

The 2000-01 Minns Lectures

**The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church:**

**The Spirit and the Promise of Our Covenant**

by Alice Blair Wesley

### Lecture 3: How We Came to Forget the Covenant for a Long Time

Love is the doctrine of this church. . .  
To dwell together in peace,  
To seek knowledge in freedom.  
To serve human need. . .  
Thus do we covenant with each other and with God.

We often read these lines in our services. Lovely and concise, they give voice to our historic doctrine of the free church. They give voice to what is at once finest and oldest in our nearly 400 years of North American Unitarian Universalist **institutional** history. Here is a brief account of our beginnings, which I spelled out at some length in Lectures 1 and 2.

In the late 16th and early 17th centuries, certain widespread groups in England, on the far left-wing of the Protestant Reformation, **radically** re-conceived **the organization of** the church. These people belonged to, but were very critical of the Church of England. They were highly sociable and highly literate people, of all economic classes, though largely of the new and “rising” middle class. Among them were many University professors, many University educated preachers and many tens of thousands of laypeople. I am talking about the English Puritans. They hated that name and did not themselves use it. They just called themselves Christians or - eventually - congregationalists.

These radical ancestors of ours said, we know - we experience - God as **the spirit of mutual love**. This reality alone is worthy of our utmost loyalty, our religious loyalty. Quoting scripture they said, “The spirit bloweth where it listeth.” Or, as Prof. James Luther Adams used to paraphrase their doctrine, “You **can’t make** the holy spirit work according to an organization chart.” That is to say, an understanding of what religious love requires of us does **not** flow from archbishop to bishops, to parish ministers, to the flocks in the pews.

Rather, said they, authentic churches are constituted by their members’ entry into a **covenant** - or promise - faithfully to walk together **in the spirit of mutual love**. They said, members of any **local** church, gathered in heartfelt union with the holy spirit of love, can discern together whither the spirit leads. Therefore, the most authentic church has **no head but** the holy spirit of love, or Christ. Their radical doctrine **re-located religious authority to the lived spirit among** covenanted members. Thus they denied authority to **all** forms of hierarchical government or ecclesiastical control of churches. In “the liberty of the gospel” members would obey **in the church**, not king or bishop but **only** the direction of the holy spirit working in their own hearts and minds.

That is the nub, by no means all, but the essence of what we have come to call the doctrine of congregational polity. We would, I think, better call it the doctrine of **covenantal** church organization.

Over the course of the 1630s - a decade - there occurred the Great Migration. Some 20,000 people crossed the Atlantic to establish, in the New England wilderness, a whole community of covenanted free churches. For some 200 years - until the early 1800s - these churches were identified, not by any “denominational” name, but simply as churches of the Standing Order. The oldest churches of our UU Association were churches of the Standing Order. That is, our congregations were among those established **in the 1630s** and somewhat later, as settlements spread from the Massachusetts Bay into the Connecticut Valley and beyond. (Our churches in Plymouth and Salem, MA were established in 1620 and 1629.)

Over the course of the 1700s - a century - many of these same churches **slowly**, and with relatively little controversy, became first Arminian in their anthropology and then unitarian in their theology of God. Around 1805 the theology of God and anthropology (the nature of human nature) did become matters of heated and divisive debate all over New England. As a result of this long debate - known as the Unitarian Controversy - our New England churches, already long unitarian, came in the 1800s to be **named** Unitarian.

Here is the feature of that history I want us to understand. **Not** a part of the Unitarian Controversy at all, was **the institutional side** of our church life: the authority of the members, of each independent congregation, together to write their own covenant, to elect and ordain their own ministers and to govern their churches in all ways. **Unitarian Churches uniformly and unanimously kept the doctrine of congregational polity, or covenantal organization, inherited from our 17th century founders.** Still today all our member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations (UUA) are organized in accordance with it. In Lecture 2 I listed eight elements of our founders’ doctrine of the church.

Still another, a 9th feature of any doctrine of the church has to do with authentic patterns of cooperation **among churches**. If a free congregation is a body of persons covenanted to walk together in love, must there not also be **a covenant of the churches** to walk together in love **as churches**, so that no congregation becomes **only** local? That is, too parochial in its concerns or **too isolated** to be helped in time of trouble? How ought free churches be related so that they can help one another?

