

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 5: Updating the Cambridge Platform

You have come to hear Lecture 5 of the 2000-01 Minns Lectures series of six. I've already said a lot in the earlier 4 lectures I thought had a bearing on how I finish. So, you might feel as we do when the only time we can get in to see a movie we want to see, is in the middle of a showing. It's hard to figure what the movie is about, when we haven't seen how it started.

So, I'll begin this evening by saying, Welcome to the world! For is this not part of what it means to be human? We are always born **in the middle of** stories. The dramas - of our families, our economy, our schools, our government - of our churches - began a long time ago. The patterns of people's ideas and assumptions, especially about authority and division of labor, and the plot line, the direction in which things are moving, or not going anywhere -- All these patterns were set long before we even start to understand what is going on.

We Unitarian Universalists are part of a very long story of many, many people who - **in the middle of** the complex situations they were born into - at some point fervently declared, "The things in this story are **not** as they should be. There is a better way! And some of us are, by God, going to **covenant** to find and live out simpler, saner, more natural, **holier** ways of love."

We UUs derive from a long, tangled line of religious reformers. Maybe tangled is not the right word. But for sure the plot lines of our story - of how our Unitarian Universalist churches came to be as they are now - are complex. T

We UUs are a liberal people over on the "left" of the free church tradition. The **root idea** of our entire tradition is the covenant. **A covenanted free church is a body of individuals who have freely made a profoundly simple promise, a covenant: We pledge to walk together in the spirit of mutual love. The spirit of love is alone worthy of our ultimate, our religious loyalty. So, we shall meet often to take counsel concerning the ways of love, and we will yield religious authority solely to our own understanding of what these ways are, as best we can figure them out or learn or remember them, together.** But the story of how this **simple** idea has been, over and over, corrupted, or got tangled up in authoritarianism, or forgot and lost from actual lives and institutions and societies - - This story is **not** simple, at all.

The thesis of these lectures: 1) We UUs **are** the people we are in large part because we inherited the covenantal free church tradition from the 17th century founders of our oldest New England churches, who themselves reclaimed the tradition, when it had been nearly lost, from centuries before their time. 2) For much of the 19th and 20th centuries we UUs almost forgot the covenant. So, we need now a new **critical appreciation** of the best gifts and worst mistakes of our

own covenantal history. And 3) we need now to **do** two things: to reclaim and **creatively** adopt covenants in our free churches, in our own liberal way, for our time, and to **invent** what we have **never yet** had, a **Covenanted** Association of Congregations. We need to do these things because too many of our churches are **not thriving**, and thriving, liberal free churches are the best hope of the world!

This evening I want us to look at the gifts and the mistakes we inherited from the 17th century founders of our oldest UU churches, as these are manifest, with hindsight, in a document called the Cambridge Platform. I want first, though, to tell you a more personal story.

### An Example of Institutional Inventiveness

In the summer of 1973 Joe and our daughters and I moved to the Texas Gulf Coast. An experienced lay UU at age 36, I had just begun studying for our ministry. In 1973 the Southwest Conference had not had - in living memory - any women students for the ministry. And suddenly, you had three, two working in Dallas, and me in Chicago and Beaumont.

The Southwest ministers received us as graciously as they could, that is, with comical awkwardness. And the Southwest laypeople were wonderfully open and generous. In 5 years, from 1973-78, I preached in 14 Southwest pulpits; I was secretary of the Conference board for a year; one summer I was the “sunset” preacher at the Summer Institute, SWUUSI; I interned at Houston’s Emerson Church; and I served two congregations as minister, in College Station and Corpus Christi, for 18 and 9 months.

I wouldn’t trade anything for what I learned here, much of it at SWUUSI, your super week-long annual gathering, then at Lake Murray, with the largest number of folks, always, from All Souls Church, Tulsa. I had not before been in a District with so much affection, with such a good spirit of forbearance and cooperation **among** our churches. Sure, there were differences, sharp differences, among ministers and congregations. But here in the Southwest you had **well instituted** and **high** expectations for - what our Puritan forebears called - **orderly** sharing of views and responsibilities.

