by the presence of Christ, that our assurance lies. Our calling in Christ is at once our assurance of Election and our certainty of salvation. Election and predestination were intended to be stepping stones to reaffirming and seeking out assurance and confirmation of our communion with God in the world. Scripture and the dialogue with it modeled by the preacher were central to the mutuality and fellowship that has governed and still governs the gathered people of God. The sermon was one avenue whereby the Puritan minister sought to resolve "the great problem of Puritan piety", which manifested itself in the capacity to "maintain anxiety while simultaneously converting it into assurance." The Puritan sermon, then, sought to provide a grounding and framework whereby the individual could examine Scripture of his or her own accord and come to reasoned and reflective conclusions of their own accord. And it is to that individual aspect of care and cure of souls we now turn.

**Avenues for Care and Cure of Souls in Self-Reflection**

Central to the confirmation of Election and calling, central to the life of the Christian and central to our relationship with Christ is the practice of prayer. The Puritan sermon was never meant to be a conclusive word about the reality of Scripture and God's presence in our lives. Instead, it was meant to open up avenues of understanding whereby a believer could return home and discover for her/himself the truth that is present within the preached Word. As a result, Puritan faith is highly experiential in the sense that it leads to a freedom to experiment and in

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31 Calvin. *Institutes of Christian Religion*. Book III, xxiv, 5-6. pg 244-5
interpretation of the Word when it comes to personal piety. At the same time, since any given sermon sought to explicate and provide guidelines rather than completed answers, individuals often left with an incomplete sense of personal salvation and assurance with regard to her/his Election into the Body of Christ, the gathered church and the "triumphant-universal-church."\[33\]

At its core, however, while the sermon is the realm in which we fellowship with one another around the Scripture, and have a relationship with that Word modeled for us, it is in our personal relationship with God and Christ that we truly come to know the truth of our faith. It is in this personal relationship that we are "sanctified" in the Holy Spirit. William Ames (1576-1633), in his Puritan classic, The Marrow of Theology, tells us that "Sanctification is the real change in man from the sordidness of sin to the purity of God's image."\[34\] The Puritans sought out deep and meaningful time with God in prayer, meditation and journaling to at once effect personal sanctification by the power of the Holy Spirit and to recognize God's presence in their lives.

It is important to note that faith is what motivates us to seek out sanctification. They are not one and the same. Again, Ames states, "faith is not properly considered a quality but a relationship to Christ, nor is repentance considered a change of disposition..., but a change of the mind's purpose and intent. Sanctification involves a real change of quality and disposition."\[35\] In other words, sanctification is the qualitative and real change in one's inward and outward disposition that reflects the increasing depth of one's relationship, one's faith, with Jesus Christ.

As a result, personal piety, the individual activity of a believer away from the context of the gathered church, is of exceptional importance in the Puritan mind. Just as today we suffer from "Sunday morning faith with God, Monday morning practicality without God", or "practical atheism", so did the Puritan communities in England and America. These individual activities sought to cross that barrier from worship into everyday life.

32 Cohen. God's Caress. Pg 19
33 See footnote #8.
35 Ibid; Book I, xxix, 8. pg 168
In the re-visioning of church that arose because of the Reformation, Puritans sought out ways to extend the faith of Sunday into the rest of the week through prayer, meditation and other practices that would reinforce the communal experience of the gathered church and, most importantly, one's direct experience with God and Christ. It became imperative, then, that all who were members of the church, or were seeking membership, sought out the personal assurance of one's calling and Election in one's daily life. The Savoy Declaration of 1658 makes this explicit: "And therefore it is the duty of everyone to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure, that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance; so far as it is from inclining men to looseness."36

William Ames clarifies the qualitative difference between the act of hearing and the act of praying by saying that "hearing is oriented to the will of God but prayer to our will. In hearing the word we accept God's will but in prayer we offer our will to God to be accepted by him."37 In the Puritan understanding of prayer, we enter into a deep theological sense that the Puritans held about the nature of God. God is not some uninvolved, distant force who does not respond. Instead, God is intimately present in the deepest fundamental reality of Creation and our very lives. Ames, in particular, reflects the ancient Desert Fathers in their discussions on the passibility of God, of God's ability to be affected by the actions of humanity.38 Ames says that, during the act of prayer, "God is pleased to commend the force and efficacy of prayer to us by declaring himself to be affected and, as it were, moved by it. Our prayer is the means by which, and not otherwise, God is willing to communicate many things to us."39

Within prayer our intentional and mutual relationship with God is expressed at its most intimate level. The reflection of our innermost self in prayer is given over to God and it is there we become most vulnerable and thus most accessible to the will and desire of God. Paul tells us,

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36 Walker. The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism. Savoy Declaration, XXVIII, iii. Pg 377
37 Ames. The Marrow of Theology. Book II, ix, 9. pg 259
38 I have in mind here the thoughts on the God who suffers impassibly of St Cyril of Alexandria. See John McGuckin, The Christology of Cyril (handout from class on Gospel of Mark); and Paul Gayriluk, The Suffering of the Impassible God (Oxford University Press. 2004), particularly pg 153.
"Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication." (Eph 6:18) Further, our prayer is not to be a rote exercise. Rather it is an exercise in attention and awareness: "Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving." (Col 4:2) It is easy to forget that prayer can devolve into a mere list of asking for things from God. Rather, it is a deliberate, honest exchange in an intimate, heartfelt relationship with God which seeks to break down blocks to God's access to the world and to build up those places which seek to further the kingdom of the Lord here and now. The relationship is not just for us, it is for all whom God seeks through the agency of Jesus Christ and for all of Creation itself.

