

**The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church:
The Spirit and the Promise of Our Covenant**
by Alice Blair Wesley

Lecture 1 of the 2000-01 Minns series of 6
Love Is the Doctrine of this Church. . .

Love is the doctrine of this church,
The quest of truth is its sacrament,
And service is its prayer.
To dwell together in peace,
To seek knowledge in freedom,
To serve human need,
To the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the Divine -
Thus do we covenant with each other and with God.

You recognize those words as one of the most frequently used readings in our hymnal. Many of our strongest churches - *e.g.*, First Church, Dallas, TX and the East Shore Church of Bellevue, WA - use now and have used this short reading - or a variation of it - in every Sunday service for many years. We North American Unitarian Universalists, in all our diversity, share one doctrine everywhere in common. We call it the doctrine of congregational polity. It would be better called the doctrine of covenantal organization. I will hold in this years' six Minns Lectures that 1) the meaning of our essential continuity over the centuries, since our oldest churches were founded here in the 1630s, is embedded in this short reading and that 2) many of our institutional problems over the centuries, right up to the present, have had to do with an inadequate understanding of the meaning of these lines.

In this first lecture I'll spend some time first telling you how I came to see our strengths and weakness as I do, and then I shall address the question: Where does that first line, "Love is the doctrine of this church," come from, historically? And what does it mean?

I sought your invitation to give the first of this year's series of six Minns Lectures here in the First Church, Dedham. I thank you for the kindness of your invitation. I hope you will come to understand as we go along, why I so much wanted to begin in Dedham, Massachusetts. It is because a very quiet little event - of long, still living, tradition-shaping consequence - happened here among a small group of ancestors of today's Unitarian Universalists, in 1637.

This quiet little event was meant to lead to the founding of the Dedham church. It did. Moreover, it led to the founding in 1638 of a particular kind of free church, having distinct features, very characteristic of other free churches already founded and soon to be founded all over the region by the 20,000 or so colonists who came to New England by the shipload in the decade of the 1630s, specifically for the purpose of founding just this kind of free churches.

I don't myself know how many free church communities these 20,000 New Englanders organized, in what they called "the liberty of the Gospel." But 200 years later, during a period of about 50 years - from roughly 1820-1870 - some 125 of these churches, one by one, took the name Unitarian, including First Church, Dedham, one of the

earliest to do so. These New England ancestors of ours set the institutional patterns in which, still today, all our Unitarian Universalist Congregations are individually organized. Our institutional history begins in the 1630s.

Now everything that happened here in New England in the 1600s was but one fruit of a great sprawling complex of many earlier and continuing events elsewhere, in Europe in the 1500s and 1600s. Those events involved much noise, a lot of very confused politics, and everywhere varying amounts of violence, even unto international war. I mean that vast complex of many events, known as the Protestant Reformation. But I want to focus on the long meanings of this one small, tradition-shaping event, way over on the left wing of the Reformation, as those meanings may be understood to have a bearing now, in the church year 2000-01, on all the liberal Unitarian Universalist congregations of North America.

I shall make and try to explain a claim many might find, on first hearing anyway, astonishing. For I claim that - whether you ever heard, directly, of this little event in Dedham or not - to understand in any depth our liberal free church tradition, or to make much sense of the deeply rooted everyday realities of Unitarian Universalist churches now, today, you must understand in your bones the historical importance of the spirit of love manifest in the doctrine of the free church, as this little group of people in Dedham understood it in New England, in 1637.

But I should make here a confession of sorts. I shall "hold forth" as a lay theologian, not a scholar. Scholars are life-long students of some many-faceted subject, whose habits of mind are neat. Scholars have practiced for years the minute tasks of making good notes and carefully filing them for later access. So, a scholar's mind slowly comes to resemble a well cataloged library. I have spent many years studying our liberal religious tradition and churches - as a lay member, a seminarian and a parish minister. My mind, though, does not much resemble a library. My mind is more like your big old family attic.