The results were sometimes stunning. I know one now strong, lively congregation that would likely have remained a weak little group - a “Sunday talking club” - but for SWUUSI. Members of this little fellowship used to tease one of their lay leaders and laugh. “Buddy went to SWUUSI and got religion!” But their whole membership was transformed, over time, by the deeper understanding of the free church Buddy brought home, from having been with more experienced and more committed liberal churchpeople than he had known.

Having come, myself, from a District where there was no institution like SWUUSI, it was clear to me - SWUUSI was the main reason the spirit **among**

Southwest churches was so much better than I was used to. Every year **every one** of the ministers was there, most with several lay members, with as many as 30 or 40 - kids and elders - from All Souls. I had not till then, and have not since, seen that anywhere else, and I've been many times to other UU summer institutes. They have fine features, but **none** so much affected the spirit **among** the churches of the region - because they are not the kind of loyal, **lay and ministerial** enterprise as SWUUSI.

So I asked, "How did this thing come to be?" The answer was Robert Raible, long-time minister of First Church, Dallas, who retired in 1964. Way back in the late '40s, Robert Raible had kept urging and persuading until he got fixed, set, a **pattern** of high expectations or, as the Puritans would have said, an **orderly rule**: All elected ministers **will be there** with our people from many churches for a 7-day, rich meeting every August, without fail, no excuses accepted. And other ministers, not those he persuaded, **still were there** every August, without fail, 30 and 35 years later, when I came and when I left. Nowhere written down, this rule was part of the covenant in the Southwest!

And the results showed throughout the region. Why? Because this is a rule of **commonsense and natural law**: When free churchpeople **regularly** and **freely** cooperate - elected leaders and members together, **in the spirit of mutual love and in healthy patterns** - good happens and keeps on happening, in wider circles. This natural law holds for **any** association of free churches: We don't get the spirit of mutual love **among** our scattered and distinct churches, unless our bodies are, regularly, together in the same place - as we are in our home churches, only less often. When elected ministers and members, of **a few** or **many** free churches in a region, associate **in healthy patterns**, all the churches benefit richly.

How do we tell whether our **patterns** of association are good and helpful, or an awful waste of time, or downright counter productive, even **way** off-track? The test: Look to what happens **in the congregations** as a result. See any more vim and vigor, more forbearing engagement and growth in membership, **in the congregations**? If not, we'd better change our patterns, because our patterns of association **matter**.

Did you know this? In the 1930s, during the Depression, a third of our New England Unitarian churches died. John Wolf used to boast that in the 1970s, there were more UUs - real live bodies - gathered on Sunday mornings in just the Southwest's 5 largest churches, than in all New England where we have many more churches. **There's a historical connection in the interdependent web of being between set patterns and spirit and live bodies.** It matters **how**, in what spirit and in what patterns, we do what we do now. And, it's **going to matter** in future generations.

Often, living participants have no notion how our patterns got started, for the sake of what principles, or to meet which misjudged exigencies, or at the urging of what wise or foolish leaders. But **if** the patterns are good ones, there's lots of room in them for creativity, varied and innovative response to challenges, and new talent coming on and taking hold. And the churches of a **region** will thrive. **If** our patterns are poor, our churches will be corrupted. Instead of giving and taking counsel when differences arise, the people will quarrel viciously and divisively. Or, whole congregations will get stalled in ineptitude and isolation and **never learn** how to do better.

I name some realities among us: A lot of expensive, time-consuming meetings among various "representatives" of quite differently constituted UU affiliates, not congregations. UUA programs having little if any effect **in our churches**. An overall church growth rate in 2000 of only .6%, when the population is growing much faster. Almost **no** ongoing exchange of wise counsel among neighboring churches. Lots of bitter complaint, in print and on the web, about the UUA. Not a few but hundreds of UU congregations stalled in ineptitude and isolation for years. **Something is seriously awry in the patterns of association among our churches.**

I am glad I began learning how to be a UU minister in the Southwest. You set my standards. You were my example of what relations **among** our free churches can be. So thirty or so years later, I asked for an invitation to give Lectures 5 and 6 of the Minns here I hope we can be called to a higher standard of **explicitly covenantal** patterns **among** our churches. I figured, if any UUs can understand what I am trying to say, it must be in the Southwest.