I need clearly to say here: **This feature of our liberal doctrine of the church is muddled and has long been muddled.** And, I am driving toward a discussion of reform in just this aspect of our doctrine and practice in Lectures 5 and 6. But, I hold, to understand **how** we came to have such historically weak patterns of cooperation **among** our churches, we need also to understand how those

disputes over anthropology and the theology of God evolved as they did, in the Unitarian Controversy. So, in this Lecture 3 I will deal with these matters as well.

I need also to note here that Unitarian and Universalist congregations were not institutionally linked until the UUA was organized in 1961. (They earlier explored the possibilities of union and earlier cooperated in some limited ways.) In the time I have, I cannot even touch on the institutional history of our Universalist churches. Yet I think no Universalist historian would contradict me in this. Whatever Unitarian **or** Universalist period you want to talk about, you could well say this: However fine our churches have been, internally or out in the world, **never** have our churches been noted for the fine ways we cooperate with one another. A recent UUA president has said trying to get our churches to work together is “like herding cats.” Many a Unitarian and Universalist leader of the past 200 years would sigh from their graves, “ Ah, yes. ‘Like herding cats!’ ”

Human history is full of anomalies. This one, so patent among us, I want us to deal with. The 17th century articulation and practice, of the (then) **radical** covenantal doctrine of the free church, preceded **and led to** secular doctrines of political freedom, to the constitutional and democratic government of free states. Two historic political documents, *The Fundamental Orders of Connecticut* of 1639 and *The Massachusetts Body of Liberties* of 1641, written and adopted by **our** earliest church founders, served as models for the U.S. Constitution. In both, you can see the doctrine of congregational **governance** carried over and applied to civil **government**. Covenantal doctrine of the church changed - and is still changing - the course of world history. Yet, for a long stretch of time, the liberal doctrine of church governance received oddly little attention among us. In much of the 20th century we almost forgot the word covenant.

In 1988 the Rev. Judith Walker-Riggs addressed a colloquium on theology at a General Assembly. She said, “You won’t find congregational polity indexed in [the works of] . . . [And she reeled off a string of scholars’ names]. It is not mentioned in any of the articles about us in the Encyclopedias of Religion, and good UUs wrote those articles.”

It is only fair to add that Unitarian Prof. James Luther Adams long taught a course at Harvard Divinity School to our seminary students on the Radical Left-Wing of the Reformation. Conrad Wright, Harvard professor of church history (now emeritus), has told us in his books that, at its best, congregational polity - or covenantal organization - is the doctrine of a **community** of independent churches, **not** of independent churches in uncooperative isolation. And recently, in response to the work of a Commission, some leaders of our Association have been trying to get us to engage in a re-covenanting process. Some groups have done so. But it’s an uphill struggle because, as a people, we have forgot the history of our own practices.

I earlier quoted JLA saying, “There is no such thing as the immaculate conception of an idea.” All ideas are born of messy social intercourse. All ideas bear the marks of concrete events, which happened within and/or against the social structures of particular times. Now I want to say the same of forgetfulness. Ideas are not just lost to consciousness in a fit of absent mindedness. Social unawareness - of how and why we ever started doing things as we do - is the fruit of concrete events.

So, in this effort of mine to help us retrieve and reformulate our doctrine of the liberal church, I mean to sketch - not a full or definitive but - a plausible answer to the question: **Why, given our history, are UU churches so uncooperative?** To do that I will have to go back again to ideas and events of the 1600s and come forward.

### Cooperation Among Our Earliest Churches

Cooperation among churches of the Standing Order was, on theological grounds, never routine. But there was a great deal of it. In 1637 founders of the Dedham Church, e.g., spent a year meeting to decide how to establish their church. They made all their own decisions. But they several times sent one or two leaders to ask of another church, What do you think of so-and- so? or What did you do about this-or-that?

Also, from the beginning and for a good 250 years, there were many, many informally arranged pulpit exchanges. The ministers very often preached in other pulpits than their own. In the mid 1800s, Henry David Thoreau wrote, of the “Monday men” going home after pulpit exchanges, “They cross each other’s routes all the country over like warp and woof, making a garment of loose texture. . .” [*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*]

Lay members, too, wove the institutional “garment” with their travels. They went to Thursday lectures in other churches than their own, and these were often followed by hours of discussion. Lay members also attended Sunday services - morning and afternoon - when they visited friends, as they often did for a week or even a season.

