

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

Lecture 3 of the 2000-01 Minns series of 6
How We Came to Forget the Covenant for a Long Time

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I need clearly to say here: This feature of our liberal doctrine of the church is muddled and has long been muddled. And, I am driving toward a discussion of reform in just this aspect of our doctrine and practice in Lectures 5 and 6. But, I hold, to understand how we came to have such historically weak patterns of cooperation among our churches, we need also to understand how those disputes over anthropology and the theology of God evolved as they did, in the Unitarian Controversy. So, in this Lecture 3 I will deal with these matters as well.

I need also to note that Unitarian and Universalist congregations were not institutionally connected until the UUA was organized in 1961. In the time I have, I cannot even touch on Universalist history. Yet I think no one would contradict me in this. Whatever strand or period you want to talk about, you could well say: However fine our churches have been, internally or out in the world, never have our Unitarian or Universalist or UU churches been noted for the fine ways they cooperate with one another. Our current UUA president says trying to get our churches to work together is "like herding cats." Many a Unitarian and Universalist leader of the past 200 years would sigh from their graves, " Ah, yes. 'Like herding cats!' "

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

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

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

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

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

Cooperation Among Our Earliest Churches

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

Also, from the beginning and for a good 250 years, there were many, many informally arranged pulpit exchanges. The ministers very often preached in other pulpits than their own. In the mid 1800s, Henry David Thoreau wrote, of the "Monday men" going home after pulpit exchanges, "They cross each other's routes all the

country over like warp and woof, making a garment of loose texture. . ." [A *Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*]

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

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

Thus, with no hierarchy, but with a number of well used lateral patterns of engagement, the churches influenced and helped each other substantially for some 200 years. These institutional patterns, by their very design, allowed both scrupulous respect for each congregation's independence and encouraged effective cooperation. On the whole they did both, quite well.

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

Salvation as Ecstasy, or Something More Sedate?

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

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

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

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

Now, as the old saying has it, the course of true love never runs smooth. Or, as we say now, good relationships take a lot of hard work, and growth in our relationships can be very painful. Members of Puritan churches did not expect their spiritual lives to be all ecstasy, anything but. Yet the experience, of ecstatically transforming and sustaining religious love, our forebears understood as the normal and normative experience of members of the church, all of whom were, individually and corporately, the Bride of Christ. The covenant of the individual soul with Christ was a mutual bond of spiritual marriage, a union of love. The covenant of members with one another was, likewise, a binding promise to walk together as a people loyal, before all else, to the holy spirit of love.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Were it not a wonderful great folly if some great king should make love to a poor milkmaid, and she should put it off and refuse the match till she were a queen; whereas, if she will match with the king, he will make her a queen afterwards. So we must not look for sanctification [a raised spiritual estate] till we come to the Lord in vocation; for this is all the Lord requires of thee: to see thy sins and be weary of them. . . [*The Poor Doubting Christian Drawn to Christ*]

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

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

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

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

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

The issue in the 1650s and '60s came down to the primacy of ecstatic religious experience. Young adults were not applying to sign the covenant because they had had no ecstatic religious experience. And, since the church only baptized children of covenanted members, their babies could not be baptized and, so, had no claim on the care and nurture of the church. Two things here were unthinkable: 1) that ecstasy might not be a primary experience for every soul; and 2) that the founders' grandchildren should be denied the baptismal "seal" of belonging in God's covenant with his people. As a way out of their dilemma, those churches approving the Half-Way Covenant, in effect, agreed temporarily to bracket ecstasy. God had said to Abraham, "I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring." [Gen. 17: 7]

Our founders reasoned that since their covenant with God was the same as Abraham's, surely God's spirit would, sometime, come personally upon their children. Was that not, in fact, guaranteed? So, if grown-ups had been baptized in and brought up in the church, and if they were of upright, not "scandalous" life, then they could be

admitted to membership before - not exactly without but before - an ecstatic, transforming experience, and their children could be baptized.

