

THEOLOGY AND COVENANT IN CONGREGATIONALISM

By

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When I was a boy I delighted in visiting my fat, shrewd, jovial grandmother for many reasons, one being that she would permit me, on memorable occasions, to look at her stereopticon slides. It may be that there are present those of this visually sophisticated age who do not know what a stereoscope was. It was an optical instrument designed to impart a three-dimensional effect to two photographs of the same scene taken from slightly different angles and viewed through two lenses. The side-by-side pictures on curved cards looked identical, but when put into the viewer, and the focus adjusted, with what marvelous depth and clarity did Niagara Falls, Yosemite, and Pikes Peak leap into view before the awed and delighted eyes of a ten-year-old Yankee who had never been as far west as the Connecticut River. The rich pictorial reality was the result of the minutely different angles from which the natural wonders were photographed. Something similar will happen tonight. I hope, when that ecclesiastical wonder, the Congregational Way, is looked at from two like, but not identical, viewpoints.

I confess that when I first read Mr. Morris's excellent paper, I was dismayed. What he had said so tersely and comprehensively made of none effect the scribbled notes and quotes I had gathered. We had gone to the same basic sources – Atkins and Fagley, Williston Walker, the 1596 Confession of the London - Amsterdam Church, and the like – with the result that he said first and well much of what I intended to say. But a moment's thought dispelled my dismay. His careful presentation of basic definitions of theology and covenant left me free to spend time with certain niceties which otherwise I would not have been able to do. Some of what I am going to say will be a mere underscoring of Mr. Morris's indubitable theses. Since the groundwork has been done, I merely offer a simple, nontechnical working definition: a covenant is a spiritual contract, in which the individual members of a church, in return for benefits from each other and from God, accept common beliefs and promise to fulfill mutual obligations. My point of divergence tonight is that I will examine the covenant in the light of the conviction that it is a marvelously flexible device, a superbly useful ecclesiastical invention for creating and maintaining that unity in diversity which marks Congregationalism. I will also laud it as a means for scattering, in an irenic way, a storm cloud of conflict on the National Association horizon, now no larger than a man's hand, but with a serious potential of damage.

Mr. Morris has clearly stated the dilemma inherent in retaining freedom in theology while living within the confines of a covenant. At this point I am moved to name a wise book which Andrew J. White of Cornell University wrote some

two generations or more ago. It was called, *“The Warfare of Science and Theology in Christendom.”* President White noted that while there was no quarrel between religion – the native experienced reality - and science, there was most certainly a conflict, bitter and continuing between scientific laws and theological dogma. I elect to deal chiefly with the concept of covenant, and I build upon the foundation already laid by discussing briefly the Biblical reference to the concept of covenant, and I build upon the foundation already laid by discussing briefly the biblical reference to the concept of covenant. In the King James Version I find by rough count no fewer than 235 of these, mostly in the Old Testament. Covenant is generally reckoned to be “the promises of God as revealed in the scriptures, conditioned upon certain terms on the part of man – obedience, repentance, faith” (Webster’s New International Dictionary, Second Edition). I begin by laying a Biblical basis for the worth of the covenant idea in Congregationalism.

While the word itself is not specifically used, there is, early in Genesis, an implicit covenant of benefit conditioned on man’s obedience:

“And the Lord god commanded the man, saying, of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.” (Genesis 2: 16, 17)

The incomparable Garden of Eden story tells of man’s primary breach of covenant, of which Milton sings in stately lines:

“Of man’s first disobedience, and the fall. . . “

There are five major covenants in the Old Testament. The first of these is with Noah, and the sign of that covenant is the rainbow, burning prismatically against the deep purple of the retreating storm that had inundated the earth. God said:

“And I will establish my covenant with you; neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood. . . I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth. . .” (Genesis 9: 11,13)

The second great covenant was with Abram, and the sign of that covenant was circumcision:

“The Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, unto thy seed have I given this land. . .” (Genesis 15: 18)

This ancient promise is still a matter of blood and bitterness in the Middle East, and no man knows how the Jewish-Arabian warfare will be ended. The third big covenant was made with Moses – the covenant of the law – the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20: 1-17). The token of this covenant is the two tablets

of stone. The fourth covenant was spoken to Solomon, but was actually made with David, and its symbol is a royal throne:

“Then I will establish the throne of thy kingdom upon Israel for ever, as I promised to David thy father, saying, There shall not fail thee a man upon the throne of Israel.” (1 Kings 9: 5)

The fifth covenant lacks a sign, but it is a noble promise – it is the new covenant which Jeremiah proclaims, a covenant dealing not with the temple, nor written book, nor priestly order, but with the setting forth of a gracious personal relationship to God as the heart of religion:

*“Behold the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the House of Judah. . . after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.”
(Jeremiah 31: 31, 33)*

While the New Testament does not contain much detailed mention of covenants, the whole twenty-seven books are often and correctly called “The New Covenant of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” His words at the Last Supper say this explicitly. He gave them the cup, saying, “This is my blood, the blood of the covenant. . .” (Matthew 26: 29 Neb.) This is a very sketchy treatment of the mighty concept of covenant, and it leaves unplumbed and unscaled its abysses and peaks of meaning, but it will serve as Biblical background for what is to come.

Here we leave the Scriptures where God sets the terms, and enter ecclesiastical history where covenant, as has been said, is a matter of mutual agreement. In Protestant history the covenant is highly important. The “First Covenant” in 1557 was a contract by some of the most powerful Scottish barons to support the Reformation. The “Solemn League and Covenant” of 1640 was a compact between the English and Scottish Parliaments for “The Reformation and defense of religion. [Which meant, of course, Presbyterianism, and nothing else], the honor and happiness of the king, and the safety of the three kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland.” Our fierce congregational hero, Oliver Cromwell, and the battle of Marston Moor took care of that nonsense; it was finally abrogated in 1661.

But let’s leap the ocean to consider the covenant as it is found in Colonial Congregationalism. To do so means to omit much – the works of Robert Browne, the London Confession of 1589 (Barrowe and Greenwood’s “A True Description. . .”) and the “Points of Difference of 1603,” interalia. The symbols of the Scrooby-Leyden Church – the Pilgrim Church – belong on both sides of the Atlantic. The “Seven Articles” written in Leyden (1619) and the better known “Mayflower Compact: are not strictly creeds or religious covenants, but they set

forth the congregational idea of mutual agreements as the basis for common action. And we cannot pass by that superb passage in Bradford's history, in which he tells of how the Pilgrims, sometime between 1602-1606:

“as the Lord's free people joined themselves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a church estate, in the fellowship of the Gospel, to walk in all His ways, made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavors, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them.”

Mr. Morris has already called attention to this in a shorter form, and he notes also how it is echoed in the Salem symbol (Deacon Samuel Fuller's influence, perhaps?) Which is still used by some of our churches in one form or another. Incidentally this Salem Covenant of 1629 did not remain in simple form. An enlarged version was adopted in 1636 and further detail was added in the “Direction for Public Profession” in 1665. And did time serve, we could profitably examine at length that definitive document of early Congregational principles to which Mr. Morris has already deferred – The Cambridge Platform of 1648. But I am afraid that the taste of old documents, like the taste of old wine, may so engross us that we will miss the meat of tonight's matter, namely, to make this dialogue zesty and relevant.

I was interested in a contrast which Mr. Morris cited between my comment that the local Church “can and does write its own creed and incorporates it into its covenant, “with Arthur Rouner, Jr.'s, statement that basically the essence of the individual covenant with Christ is not creedal, but a matter of personal commitment. It seems to me that early American Congregationalism clearly recognized the fact that it is impossible to draw up a document which is disciplinary and functional in its covenant aspect without including the theological convictions which serve as the cement to bind a company of believers together in a common faith and work. After all, Jesus did say that we were not only to worship God with heart and soul and strength – intense emotional and spiritual commitment – but with the mind as well. The early great confessions of the Church – the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed – were precise formulations of the body of Christian Doctrine. The old question put by Amos still has point: “Can two walk together except they be agreed?” (Amos 3:3) Indeed, one of the early New England symbols, “The Windsor Creed Covenant of 1646,” frankly incorporates in its title both the elements of functional agreement in the actions and ordinances of the local church and a very strict Calvinistic theological position. To this day most Congregational Churches have a covenant or articles or constitution, which contain a covenant of service (what the members are obligated to do) and a covenant of faith (what they mutually believe). In many cases these Churches mitigate the rigidity of the doctrinal standard by some such phrasing as “Do you accept this declaration of faith as we do, not as a test in every detail, but as a testimony to the faith that is in your heart?” I believe it impossible to write a covenant with no theological content at all. You have to