PT Forsyth says of prayer, "In prayer the inmost truth of our personal being locks with the inmost reality of things, its energy finds a living Person acting as their unity and life, and we escape the illusions of sense, self and world." Forsyth is not speaking in some mystical sensibility here. Instead, he means it on the most practical, expressive grounds we can imagine. God, he is saying, is a living Person who acts through us in the world, breaking through our illusionary, self-focused sensibilities and through the brokenness of the world itself to alter it and bring forth from that "inmost reality of things" the kingdom of God. The Puritan mode of prayer, deeply personal and self reflective on personal change as it is, seeks to manifest the understanding of prayer in Psalm 10: "O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed, so that those from earth may strike terror no more." (17-18)

**Journaling**

A derivative element of prayer was the activity of journaling among Puritans. There were several reasons for this unusual practice. The first was to simply document the presence of God in their lives. Since the theology of the Puritans freed the sacred from the confines of the church and located it in the Creation itself, their eyes were opened to the presence of God in all places.

Second, journaling provided a valuable log of one's progress toward sanctification. By having a documented detail of one's journey of faith, it would also provide valuable insight in the event of

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despair, unbelief or backsliding. And third, given the theology of "total depravity", whereby the original and actual sin of a person stains each and every part of a person's life, making our ability to "do" anything relative to our salvation, journaling provided an avenue to "do" something relative to it, even if it is merely reflective. Thomas Shepard (1605-1649), in fact, took great heart in the command by God to Adam to "do" things: tend the Garden, name the animals, till the fields, and raise his children. He insisted that "anyone encouraged to work for salvation will do so, and it should surprise nobody...that they persist despite Adam's conspicuous (and hasty) failure."

Shepard was a first-generation Puritan minister in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He exemplified a deep aspect of Puritan theology which was an unwillingness to shy away from difficulty, unsettledness and doubt. Instead, Shepard and Puritans in general confronted these issues directly, without apology. As a minister, journaling provided him with an account of his own spiritual difficulties and thus gave him a deep respect and capacity to communicate with all kinds of people at different stages of faith.

We spoke above about the problem of Puritan faith being the maintenance of anxiety about one's salvation and the concomitant judgment without it, while seeking to covert that anxiety into assurance. Shepard struggled with this anxiety greatly and intuited that his parishioners might as well, and so he advocated the act of journaling to document that assurance. His personal journal entries are marked by truly inspiring insights that arise precisely out of his tightrope walk with anxiety and assurance. Doubt itself became an affirmation of his salvation. He also noted the great difference between trust and certainty. The foundation of certainty was reason, which only took one so far into the knowing of God, and not a very convincing distance.

40 PT Forsyth. *PT Forsyth and the Cure of Souls*. Pg 68
41 Total depravity is a phrase which comes from many quarters in Protestant theology. It does not mean all of humanity is completely depraved. The "total" refers instead to the reality that there is no part of our lives which is not touched, or stained (Augustine), by sin. See Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk I, xiv, 3. pg 143
42 Cohen. *God's Caress*. Pg 59
Trust, however, is an act which involves the whole being and transcends reason and intuition into a complete and total reliance on the power of God in order to be "ravished and beheld" by God.\textsuperscript{44}

The key phrase in Shepard's journal was the simple "I saw..." In his reflections and his prayer life, Shepard felt that he was shown understanding by intensely meditating on his actions and difficulties. For instance, on January 30th, 1641, he wrote: "When I was in meditation \textit{I saw} when Christ was present, all blessings were present, as when any without Christ were present, there sorrows were. Hence I saw how little of Christ was present in me. \textit{I saw} I did not cease to be and live that Christ might be and live in me. ..Hence I blessed Christ for showing me this, mourned for want of this."\textsuperscript{45} Journaling, being of a personal nature, was not intended for posterity, and thus very few Puritan journals remain. Shepard's is the preeminent example, but we know it was done regularly by those in his congregation and many outside of it as well.

\textbf{Meditation}

Another aspect to prayer life that was practiced by the Puritans, an activity that acted as a bridge between sermon, world and person, was meditation. Puritan meditation is unusual in its implicit assumption of the closeness of God in the relationship of the Christian, and in its practice at all. Puritan theology, however, deviated from traditional Calvinist thought by an emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit. There was a strong belief that one could prepare the heart and soul for the conversion event through prayer, fellowship and meditation on the Word. This created an amplification of the tension between anxiety and assurance, between being wholly taken and doing something related to salvation. "In strict predestinarian dogma the sinner was taken by storm -- his heart wrenched from depravity to grace. Before the moment of effectual conversion, he was held to be spiritually void."\textsuperscript{46} Some Reformers were selective to the point of saying conversion was the equivalent of Paul being struck down by light from his horse. The Puritans tended to reject this completely passive view, however. (It should be noted that this is the foundation of Anne Hutchinson's argument with the Puritan preachers of Boston at the time - she

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid; pg 27
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid; pg 85. Italics mine.
rejected the idea that the soul could be prepared for conversion.) For the Puritans, "covenant theology provided a theological consistency for experiential notions, and in this respect it was an essential ingredient for the emergence of preparation."

Within the theology of covenant, then, was the very basis for seeking out the experience of the Holy Spirit active in one's life. Meditation was one avenue for this. The Old Testament provided numerous justifications for the practice as well, particularly Psalm 119, which has at least three references to meditation: "I will meditate on your precepts, and fix my eyes on your ways" (119:15); "Make me understand the way of your precepts and I will meditate upon your wondrous works" (119:27); "My eyes are awake before each watch of the night, that I may meditate upon your promise" (119:148). Henry Ward Beecher finds the justification for meditation in Christ himself. He says, "The death of Christ was to raise our conception of the grandeur of the moral qualities of God's nature, so that men should be drawn to them with an irresistible attraction." What was being sought in the act of meditation was a "sanctified imagination." This reclamation of the imagination is significant and it is a large part of what animates Puritan theological reflection and spiritual life, contrary to our public, modern image of dour, serious spiritual do-gooders. In actuality, Puritans were active, imaginative, experimental people who sought new ways of being church. It is through meditation that the Puritan sought to open that holy imagination, in such a way that meditation was "a holy exercise of the mind whereby we bring the truths of God to remembrance, and do seriously ponder upon them and apply them to ourselves" in our lives and relationships.