More formally, when members of a local church were unable to resolve some difference, they asked for a Council meeting. On an appointed day, neighboring parishes each sent leaders, lay and ordained, to meet with the troubled church and hear all sides of the dispute. The Council then offered non-binding advice, most often accepted. And, on rare occasions, church leaders met in formal synods. Conclusions of a synod, like those of the Councils, were advisory only, until members of a local church voted to adopt them in their own meeting.

Thus, with no hierarchy, but with a number of well used **lateral** patterns of engagement, the churches influenced and helped each other substantially for some

200 years. These institutional patterns, by their very design, allowed both scrupulous respect for each congregation's independence and encouraged effective cooperation. On the whole they did both, quite well.

Even so, events began very early to complicate and weaken these patterns. To grasp their consequences, which still today ricochet around our movement, I think we have to try to grasp the spiritual experience our founders thought should be - had to be - at the heart of a covenanted church. I spoke of it a few minutes ago as "heartfelt union with the holy spirit of love." What did that phrase mean in our earliest churches? I explain this way.

### Salvation as Ecstasy, or Something More Sedate?

The generation that founded our churches came to New England with what I will call a "Cinderella" concept of salvation. **Every soul**, they held, is, like Cinderella, born into a **very low** estate she is **powerless** to change, but from which **she may be rescued, by the power of divine mutual love.**

The role of the Puritan preacher was akin to that of Cinderella's fairy godmother. His task was, with his preaching, to make Cinderella understand her ashy condition. That is, the hatefulness of her sinful state. But the preacher also made it possible for her to "go to the royal ball" and see the splendid life of the palace. The sermon, praising the glory of Christ, could arrange for the soul to "look in on" a far different and better life, as a stranger, an outsider unworthy of such a company. If she thus beheld Christ the Prince of Peace, she might fall in love with him and, therefore, earnestly mourn her low estate - her sinfulness - the more.

All the members of the church were also "Cinderellas," but they had already experienced the story. So they knew that if the plot goes forward, as it may, once any soul has been rightly **humbled of heart**, the Prince himself might, some time, suddenly appear directly to Cinderella. In the fairy tale the prince was able to find her because of the glass slipper business. In our forebears' story, the Prince had chosen her for his own before the foundation of the world. Indeed, **distress** over her sinful state was **a hopeful sign** that he **had** chosen her, that his prevenient grace was already working to ready her for transformation.

The salient point is the splendor, the **ecstasy**, of their union. In an extraordinary and exalted moment, the Prince/ Christ appeared to the individual soul directly, declared his love for that **one person** and claimed him or her as his bride. They married, and she or he was **in union with the holy spirit of love**, henceforth no stranger, but from that day a member of the royal household, the kingdom of God.

Now, as the old saying has it, the course of true love never runs smooth. Or, as we say now, good relationships take a lot of hard work, and growth in our

relationships can be very painful. Members of Puritan churches did not expect their spiritual lives to be all ecstasy, anything but. Yet the experience, of **ecstatically** transforming and sustaining **religious love**, our forebears understood as the normal and normative experience of members of the church, all of whom were, individually and corporately, the Bride of Christ. The covenant of the individual soul with Christ was a **mutual** bond of spiritual marriage, a union of love. The covenant of members with one another was, likewise, a binding mutual promise to walk **together** as a people loyal, before all else, to the holy spirit of love.

I have used this “Cinderella” language as a shortcut. My aim is to communicate an accurate **sense of** our ancestors’ spirituality. In our culture now, the pains and the ecstasy of “falling in love” are constantly celebrated in our popular art.

Some enchanted evening you may see a stranger,  
You may see a stranger across a crowded room. . .

If we’ve ever hummed along with those lyrics - or many others - we can be **empathetic with** our founders’ **religious** experience of “falling in love.”

Here are some sample quotations, such as can be picked almost at random from early 17th century Puritan sermons. This from John Preston, Cambridge professor, for a time court chaplain of Charles I, and “lecturer” to an association of London lawyers, in 1625.

