

The Free Church: Revolution and Experiment

The Reverend Doctor Brent A. Smith, Senior Minister

Fountain Street Church

(Reprinted with permission of the author)

INTRODUCTION

The year was 1781. In what could never had been expected or foreseen, a ragamuffin group of revolutionaries had concluded a struggle of Biblical proportions and found they had gained the freedom of the other side of their own "Red Sea." But, the body of water was the Chesapeake Bay, the place was Yorktown, and instead of Moses facing down Ramses, it was George Washington and General Cornwallis, who was standing in for King George.

Individuals fight wars for as many different reasons as there are individuals, and it is a heady assumption to say that all of these rebels were fighting for the same thing; especially in that blacks and women could not have registered resistance to British political rule for the same reasons as did white men. Yet, what would be an equivalent mis-reading would be to deny or ignore the intimate relationship between the idea of personal liberty, and the initiative and outcome of this remarkable revolution. The band that day at Yorktown piped and drummed the tune, "The World Turned Upside Down," and indeed it had!

The modern world had never seen a political experiment where the church and the governing state were separated; where inalienable rights propelled citizens towards self-government instead of submission to the divine rights of kings; where individual liberty and the independence of the free spirit were so prized that civil authority would be created to protect and eventually extend it; and, where the public square and the private sphere would be progressively revolutionized down to our own day. Philosopher Hannah Arendt noted how radical and historically unique the American Revolution was. It was a revolution over civil rights, she noted, and every revolution since, beginning with the French Revolution, has concerned itself with social well-being or economic rights. And every one after has failed! She wrote before the revolutions in the former Soviet bloc, some of which concern civil rights and may eventually succeed. The world had turned upside down in the late 1700's because of an experiment in transforming the idea of freedom into a political reality.

But the experiment in transforming the idea of freedom into a reality had its roots in the generations before. We, in the tradition of the free church, are more than just heirs of this revolutionary experiment. The religious tradition we have chosen is one of its chief originators and protectors. It was no coincidence that a political revolution concerning liberty would occur on this continent. In many ways it was prefigured every time one of the numerous independent churches of New England gathered for worship. "Congregationalism, by its very nature, grants sovereign power to no one," Yale

historian Harry Stout pointed out in citing congregational polity as the cornerstone of the revolution, "So we find people in New England in these churches playing democratic politics from the start, without ever calling it that. As a matter of fact, I think if you were to stop the average New Englander in the early 18th century and mention the word politics, they would know that word, but would think instinctively of church politics." ¹

The demand for political self-government was most certainly foreshadowed every time one of these independent congregations met to elect a new minister. The first use of the written ballot on these shores was in the Salem, Massachusetts congregation on July 20, 1629. When this Puritan group voted on its ministers, an ocean away from the English Establishment and the set and staid ways of the Church of England, there began a series of revolutionary actions which would create a new world:

The persons thought on (who had been ministers in England) were demanded concerning their callings; they acknowledged there was a twofold calling, the one an inward calling, when ye Lord moved ye harte of a man to take yt calling upon birrt, and fitted him with gifts for ye same; the second was an outward calling, which was from ye people, when a company of beleeveres are joynd together in covenante, to walke together in all ye the ways of God, and every member (being men) are to have a free voyce in ye choyce of their officers, &c... So these 2. servants of God, clearing all things by their answers, (and being thus fitted,) we saw noe reason but we might freely give our voyces for this election, after the triall. [Their choice was after this manner: every fit member wrote, in a note, his name whom the Lord moved him to think was fit for a pastor, and so likewise, whom they would have for teacher; so as the most voice was for Mr. Skelton to be Pastor, and Mr. Higginson to be Teacher.]²

It takes no stretch of the imagination to see in this single act the seeds of revolution concerning the divine rights of kings. Why should citizens not elect those who would govern them if as congregants they also elected "Christ's representative on earth," as clergy were then known? It takes even less imagination to see the seeds of reforming a Christian orthodoxy with little regard for the human prospect in its inherent sinfulness and depravity. If an individual possessed the capacity to discern the good, so as to recognize and thus elect "Christ's representative on earth," then how can that same individual be considered essentially sinful and depraved?

