

All Are Holy, Every One of Them
(submitted for consideration for the J.J. Russell Sermon Award)

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Numbers 16.2-3
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(p. 118, pew Bibles) "... two hundred fifty Israelite men, leaders of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men ... confronted Moses. They assembled against Moses and against Aaron, and said to them, "You have gone too far! All the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them. So why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?"

Dr. Harry Butman, the man I like to refer to as the Dean of American Congregationalism, used to cite this passage as the first example of Congregationalism in the Bible. While interviewing him for the article about him that I wrote a few years back, he expounded upon this. "Well," he said, "Moses was a prince of Egypt and so he was pretty dictatorial. And his brother Aaron, as a priest, ran things pretty much as he pleased."¹

Korah was the leader of the two hundred fifty other leaders of the congregation who challenged Moses and Aaron. "They had their point," Dr. Butman maintained, "and it was Congregational."²

Some of you know that I served a United Methodist Church for a few years, a little over ten years ago now. That denomination's reading material began to cross my desk and, in fact still does, along with that of several denominations. And, I was reading a Methodist magazine at one point during that time, and a phrase jumped out at me. That phrase was, "creeping congregationalism." The article was decrying the desire, and demand, by many Methodist congregations to make their own decisions regarding the calling of their ministers and the expenditure of their monies. Imagine that!

I did a web search for "creeping congregationalism," while I was writing the article on Dr. Butman and got about thirteen hits, mostly from United Methodists, who seemed to have coined the term, but also from Presbyterians and Lutherans. Today, you get over forty hits, with at least two coming from the Anglican Church and one coming from the Roman Catholic Church. Well. It's no longer creeping. In fact, in one article, Congregationalism was described first as "creeping" but later as "rampant."

The authors of the writings I found on the web sound a bit like Moses and Aaron in our biblical text today. In our scripture passage, we read, "All the congregation are holy, every one of them." Who can argue with that? Apparently Moses and Aaron did. Further on in the sixteenth chapter of Numbers, in verse 19, we read that "the glory of the Lord appeared to the whole congregation."

But, this glory of the Lord appears as the Levite priest Korah is assembling the congregation against Moses and Aaron. And, what is the response of Moses and Aaron? They have Korah and his kindred swallowed up by the earth, along with the original two hundred fifty leaders who first confronted Moses.

Why is this text in our Bible? Are we supposed to side with Moses and Aaron, the heroes of the faith? Are we supposed to side with Korah? What is going on?

¹ Giovan Venable King, "The Revd Dr. Harry R. Butman," *Journal of International Congregationalism*, vol. 3.1 (February 2003), 85.

² Ibid.

As the author of Ecclesiastes wrote, “There is nothing new under the sun.” I would be willing to bet that this was basically an all-too-familiar fight within a congregation that was supposed to be united by God. Does that sound familiar? Or does it sound like a hopelessly dated story from thousands of years ago?

That is a rhetorical question. It happens today, all the time, within an individual, local church. It happens in synagogues. It happens in denominations and associations. It happens at the national and at the international level.

I’m sure you know that several denominations are having some pretty heated battles these days over issues of sexuality and ministry. And, I know that there are several points of view on these issues within our congregation – probably more points of view than members of the congregation.

Anyway, people are fighting. People are getting hurt. People are trying to destroy others, sometimes, who hold views different from their own. Not a bit of it is Christian. I believe God tells each of this, if we just listen.

But, what happens when individuals, or churches, believe they have checked something out with God, and God has given them the definitive answer ... and not everyone’s definitive answer is the same?

Can there be more than one point of view within a church, without that church splitting in two ... or three ... or four? Can there be more than one point of view within a church, without those holding a certain view being “swallowed up by the earth”? Congregationalism says, “Yes, that is possible!” And, that is probably why congregationalism is creeping – the better term from our point of view is flowing – yes, flowing - into gathered flocks of faithful Christians, and probably into other religious groups as well.