Meditation was considered to be central to understanding the nature of Scripture, to being able to defend the truth of the faith, the essential bridge between the preached word and the profit from that Word and the fuel that fires effective prayer. Thomas Manton (1620-1677), Oliver

47 Ibid; pg 11
50 Ibid; quoting Thomas Watson. Pg 74
51 Ibid; pg 79
Cromwell's personal chaplain, said, "A man that is a stranger to meditation is a stranger to himself." Manton saw meditation as that animating action that allowed the believer to see the promise of God in all our work here on Earth. He said we should meditate in such a way "that in every trade and calling we might be employed in our worldly business with an heavenly mind, that, whether in the shop, or at the loom, or in the field, we might still think of Christ and heaven."

The act of meditation itself was not governed by strict rules of engagement. As with all meditation, a clear conscience, a place of silence and a posture of reverence were important to begin. A verse was chosen and memorized, then one's thoughts fixed directly on that verse, without a lot of interpretation. Instead, the directives from the Puritans often suggested that one bring one's conscience, experience and knowledge of other parts of Scripture to one's reflection on the verse, invoking Wesley's quadrilateral of interpretation: Scripture, tradition, experience and reason. Then one would seek a sense of God in the verse through one's affections - love, desire, hope, courage, gratitude, joy, etc. From this place, the Puritan divine would engage in the most imaginative and surprising part of the meditative exercise, a direct, honest, personal dialogue with the soul and God or Christ. Complaints and shortcomings, difficulties and doubts were held forth and spread out before God. The conversation would be examined for what one has done and what one is resolved to do or change. Legalism was to be avoided at all costs and any resolution was to come from a "holy excitement. Commitment to change was prayed for and the memorized verse reviewed, thanksgiving made, a Psalm was read, and then some moments in silence to prepare to enter the world finished the process.

The self-reflective nature of the Puritan spiritual life through prayer, journaling and meditation provided a solid foundation to seek assurance in one's life for one's relationship with God. The intentional quality of each of these aspects made for thoughtful, introspective Christians and, in part, explains the success of the Congregational tradition in America. Mutuality and

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52 Ibid; pg 79
53 Ibid; pg 75
54 Ibid; described in detail pgs 82-87.
fellowship were strengthened and reinforced by the vertical relationship with God enacted on a regular basis. The tensions built into the covenant theology created an imaginative atmosphere in which the Holy Spirit could act in surprising ways for these early Puritans. The freedom present within the Congregational church structure, which essentially eliminated hierarchy and returned personal conscience to the believer, provided powerful opportunities for all to express the experience of their individual faith practice. That freedom, however, was not without guidance, and many saw that guidance as a blessing. We have spoken of the guidance within the spoken Word, with regard to the sermon and personal faith practice, but now we turn to the more personal guidance the Puritan pastor enacted through visits and direct care of the soul.

Avenues For the Care and Cure of Souls through Pastoral Visits

The title page of Thomas Hooker's (1586-1647) *Survey of the Summe of Church-Discipline*, one of the foundational documents of Congregational polity, includes an Obituary poem written by Sam Stone, the teaching elder for Hooker's church in New England. It says, in part:

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He had a clear insight, in
The souls conversion unto God from sin:
And in what method men come to inherit,
Both Christ and all his fullness by the spirit.
He made the truth appear by light of reason,
And spake most comfortable words in season.
To poor distressed sinners and contrite,
And such as to the promises had right.
-Sam Stone, 7/7/1647
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As pastors in the church, the model held forth here is one to attain and aspire toward. Hooker gained his reputation as a healer of souls by curing a woman who was deeply troubled and believed she had committed the unpardonable sin of sin against the Holy Spirit. Hooker instead elicited from her a deep testimony of faith and belief, convincing many that he was a man of

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55 Reverend Thomas Hooker. *Survey of the Summe of Church-Discipline*. (London, 1648). Pg c3. Special thanks to the Congregational Library, 14 Beacon St., Boston MA for access to this text.
"singular ability" in his capacity to heal the sick of the soul. He set aside one day each week which was devoted to counseling any and all with regard to spiritual matters and was responsible for counseling thousands by the time he died. He did not deny access to his counsel because of a person's belief or lack thereof, and sought to fulfill Paul's request to Timothy that a pastor be "kindly to everyone, an apt teacher, patient, correcting opponents with gentleness." (2 Tim 2:24)

Pastoral guidance was intended to reinforce the community itself. In early Puritan practice pastoral guidance was seen to be a communal activity, even if done in private. The overall effect and goal was to deepen the mutual relationship with one another and to fulfill the covenant of the individual church. Since churches in Puritan Congregational practice were autonomous, they developed their own covenant. Most reflected the Salem Covenant of 1629, if not in word, at least in intent: "We Covenant with the Lord and one with another; and doe bynd our selves in the presence of God, to walke together in all his waies, according as he is pleased to reveal himself unto us in his Blessed word of truth." The binding together in the presence of God and walking together in Christ, as in being with others in times of trouble, was taken very seriously by Puritan pastors, Hooker being a preeminent example. The charge was to be a community that sought out relationship with one another under the promises of God. The pastor had a responsibility to affect the parameters of that relationship.

If there was a quintessential model of the pastor caring for his flock, it would have to be Richard Baxter (1615-1691), the Vicar of Kidderminster in England. An occasional Congregationalist, if there is such a thing, he was definitely a Puritan in theology and action. At Kidderminster, he perceived that the parish was woefully undereducated in the basics of the Christian faith. At the same time, he noticed that many people had problems that required direct attention which was not being provided - depression, moral laxity, anger and frustration, rampant disbelief and doubt. Immediately, Baxter set about to deal directly with his parish. He wrote, in his great work *The Reformed Pastor* (1656), "We spend Monday and Tuesday, from morning

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56 E. Brooks Holifield. *A History of Pastoral Care In America: From Salvation to Realization.* (Nashville: Abingdon Press. 1983) pg 33
57 Walker. *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism.* Pg 116
almost to night, in the work, taking about fifteen or sixteen families a week, that we may go through the parish, in which there are upwards of eight hundred families, in a year; and I cannot say that one family hath yet refused to come to me, and but a few persons excused themselves, and shifted it off."\(^{58}\) At first, Baxter sought to visit his parish, whether the parishioner was a member of his church or not, in their homes. This became too much work, so he set a schedule for the entire parish throughout the year to come to him. It is a testament to his influence and skill that very few did not fulfill their appointment with him.