In his work on the nature and structure of the free church, Conrad Wright has identified two characteristics that mark the free church and set it off from its orthodox counterparts. First, that each congregation calls its own ministers. Religious leadership is not a matter for ecclesiastical higher-ups, nor is it the province of civil authorities. Parenthetically, one might well ask what happens to the free church when ecclesiastical hierarchies, like the Unitarian Universalist Association, participate directly in ministerial selection as is done in Extension ministry. Secondly, that each congregation determines its own criteria for membership. There are no necessary doctrinal or creedal boundaries

that are common to free churches. It is the act of self-determination of membership that characterizes them. Parenthetically again, one might ask what happens to the free church when anyone supposes it is faithfulness to the UUA's Purposes and Principles that determines whether we should belong to a particular Unitarian Universalist congregation.

Why is it imperative to lift out these two characteristics? They both concern relationships, and what is it that these relationships serve? In other words, what is the purpose of a church gathered in such a way that it institutionalizes these characteristics, using these relationships as a pathway to authentic religious fellowship? Or, as Conrad Wright asked in his essay, *A Doctrine of the Church for Liberals*, "What is the difference between a collection of religiously-concerned individuals and a church?"

THE PURPOSE OF RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATION

The "organizing principles" that lie at the heart of the free church arose from the Protestant Reformation. The form of church governance called congregational polity "is a legitimate outcome of a consistent application to church polity of the principles of the Reformation."³ Simply put, the Reformation represented human salvation as the province not of the absolute claims of Christian Orthodoxy's doctrine or practice, but of an individual's direct encounter with the Word of God and one's own faith. In other words, the Reformation attacked the ways that organizations, in this case the Church, foster their own absolute and all-encompassing claims, thereby distorting reality and justifying those distortions at the same time. No organization, no official position of that organization, and no official representative of that organization stood as a "mediator" between the individual and the most sacred demands and domains of existence. In many ways, the Reformation signaled the beginning of the idea of the individual. From the time of the establishment of Christian doctrinal orthodoxy - when the 4th century Church Councils of Constantine muzzled what we now know to be the diverse forms of religious fellowship emerging from Jesus' death up unto that time - the church had been the repository of salvation, and coercively so. Conformity to church doctrine was essential to the fate of a man or woman's soul. Deviation or dissent were deemed heresy and punished accordingly. The Reformation, though, posited a new thing, which would inevitably be expressed in organizational form: the primacy of individual conscience in discerning matters of faith. In an individual's direct encounter with Scripture - unmediated by priest or church doctrine, king or civil law - God's will could be discerned. This was a revolution in the deepest and most creatively unstable sense of the word.

Of course, initially this was an "anti-institutional" stance, simply because there were no church institutions that could hold such a radical reforming of a individual's relationship with others, with the church, and with God. Many Protestant leaders of the 1500's even came to compromise it themselves when trying to give it organizational form. But, one man showed no such inclination, perhaps because he was either a genius, madman, or both.

...the first Englishman to proclaim Congregational principles in writing was Robert Browne...[who] after he had been silenced by the bishop...formed with others whom he gathered about him the first Congregational Church of the long series which has continued since that day... The model for their organization Browne found in the New Testament. The believers should be united to God and one to another by a covenant, entered into, not by compulsion, but willingly... There are officers of divine appointment, some of temporary use...and others designated as the abiding officers of individual churches, the pastor, teacher, elders, deacons, and widows, who 'haue their seuerall charge in one Churche onely.' Yet these officers do not stand between Christ and the ordinary believer, they 'taue the grace & office of teaching and guiding;' but 'euerie one of the church is made a Kinge, a Priest, and a Prophet, vnder Christ, to vpholde and further the kingdom of God'... Browne saw that not only individuals within a local church, but the local churches as separate bodies had duties one to another.⁴

How many of us have responded to coercion similarly to Browne by seeking some other form of religious association than what suppresses the spirit? I remember from my seminary days the first time I understood the different purposes for religious association. I was in an interfaith preaching class, and met and befriended an Episcopal priest who was taking the class for continuing education credits. One Monday morning he told me he had a woman come up to him following Sunday worship confessing, "Father, I can no longer say the creed because I no longer believe it." "What did you tell her?" I asked. He replied: "I said, 'Madam, you don't have to believe it. You simply have to say it.'" I think he helped our evangelistic efforts that day. It was then that I realized the genuine difference in the purpose of religious association!