believe something, and say so plainly. Even the simple Salem covenant demands a belief in God – an atheist couldn't honestly accept it.

And while concurring with my colleague in the substance of doctrine in his presentation, I must mildly protest that he was a bit harsh on the evangelical party in the famous Dedham decision, which the Trinitarians legally lost in 1820 to the Unitarians in the case which Daniel Webster successfully argued for the First Parish against the Evangelical party, which later became Allin Congregational Church. I was for eight years the Minister of Allin, and I read with great care the records, as well as initiating an unsuccessful effort to bring about a modern common use of the Paul Revere Communion silver which the Trinitarian deacons took away by moonlight, under the, to them, reasonable conviction that infidels who denied the divinity of Christ had no right to celebrate his supper on silver plate bought by a family holding the true faith. But the story of the Unitarian Departure is a complicated one, and I will make no effort to analyze it here, although the temptation to needle Mr. Morris is strong indeed.

But in mentioning that famous and as yet unhealed schism, he raises a point which is of present and powerful importance to the National Association in the here and now. Mr. Morris has correctly named three excellent characteristics of a Congregational Church covenant which make it an instrument of freedom: It is voluntary, it is mutual; and it is transient – subject to change. I add to these characteristics another: It is binding only on the members of a particular local church. There is but one place in Congregationalism where ecclesiastical power can be lawfully exercised, and that is in the local church. This is so because nobody compelled an individual member to own the covenant: He did it freely and voluntarily, and he is therefore morally and spiritually bound by it.

The Cambridge Platform, in speaking of the matter and form of a visible church, says:

“This *form* is the visible *covenant*, agreement, or consent whereby they give up themselves unto the Lord, to the observing of the ordinance of Christ together in the same society, which is usually called the *Church-Covenant*; for we see not otherwise how members can have *Church-power* one over another mutually.” (C.P. Chap: IV.3)

But here is no church power elsewhere. Nothing stated by any ecclesiastical body exterior to a local Church is binding in matters temporal or spiritual on that church, nor any member of it. A Congregational Church can be bound only by its own actions. The National Association is denied any manner or creedal control or disciplinary power over a local Church or a minister (article VIII(A), and Bylaw IV 4). We are not a creedal national communion. I have been told that the Conservative Congregational Christian Churches – the Four C's – have a denominational statement of doctrine to which member Churches must

subscribe. It is thus with the Evangelical Fellowship in England. The member Churches of these bodies must adhere to a strict doctrinal standard. At this point, in my opinion, they cease to be true Congregational Churches. A Congregational Church, in our usage, is subject only to Christ, the great Head of each local church, and accepts only the Scriptures as its rule of faith and conduct. With us there can be no manmade statement of faith on a national or regional level, which is mandatory for a free local Church or any individual member of such a Church. The only discipline a local Congregational Church or Congregationalist is subject to is self-accepted. That's the meaning of our great text, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ had made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage." (Galatians 5: 1)

Lest you think that I have left the solid ground of history and am about to vanish in a cloud of rhetoric, let me now say plainly what I hinted at in the statement of my thesis – that the covenant is a means by which we can avoid a theological split in the National Association. We err if we think doctrinal division could happen only in Massachusetts 152 years ago over the Persons of the Trinity. To me, and I am not alone in this concern, there are clear signs of a growing divergence of theological views in our fellowship, a divergence which, if not taken seriously and checked, can have baleful results. As Mr. Morris has indicated, polity has been our theology. The autonomy of the local Church and tension about the matter of social action stance, were for us the big issues in the merger fight. But we did not escape unscathed, for the Four C's although rejecting the merger because of theological principles, did not continue in fellowship with us. There is already a schism of more than twenty years standing in the nonmerging Congregational Churches.