I have often ruefully wished I were a scholar. But I have spent my forty-odd years as a Unitarian Universalist mostly in active - some might say hyperactive - engagement with other church members, in 16 of our congregations, in Kentucky, Delaware, Texas, Maryland, New Jersey and, of late, Washington State and Pennsylvania. I have been briefly in and out of the buildings and lives of many more of our churches, from Georgia to British Columbia and from Maine to California..

Of course, I have also spent, in my four decades as a UU, a good deal of time closeted with books, off by myself, reading, pondering, trying to get some handles on the meaning of our churches' very mixed bag of strengths and weakness, fine success and sad failure to thrive more vigorously than many of our churches do. In my hunt for some handles on the meaning of UU churchlife, I have been, then, also mentally much in and out of our churches in Massachusetts and other New England parts, trying specifically to understand how we got started and the paths our people traveled that led to where we are now.

But the truth is, I never stayed closeted long enough to do much filing. Instead, I always rushed off to another meeting, or counseling session, or worship service - to engagement with other members. So, my studies of our history have always had more of a rummaging than a scholarly quality. You know how it is on a hunt for something up in the attic. It's a kind of round-and-roundabout-again exercise in frustration and delight. You start,

thinking you'll go through these dusty old boxes to find one thing. First thing you know, though you still haven't found that one thing, you've got a hodge podge of very interesting, happily chanced-upon old family things lying about, pulled from various boxes, and the doorbell rings. Next month, when you can, get back up there, you go through the same process, only now you're arranging little stacks of stuff there and about, while still looking for that one thing, and your dog starts barking at the neighbors' cat, the neighbors who really don't like your dog barking at their cat. Such have mostly been my times of study. And that is partly what I mean by saying I am a lay theologian.

But there's more to it. When I say I am a lay theologian, I mean that for longer now than 25 years, my rummaging in our history has always centered - more or less - on a hunt for the lay doctrine of our North American free and liberal churches. What ought all the lay members of a liberal free church understand their own local congregation to be about? Answer that, and you can talk about - discuss - the liberal doctrine of the church. That is, you can have a lucid conversation about the doctrine our members should teach concerning their own thriving, livewire liberal church, consistently and collectively, by what they say and by their actions in the church. For that is what a doctrine is: It is a lived teaching about the essential nature of something. So, this is my question: What ought the *lay* members of a liberal free church understand our kind of church to be about, now, in our time? And however far afield in time I may get in parts of this discussion, I mean this one question to be the one subject of these lectures. Here's how this question became central for me.

For one academic winter term I was lucky enough, at age 36, to be part of a seminary class taught by James Luther Adams at the Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago. The course was titled Liberal Doctrine of the Church. Jim Adams traced in his lectures and class discussions dozens and more dozens of factors involved in the historical development of our liberal churches. Yet, his classes always had one paramount theme, which I summarize: Strong, effective, lively liberal churches, capable of altering positively sometimes the direction of their whole society, will be those liberal churches whose lay members can say clearly, individually and collectively, what are their own most important loyalties, as church members.

Note: *Not* what are their beliefs, as in a creedal church. Rather, what are their shared, mutual *loyalties* in a covenantal church.

I don't know any of Adams' students who can describe briefly what he could do to your head. The only world class theologian North American Unitarian Universalists produced in the 20th century, Adams had the ability to lay his hand on the time horizon of a student's mind and give it a swift yank. The sudden expansion of relevant time was breath-taking. For JLA - as his students call him - was not interested only in the modern, the current version of the liberal free church. He wanted us to learn how there ever came to be such a thing as a free church and, moreover, what was going on during those crucial events of history, when a few people - loyally holding onto the idea of the free church, in face of nearly overwhelming opposition - - when a few people in little religious groups made fateful decisions, which re-shaped the tradition, not only of the free church, but, eventually, all Western culture.

Why? Why did JLA so much want us to learn about the roots of our liberal church tradition? Because this is simply a fact: The modern liberal free church grew, very slowly, out of earlier free churches. And, as novelist William Faulkner said, "The past is not dead. It's not even past."