In *The Reformed Pastor*, Baxter's passion for caring for his people is almost shocking to our modern sensibilities. The direct question he asked at every meeting, regardless of person or situation, was "How goes it with your soul?" The meeting was not done until he had an answer. Further, he advises pastors to know the names of all in the congregation. Baxter quotes Ignatius, "Let assemblies be often gathered; inquire after all by name: despise not servant-men or maids."\(^{59}\) If this becomes problematic, Baxter states the pastor should hire an assistant and pay him from his very own salary. To the concern that it will lessen a pastor family's income, Baxter says, "if you have but a hundred pounds a year, it is your duty to live upon part of it, and allow the rest to a competent assistant, rather than that the flock which you are over should be neglected. If you say, that it is a hard measure, and that your wife and children cannot so live, I answer, Do not many families in your parish live on less?"\(^{60}\) The importance of caring for the congregation and the parish were of such importance that Baxter made the above recommendation based on his own experience.

Presaging psychological profiling of the 20th century, Baxter devised a category table of 13 characteristics for the families of his parish. Using wholly theological categories, the 'lowest' being "unregenerate" to the 'highest' being "sanctified", Baxter was able to walk into a family's house and know how to speak with them about the faith. At the bottom of his scale, simple catechesis and training in prayer along with pastoral counsel was given, along with perhaps a


\(^{59}\) Ibid; pg 91

\(^{60}\) Ibid; pg 92
Bible and a catechetical book. At the other end, Baxter sought to build up the faithful per Paul's counsel in his letters. The category which took precedence, however, was the "conversion of the unconverted." He made this claim not on the basis of mere desire to convert, but out of a sense of compassion. "The work of conversion is the first and great thing we must drive at; after this we must labor with all our might. Alas! the misery of the unconverted is so great, that it calleth loudest to us for compassion." 61

Baxter further outlines how one should work with inquirers, the faithful, the sick and dying, the backsliding and sinful, and he has a particular concern for the state of families. Since the faith thrives only insofar as it is practiced in the home, it was imperative that the state of the family be well understood.

In *Reformed Pastor*, Baxter offers five steps to understanding the family. First, the pastor must get a sense of how the family is ordered, in order to know how to speak with them appropriately. Second, visit them on a regular basis, particular when they are not busy, and ask whether they pray and read Scripture together. Teach them if they do not. Thirdly, if they are unable to pray, give them a prayer they can recite together. "Persuade them to study their own wants, and to get their hearts affected with them." 62 In other words, get them talking as a family about what they really want in their life of faith and to align their desires accordingly. Fourth, give them books that are useful to the faith above and beyond the Bible. Baxter states that a congregation "cannot be saved without knowledge." 63 These should be read out loud for the whole family. And finally, the family should be directed as to how to spend the Sabbath. Baxter betrays a deep sense of the state of the impoverished in his community. "The life of religion dependeth much on this, because poor people have no other free considerable time; and, therefore, if they lose this, they lose all, and will remain ignorant and brutish." 64 By "ignorant and brutish" I take Baxter to mean that a family, without free unencumbered time together, will be

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61 Ibid; pg 94
62 Ibid; pg 101
63 Ibid; pg 92
64 Ibid; pg 101
completely subject to their impoverished circumstances and descend into in-fighting and loss of faith.

Baxter's shepherding of his flock had long-lasting effects. The catechesis he provided and the solidarity of family and faith community was recognized by George Whitefield (1714-1770), the great Methodist preacher of the Great Awakening, almost a century later when, in 1743, he visited Kidderminster. "I was greatly refreshed to find what a sweet savour Mr. Baxter's doctrine, works and discipline remained to this day."

It would be an oversight to not point out that the first section of Baxter's book *The Reformed Pastor* details that the foundation of this pastoral work begins with the pastor her/himself. "Be that which you persuade your hearers to be and believe that which you persuade them to believe and heartily entertain that Savior whom you offer to them." The damage done to a congregation when the pastor does not practice what he preaches is devastating, and the fact remains that "preachers of the Gospel must be judged by the Gospel." Ultimately, a pastor must not lose sight of the fact that "we are the nurses of Christ's little ones."

One of the most compelling aspects of the concern for the care and cure of souls in the Puritan tradition is the pastoral element of the theology that feeds the tradition. Theological reflection was never divorced from the practical realities of ministry. Thus, even in deeply theological works, the experience of the theologian as pastor rises quickly to the surface. The Puritans fully recognized that the goal is to "equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ." (Eph 4:12-13) Theology fuels ministry directly, and ministry influences directly the practicality of one's theology. The two disciplines cannot be separated. The truly great theologians of the Puritan tradition, as with all Christian traditions, were first and foremost deeply compassionate pastors.

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66 Ibid; pg 54
67 Ibid; pg 73
Theological Considerations of Pastoral Visits

William Ames (1576-1633) was one such pastor theologian. Educated with many other Puritans at Christ's College in Cambridge, England, Ames was deeply influenced by the teachings of William Perkins (1558-1602), one of the early Puritan teachers there. Whereas the most influential Puritans of the time were Separatists, who sought a clean break with the Church of England, Ames refused to adopt this position, even when he was denied posting as a fellow at Christ's College in 1607 and as pastor at Colchester around 1609 for his nonconformist theology. Under persecution, he arrived in the Netherlands in 1610. There he tangled with John Robinson (1575-1625) of the Leyden separatists (who 10 years later would sail for America in the Mayflower) and was able to get Robinson to moderate his separatist views somewhat. Ames acted as a freelance pastor for several nonconformist English congregations around Holland, eventually becoming chaplain of The Hague in 1611.