The purpose of religious association in churches and fellowships that claim a lineage to the spirit and principles of the Reformation, is to institutionalize religious freedom. The mission of churches and fellowships in this tradition is to maintain and strengthen the free spirit; to help each and every person become a fully functioning, free individual. The paradox of fulfilling a purpose and mission that yields individual religious liberty, is that it must be done in community. An individual by himself may know who he is; but he is not free. He is simply alone. Freedom is a currency spent by individuals, but minted in a community. It is relational. And, associations that concern freedom become religious when their creation and maintenance are seen as tasks mirroring the deepest, most profound orders of existence. "God's work" say some. The "highest of human aspiration" say others. It is a tricky balance, associating with others in religious fellowship through relationships meant to maintain and strengthen the free individual. Everywhere and always an individual will be tempted to use his or her own theological language to interpret the religion foundation of this association. And the tendency of groups is towards a conforming identity. To the extent that the purpose and mission of associating religiously with one another is well maintained, the church or fellowship, as well as the tradition itself, will resist these temptations and tendencies, and the free spirit will flourish.

THE VISIBLE SYMBOL OF FREE RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATION

In an excellent article entitled, “The Doctrine of the Liberal Church from a Historical Standpoint.” Charles Howe identified both the problem of enumerating a doctrine of the church, and the implications:

By ‘doctrine of the church’ is meant the understanding by its adherents of what a church should be, however imperfectly realized. Such an understanding inevitably changes with time; thus any doctrine of the church is necessarily an evolving one.”⁵

At selected times in history the authority to which groups referred in affirming their free religious associations, has varied. For example, Puritan and Pilgrim congregations used scripture to justify how their communities were organized. By the middle of the 19th century, it was a combination of scripture, and the organizational tradition of independent congregations established by the Cambridge Platform (an ecclesiastical council of congregational representatives which gathered in 1648 and produced a fairly detailed “organizational chart,” including specific roles and responsibilities for various offices within the congregation) and honed through practical experience. By 1961, the authority to which groups referred in affirming their free religious associations was a combination of tradition, practical experience, and expediency. Yet, throughout the centuries the common thread throughout different congregations was the idea of congregational polity; that is, that “the church” in its essence is made up of a single, independent congregation, in relationship with other independent congregations. This thread exists in the 20th century as surely as it did in the 17th, as enumerated in 1645 in Thomas Hooker’s *Summary of Congregational Principles*. “Each Congregation completely constituted of all Officers, hath sufficient power in her self...”⁶

Where the Reformation had declared the primacy of the individual in matters of religious concern, the evolving institutional expression had come to be the single, independent church, in association with other independent churches. In their evolution over centuries these congregations could be seen to be gathered to institutionalize religious freedom and help each and every person become a fully functioning, free individual. Yet, throughout the centuries, the common symbol, the needle for that common thread, has been the covenant.

Looking at covenants of early Puritan congregations one can see, beneath the theological homogeneity of a time different from our own, the words that would eventually direct those communities towards serving the free spirit:

The Charlestown-Boston Covenant, 1630

In the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, & in Obedience to His holy will & Divine Ordinance.

Wee whose names are herevnder written, being by His most wise, & good Providence brought together into this part of America in the Bay of Massachusetts, & desirous to vnite our selves into one Congregation, or Church, vnder the Lord Jesus Christ our Head, in such sort as becometh all those whom he hath Redeemed, & Sanctified to Himselfe, do hereby solemnly, and religiously (as in His most holy Proesence) Promise, & bind o'selves, to wallce in all our wayes according to the Rule of the GospeU, & in all sincere Conformity to His holy Ordinaunce, & in mutuall love, & respect each to other, so neere as God shall give vs grace.⁷

The Salem Covenant, 1629

We Covenant with the Lord and one with an other; and doe bynd our selves in the presence of God, to walke together in all his wales, according as he is pleased to reveale himself unto us in his Blessed word of truth.⁸

When the transient - the religious language and symbols relative to a particular time in history - is removed, and the lasting, enduring, "permanent" is left to stand alone, what emerges is the agreement by a group of individuals, relative to their historical time, which allows the possibility of institutionalizing the principles of the Reformation. The phrase, "and doe bynd our selves in the presence of God, to wallce together in all his wades," or "& bind o'selves, to walke in all our wayes" became a commonly used formulation to indicate that the center of the community was and is a covenant, an agreement, entered into voluntarily and in good faith, preserved by a particular community's customs and practices, in order that an individual might discern the "wades" of God and walk tightly with others. Our words today may be different, but the spirit is similar. It is a religiously held, social agreement which is the symbol that our aim as a community is towards what will make us free.