. . . God the Father gives Christ to us, as a father gives his son as a husband to one in marriage. . . A man [should say in his heart], . . . that “all within the compass of this world is mine, (a great dowry), that Paul, . . . and all the good ministers that ever have been, have been for my sake. . .” When therefore your eyes are opened to the Lord himself, you will see such things in him as will make you fall in love with him. [*The Golden Sceptre: 6 Sermons on II Chron. 7: 14*]

Here is Thomas Hooker, who had much to do with the *Fundamental Orders of Connecticut*, preaching, in 1629.

Were it not a wonderful great folly if some great king should make love to a poor milkmaid, and she should put it off and refuse the match till she were a queen; whereas, if she will match with the king, he will make her a queen afterwards. So we must not look for sanctification [a raised spiritual estate] till we come to the Lord in vocation;

for this is all the Lord requires of thee: to see thy sins and be weary of them. . . [*The Poor Doubting Christian Drawn to Christ*]

Peter Bulkley was the first minister of our church in Concord, MA. These lines are from his book, *The Gospel Covenant*, published in 1651.

. . when the mighty God of heaven and earth takes his people into the covenant with him, he is a husband to them, and marries them to himself. .  
. As a woman may say of him to whom she is married, this man is my husband; and so may every faithful soul say of the Lord, he is my God.

The bridal metaphor was by no means the only one in our founding preachers' quiver. They used as great a wealth of rhetorical figures of speech as did Shakespeare. But the bridal metaphor is everywhere in the Puritan sermonic literature of the 17th century. It provides our best clue for understanding their doctrine of **preparation**.

Think of the emotional stages of the Cinderella story, as she passed through fear, humiliation, doubt, hopeful anticipation, the pleasure of being at the ball, followed by despair in face of her future. As these emotional stages are necessary to the plot of the Cinderella story, our ancestors believed similar **spiritual stages** must **necessarily** prepare every soul for the climactic moment of ecstatic spiritual union. Historian Harry Stout says sermon series often dealt, one at a time, with the **stages of preparation** for grace, and congregations loved these sermons. No wonder! They were about the most intimate and important experience of their lives, of which they never could tire of hearing.

Even so, there early occurred a development very puzzling and alarming to members. Before all the first generation had died, membership in the churches began to decline. Young adults of the second generation were not joining. Something had to be done. But what? Leaders came up with a solution called the Half-Way Covenant. First proposed in 1657 and adopted by a synod in 1662, it was never adopted by all the churches. Our Dedham Church refused and later adopted it two or three times. The Half-Way Covenant, I say, marks the beginning of a long, twist-y, wind-y path of historical developments in which the covenant began to lose its clear meaning as the mutual bond of love which **constitutes** the free church and determines the shape of its organization.

The issue in the 1650s and '60s came down to the **primacy of** ecstatic religious experience. Young adults were not applying to sign the covenant because they had had no ecstatic religious experience. And, since the church only baptized children of covenanted members, their babies could not be baptized and, so, had no claim on the care and nurture of the church. Two things here were unthinkable: 1)



that ecstasy might **not** be a primary experience for **every** soul; and 2) that the founders' grandchildren should be denied the baptismal "seal" of belonging in God's covenant with his people. As a way out of their dilemma, those churches approving the Half-Way Covenant, in effect, agreed **temporarily** to bracket ecstasy. God had said to Abraham,

I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring. [Gen. 17: 7]

Our founders reasoned that since their covenant with God was the same as Abraham's, surely God's spirit would, sometime, come personally upon their children. Was that not, in fact, guaranteed? So, if grown-ups had been baptized in and brought up in the church, and if they were of upright, not "scandalous" life, then they could be admitted to membership before - not exactly without but **before** - an ecstatic, transforming experience, and their children could be baptized.

The stilted, rambling style, of the report recommending the Half-Way Covenant, could be taken as evidence that even its proponents knew it was not very good theology. A covenant is a vow of faithful love. But their solution fuzzed the difference between a covenant of love and a **contract** to perform certain **narrowly prescribed** acts. As though the "Bride of Christ" should say, "Well, our 'husband' did contract to carry out the household trash. And our trash is rather piling up, unremoved. But he will get around to it, one day. Anyway, our very own trash is not so offensive. We can live with it."