The still living consequences of our spiritual ancestors' convictions - their convictions "right on" and still in accord with reality, and their mistaken convictions, based then and still based on inadequate readings of the human situation - - The consequences of our ancestors' convictions live on in us most often *as* unexamined assumptions, some of them inadequate, mistaken, not life enhancing, even deadening. So, while we have inherited, though we may hardly realize it, some wonderful consequences of their "right on" convictions, we have also inherited warping consequences of our ancestors' mistakes which show up in our weak, or warped, or nearly dysfunctional, maybe dying churches. All that is part of our tradition, which has made us and makes us now who we are as liberal church people.

Often you may hear UUs speak of our churches as "the free church," as though ours are the only such. We may speak of our tradition in a fashion implying that our tradition has nothing to do with any older - we mean those "outmoded" - traditions of other churches. It was a major mission of James Luther Adams to make his students understand that the naive and arrogant assumptions, underlying any such talk, are arrant nonsense, warping nonsense which the more we believe it, the more it weakens us.

Many a liberal student - including yours truly - entered one of JLA's courses assuming that liberal churches sprang up, sort of like mushrooms, overnight - maybe in the 1820s, maybe in the 1930s, or even later. Anyway quite recently, as history goes. Anything that happened before that time is "ancient history" having practically nothing to do with the modern liberal church. Supposing ourselves "broad-minded, we were in fact - as JLA would say - "temporally parochial." The very word liberal means free to think broadly, but we were, in our thinking about liberal religion, not really broad-minded, but narrow-minded, limited to the confines of a narrow little slit of time, recent decades, actually.

And suddenly, there you were in a JLA class, listening as he showed you, illumined for you - with his endless stories - the many direct links between other long ago and faraway crucial times and events of today. For the modern liberal church is but one of many groups belonging to the great tradition of the free church. The great tradition of the free church reaches - not reached - reaches, still lives, in a stretch of at least 4000 years of human history, not a mere 70 or 180 years. So, JLA's lectures ranged all over the continents and back and forth in time, lighting here on the yesterday's newspaper headlines, there on the writings an Old Testament prophet, touching briefly on the craft guilds of medieval Europe, back to the hierarchical governments of ancient Mideast empires, and on to what happened in 1947 at a board meeting of a local Unitarian church. Or, as JLA used to say, "There is no such thing as the immaculate conception of an idea."

With reference to the liberal doctrine of the church, JLA meant that whenever the lay members of a liberal, lively and effective local church can speak clearly of their own shared loyalties, neither their achievement of such clarity nor the splendid power of their congregation, richly to enhance human lives, is rightly understood if you think of it as something easily or only recently available to modern liberals. True, certain visitors - potential members - may

very well find what the members say is so patently clear that the whole idea of an authentically liberal free church may seem like just very appealing common sense. And these will join and become active members.

But in truth, the simple, transparent, potent idea of the free church has had to be, time and time and time again, re-conceived, re-constructed in human imagination, from memories of the tradition so obscured, or twisted and bent out shape over time, as to be - sometimes - almost gone from the world. Moreover, the free church has never been re-conceived and re-formed other than in the midst of some very particular era, when the reformers themselves were caught up - as all human beings always are - in confused and confusing, complex and complicated events of their own particular times, in the messiness of human social intercourse. All ideas are born of human social intercourse. There is no such thing as the “immaculate conception” of any idea, including the idea of the free church.

So really, no matter how neat may be their study habits, even great scholars never can find anyhow, in the records of our spiritual history, any perfect sample of the free church, one item we have only to lift from a box neatly labeled, “Documents of the Free Church.” For the free church never has been and is not now perfectly manifest in any religious group - and not in ours either. That is the very nature of an ideal.

We cannot ever fully realize or institutionalize the ideal free church. Why? Well, for many reasons. The most important one, by far, is this: Our human loyalties are hardly ever quite as clear to ourselves as we may think they are. Only the consequences of widely characteristic events of any one era can to some extent disclose the actual human loyalties shaping events of a particular time. Jesus is said to have said, “By their fruits ye shall know them.” Well, sure. But very often the fruits of what we do today don’t show up for a long time. And besides the problem of delayed results, when the “fruits” of human choices and actions are “born,” they come to fruition all mixed in with a lot of other stuff. Which can make it really hard to tell what the heck we are doing, right now in our own group every Sunday and everyday.