I have said we need a **critical appreciation** of our history, of how our good and poor patterns got set as they did, and a historically informed and **inventive** imagination, something like Robert Raible's in the 1940s. What is a critical appreciation? Just this. I know you didn't suppose, a minute ago when I was praising Southwest churches, that I left these parts thinking - here there were no problems or deficits. I did not. I never thought everybody here was flawless. I simply **saw** that your spirit and some of your practices were of a piece. They worked! I was better off for having learned here something more of what is **possible among** us. A critical appreciation of our past can do the same for us.

Our notions, of what free churches are and could do, **always** come from **concrete human experience**, our own or other live peoples', or those recorded **in history**. That's why it's important that, as liberal churchpeople, we not be geographically or **temporally** parochial. There are things we need to learn from looking at our churches' patterns, set long ago.

A Critical Appreciation of the Cambridge Platform

So, who were the 17th century founders of our oldest UUA churches? They had been churchpeople in England - many tens of thousands of ordinary members and ministers and University students and professors - **appalled**, not by all but, by many of the institutional patterns they were born into, in the Church of England. These patterns were already long set before they came to consciousness. But they learned of - what looked to them - very different and much **better** patterns from history, from the Old and New Testaments of the Bible which they understood as the record books of the free church. Having tried mightily and failed to reform the Church of England - because they were thwarted and persecuted and punished by the kings, the queen and the bishops of England - our ancestors made the amazingly brave and costly choice to remove - some 20,000 of them - to the wilderness of New England in the 1630s. They came to this continent to gather themselves into free churches, in what they called the “liberty of the gospel.” These were the churches which in the 19th century first became, on this continent, Unitarian. And we UUs have kept ever since many - not all - of the patterns of free churches, just as they were set in the 17th century.

We could put this way what happened in our UU story, before you and I came into the movie. Our Puritan ancestors left England for New England, **not** because they disagreed with the Church of England - or other Protestants in Europe - over theology or anthropology. That is, over the nature of God or of humankind. They left because they disagreed over **the theology of organization**, over the question of **how** churches ought to be organized in the spirit of mutual love, over who should have authority and why - in churches **rooted in** that spirit. Two hundred years later, in the early 1800s, when we Unitarians separated from more conservative churches of the Standing Order, the disagreement **was** over the nature of God and humankind. But we unanimously **kept** - and **have kept** to this day - the pattern of covenantal congregational polity set in the **17th** century.

There were many more dissenters in England from episcopal polity - control of churches by a hierarchy of bishops - than the 20,000 who came here in the Great Migration of the 1630s. Our folks fervently hoped they might be joined in New England by many more. But the whole scene in England changed drastically in the 1640s with the outbreak there - twice - of civil war, the beheading of Charles I, and the rule of Parliament and Oliver Cromwell as Lord Protector. In all that turmoil, there emerged in Cromwell’s army - the guys with weapons - passionately **religious** advocates for a far more revolutionary, socialist re-organization **of the whole society** than England was anything like ready for. So, opinion concerning **church** governance, even among the dissenters from episcopacy, shifted toward presbyterianism. That is, a pattern of authority **over** the churches, by “representative” bodies, who could **deal with** any wild-eyed socialist extremists

who might spring up in the churches and gain followers within them! (Yes, left-wing political socialism was born in left-wing, independent churches in the 1600s.)

New Englanders were very aware of the shift toward presbyterianism, among their own friends in England, **away from** New England's **scrupulous** congregationalism, a pattern in which **all** religious authority is **located in** each **single**, distinct congregation. To deal with all the issues of the Church of England, Parliament called on 109 "divines" and 24 members of Parliament to meet in Winchester Hall in London and agree on what would be the faith **and the form of church governance** in England. The Assembly began to meet in the summer of 1645, concluded in the fall of 1646, and published the results, the *Winchester Confession of Faith*. Parliament invited two widely respected New England theologians, John Cotton and Thomas Hooker. They did not go because they knew, on the very matter closest to New England hearts, they would now be in a small minority.