*The Marrow of Theology* stands as Ames great contribution to Reformed theology and it is a work of deep thought and care. He sought to ameliorate some of the more difficult doctrines of Calvin, while at the same time directly challenging the Arminian heresy surging through the Reformed world at the time. He illustrates the Puritan balancing act between personal will and action and the sovereignty of God through Election and Predestination with an artful flair and logic that deserves deeper study and attention than I give here.

Ames discussion in *The Marrow of Theology* on the nature of humanity and the conditions under which it functions applies to our concerns in this paper. On the issue of predestination, Ames clarifies the potential exclusionary nature of the doctrine by first affirming Calvin's sense that predestination "is unmovable and indissoluble."\(^6\) The use of the doctrine, however, as an attempt to exclude others is baseless and without scriptural evidence. "Hence, it is not necessary, nor does it agree with the Scriptures, to appoint any previous quality in man which might be considered the formal object of predestination. No condition in any man decides that

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\(^{68}\) Ibid; pg 61

\(^{69}\) Ames. *The Marrow of Theology*. Book I, xxv, 7. pg 152
others should be excluded. It is sufficient only to understand that men, equal among themselves, are the object of the decree..."\[70\]

With this context in mind, Ames seeks to play out the "fruits of the Spirit" and the resistance to those fruits. In the arena of resistance, Ames shows remarkable insight into the potential psychological state of those resistant to the faith. Under the heading of "Testing God", he elucidates that a person may rebel against God "when a person desires and expects something but refuses the means necessary for it."\[71\]. The doubt or unbelief shown by a person may be suggestive that "he who tests God does not sufficiently trust the revealed word of God."\[72\]. Or a person's difficulty with faith may derive from despair. "Not expecting the promises of God, men wish to tell God in inordinate haste, as it were, when and how he may satisfy their expectations."\[73\]. Presaging modern popular psychology, Ames determined low esteem, combined with contempt of God may suggest a rejection of the love inherent in the Gospel, because of a sense of deep unworthiness.\[74\]. Or arrogance and pride overwhelm us to such an extent that we attempt to make God's "will subject to our lust."\[75\]. In my reading of this section of *The Marrow* Ames is providing access points for how we can understand the state of people who are coming to pastors for guidance, or who are falling away from the congregation. Testing God, he says, comes from a presumption that "God will do something which he has never promised, or at least has not promised in the manner and by the means expected."\[76\]

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) derived much from William Ames, but adopted a much more strict theology with regard to Election and Predestination. At the height of his ministry during the Great Awakening of the mid-1700s in America, he drew huge crowds to hear him

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\[70\] Ibid; Book I, xxv, 10. pg 153
\[71\] Ibid; Book II, xii, 10. pg 276
\[72\] Ibid; Book II, xii, 11. pg 276
\[73\] Ibid; Book II, xii, 12. pg 276
\[74\] Ibid; Book II, xii, 13. pg 276
\[75\] Ibid; Book II, xii, 14. pg 276
\[76\] Ibid; Book II, xii, 15. pg 276
preach in a dull monotone for upwards of two and a half hours at a time. He claimed only the Holy Spirit could be responsible since he would not willingly listen to himself that long.\textsuperscript{77}

Considered harsh in preaching by many, if not in words then in length of sermon, he was also loved as a pastor by many more. His reputation as a pastoral counselor was renowned, in particular because of his honesty. Often criticized for being too positive and affirming, he had written that a pastor should be "easy of access...open and free, pitiful and compassionate, tender and gentle."\textsuperscript{78} Because of his capacity to embody this advice, he was sought out by people from miles away for counsel. He was able to balance his counsel with honesty of their condition with compassionate concern, a model for many at the time and following.

\textit{Avenues for The Care and Cure of Souls Today}

Having explored the primary areas that the care and cure of souls expressed itself in Puritan practice and theology, we can ask what we can bring forward for today. At the outset, I would remind us of the difficulties mentioned early on in this paper with regard to the "unchecked meanness" of Puritan theology as it occasionally expressed itself, particularly in the early American experience and in the Glorious Revolution in Britain. I would hold these difficult aspects of Puritanism and Congregationalism to the harsh light of human experience and behavior rather than being necessarily indicative of the specifics of the Puritan faith itself. I am not seeking to make excuses, merely to not misdirect our discussion with regard to what is useful.

To that end, let's first look at what no longer applies from the tradition. Exclusionary understandings of Election and Predestination will not help us in our present situation with regard to the "militant-visible-church."\textsuperscript{79} There are aspects which are valuable here, which will be discussed below. Using these ideas against their original intent is what gets us into trouble today. Exclusion, rejection and undue judgment were never the intention of these doctrines. Assurance and comfort were, and always have been, their intention. Calvin himself, in his Commentaries, states, "Those who seek their or others' salvation in the labyrinth of predestination, while they

\textsuperscript{77} I do not recall where I read this. I believe it was in a book about the art of preaching I read several years ago.

\textsuperscript{78} Holifield. \textit{A History of Pastoral Care in America}. Pg 91, quoting Jonathan Edwards.
move out of the way of faith set before them, are insane by such absurd speculation, they even try to do away with the power and effect of predestination."\(^{80}\)

Undue focus on sin and judgment as a manipulative tool to conversion and repentance no longer works, whether in preaching or private council. In the Great Awakenings of the 1700s, this had some effect, although this attitude also generated a backlash of pastors who rejected and resisted participation in the revivalist fervor. The very reason these pastors, mainly Presbyterians and some rationalists like Charles Chauncey (1747-1823) (before his adoption of Unitarianism), resisted the Great Awakenings was precisely because of the manipulation of feelings by the raging against sin that some of the Awakening pastors participated in. The worst offender was James Davenport (1716-1757). In 1740, Davenport focused his primary attention in Connecticut and the surrounding vicinity. He would scream from the stage for people to burn books and melt down jewelry, rail against local pastors and eventually caused laws to be passed to dissuade unruly gatherings for religious purposes.\(^{81}\)

It would be a mistake to hear what I am saying to mean we should not talk about sin and judgment, or Election and predestination as pastors. The way we talk about these Christian realities, however, should take a lesson in what not to do from the manipulative use of such preaching and counsel in the early religious growth in America. Clearly, it is precisely in the personal acknowledgment of sin and evil, its pervasiveness and our inability to control it in ourselves and the world that a person begins to see the deep need of God and Christ in his/her life. God, however, does not force or manipulate repentance or salvation upon any of us and it is in our best interests as pastors and preachers to model accordingly for others by rejecting the manipulation of negative emotions and fear as modes of conversion.