Take just one example of what can happen in a liberal free church. The picture, of recent events I shall describe in one church, is sufficiently like - I dare say - the picture of similar events in many Unitarian Universalist churches, that thousands of UUs would immediately recognize this picture and say - “Yep, I know that church. As hard as the devil to change, too. Try to change it and you may get ‘killed!’”

Just 12 or 15 years ago, in the late 1980s, there was a small UU congregation of about 70 members. Call it the Little Valley Church. If you asked the members to describe their liberal church, they would tell you, sincerely and with one voice, “Our church stands for individual freedom of thought.” If you then asked, “Is that what makes yours a good church?” the members answered, again with one voice, “A church is really just people. Our members are wonderful, interesting, caring people. That’s why ours is a good church.”

Well, the Little Valley Church was then, in the late '80s, about 30 years old and sitting right in the middle of an area which had become, in the last 15 years, a far out suburb of a large city, with a rapidly growing and increasingly liberal population. *I.e.*, their county had changed a lot in the last 15 years. Back when the church was still new, 30 years earlier, their mostly rural and conservative county had three small towns. And the church back then, drawing members from all over the county, had flourished remarkably. They had a lively church school on Sundays and a much larger art school for children during the week. Members started an art fair, which soon grew to

be so huge that the County Parks Dept. had to take it over. And, most remarkably, in this conservative area members of that church were largely responsible, in the late '60s and '70s, for ending racial segregation in the county schools and restaurants. Several members were long-time friends of the county's African American leaders. A few church members were African American. Sound great? It was a great little liberal church!

By the late '80s the county had been booming steadily for 15 years, but the little liberal church never grew. By then, about 40% of the members were 70 years old or more. The church school was tiny. There was almost no church activity during the week. The grass outside might get to be a foot tall before it was mowed. What in the world happened?

Well, with all the good stuff they did, here's what else went on. Members of the Little Valley Church for 30 years loyally persevered, not in life enhancing acts of devotion to freedom of thought in their church, but in stupefyingly dull acts of waiting out the "talkback." The talkback, together with announcements, took up at least half the service every Sunday. Think of it! Thirty minutes X 40 Sundays a church year X 30 years! That's a lot of dull and boring time. But every Sunday, all the members present patiently waited for two, just two long-winded, very sarcastic individuals - who disagreed about everything under the sun - at long last to run down and hush. For not until they did, could the leader of the day say the "closing words," after which all could at last move on to "coffee hour."

I must tell you they did much good ministry in coffee hour, which might well last an hour, and also during monthly potluck luncheons which could last up to 3 hours. These were loving people; they enjoyed each other and helped each other out a lot. But freedom of thought in the liberal church, they thought, implied a strict rule to be rigidly observed, a kind of Law: Members of a liberal church must listen to hours and hours and hours of sheer blather. And they all did, not to anyone's benefit, but in loyal accord, they thought, with the tradition of the liberal free church.

What sort of loyalty was actually at work here? Neither of the two persons who dominated Sunday services cared two hoots, really, about freedom of thought in the liberal church. These two just loved to argue, about anything, in front of an audience. They really never noticed how seldom other members of the congregation - the free church gathered for worship - took part in these unending harangues. They never changed each others' or anybody else's thought. No issue was ever resolved and followed by some earnest action. Indeed, there was precious little exercise of freedom of thought, during their worship services, having any non-trivial purpose. And the members of the Little Valley Church wondered why their church - which had lots of visitors - never grew!

Moreover, the members' addiction to informality brought with it an even more serious problem, one entirely invisible. I mean the problem of authority in the free church. Authority: Who gets to decide what in the free church? When? Why? At those long coffee hours and potluck luncheons, the whole atmosphere looked friendly and relaxed, as if these people had no leadership. They did. They had a highly authoritarian, secret ringleader, who by the late '80s had been exercising illegitimate power in the church for at least their most recent 15 years, maybe throughout their 30 years as a church, although nobody knew it. This is what was happening and how it finally came to light..