So, after publication of the *Winchester Confession* - which included prescription of a presbyterial church order - and at the request of the Massachusetts General Court, the churches sent elected lay and ministerial officers, or "messengers," to convene at Harvard College as the Cambridge Synod. Others could also attend if they wished. This assembly "thought it good to present unto [the local churches], & with them all the churches of Christ abroad, our professed & hearty assent & attestation" to the *Winchester Confession*, "**Excepting only some sections.**" [Preface] Namely, those sections having to do with authority in the church, or organization.

That is how we came to have the Cambridge Platform, a Preface and XVII Chapters. Each chapter is footnoted with many references to passages from the Scriptures clearly illustrating, to the unanimous satisfaction of the "elders and messengers," that the **substance** of the congregational way is the same as that of the very **first** free church, the family of Sarah and Abraham. In our terms they meant - some things have **not** changed for as long as people have been coming together, either out from under or in the midst of corrupted, hierarchical societies, to live in **free** groups called churches, whose free and orderly ways are the ways of love, **not** the coercion of **any** hierarchy.

Our church ancestors understood the Bible to be mainly about - the free and covenanted, **social** practice of love. They were not, by any means, ignorant of all other history. Their University trained ministers were saturated, especially, with Greek and Roman history. But their periodization of **church** history they expressed as follows: "The state [of] the members. . . walking in order was either [1] before the law, Oeconomical, that is in families; or [2] under the law, Nation; or [3], since the coming of Christ **only** congregational. (The term Independent, we approve not.)" [Chapter 2:5]

Paraphrase that. Say that in words we use now. Free churches are groups of people who have covenanted to “walk together” - live together or meet often - in patterned ways, or “in order,” **in the spirit of mutual love**. People have covenanted to do this, over a great stretch of time, first 1) as families, beginning with Sarah and Abraham; then as 2) the nation of ancient Israel, beginning with Moses; and, since the time of Jesus and his disciples, as 3) local congregations. As our forebears understood **church** history, the holy spirit of mutual love, or the “**substance**” of a free church - an Aristotelian term - has always been the same, in all three periods. (That is why they found the Old Testament as instructive as the New.) The live gathered bodies of the members are the “**matter**” of the free church. And its “**forme**” is the covenantal promise, which defines the membership, determines its organizational shape, or structure, and imbues the church with promise, the potential, to be a life-giving organization for all the larger world.

Again, from the Platform: “The partes of Church-Government are all of them exactly described in [the Scriptures] being parts or means of Instituted worship **according to the second Commandment**: & therefore continue one and the same. . .” The “second Commandment” is: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” So, our forebears were saying, the **substance** of the free church is **the spirit of** neighborly love. And everything in the free church’s “administration” - **everything** - follows naturally and logically from the primacy of this **one** experienced, central, holy reality, **the spirit of neighborly love**. In other places in the text this spirit of love is called “the supream power,” or Christ, the only head of the church. In the Dedham Church Record, John Allin actually used one X, the Greek letter *chi*, to denote Christ and two XXs to denote the free church, **plural Christs**, or **the spirit of love in live bodies meeting in one place**. The **one** “end,” or purpose, of everything the gathered members do, says the Cambridge Platform, is “**mutual edification**.” That is, mutual learning and teaching concerning **the ways of love**, one topic with an infinite number of sub-topics since the ways of love are to be sought in **all** life’s complexities. The people must be **gathered** - meet in the same place at the same time - for mutual learning to take place. Otherwise, the “spirit of love” is just a fuzzy, sentimental head trip, a bodiless abstraction - or as some irreverently say - Sloppy *Agape*.

So, said our forebears, to gather and go about a church’s “administration,” the members needed three things: 1) personal **experience of the spirit of mutual love** between the individual and God, often described in Puritan sermons as union, or “marriage of the heart,” with the spirit of love; 2) to be individually, one by one, called - or drawn - by the spirit of love **to enter the covenant** with other members to love faithfully; and 3) to **elect officers**, lay and ministerial. And there you have - said they - a whole, complete free church in **all** its “partes,” **just two**



“partes,” ordinary members and ordinary officers - meaning that free churches have no need, **in church affairs**, of **any higher** authorities. Or, as they put it, “[I]t is not left in the power of men, officers, Churches, or any state in the world to add, or diminish, or alter any thing in the least measure therein.” [Chapter 1:3]

This formulation eliminates any such thing as the outside supervision or interference of the civil government, or the bishops of an episcopacy, or the authority of any provincial presbyterial body, or - we might add - the UUA board/staff.