\(^{79}\) Cf, footnote #8
Our Situation Today

As we explore what we can draw from our past, we need to reconsider our position as Christians in general and Congregationalists in particular within the present day and age. In many ways, Christianity faces a great opportunity, rather than a crisis. As the Christian framework, which formerly defined not only American culture but most of Western culture, collapses rapidly, the church is confronted with a situation it usually perceives from a position of fear. In Europe and America, we are approaching a situation where Christianity is rapidly becoming a diminishing faith or belief system, relative to secular beliefs and other world religions. The most common response to the fear of a world no longer defined by Christianity is reactionary thinking, at least in the public domain. As a result, the "militant" part of the Cambridge Platform is interpreted literally, when it meant, at the time of its conception, merely "worldly".

We, as Christian leaders and pastors, should welcome the collapse of Christendom and the disappearance of Christianity as the modeling metaphor for society as an opportunity to experience the Christian Way as the first disciples experienced it - powerfully, present and predicated on personal relationship and intimacy, not institutional reinforcement. Thus, my concern in this paper is not about maintaining the superstructure of historical Christendom. It is instead about re-visioning the Christian faith to make it a "light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6), a small beacon of hope in a vast sea of injustice. The Christian Way should, just as it did in the first 300 years of its existence, willingly and expectantly walk out with faith, hope and trust that it can fight its way and maintain its truth in the marketplace of ideas, without the institutionalized influence of government, money and power determining its strength and credibility.

To that end, the Congregational church seems to offer the best model for promoting and honoring the beginnings of the Way of Christ. We are not subject to any authority except Christ. Our church structure deliberately maintains autonomy while seeking a polity that gives the power of the Spirit to the congregation itself, the Body of Christ, where it belongs. Covenant theology,

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81 Steven Bailey. Lecture at Boston Seminar, 8/16/06
as a solidly Biblical means of maintaining integrity and authenticity, demands an intentional gathering that affirms our desire to submit to God's desires with one another, as a people of God. The deep, historical concern for personal conscience provides an atmosphere of tolerance that promotes, if not demands, discussion and fellowship. In its ideal form, Congregational polity mirrors the mutuality that God desires with God's people and that Christ had with his disciples.

Of course, I speak in ideals above, but the Way of Christ is itself a way of idealism and hope in the fulfillment of those ideals. It is foolishness to the skeptical and disbelieving because they want a sign from heaven for proof, and it is foolishness to the rational and worldly because they wish to believe only what agrees with their own wisdom. (cf: 1 Cor 1:22) It is precisely into this ideal that I wish to affirm some of these elements of the Congregational tradition, and it is within this context that I think we are best able to deal with the spiritual malaise of our time.

What then rises to the surface that should be held up in our Way that would seek to cure and care for the souls that are drawn into our fold?

Preaching

In the context of preaching, the continuing Congregational preacher would do well to reclaim the arena of difficult theological issues. Five come to mind, which we spoke of early on: Election, Predestination, Sin, Judgment and Assurance. There are many others. The preacher is not an 'answer person', nor is s/he a 'yes person'. Instead, as the Salem Covenant affirms, "we walk together in all God's ways." To that end, the preacher seeks to provide ways of reading Scripture and applying it to the busy life of Monday through Saturday, thereby proclaiming the presence and reality of Jesus Christ in our lives. These difficult elements of Christian, particularly Election and predestination, if it is remembered, functioned for the desert fathers, Luther, Calvin, and others as pastoral claims that offered assurance for troubled souls. They were doctrines that spoke to the unconditionality of God's covenant with His chosen people. For our moderate to liberal association, what would preaching on these topics look like today? How could these

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82 Soren Kierkegaard, in one of his great texts, says when everyone is a Christian there are no Christians, meaning there is nothing which defines or sets apart the Christian, either from the culture or even him/herself. The context for differentiation and comparison disappears.
doctrines be preached today without falling victim to the tragic displays of exclusion and rejection that often characterize these doctrines?

Reverend Dr. David Fisher, now senior pastor at Henry Ward Beecher's church, Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims in Brooklyn, NY, wrote a book called *The 21st Century Pastor.* Writing about preaching, Fisher points to the loss of authority the pastor used to hold. There is a balancing act between the authority of the office and the earned authority that comes with time in the congregation, and we have seen numerous examples of the abuse of both authorities. Be that as it may, because of the anti-authoritarian age we live in, where anyone in authority is suspect, it is imperative that we review where our authority comes from. It comes from Christ and, like Paul, we are ambassadors of and for Christ. This is a powerful and humbling thing, fraught with danger and potential for abuse. "Nevertheless, we are called to minister for Christ in a manner that bears the dignity of our King, with confidence appropriate to envoys of God, and with the loving concern of our King who died for the world."

With such a vision in place, the pastor can wade into any theological difficulty with trust and confidence, and without fear of ambiguity. It is the tragedy of our time that all our activities are subject to a straight answer and a clear fact. The true irony is that Christianity is concretely a faith that willfully and decisively places itself in the greatest of ambiguities - the space between life and death, between the present and eternity, between "unwavering hope" (Heb 10: 23) and complete desolation and despair (Lk 24:13-24 - the Road to Emmaus). In that space of the 'already' and 'not yet', we do not get answers. Instead, we get a companion in Christ. This is the place Rev. Fisher proclaims we go with confidence and authority.