With the growing population of the county, came a few UUs from more active churches elsewhere. These few newer members often brought up, during coffee hour, ideas of things it would be good to do in the church. Others might respond with some enthusiasm. Then what? Nothing. No matter how many times they brought them up. So, the few newer members were always saying to one another, "The people here are awfully nice. I really like them, but they won't do anything. Why?"

The fact is they couldn't do anything. Because, given the rigid informality of their church organization, it was easy as pie for one ringleader of a little group of three or four old friends - charming people, everybody loved them - to get together, maybe just on the phone, during the week. These few would decide privately, "No, we don't want to do such-and-such; it would cost too much. Or, we tried that years ago, remember; it didn't work out. Or, not many people in our church are really interested that sort of thing." Then each of these three or four called two or three other members, their special friends. Thus, all new ideas were quashed, routinely, systematically, thoroughly. Whoever raised an idea never knew why at the next coffee hour, it was just not to be discussed. Bring it up again, and the conversation just moved pleasantly on to other matters, as inexorably as late afternoon moves toward night.

Empowerment, of both individuals and groups, happens within certain patterns of organization. Unless these patterns are both visible and widely familiar, nobody knows who can properly do what, and so nobody feels empowered. Whenever there is too much informality in free church organization, trouble - bad trouble - is either already at hand or coming. For in an informal organization, authority is not clearly delegated, with members exercising their freedom of thought to decide who might best head up or coordinate this or that task, or why it might be good for several subgroups to take up different tasks, or why we might need to alter how all our subgroups connect, and thus work both separately and together.

In fact, in a very informal little church there aren't any fructifying and complementary sub-groups. So the members become, not an organized body, walking toward some chosen goals - with arms carrying, legs walking, lungs taking in air, eyes reading the road signs and so on. The members become, instead, just an amorphous collection of individuals sort of milling about, as in coffee hour. In the Little Valley Church, this had come to pass because one undelegated ringleader had an invisible hammerlock on all the decision-making authority in that church. Even officers were really elected only *pro forma*. And this ringleader loved - what - freedom of thought? She loved her authority and power - in a corrupted liberal free church - as much as any Roman Catholic pope ever loved his. The informal church organization only looks free; it is actually rigidly hierarchical and authoritarian.

A case in point, then. The lay members of that church could not say clearly what were their own mutually shared loyalties. Actually, they were primarily loyal as churchpeople to two things: 1) loosely expressed, often meanly expressed, meaningless opinions and 2) informality. So, the church was stuck, irrelevant now to their county, not doing anything much but taking care of each other, caught in the shallows of unconscious hypocrisy, and slowly dying.

Friends, we Unitarian Universalists deceive ourselves if we falsely suppose that only older churches, established in the 4th or the 16th or the 18th centuries - not modern liberal churches established in the 19th or 20th or 21st centuries - can deserve to be called "outmoded," drugged by the thin fumes of a not profound liberalism - and

dying. A devoted friend of our churches, a UUA Officer, used to say to me in the late '80s, "We've got hundreds of churches already dead. They just haven't fallen over yet." And she was, sadly, right. We UUs are beneficiaries and bearers of the great tradition of the free church. It is, at once, an exceedingly strong and precious, and fragile inheritance, and we stand in just as much danger of losing it as any other church ever has or ever will - in a haze of confusion and forgetfulness.

But hey, guess what! Did you think I might be planning to deliver a jeremiad, to make you feel really down about the state of some of our churches? I will not. Here's a P.S. to the story of the Little Valley Church. In the late '80s things began to change in that church. Then it began to grow, significantly. More changes followed growth. And with these changes came a full measure of baffling "dust and heat," as hard for members to understand as anything that had ever happened among them. The truly beloved ringleader left, very angrily, and took about 16 other loved members with her. It was a painful and wrenching big loss for so small a group. But the church kept on growing anyhow, bought a new site and put up a fine new building to make possible more growth still. Since their dying time of 12 or 15 years ago, their membership has nearly tripled. Their members now can say much more clearly than they used, what are their commonly shared loyalties. Freedom of thought in the church now means much more than it once did. That's why it is still growing, steadily.