Remember what a difficult time we have had with some of the Parables of Jesus, in our Adult Sunday School class? Think about all of the different answers we have had to the questions raised in the class. And, think about some of the questions for which none of us has had definitive answers. When you think about it, I believe you will realize that Jesus left us with more questions, and puzzles, than with answers.

Jesus told us to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. Jesus told us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Jesus didn’t tell us just how to do that.

Still, we have been given each other, and without each other, we can’t experience that love. Without each other, we can’t express that love. That is why two or three must be gathered together.

Augustine once likened the Trinity to that most precious phrase, “I love you.” That is the only real response to the Great Commandment. And, the condition inherent in that phrase cannot exist without the one doing the loving, the beloved, and the love itself. They simply can’t exist one without the other and fulfill the Great Commandment, to love God and neighbor.

Further, that love cannot be practiced by mandate. That love can only be lived out as an expression of the heart, freely given. Likewise, each individual church needs other churches in order to live out its own mission to fulfill the Great Commandment. And, that loving relationship between churches cannot be mandated, either.

I believe hierarchical church bodies know this instinctively. And, they are coming face to face with it and calling it “creeping congregationalism.”

But, I don’t believe I hear churches saying that they don’t want to fellowship with other churches in their denominations or associations or beyond. I believe I hear

churches saying that they want to fellowship while living out their faith in a way that is true to who they are. Sometimes that means taking a stand on an issue that is in conflict with a stand their national church body has taken. Sometimes that means choosing to spend their resources in one particular way instead of another.

Sure, there are some lone rangers. We have members here at our Church who sort of “do their own thing” and each time they walk out of the Fellowship Hall, after Church, we wonder if we will ever see them again, or, if we do, if they will ever volunteer to help with one of the church projects, or bring refreshments, or – yes – tithe, or whatever.

We have churches like that in our regional Cal-West Association, and then even more churches like that in our National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. How can we love them, and fellowship with them, and live out our covenant to walk with them in all of God’s ways, unless they show up every now and then?

We can’t. The love we want to give has to be received before we have that magic loving relationship that God wants for all of us to have with each other.

Can someone you disagree with nonetheless receive and accept the love you offer? Just as important, can you offer that love? Can our Church love and have true fellowship with a Church with which it disagrees? Can that Church love and have true fellowship with us?

Creeping – NO - flowing – flowing congregationalism says, “Yes. That is possible!” Did Moses and Aaron have to do away with Korah and his family? I believe the historic reason for that Biblical event is similar to the rationale for what we know as orthodox, or catholic, Christianity in the 4th Century. In order to survive, certain leaders of the nascent faith felt that they had to exert a strong force over the rest of the faithful. There had to be unity, a united front, to face the outside, secular forces.

But, think of the strongest families you know, those strong in spiritual terms. Do all members agree on everything? Do they all live out their lives in the same exact ways? Do they become strong because of heavy-handed heads of the family that require undivided devotion? I doubt it.

Families become strong, spiritually, because their members challenge each other, yet at the end of the day sit down to dinner and pray together. The same can be said for churches, and denominations and associations. It can be said for the entire Christian family, the Church Universal. It can and should be said about all of humanity.

All of us are holy, every last one of us. No matter who we are or what we believe. And, if we will only let it, the glory of the Lord can appear to the whole congregation, and the whole of the earth. How can that happen? I believe we have been given a glimpse of the answer to that question in this passage in Numbers. None of us, individually or as a group, can exalt ourselves over the others and experience the true glory of God.

We are all pilgrims on this journey through life. None of us has all the answers. Congregationalism is a reminder of that. And, that is why we ourselves can give thanks for this – not creeping – but flowing congregationalism – flowing like an ever-rolling stream. For it acknowledges the holiness, the sacredness of all. It requires humility of all. It will take us out of the Book of Numbers and put us into the Book of Acts. Because it takes loving and courageous, bold and gentle action on the part of each individual and each church. Its path is not easy. But its rewards are great. Let’s begin again. Right now. Amen.