The care and cure of souls comes, in preaching with confidence and authority as our Puritan predecessors did, in the hope and assurance that Christ is the final Word about death and eternity and that we are participants in that great hope. In today's world, the constant struggle in churches and the talk of seminaries is how to grow the Church. What about the youth? How do

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84 Ibid; pgs 230-233
85 Ibid; pg 240
we keep them there? How do we attract people with our preaching, our programming, our ... on and on it goes. Congregationalism as a polity and as a tradition stands in opposition to this sort of thinking. The concern for the intentional gathering of others in mutual fellowship does not engender a consumer mentality and, as a result, does not engender capitulation to the culture of "church-shopping", as if faith were a commodity to be bought and sold. Authoritative preaching that seeks to expand the love for neighbor and God through Christ, to assure us of our salvation as a people, is a rare thing these days. But for almost three centuries, the Puritans and the Congregational pastor took these ideas very seriously, to the point that Congregational pastors had a dual reputation for being deeply authentic and deeply concerned about their congregations and communities from a strong basis in Scripture.

Since preaching is such a subjective process, both for preacher and congregation, I leave the discussion with simply the call to reclaim the authority once held by Jonathan Robinson, Cotton and Increase Mather, Jonathan Edwards, Henry Ward Beecher, Washington Gladden, and countless other great Congregational preachers. What marks these great preachers is not simply the clear expression of the Gospel, but primarily and foremost a genuine care and love for the people they were speaking to, a concern that manifested a deep willingness to care and cure the souls that graced their congregation in the name and grace of Christ.

Prayer, Journaling and Meditation

The practices of prayer, journaling and meditation are valuable resources from the Puritan and Congregational past that would go far to healing the spiritual wounds we suffer today. Prayer is a practice that must be taught. Aside from the examples throughout Scripture, mostly clearly in the Psalms, people learn to pray by listening to how their pastor and church leaders pray. It has been said that "if you show me how you pray, I will show you what you believe about God." To that end, it is imperative we learn from Richard Baxter, who sought to teach those he visited how to pray. Until they were capable of praying on their own, he gave his parishioners prayers to read. In other words, we must be taught to pray. This comes from the pulpit as well as

86 Ibid; pg 241
we keep them there? How do we attract people with our preaching, our programming, our ... on and on it goes. Congregationalism as a polity and as a tradition stands in opposition to this sort of thinking. The concern for the intentional gathering of others in mutual fellowship does not engender a consumer mentality and, as a result, does not engender capitulation to the culture of "church-shopping", as if faith were a commodity to be bought and sold. Authoritative preaching that seeks to expand the love for neighbor and God through Christ, to assure us of our salvation as a people, is a rare thing these days. But for almost three centuries, the Puritans and the Congregational pastor took these ideas very seriously, to the point that Congregational pastors had a dual reputation for being deeply authentic and deeply concerned about their congregations and communities from a strong basis in Scripture.

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86 Ibid; pg 241
of Christian meditation to great effect. It was an absolutely essential practice for preachers to bridge the word of the Gospel and personal experience over to the people of the congregation. It was taught and practiced for centuries. Because it was a private practice, we simply do not hear about this aspect of Puritan and Congregational tradition. It is perhaps its most surprising aspect.

In what by many would be considered high irony, Puritan meditation practice can still be found in progressive Roman Catholic communities.⁹⁰ We should be grateful that it has survived in that realm and recognize that the Catholic tradition is often a holding area for lost traditions waiting to be reclaimed by their original progenitors. Presented as an integral part of Christian practice, along with prayer, worship, fellowship and service, Puritan meditation was and would be a powerful and invaluable way to help people take personal responsibility for their faith, see the personal application of Scripture in their lives at a fundamental level and foster fellowship and community because of the intimate nature of meditation. This practice bears the need for study and resurrection because it brings forth powerful gifts of the Spirit. We have abandoned this practice to our great loss as a tradition.

Finally, the arena of direct pastoral care and cure of souls is an integral part of the Congregational tradition. And in this area, Congregationalist pastors are at the vanguard. In this busy day and age, many pastors in most traditions have abandoned visiting people in their homes and even given over the counsel of parishioners to therapists and secular counselors. But the Congregational tradition has held tightly to this practice. Referring to Reverend Dr. Fisher’s work, he suggests, with the Biblical authority of 1 Thessalonians 2:11, that we deal with our congregation “as a father deals with his children.” In a time of history where the image of the father has been abused and dismantled for any number of reasons, Fisher is asking that we

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⁹⁰ The Catholic website, www.sharetheword.net, appears to be no longer active. It had a lengthy description of how to do Puritan meditation and spoke of it being used in many Catholic churches. Beeke’s previously referenced book has reclaimed the hows and whys of Puritan meditation in Puritan Reformed Spirituality. Also, http://theconventicle.blogspot.com/2006/10/puritan-meditation.html has a lengthy article on the foundations of Puritan meditation, just posted at the end of October 2006. (accessed 12/2/06).
reclaim the positive aspects of fatherhood for our ministry. Further, he also proclaims we reclaim the image of motherhood in our ministry as well.91

Pastoral Visits to the People

The reclamation of pastoral authority spoken of in preaching also asks that we reclaim that authority in the visiting of families. We must not allow capitulation to the prevailing busy-ness of the culture influence our decisions in this regard. In fact, it is precisely because of this busy-ness that the pastor should visit the family. In fact, the reasons for doing this are identical to the reasons Richard Baxter recommended 350 years ago. Faith and unity of family are integrally linked, and it is the culture that breaks apart that unity and that link. Just as the Gospel breaks into our lives from the outside without regard for our personal process or even circumstance, so also the pastor should be for the families of her congregation. This does not mean simply arriving unannounced, as Baxter did on occasion. While we are breaking into the schedule of the people, we must honor it as well. It does mean insisting with our reclaimed Gospel authority that we be invited into the home of those families.

The Congregational tradition bears this insistence out. Because of its structure, the intentionality and mutuality of the Congregational church allows a pastor to think in terms of intimacy, personal attention and counsel. In contrast to our age of church growth and megachurches, the Congregational tradition had the practice of splitting a church once it became too large for the pastor to know everyone in the congregation. This may comprise 10 families, or it may be 50 or 100 families; if the pastor could no longer know the names and relationships in a church, the church was split to maintain intimacy and fellowship. Congregationalists consistently thought in terms of community, relationship and fellowship — not in terms of growth.