As a liberal I say, the problem was with their **mistaken** notion that the path to an authentic religious life of love **must** include ecstasy. The religious life of many splendidly loving people - and churches - is much more sedate. Members in the 1650s **might have** entered into a conversation with the young people. "Let us tell you what we **mean** by promising, as best we can, to be a community faithful to the spirit of love. If what we say makes sense to you and if you, too, yearn for life in a holy community, we invite you to join with us in the covenantal way." That, in fact, is just what we ought to say, in our own words, to people thinking of joining our churches today.

But they **couldn't** utter such a simple message, because they thought authenticity **had to** involve ecstasy. Oddly, the Dedham folks had readily exercised "the judgement of charity" in welcoming all who would to take part in discussions that **led to the founding** of their church. But, though their beloved minister tried hard to persuade them otherwise, these same lay members believed "charity" could **not** be a criterion in admitting their own children to the church once it was founded!

There were at least three very sad, long-term consequences of confusion over what is required for entrance into the church's covenant. 1) Over time, the whole idea of the covenant got all tangled up with the notion of a divine **contract** with **all New England** and with the hopeful Judaic Christian doctrine of history. Some became convinced the "signs" pointed to the imminent "Second Coming" and realization of the kingdom of God on earth **in America**. Thus "federal theology" - as it was called from the Latin word for covenant, *foedus* - became so convoluted and embarrassing that the covenant tended to slide out of **liberal** discourse.

2) Without clear emphasis on what it **meant** to sign the covenant, over time and **in practice**, though never in theory, membership in the Standing Order churches gradually became far more a matter of family connections - genetic inheritance - than a deliberate religious **choice**. By the 1800s all of New England's old congregational churches, including the Unitarians', were **ethnic** churches, as much so as those of Boston's - by then many - Irish Roman Catholics.

3) All the old congregational churches, conservative and liberal, before and after separation, were repeatedly set a-roil and swamped with conflict generated by folks who just **couldn't** affirm a religious life without a metaphysically conceived, transcendent ecstasy, unlike anything else in everyday life. In the conservative camp, the troublemakers were the revivalists of the First and Second "Great Awakenings." On our side they were the "Transcendentalists." If I were to read you the diary accounts of their conversion experiences, written by the revivalist Jonathan Edwards and by Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau, you wouldn't be able to guess who wrote which.

But let's get back to those young adults of the second generation in the 17th century churches. Why weren't they joining? This account makes sense to me.

The **imagery** of the "Cinderella" concept of salvation reflects the pyramidal class structure of pre-modern European society. In that society the kings and princes, archbishops and so on were **way** up there on the narrow top, the nobility on tiers a little lower, small property owners below them, and the great mass of the population **way** down on "Cinderella's" level. The first generation of New Englanders knew that pyramidal structure first-hand. That fact made the **imagery** of salvation from a very low **spiritual** estate accessible to them. Their children knew no such extremes of class difference. Marked difference, yes; extreme difference, no. And that is one reason Puritan preaching so rapidly declined in its effectiveness in New England. New England class structure provided no objective correlative to the low spiritual estate the Puritan preachers addressed. Therefore, over time, especially young hearers were increasingly less inclined to see their natural spiritual estate as so low as all that!

At the same time, young hearers growing up under such preaching heard constantly that their most intimate and personal feelings were of **cosmic** importance. So, some concluded, if they didn't **feel** themselves to be of such low estate, then they were **not** of such low estate. Nor need they worry about their spiritual lives just because they never were religiously swept off their feet.

I do **not mean** that class issues are always **the** major factor in people's theology. I am saying **lived doctrines** of spiritual health are always linked to many features of our lives. And I am saying if the social context of our common life changes, our religious experience changes with it. Doctrines of salvation which have grown up in one social context **will be** modified in a another, sooner or later, smoothly, awkwardly or with baffling dissension.

So, what happened to the concept of salvation as the "Cinderella" story became, over time, inaccessible to many? We say, abstractly, it became Arminian. I shall try to say what happened more imaginatively, more existentially.

In the more liberal churches that would one day be called Unitarian, the "Cinderella" story morphed. Call the new version the "Cynthia" story. Cynthia was born to parents who lived in "court circles," in the church. Maybe her father was a "court officer," an elder. Anyhow, Cynthia had known the Prince, to some extent, all her life, since childhood. As she neared adulthood, she learned from her minister's sermons that the king had said the Prince should think of marriage and that some thought of her as a good match for him.