I do not bring up the painful point of further possible division on matters of theology simply to make an interesting discussion. I do not think that schism over doctrine is something which happened in Massachusetts long ago, never to return again. I see it as a real and simmering issue that has not been brought to a boil. I have been with National Association from the beginning, and in matters of theology I have some standing in both camps. I am for the unfettered intellect, and the need for intellectual integrity in all that we do. But I am also the product of a Baptist Sunday school, and I believe in prayer, and prayer healing, in a simple and naïve way. I have a complex periphery of thoughts and words and doings, but my core is childlike. Serious-minded men of both liberal and conservative casts of thought have honored me with their friendship and trust, and it is because of this background plus the fact that at my age a man is beyond ambition and free from worry about what people will think of him) that I bring into the open a trend which must be dealt with wisely and affectionately, with serious penalty for failure.

In recent years the charismatic movement has had enormous influence on mainline American Churches. The gains of renewal are great, but there has been a price. The Lutherans are sadly split because of new pressures. The

Roman Church and Episcopal Church are torn by conflicting views on the marriage of priests, the ordination of women, and the alteration of ritual. The fresh winds of the spirit have been powerful and rending. They are also blowing in the National Association. At Tacoma in 1974, the moderator granted a number of young ministers much time to speak their concern that a more spiritual stress was needed in our annual meetings; at Wichita generous provision was made for greater spiritual emphasis in the program. But it is no secret, although it is now being said formally for the first time, that theological liberals are worried about this strong conservative thrust, and conservatives are troubled because, for example, it seems to them that the pages of *THE CONGREGATIONALIST* are reflecting a humanistic trend. To deny or ignore these tensions is not the part of wisdom. They should be faced with intelligence, mutual respect, and loving prayer.

My specific medicine for this malaise is what we have been talking about tonight – the Church covenant as the sole theological statement of binding strength in Congregationalism. We are marvelously blessed that our fathers wisely shaped and passed on to us this flexible instrument of Church life. I am going to make a highly personal illustration, and I have not asked either of the men I shall name for permission to use him as an example. We are old comrades in arms and can speak frankly of each other. I have just read a book of sermons by Malcolm Burton, preached during his active ministry. They are, I think, liberal in the good sense of the word – thought-provoking, well-reasoned, polished. I have also read for many years the sermons of Leslie Deinstadt. He is a solid expository preacher; his sermons are doctrinally conservative. The two men are utterly divergent in their pulpit approach to the religious life. Yet both are Congregational ministers, and members in good standing of member National Association churches. How can this unity be in the face of homiletic and doctrinal diversity? Well, for one reason, to put it bluntly, it wouldn't make the least bit of difference to Les Deinstadt what the Pontiac Church thought of his sermons, nor would Malcolm Burton give a hoot for the views of Mayflower Church. This splendid liberty could not exist in a connectional Church, with a denominational book of discipline, a national creed, and a series of judicatories for heresy trials. God be praised for our heritage of covenant. It is the rock of our ecclesiastical freedom.

This last, and it is somewhat tangential to my thesis. As valuable as the covenant is in making it possible for the National Association to include a wide spectrum of theological opinion while remaining a fellowship, the covenant alone is not enough. It is letter, and not spirit. If our beloved National Association is to grow and witness to freedom, we must have a deep and true respect for each other's convictions, and a liberty rooted in love. Liberals must not look down their intellectual noses at conservatives, and conservatives must not hold a pharisaical attitude of pious superiority toward liberals. I once read that the medievalists had a phrase – "Odium Theologicum" – the hatred engendered by theological differences. It was the worst kind of lathing. It was spiritually deadly because

those who indulge in that violation of the law of love thought, in Christ's cutting phase, "That they did God Service." Our fellowship has been richly blessed by God, and its witness is sorely needed in a day when organizational ecumenicity seeks to clamp creedal fetters on free minds. Let us with mutual respect and Christian love, each grant to the other the right to think of God as God leads him to do.