Question: Why, since they were patently describing here, independent congregations, did the Cambridge synod “approve not the term Independent”? Because, in the 17th century, those churches which named themselves “Independent” in England had taken the position that whatever happened anywhere else than in each distinct free church was of no concern to them. But in the minds of our congregationalist founders, strong convictions about the autonomy of each church, did **not** imply sectarian isolation. For they also had, from the Bible, a concept of the church universal - the “Catholick Church” - that great measureless company of people, the living and the dead of every age and land, who have ever experienced and walked in the spirit of mutual love, in whatever church - or no church. They would not make an idol of church organization, even one they believed to be the **only** right “forme.” God was, in their experience, the spirit of mutual love, which hardly justifies “hardness of heart.” “[I]s difference about Church-order become the inlett of all the disorders in the kingdom? . . . that we cannot leave contesting & contending about it, till the kingdom be destroyed? . . . surely, either the Lord will cleare up his own will to us, . . . or else we shall learn to bear one another’s burdens in a spirit of meekness.” [Preface]

Those lines nicely illustrate that strong-minded congregationalists can certainly see the need for and plead for tolerance, as 17th century Puritans did in regard to many matters, though not in as many as we wish they had.

But even more emphatically did the independence of free churches **not** mean isolation from other free churches, according to the Cambridge Platform. Though all churches were “distinct. . . & therefore have no dominion over one another,” they are to be a **community of** independent churches. They were to “take thought for one another’s welfare.” “[W]hen any church wanteth light or peace among themselves it is a way of communion. . . to meet together. . . to consider and argue the point in doubt or difference; and, having found out the way of truth and peace, to **recommend** the same. . . to the churches whom the same may concern.”

It was **not acceptable** “if a church be rent with divisions . . . and yet refuse to consult with other churches for healing. . .” If a divided church does refuse to “consult,” **neighboring churches** - not a staffperson from headquarters-- **neighboring churches** are to “exercise a fuller act of communion by way of

admonition.” I.e., free churches are **not** to regard the challenging difficulties in congregational life - either their own or others’ - as none of anybody else’s business. Rather each is to listen to other churches’ counsel. “[S]o may one church admonish another, and yet **without usurpation**. . . [Chapter XV]

In all times it is a good thing, said our founders, if members of two or several churches - all the members - occasionally come together. A church with two ministers should lend one to a congregation whose minister is ill. When members move, even temporarily, to another town, the church should send a letter of recommendation to the congregation in that town. In case of need, one church should furnish another with officers, or sometimes money. And by all means, neighboring churches should help a new church get started well and rightly. If any one church gets too large to meet all in one place, some of the members should form a new congregation, “[a]s bees, when the hive is too full, issue out by swarms, and are gathered into other hives. . .”

Question: Did they really get all this from the Bible? They really thought they did. It is fascinating to read the closely reasoned argument of the Platform, which often uses the terminology of Aristotelian and Ramist logic, and look up, as you read, the many biblical passages footnoted in every paragraph. What you see is - they read the Bible with a very different interpretive key than you or I might use. The books of the Bible are mostly, of course, **not** lists of rules, but poems, lyrics of hymns, strung-together pieces of the prophets’ sermons and narratives, stories of events. But our 17th century congregationalists were obsessed with issues of **authentic** authority. So they read **every** word of the Bible asking of the texts, “What was decided here? Whose counsel was sought? Who decided? Which people had to be involved if a decision was to be considered legitimate? What did people in these stories do if they disagreed?” They then inferred that answers to these questions were to be taken as illustrating the **rules** of **authentic** authority in free churches.