The doctrine - the lived teaching - of a free church entails several crucial elements. One of the most important has to do with patterns of delegated authority both in local churches and among churches belonging to our Association. In times of weakness we always need to look to see if there aren't some very poor patterns of authority among us, of long standing. Remember: I am always talking about patterns of authority affecting the lay members of the local church, the people who, from the time they join, intend to - and do - attend services together, plan and work together, and socialize together - often and continuously over the years of their lives. I will later try to show something of how and why healthy and open delegation of authority became the difficult problem it has long been for us, throughout much of our movement's history. I hope I have so far illustrated this: Most crucially, the doctrine of a free church flows from mutually shared loyalties of the members, and these loyalties are to be seen at work in everything the members do together as churchpeople.

But what loyalties, specifically? So far, I've only talked about loyalty to meaningful freedom of thought in the church. Is that it? No. That formulation of the issue doesn't cut the the heart of any specifically religious issue.

I just told of some good - not bad, good - people who came pretty close to killing off their own church because they loved most, in the church, the wrong things. They forgot that freedom in the church is not of much use or value unless freedom is there used, often and repeatedly by the members to explore, together, the realities of their own lives which the members find most worthy of faithful love. For all their easy talk about freedom, these members had not consciously, for a generation, linked freedom in the church with religious love of the most worthy realities of their own lives, the kind of love so deep that it informs and shapes all our loyalties, inside and outside the church.

Here's a little question some in the world might consider innocent enough. Why not have the programs of a liberal church efficiently run and managed by a hired agent of our democratic government, *e.g.*, the Dept. of Human Health and Services? Or, an agent from one of the big non-profit corporations? The Red Cross, the YMCA, or the

YMHA? We'd surely have just as many pleasant coffee hours and potluck dinners and more good lectures and discussions.

Why? do we here in this Unitarian church inwardly scream NO, at the mere suggestion of having our churches run by any outside corporate bureaucracy, no matter how benign, even by one of our own devising, the UUA? The reason is: No matter how much we Unitarian Universalists may have changed as a religious people since New England colonists established the free church tradition in our part of the world in the 1630s, we have not changed in this: We understand somewhere way down deep that freedom in the church - and the authority to run it and do in it what we the local members deem best - is absolutely necessary and must be inviolable if we are to have in our lives one community, among all those of which we are a part, in which we can - with honest if sometimes conflicted hearts and minds - examine together our own deepest loves. We need to examine together our own deepest loves so that we can try to see whether we are living by right loves, or by some misplaced, inappropriate love for less than worthy realities.

Another of the more popular readings in our hymnal is titled, "It Matters What We Believe." I'm saying it matters most what we love. The free church is an organization we establish and join so that we can help each other to find, over and over again in a thousand varying time frames and settings, what are our worthiest loves, and therefore, what our own love may now require of us, if we would be loyal in the most meaningful sense, in what we do, in our actions, in the way we live. The basic enterprise of the free church is too personally important ever to turn over to, or even to engage in with any but faithful, long-term partners in the business of living with religious integrity - the living out of our true and real and right loves.

Now I want to tell you what happened here in Dedham, in 1637, before the founding the Dedham Church, the same church in whose building we are meeting in the year 2000. The story is recorded in the First Church Records, Book I, now kept in the archives of the Dedham Historical Society.

By 1637 there were about 30 families in Dedham, all very recently settled here. They had come from various parts of England. Some families had even lived for a while - since they got off different ships - in various of the new towns of New England, until the General Court said people of these 30 or so families could have a portion of land, a township to be named Dedham.

Upon reaching this piece of the American wilderness, they first had to design a town government, so they could decide how legally to allot fields for growing crops and smaller lots for the building of houses. Then, with pens built for their animals, initial crops seen to, houses up, furniture unpacked or freshly pegged together, and so on, they began to think of founding a church. But they had been working so hard they really hadn't had time to get to know each other very well, much less talk about what kind of church they should establish. In other words, except that many of them - though not all - were farmers, these folks were something like present day suburbanites, almost all of whom may have moved quite recently to where they now live. Certainly, if suburbanites now think they might want to start a new Unitarian Universalist church, they will have to start by talking with strangers, maybe much like themselves religiously, maybe not, but who certainly do not know each other in any depth.