Thus it came about that Cynthia and the Prince began a discreet courtship to see if they were, in fact, suited to one another. And thus Cynthia slowly became aware that, actually, she had loved the Prince, in a childish way, for as long as she could remember. As their courtship grew more serious, her love for him slowly deepened and became quite profound - all the more so as she and the Prince considered how important would be their shared responsibilities in future for the entire realm, the larger society. True, there were stages in their relationship, but they were **stages of maturation**, as from seedling to bud to flower. The day of this soul's spiritual "union" could not be dated, so bit-by-bit had it happened. Nor was her membership in the church ever an issue. In the church her spiritual love had, not dramatically, but gradually matured and grown, as had her keen sense of spiritual responsibility for the world at large.

It is impossible to say just when conservatives and liberals diverged in the Standing Order. **In all the churches congregational polity was taken for granted. And both the "Cinderella" and "Cynthia" concepts of salvation were grounded in the spirit of mutual love.** So these two concepts could - and did - coexist in the same churches for a long time. There came a time, though, when conservatives began to say to liberals, "You've changed the whole gospel story! You're preaching heresy!" Literally, conservatives criticized liberals for omitting

the “peculiar” doctrines of the gospel. They meant the “peculiar” doctrines of God’s utterly **arbitrary** selection of some people as his “Bride,” the rest of humanity being doomed to everlasting punishment, of God’s absolute omnipotence and omniscience, of predestination and human depravity, all of which **are** absent from the story of “Cynthia.” Liberals **had** slowly and quietly rejected them. (And not casually or carelessly but, with detailed and thorough study of the Bible and church history.)

Many, many UUs have - ever since - thrown up their hands in frustration or fury over those “peculiar” doctrines, saying, “They’re crazy and crazy-making!” I wholly agree. They are. We were and we are right to be rid of them. And yet, I think we **need** to be able to imagine **why** these doctrines had such convincing power for our early North American ancestors, that our alienation from our own heritage might diminish, that we might more clearly claim its treasures. So I ask you to think again of how much “falling in love” is celebrated in our **present** culture.

When we “fall” in love, helplessness is a part and parcel of the experience. “Falling in love” is not something we decide and choose to do of our own volition. That’s part of its charm. Unless it turns out we’ve “fallen for” a creep, it’s a wonderful experience we celebrate the more because it happened **to us**. And then we get on with the rest of our lives, never doubting that, for the most part, we are quite able to decide and choose. We hold this truth to be self-evident: Over the course of human events, we do not control **all** our experience **all** the time, but this does **not** imply that we should logically be either theological or philosophical determinists!

But historically, often in the West, when **ecstatically** “falling in love” with God has become the **central** concern of a religious leader or group, the helplessness of that experience **has** assumed theological significance. In our case, our Puritan forebears took the helplessness of their salvific experience to be a **demonstration of** philosophically **necessary** truths: that God’s omnipotent power is manifest in human impotence to escape sin; that we must be born vile, utterly depraved; that the omniscient God must always have known and chosen whom he would save. These doctrines of God and humanity seemed to our Puritan forebears **logically** entailed in the experience of mutual love on which they based their - and our - doctrine of the church.

But were these awful doctrines ever **really** so entailed? I say they never were. Our New England founders were mistaken, **not in the central importance of the spirit of mutual love in an authentic church**, but in their inferences from the helplessness of **ecstatic** love. With a curious inconsistency, they **didn’t notice** that when their attention turned from the ecstasy of salvation to issues of governance - in the church or in civil government - these “awful doctrines,” often,

dropped out of mind. In Lecture 1 I pointed out their complete absence from the record of that year of Dedham conversations about the church, 1637. With the same curious inconsistency, the Cambridge Synod of 1648 voted to approve England's Winchester Confession "for the substance thereof," "Excepting **only** some sections," and thus, "leaving the matter of discipline (that is, authority) to our own declaration thereof." **Only!** The Winchester Confession was consistent with the "awful doctrines." The Cambridge Platform, the New England churches' declaration of the doctrine of congregational - covenantal - polity, is **not**.

Arguments over this "curious inconsistency," over the theology of God and human nature, finally erupted early in the 1800s, in the Unitarian Controversy. When the dust had settled, the Standing Order was no more, and we Unitarians were a separate communion. How did our Unitarian churches do then, at cooperating with one another?