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

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

But they couldn't utter such a simple message, because they thought authenticity had to involve ecstasy. Oddly, the Dedham folks had readily exercised "the judgment of charity" in welcoming all who would to take part in discussions that led to the founding of their church. But "charity" could not be a criterion in admitting their own children to the church once it was founded!

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

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

3) All the old congregational churches, conservative and liberal, before and after separation, were repeatedly set a-roil and swamped with conflict generated by folks who just couldn't affirm a religious life without a supernaturally conceived, transcendent ecstasy, unlike anything else in normal, everyday life. In the conservative camp, the troublemakers were the revivalists of the first and second "Great Awakenings." On our side the troublemakers were called "Transcendentalists."

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

The imagery of the "Cinderella" concept of salvation reflects the pyramidal class structure of pre-modern European society. In that society, the kings and princes, archbishops and so on were way up there on the narrow

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Were these - I want to say awful - doctrines ever really so entailed? I say they were never were. Our New England founders were mistaken, not in the central importance of the spirit of mutual love in an authentic church, but in their inferences from the helplessness of ecstatic love. With a curious inconsistency, they didn't notice that when their attention turned from the ecstasy of salvation to issues of governance - in the church or in civil government - these "awful doctrines," often, dropped out of mind. In Lecture 1 I pointed out their complete absence from the record of that year of Dedham conversations about the church, 1637. With the same curious inconsistency, the Cambridge Synod of 1648 voted to approve England's Winchester Confession "for the substance thereof," only "leaving the matter of discipline (that is, authority) to our own declaration thereof." Only! The Winchester Confession was consistent with the "awful doctrines." The Cambridge Platform, the New England churches' declaration of the doctrine of congregational - covenantal - polity, is not.

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

Unitarian Evangelism: Who Needs Churches to Build Churches?

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

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

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

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

2) The ministers looked back at how their own congregations had become Unitarian, gradually, quietly. Doubtless in future, they said, the same would happen in many now conservative churches. And, just as, generations ago, the whole idea of the covenant had got tangled in a doctrine of history, so the liberal concept of stages of maturation in their own experience was taken to imply stages of progress in history, the "signs" of progress, of course, most clearly to be seen in America. (This was at least as early as the 1820s, years before Darwin's books, and a large part of the reason Unitarians readily accepted Darwin's theory of evolution.)

Some doctrine of history is always still another part of any doctrine of the church. With a too optimistic doctrine of history, the conditioned character of human destiny tends to drop out of mind. It leads to a loss of urgency in members' sense of mission. Love itself comes to be taken as just natural, as needing no special communal focus or nurture. In our case the idea of progress seemed to justify doing nothing special, in the way of organized

cooperation, other than what the churches had been doing for 200 years. Progress in religion would come of itself, gradually, as from seedling to bud to flower.

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

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

A business corporation - especially a large one, such as developed for the first time in England's Industrial Revolution - is usually a steep hierarchy, with owners of capital in control of a small governing board, which controls a small executive staff, which controls the mass of workers. So you might think Unitarians in New England, a deeply religious people, with a 200 year old congregational tradition, would never re-locate authority to the top of a governing structure like that of a business corporation, leaving people in the churches with little or none. But we have to take account of this cultural development in New England, in which the theology of covenantal organization never even came to mind.

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

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

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

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

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

Well, it's been a while since 1825. Our institutional path to church year 2000-01 has been twist-y and wind-y. Maybe all such paths are. In these lectures I shall not tell the tale of how the AUA of 1825 became the UUA of 2001, with essentially the same board/ staff structure of 1825. Delegates from our churches now elect the UUA board and its president - our "chief executive officer" - even though the pyramidal shape of a board/staff structure is, by definition, topsy turvy from that of congregational - or covenantal - polity, and even though none of our leaders have ever been able to elicit much glad cooperation from us within such a hierarchal structure. The fact is we never have to this day, as a people, thought much about our patterns of cooperation among churches as an element of our liberal doctrine of the church.

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

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

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