An example. An elected officer in our oldest churches was called the “ruling elder.” An ordained lay member, he was primarily responsible for “discipline.” That is, for talking privately, tenderly but firmly, with any member whose ways of behaving were not ways of the spirit of love. Consider an event in one our churches. Suppose an angry member starts loudly saying harsh things about what the RE Committee and teachers have carefully chosen to teach in a church school class? I’ve been in weak churches, scared to death that anyone might resign. RE folks would dump a curriculum in a minute, to avoid a fuss with **one** viciously rude person who had no understanding of what the teachers were trying to do or why. They put in its place a bland, uncontroversial curriculum. Then some families quit coming because the kids said church school was boring! By whatever name, “ruling elders” provide a better response to any members’

unruly anger than church-lite! That better response is the work of free church **discipline**.

Once, a super UU couple joined a church I served. They came every Sunday, but without their middle school kids. So I said one day, ‘Where are the kids?’ Well, the parents’ work had required them to move often. And three times, after a move, the kids went to a new church school class doing a unit on the Hopi Indians. So these kids decided UU churches are weird. Fixated on the Hopis. They wouldn’t come to ours!

Our earliest free churches elected and ordained the “ruling elder” to deal with such as that first **harsh** member. If the member refused to listen, even when, later, two or three others members could not persuade him or her to listen either, the ruling elder took the issue to the whole church. All the members together decided whether a reprimand, or even dismissal, was in order. The “ruling elder” couldn’t just **pronounce**, by himself, on any issue; authentic authority lay in the whole gathered congregation. The model for both the office and the “rule” of the “ruling elder” they took from one of Jesus’ sermons in the Gospel according to Matthew.

But “discipline” was not solely the ruling elder’s responsibility, even to initiate. **Every** member should speak candidly to any member whose ways were unloving. This “rule” they inferred from a story about Paul in the book of Acts. Paul, though he had no authority **over** Peter, told Peter, in front of the whole church, that it was wrong of him to refuse to eat with the Gentile members at church suppers.

But for all their reverence for the Scriptures, there is, in the Platform, a rather impatient sounding admission that not every “necessary circumstance” of the free church is clearly indicated by some biblical passage. If any procedures should seem only practical, or “necessary,” two tests of reason were to be applied: 1) Is their “end” “unto edification”? And 2) “in respect to the manner,” are these things to be done “decently, and in order, according to the nature of the things them selves **& Civil and Church Custom**. [D]oth not even nature it selfe teach you? [Y]ea they are in some sort determined particularly,. . . so, **if there bee no error**. . . concerning their determination, the determining of them is to be accounted **as if it were** divine.” [Chapter I:4]

Well, let it be said at once, some of the worst mistakes our founders made - **very costly** to later generations - were precisely those patterns they “accounted as if [they] were divine,” when, for all their careful reasoning and logic, they were merely habits “of Civil and Church Custom,” very bad cultural habits, brought from Europe, which they ought never to have continued here, **not** because Bible stories contain no precedent for them, but because they would **work ill** in the long run. These practices were “determined,” not in accordance with the “substance” of

the free churches, - the spirit of mutual love - but in accordance with an **authoritarian** expedient of coercion.

Money is certainly “necessary” for churches, whose mission of “edification” - teaching and learning - is needed by and beneficial to the whole town, or parish - they called it - in which the church was located. So, our ancestors concluded, it is perfectly reasonable that the magistrates, as they had done in England, should **coerce** all land owning citizens to pay the parish rate, taxes, to support free churches. That is, churches properly constituted according to the Cambridge Platform. So, while the laws of New England didn’t **forbid** organization of churches not part of the Standing Order, members of these other churches - including our Universalist ancestors - had the very devil of a time getting an exemption from also supporting, with their taxes, the **legally designated** “free churches.”

And who fought hardest to maintain the “necessary” rule of tax support for the **right** free churches in the **1830s** in Massachusetts? Why, the Unitarian heirs of the Puritans. So, why did all those New England Unitarian churches die in the **1930s**? Because, after they lost Massachusetts public tax support in 1834, Unitarian churches were heavily dependent financially for the next **100 years** on a few **wealthy** members or “pew owners.” When these few lost their money in the Great Depression of the 1930s, a third of our churches collapsed. **Church patterns matter and have long effect, for good and for ill.**

Another mistake of our founders. Early in the text, the Cambridge Platform makes about as strong a statement on the importance of the covenant as one can imagine. **Only** each member’s promise, made freely and one by one - to walk together with other members in the ways of love - makes the people a free church. “[It] followeth, it is not faith in the heart, nor the profession of that faith, nor cohabitation, nor Baptisme: 1) Not faith in the heart? because that is invisible: 2) not a bare profession; because that declareth them no more to be members of one church then of another: 3) not Cohabitation; Atheists or Infidels may dwell together with believers: 4) not Baptism. . . , as circumcision in the old Testament, which gave no being unto the church, the church being before it, & in the wilderness without it.”