So, guess what these New Englanders did in 1637 to get to know one another and to approach - gently, slowly - some very profound and personal religious issues, *terra incognita* among them. They set up a series of weekly neighborhood meetings, “lovingly to discourse and consult together. . . and prepare for spiritual communion in a church society, * * * [gap in the record] that we might be further acquainted with the (spiritual) tempers and guifts of one an other.” Meetings were held every Thursday “at several houses in order,” in rotation. Anybody in town who wanted was welcome to attend.

They adopted a few simple rules for their meetings. Rule 1: They would decide before leaving each meeting what question to discuss next week. That way people were more apt to share considered thoughts. Rule 2: Each week the host of the house would begin, speaking to the agreed upon question. Then everyone else could speak by turns. All individuals could, as they chose, speak to the question, or raise a closely related question and speak to that, or state any objections or doubts concerning what any others had said, “so it were humbly & with a teachable hart not with any mind of cavilling or contradicting.” In other words, Rule 3 was: Here we speak our own understandings or doubts. No arguing. The record reports that all their “reasonings” were “very peaceable, loving, & tender, much to edification.”

Nowadays we don’t often say a good meeting contributed to our “edification.” But otherwise, what a contemporary ring those rules have! I have sat myself in hundreds of hours of Unitarian Universalist discussion meetings with exactly those rules! In a large, well-established church of 1000 members, with members who wanted to get to know one another and go to some deep places of the spirit together, which might prove controversial. And in meetings of suburban strangers exploring the possibility of starting a new liberal church together.

The account in the Dedham Church record lists the questions the people in 1637 - not yet a church - discussed at their weekly meetings, which continued a whole year, one event really, from the winter season of 1637 until some time after the church was founded in November of 1638. Several features of this event are just intriguing. E.g., we all know the New England colonists were a “people of the Book,” the Bible. But they did not begin to talk about a church by talking about the Bible. By way of laying a basis for discussion of the church, they began by addressing a question of common sense or natural law. I quote, “For the subject of theses disputes or conferences divers meetings att first were spent about questions as pertayned to the just, peaceable & comfortable proceeding in the civill society * * * .”

In a word, a foundational concern of a free church is for the justice, the peace, the laws and regulations -the conditions of any healthy free society. Here in the wilderness these people, having just come from the anguish of European society in the 1600s, knew there can be no peaceably functioning free church - in the long term - if it is not set within a larger society wherein concerns for justice, peace and reasonable laws can be freely and effectively voiced, without suppression. And that beginning concern for the conditions of the larger society always remained in the background of the New England free church, and could very readily, at any time, spring to the foreground, if occasion warranted, although the free church certainly had its own more specialized concerns.

At just this point there is an unrecorded assumption in the text of the Dedham Church record, but - I think - if we don’t catch the force of it, we are very apt to misread the thrust of much of our own still living past. These New

Englanders assumed that the strongest - maybe not the only - but the strongest, clearest, most authentic voice in their whole society - for justice, peace and reasonable laws - would come from the free church, once it was established. Why? Because they understood the divine will of the loving God of the Universe to be for justice, peace and good laws in the whole society. *The* task of the free church could be summed - in their terms - as loving God and loving one another so well that in their own study and discussion, dispute and conference, prayer, consultation and more discussion in the free church, the members might learn together the divine will of the loving God for the whole society insofar as that will relates to justice, peace and reasonable laws. And, if so, the members would be called, compelled, bound to proclaim it and try to bring it to bear in their whole society.

In England, in the decades before the 1630s, there had been no strong, clear, authentic voices for justice, peace and reasonable laws coming from the established State church, as these New Englanders understood things. Furthermore, every effort of lay people like themselves to get going even quasi-church meetings to discuss such matters - in their homes or in lawyers' professional organizations or in the marketplace - had been systematically thwarted and suppressed. For just such meetings as they were now having in Dedham, people had been fined, jailed, exiled, whipped and even hanged. So, they talked first about the conditions of a good society in general. But the author of the record, John Allin, wrote down no details of their "divers meetings" on this broad subject, perhaps because of the danger that, even out here in the wilderness, 3000 nautical miles from England, a written record could fall into the hands of an unfriendly agent of the king.