There is another aspect to this intimate concern for the care and cure of souls for which the Congregational church is perfectly created, and that is the present state of our culture. The Congregational church has always had a "missional" focus, a desire to reach out beyond its walls to help and guide others. Because the concern of the Congregational church is not doctrine in the
sense of enforcing creeds or even orthodoxy, but rather with the way we "do church", we are in the position of 'looking up from below' to the needs of the people.\footnote{I am not saying that doctrine is not important – it is deeply important. Rather, doctrine is not the fundamental purpose behind Congregational polity, as opposed to, say, Lutheranism or Catholicism. In our tradition, doctrine derives from trust in the Holy Spirit to guide the individual conscience in interpretation of Scripture and faith.} We are willing to work with other denominations, people of differing theologies and even beliefs to further and find ways to increase the Kingdom of God.

We face a culture that is becoming crowded with "unchurched", "no-church", "post-church" and "rejecters and rejected of church." We as an association of 'continuing Congregationalists' in the NACCC face this situation with the possibility and potential of personal contact, intimacy, commitment and fellowship. It is exactly here that we can draw upon the deep tradition embodied in most of the Congregational ministers we have looked at in this paper and seek to be "sought unto, not only by his own people, but by many who live(d) scores of miles off."\footnote{Not for our preaching, although may God's blessing be upon that Good Word, but for our personal counsel and insight.} Not for our preaching, although may God's blessing be upon that Good Word, but for our personal counsel and insight.

To that end, we should also look to Baxter and to William Ames, and seek to find ways to identify where people are in their journey of faith. While it may be of value to use some of the psychological models as a basis for this (Myers-Briggs, MMPI, etc), it would be of more value to develop our own theologically based models. Part of what allowed Hooker, Baxter, Robinson, Edwards and others to be sought after and beloved was their ability to discern the spiritual condition of those whom they counseled. Further, they knew their Bible well enough to speak from the stories therein to a person's particular state.

In this day and age, people are seeking authenticity, guidance and hope in a morass of competing ideas and concepts. It is within the personal relationship manifested in the congregation and with the pastor her/himself that is the deciding factor, not truth or doctrine. These are important and are not to be overlooked, but today they are trumped by relationship, authenticity and the possibility of commitment to those things. In other words, what people seek
in a church today is a place that will care and nurture their soul and their family and will provide
counsel and guidance to cure and heal the wounds our spiritual selves have suffered in the present
world. We have a tradition of doing this with integrity, authenticity, intentionality and deep care,
precisely the qualities our present generations seek in the formation of their faith.

**Conclusion**

In the Care and Cure of Souls, then, the Congregational church, particularly within the
NACCC, we offer a powerful platform and tradition. Intentionality heals the broken and transient
communities we are a part of these days. In the Congregational way, the covenant provides the
potential for commitments to be formed and acted upon in the context of a relationship with God
and with fellow believers in a way that allows for exploration and peaceful discussion. Our
concern for personal conscience with regard to interpretation of Scripture provides the foundation
for exploration and discussion. There is an implicit assumption in this fundamental aspect of
Congregationalism that actual study and meditation upon Scripture is actually occurring. This
intentionality and freedom of personal conscience was envisioned in the Savoy Declaration. In
the implicit recognition through covenant that our only authority is God and Christ, "God alone is
the Lord of Conscience, and hath left it free from the Doctrines and Commandments of men...and
the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blinde obedience, is to destroy the Liberty
of Conscience and Reason also."\(^94\)

As an outcome of intentionally covenanting "one with another", communication is
fostered and encouraged. This communication has two dimensions: vertically, with God, and
horizontally, with each other. In its ideal form, a Congregational church becomes transparent as a
result of these dimensions. Ideally, this is meant to reinforce open channels of communication.
Because we are human, of course, the ideal rarely matches reality, but it should be noted that the
Congregational sensibility has a noble tradition of working very well. We would do well to look
to our neighbors in polity, the Unitarian-Universalists, to see how well this can work on a

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\(^93\) Holifield. *A History of Pastoral Care in America*. This was said of Jonathan Edwards in a eulogy at his
death. Pg 91

functional level (not in terms of belief or doctrine). Virtually all the people in a UUA church are aware of how the church functions and its inner workings. I wonder, without a deliberate campaign to train and educate the congregation, how many NACCC churches understand the function and nature of a Congregational church.95

Through the acting out of our intentional covenant relationships, and the communication engendered through that covenant, mutuality begins to form and increase amongst people. More importantly, our understanding of how God works with and through us deepens. Christ as mediator, reconciler and intercessor becomes our guide in our relations with others and spreads outward.

Through the preached Word, we learn the principles and guidance available in Scripture, receive assurance in our relationship with Christ and how it is made real in our lives today. Through prayer, we deepen our mutual relationship with God and Christ. Through meditation, we increase our understanding and the depth of the guidance available to us in our spiritual lives. And in the personal interaction modeled by Richard Baxter and others, we build up the community of faith and spread the Good News through the good works of the Spirit in communion with others. In worship, all these things are affirmed, particularly in our gathering at the Lord's Table for communion, where we are assured as the gathered people of the promises of God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Service to others shows the world that the basis of our concern comes from an intentional commitment to a mutual relationship with God and thus all whom we might meet.

Central to all this – preaching, prayer and pastoral visits - is Jesus Christ, in whom we find both the model and the inner guidance for our faith and ministry. Since, in our tradition, there is no higher authority, we can go forward in confidence, following in the proud footsteps of those who have gone before us, in whom God was pleased to reveal God's self, and in whom we can learn to walk together in all His ways.

95 1st Congregational Church of Wauwatosa recently completed a long-term re-visioning of the church covenant that did precisely this, to great effect. Rev. Dr. Steven Peay is senior minister.
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