That’s point 5 in Chapter IV. I say, “Great! Wonderful!” But then, in Chapter XII, titled, “On Admission of members. . .” are sentences like these: “[S]uch as are admitted therto, as members, ought to be **examined & tryed** first; whether they be **fit & meet to be received**. . . [T]hey must profess & hold forth in such sort, as may satisfie rational charity that [repentance and faith] are there indeed. . . A personall & publick confession, & declaring of Gods manner of working upon the soul, is bothe lawfull, expedient, & usefull, in sundry respects, & upon sundry grounds.”

This part of the Platform makes me want to cuss. When new people are thinking of joining a free church, **those already members** need to be “examined and tried.” It is the **members’** obligation, I say, to explain - in very simple and **appealing** words - what is so fine about the covenant of their free church and warmly to invite others to enter it with them. If members cannot explain what their covenant is and what it means, that church is **not** “fit & meet” to be joined! I said in Lecture 3, I think we need to be empathetic with our earliest congregational ancestors’ concept of salvific spiritual experience. And it’s only fair to add, **if we had seen** what they saw, what an **awful** institution the Church had become in their time, maybe we, too, would have thought the best hope, of keeping their churches from morphing back to horrible hierarchy, was to keep them “pure.” But this horrible requirement for membership - that old members test and judge the substance of new members’ neighborly love - soon gave the founders and their children no end of trouble, starting in the 1650s, only a decade after they wrote the Platform. But it’s not much comfort that they suffered for it. For **this** dreadful mistake is the main historical reason we liberals almost **forgot** the covenant 300 years later, in the 20th century.

Here’s what happened. The founders tied entering the covenant to a very special kind of experience, an **ecstatic** “falling in love with God.” But even in the second generation, most people never had that **ecstatic** experience. So, in the 18th century preachers like Jonathan Edwards and other “revivalists,” thought they had to make this thing happen, with hellfire and brimstone preaching of a sort which would have horrified the **17th** century Puritans. The covenant then became linked, in liberals’ minds, with **18th** century “revivalism.” Thus, our **19th** century liberal churches kept the old, earliest covenants on the books - beautiful, simple promises to walk together in the ways of love, but the covenant was mostly **not** talked about. **This bad pattern works ill yet today.**

For if you don’t talk about the covenant - the members’ basic agreement, the **simple promise** that constitutes the church as a church, the promise all who will are cordially invited to enter with us - what **do** you say is the basis of a liberal church? A creed? Tens of thousands of liberals have never been able to respond to that question any better than by saying, “Oh, no! No. Not a creed! We don’t believe in creeds.” You know the question which follows that **empty** negation. “Then what do Unitarian Universalists believe?”

Will the day ever come when many, many of us can say, **Ours is a covenantal church. We join by promising one another that we will be a beloved community, meeting together often to find the ways of love, as best we can see to do. We have found there’s always more to learn about how love really works, and could work, in our lives and in the world.** I hope that day comes.

One more mistake of our founders. Our founders, ready as they were to defy the kings and bishops of England to establish free churches, nevertheless assumed that tiered levels of privilege and authority in society - and in the churches - were “natural.” So, the Platform said the free church had a “mix’t government.” “Kingship” of the holy spirit of Christ made the free church a “monarchy.” And because the members elected, and could dismiss, their own officers, the free church was also a “democracy.” But then, since the members were to “obey” their officers, once elected, the “elders” - elected ministers and lay officers whom we call board members - were the “aristocracy.”