Anyhow, after much general talk about "civill society," they began to edge toward talk about a church. Their first question on this subject was: Here we are, not presently members of any church. We don't know each other well, religiously. Are we qualified to "assemble together. . . [and] confer" like this? Their answer: We are if, "in the judgement of charity," we seem to be and think we are acting out of [in our terms] genuinely deep, religious love. Now I don't want to mislead here. For these Dedham people genuinely deep, religious love meant a union with Christ. I will not till Lecture 3 to get into the details of what they meant by "union with Christ." For now I will just say I am convinced what they meant by that term generally was no different from what we mean by a phrase like "genuinely deep, religious love."

Next question: Well, if we can meet like this, just as neighbors, isn't this enough? Maybe we don't need a church. Their answer: No, this is too casual. If we really want to live in the ways of our deepest love, then we must intentionally form a much deeper community of love. "The spiritual condition of [even deeply loving people] is such as stand in need of all instituted [helps] for the repaire of the [spirit] and edification of the [whole] body of [the church.]" And besides, others in the larger society need the example of love which a free church will publicly show forth. Otherwise, others might not be drawn to the life of effective love, or enjoy the benefits of justice, peace and so on - in "civill society" which the free church will care about and speak out for. My point is they understood the role of the church as filling needs of both the members and the larger community.

Quite a few references to the Bible came into their later discussions, precisely when they got into issues of authority inside the church. For they read the Bible with a sociological and political hermeneutic. But what they were doing with reference to Bible stories, is just what I am doing right now. They were looking back in time to earlier eras

of reform in the records of great free church tradition, to see how things were done back then, and whether those ways made sense to them in their own times.

These laypeople's central conclusion, from all these weeks of discussion, was this: Members of their new free church should be joined in a covenant of religious loyalty to the spirit of love. And once the members were joined in a covenant, of their own writing and signing, the member's loyalty in the church should be only to the spirit of love, working in their own hearts and minds. No one - not the Governor, not the General Court, not even members of other similarly covenanted churches, would have any authority in the local free church. They were not sectarian loners. As I shall explain later in this series, they thought they should and they did seek counsel from neighboring churches often. Yet they were very careful to make sure everybody understood, they would seek and consider counsel from others often, accept rulings or commands contrary to their own experience of the spirit - never.

For any who might suppose our 17th century free church ancestors talked mostly about original sin, predestination and hellfire, I am glad to be able to tell you, not one of those topics is even once mentioned or so much as hinted at, in the record of the founding of the Dedham Church. The document describes these discussions of 1637-38 and the talk, talk, talk they engaged in, at each step of the way to the founding, and on to their first reception of new members after the founding, and on to their first election of Officers, after which they ordained two of their own members as Pastor and Elder.

In these pages there is much use of the words: reason, reasons, reasoned, reasoning, deliberation, make trial of, clearing, cleared up, encouragement, advice, advise, counsel, agree, agreed, agreement, approbation, liberty, liberties and promising. There is also repeated use of the words: sweet, comfort, help and brotherly. But by far the most commonly used words in this written history are: affection, affections, affectionately, embrace and love, loving, lovingly. In the first 24 pages I counted 32 uses of the words affection and love. Why? Because then and now and for as long as human history lasts - when all is said and done, done and said some more - the integrity of the free church comes down to our loyalty to the spirit of love at work in the hearts and minds of the local members. The laypeople who founded First Church, Dedham knew so and clearly said so, and that is why we still say together, so often in our churches now, "Love is the doctrine of this church. . ."

May we long continue to say so, and understand deeply what we are saying in the liberal free churches these laypeople founded.

On Wednesday evening at the Brookline Church, I shall take up the covenant and ask: How shall we now understand the covenant of the free and liberal church?