### Unitarian Evangelism: Who Needs Churches to Build Churches?

Life went on as it long had in most Unitarian churches. Many were large urban congregations of hundreds of families, with a Sunday worship attendance of 6 or 8 hundred. (Theodore Parker's Twenty-eighth Congregational drew between 3 and 7 thousand, but that was an exception.) Many churches also had a rich program life during the week, of youth groups, groups meeting to do charity work, various study groups and so on.

But many Unitarians were deeply wounded from battles they had never wanted to fight. They had believed people of a loving Christian spirit could live together in the same churches, no matter their differences. Then they had been accused of hypocrisy and deception for not making much of these differences. So, liberal leaders reluctantly set forth their case, with plain and careful arguments, laden with explanation of biblical references. Opponents were not persuaded. Soon, liberal ministers were excluded from pulpit exchanges in conservative churches.

Then within the walls of Harvard University - long the fount of Unitarian theology - Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered his "Divinity School Address" in 1838. He implied that Unitarian ministers in general preached without "soul." His "Address" set off the Transcendentalist flap doodle. A bevy of bright young Transcendentalists - lay and ordained - made themselves as hard to get along with as possible, for a generation and more. Moreover, in this period there occurred the bitter conflict of the Hollis Street Church in Boston, over the minister's preaching against the Commonwealth's alcohol policies. The Council summoned could be of no help. Of course, Councils had not been able to help either during the Unitarian Controversy, which split many churches. But after the Hollis Street uproar no Unitarian church ever called a Council again. That long standing **lateral pattern**

of cooperation among the churches vanished. And with it, the very **notion** that even strong and healthy churches **need one another**, not to mention weaker churches who get may stuck in a narrow, parochial view of what a liberal church is about.

A few - a very few - said Unitarians should organize themselves and make plans to grow as the country was growing. But most ministers resisted doing any such thing for 40 years. Why? 1) They had no precedent for doing so. Since colonial days, new churches had gathered themselves, as settlers moved west a few miles. They had needed no special urging or assistance.

2) The ministers looked back at how their own congregations had become Unitarian, gradually, quietly. Doubtless in future, they said, the same would happen in many now conservative churches.

3) Just as, generations ago, the whole idea of the covenant had got tangled in a doctrine of history, now liberals took their own experience of **stages of maturation** to imply **stages of progress in history**, the “signs” of progress clearly to be seen **in America**, actually, most clearly in New England. (This was at least as early as the 1820s, years before Darwin’s books, and a large part of the reason Unitarians readily accepted Darwin’s theory of evolution.) Some doctrine of history is always still another element - the 10th on our list - of **any** doctrine of the church. With an **too optimistic** doctrine of history, the **conditioned** character of human destiny tends to drop out of mind. It leads to a loss of urgency in the members’ sense of mission. Love itself comes to be taken as **just** natural, as **needing no special communal** focus or nurture. In our case the idea of progress seemed to justify doing nothing special, in the way of organized cooperation, other than what the churches had been doing for 200 years. Progress in religion would come of itself, gradually, as from seedling to bud to flower.

4) Most importantly, a **new** institutional pattern had reached New England and spread in the early 1800s with amazing speed - **the non-profit corporation**. Today, we take this pattern so entirely for granted, we forget how young it is, historically.

Business corporations had been around a long time. But even in the 1700s, a few people couldn’t just pool their capital, file some government forms, and start a new business. The king had a monopoly on monopolies. It was the king’s prerogative to charter only such corporations as he chose. It took Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* and hard political struggle to win “the free market,” the right of any group who can raise the needed capital to form a business corporation. But, that right was finally enshrined in English law.

A business corporation - especially a large one, such as developed for the first time in England’s Industrial Revolution - is usually a steep hierarchy, with owners of capital in control of a small governing board, which controls a small

executive staff, which controls the mass of workers. So you might think Unitarians in New England, a deeply religious people, with a 200 year-old congregational tradition, would **never** re-locate authority to the top of a governing structure like that of a business corporation, leaving people in the churches with little or none. But we have to take account of this cultural development in New England, in which **the theology of covenantal organization never even came to mind.**

It started with somebody's brainstorm in England. Why couldn't a few people form a corporation to do some some good and generous thing - like give away Bibles to poor people? They would not need their own capital, just people on a board of excellent reputation, whom others would trust, and the public would give the corporation money to distribute Bibles. Board members "of excellent reputation" would not have time to do this work, but they could use donated funds to hire an executive staff to see to the work. With that brilliant idea the British Bible Society was born. It was a huge success. Money poured in; Bibles poured out. The more Bibles it gave away, the more money people gave to this non-profit corporation.