My response to that is: What a crock! Members not elected to any office in our earliest churches could be, and often were, anything but “obedient,” if they didn’t agree with their “aristocracy.” Even if the members got talked into adopting some measure by their “elders,” if they really **didn’t** approve it, they just **wouldn’t do it**, no matter how often they were “admonished” to do it. **Phony** democracy worked then as now, when our members, year after year, do **nothing** with all those “study issues” we keep “democratically” voting to take up, these “votes” really involving very few members. Most of our members **don’t** agree that these issues are well handled in this poor **pattern**. And the many admonitions of our “aristocracy” can’t get the members of our free churches “do it,” either.

But it is simply a fact that nearly all colonial and later New Englanders - of all classes - assumed, for a **long** time, that status once acquired is status deserved in perpetuity. So, a pattern early developed that lasted, among Unitarians, into the late **20th** century. Once officers were elected in the earliest churches, and - in our lifetimes - once people were just **appointed** to some position in the AUA or the UUA, unless they did something really awful, ministers and **lay** leaders tended to stay in office a long time **and** pass their status on to their children. The same was true, from the beginning, of civil offices in New England towns and in the legislature. Connections and influence then, often, led to wealth.

So, rather quickly, New England developed something like a European aristocracy, a class, economically and politically privileged by birth. Many members of our earliest-named Unitarian churches - after 200 years in the Standing Order and named Unitarian in the 19th century - were of this class, **directly** related to old patterns of privilege in their churches and State. There are advantages to a culture in having a well educated and wealthy class, but in the long run patterns of assumed privilege **work ill**. Without new leaders, without fresh connections and language - fresh words of abiding truth - churches get stale, complacent, dull and stuck. Then, trying to wake the people up - develop new leadership, start new programs and bring in new members - is like pulling whales’ teeth. Established authority figures don’t like it and they will resist needed change mightily.

Trouble is, of course, if there's no way to get leaders off **elevated** boards and staffs - except to mount an insurrection and have a big fight - even "free" churches are not free to do anything but creak along, blindly repeating the same boring, counterproductive, **set pattern of mistakes working ill in the churches**. This **old** pattern - of regarding "leaders" as an "aristocracy," or leaving programming decisions to "leadership at the **highest continental level**" - has proved a **bad** pattern of organization, for all of us. We have kept variations of it way too long. Ultimately, in the long run, "leaders" of this type can't get members of free churches to do diddley squat.

I trust you see that I have hardly gone ga-ga over our flawless 17th century founders, though I have come to love them. Courageous, intelligent, brilliant even, creative and **right on** about many things, they failed to see the consequences of their share of mistaken assumptions. The love in their hearts and the human capacity to reason about and learn together the ways of love, they rightly saw as divine gifts. Yet, they also believed it was fine to take their reasoning about practical, "necessary circumstances" as divine "**if there bee no error!**" A rather large if, you and I would say. But then, of all the changes between the 17th century and our lifetimes, the greatest may be our learning - given all the ghastly tragedies of the 20th century - that human reasoning often fails the test of time. That doesn't mean we shouldn't use our heads! It means we need to be humble about the **fact** that the best of us tend to institutionalize patterns we think are only "practical," when these poor patterns are nothing but a convenience to some, forms of governance working ill in our liberal free churches, even now.

If the Platform authors' were over-confident that, with close enough attention to logic and rules, they could find **the** truth, we need to remember - in that they were quite at one with the spirit of their age. The 17th century was a time of great scientific discovery and the doctrinaire belief in certain circles that the logical, mathematical discoveries of Newton, e.g., certainly heralded our coming acquisition of the **absolute** truth about everything. The Puritans were not the only ones in their time - or later - to be rather awfully sure of themselves.

How much more, then, do we need to remind ourselves, that unrecognized and **false** assumptions characteristic of our time - **such as the notion that the non-profit corporation pattern of board/staff governance is "natural" for our Association** - must be part of who we are, too. It is terribly arrogant to suppose that because we can see, with hindsight, mistakes of the generations before us, it's okay to demonize them. Without demonizing them, we need to be as clear as we can be about their gifts to us and their mistakes, because the consequences of both **still** shape us.

Then we can try to answer, not ever flawlessly but better than we have, the questions: What reclaimed patterns of governance might be good for us, especially

in our ways of associating as liberal free congregations in our time? Could we **invent** patterns based in the spirit of neighborly love **among** our churches, for our time, appropriate in our society? In Lecture 6 I'll try my hand at those questions.