What a switch! Religious people, no doubt, **but not the churches per se**, adopting the hierarchical structure of a business corporation, to spend money from donors for charitable purposes, over which the donors had not a smidgen of control. In the bat of an eye, historically speaking, all kinds of reform movements were afoot - in New England - urged on and organized by non-profit corporations, to address immigrant poverty, to educate orphans, to advocate freedom for the slaves, to institute tax support for public schools, for peace, against alcohol, for woman's suffrage, and on and on. [Conrad Edick Wright tells the story of this institutional revolution in his book, *The Transformation of Charity in Postrevolutionary New England*, 1992]. Unitarians were leading figures in all these efforts and held board positions in many, many of these non-profit corporations.

Thus it came to be that, over time and with a curious inconsistency, when Unitarians turned their attention **from** governance of the local church **to** any good work beyond the walls of the local church, we took for granted **the hierarchical structure** of a non-profit corporation, **even for gathering new Unitarian churches!**

In 1825 a few Unitarians adopted this new model and organized a Unitarian non-profit. They sought no vote of approval from members of the congregations. The congregations had nothing to do with it. A few people simply started another non-profit corporation and called it the American Unitarian Association. Made up of a board, a small, part-time staff and, spasmodically, a few volunteers, it was a missionary enterprise, its purpose to raise money for starting new churches, or at least "to diffuse pure Christianity" by distributing pamphlets and books.

The AUA was not well supported. For the next 40 years, it had an average income of about \$8,000 a year. Even so, the AUA slowly acquired **informal** authority, an authority **never delegated** to it **by local churches**. In 1865 - 40 years later - a Conference of Unitarian churches was at last organized, with great enthusiasm and much **lay** participation. The Conference in one year raised \$100,000 and turned it over to the “**traditional**” executive board of the AUA, even though the AUA **still** had **no** institutional ties with the churches at all.

Well, it's been a while since 1825. Our institutional path to the 21st century has been twist-y and wind-y. Maybe all such paths are. In these Lectures I shall not tell the tale of how the AUA of 1825 became the UUA of 2001, which has essentially the same corporate board/staff structure of 1825. “Delegates” from our churches now elect the UUA board and its president - our “chief executive officer” - **even though** the pyramidal shape of a board/staff structure is, by definition, topsy turvy from that of congregational - or covenantal - polity, and even though **none** of our leaders have ever been able to elicit much glad cooperation from us within such a hierarchal structure. The fact is we **never have** - to this day - **thought much about** our patterns of cooperation **among** churches or the structure of our Association as elements of our liberal doctrine of the church.

I saw a sentence on a website recently, which illustrates how unaware many UUs are of how and why we ever started doing things as we do. The sentence read, “Unitarians were not organized as a sect until the founding of the AUA in 1825.” That **tiny** group in the AUA, **a sect!** In an era when Unitarian churches were unanimously agreed that our churches should be **non-sectarian!**

Here, in two sentences, is the thesis of these lectures. Our UU churches are uncooperative, **not** because congregational polity is our doctrine of the church. Rather, our churches are uncooperative - and far too many are weak and ineffective - because **our organization needs to be more covenantal, both in** our congregations and **among** the congregations of our Association.

To worship and serve and grow and thrive, as we have it in us to do, we need now to **invent** new covenantal structures for more free cooperation **among** us than we have had since our earliest days on this continent. We've come a long way in many ways since the founding of our oldest churches in the 1630s. The spirit of mutual love is yet that reality most worthy of our ultimate loyalty, our religious loyalty. Our love, though seldom of the ecstatic variety, is warm and steady and deep and powerful to redeem and to enhance our own lives and many more lives in our larger world. We might yet enter a covenant to walk together in this spirit as an Association of free Congregations, without hierarchy, but with many well used **lateral** patterns of engagement, in which we respect each congregation's independence and our **interdependence** in the interdependent web of existence of which it is our blessed privilege to be a part. I pray we may yet do so.