THE RELATIONSHIPS THAT MAKE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM POSSIBLE

In the Cambridge Platform of 1648 there were listed in some detail the congregational "offices" or roles and responsibilities that arose out of the covenant. Questions like, "Who has the responsibility for what?" and, "Who has the authority to do what?" will inevitably arise in religious communities which have a covenant at the center. Common theological belief does not necessarily bind persons together in free religious communities, but an agreement on how we seek to treat one another does ("to walke together in all his wades, according as he is pleased to reveale himself unto us" or "dwell together in peace, seek the truth in love, and help one another"). And this requires knowledge and division of roles and responsibilities. These do not arise haphazardly, but deliberately and in consultation, as the means to fulfill the purpose of association. In other words, as freedom is the aim of the religious community, and freedom is by its nature relational, and the covenant is the symbol for what holds the community together, what are the various "covenants" or relationships in the church that

make freedom possible. The theological tradition from the Reformation holds that one's faith, one's deepest convictions concerning the nature and structure of existence and its demands upon us, dwells in the region of individual conscience. But, in order for that principle to be made real it needs to be embodied in a community devoted to protecting and strengthening it. The organization of a community so designed has to be sophisticated and explicit, arising out of the relationships that make a community possible and free.

The foundation of the free church is the relationship between an individual and the congregation. In terms of the organization of a free religious community, individuals do not covenant with other individuals. Individuals pledge themselves to the purpose of the community upon joining. The most visible symbol of the purpose of free religious association, in terms of the covenant between an individual and the church, is the free pew. On the back of the covers of the Sunday bulletin at All Souls there appears the declaration of purpose adopted by the congregation in 1952. Part of it reads: "This church is dedicated to religion but not to creed. Neither upon itself nor upon its members does it impose a test of doctrinal formulas." This is the free pew which each member is responsible for protecting for every other member. It is the cornerstone of the institutionalizing of religious freedom. It is the primary way the religious community protects the principles of the Reformation out of which it came. The free pew is the responsibility primarily of laity.

The free pew doesn't mean that "you can believe anything you want" and be, for example, a member of All Souls. That is a distortion of the covenant between an individual and the congregation. The free pew does mean there are no theological constraints on belief. When someone from another congregation said to me that he assumed I believed in the "inherent worth and dignity of every human being" since it was written in UUA's Purposes and Principles, I replied that I don't but, instead, believe passionately in the theological idea out of which the concept of the free pew originated. The symbol of the free pew is the reminder by the church to itself that theological convictions are not appropriate criteria for membership. The church has a higher purpose than sectarianism towards which its organization aims. But, there are many, many beliefs that have nothing primarily to do with theology, which you cannot hold and be a member, for example, at All Souls. You cannot believe that free speech means you can say anything you want at any time, rise in the middle of Sunday worship, and shout "fire." You will get a gentle but firm reminder from Bernadine Evans, that that is not the free pew! It is the custom and practice of All Souls not to let people exercise any belief about how they want to treat others.

While the free pew does not itself have "theological substance," it does allow for each individual to unfold unto selfhood, when nurtured and protected by members. The free pew makes possible a religious life of contemplation, possibility, excitement, and invigoration not unlike that envisioned by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who himself had to leave the church to find this:

Let me remind the reader that I am only an experimenter. Do not set the

least value on what I do, or the least credit on what I do not, as if I pretended to settle any thing as true or false. I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no Past at my back.⁹

The free pew is the sanctuary in miniature, where the depths of conscience or the glory of God can be met first hand, can be weighed by the rigors of reason, any conviction can be doubted, and the heart and the hand can be stirred to vigorous and voluntary action. No member should allow the encroachment of culture or the preference or neediness of individuals, to desecrate it. The free pew is the field where all things can be unsettled, an individual planted, and selfhood harvested.

The covenant between a minister and a congregation arises from the foundational covenant between individual and congregation, because historically ministers were called out of the congregation and out of one covenant and into another. The roles and responsibilities of a minister are different than a lay person. Laity are concerned primarily with the maintenance and strengthening of the free pew; literally, as in the practical and financial proceedings of the church, and figuratively, in keeping the pews a sanctuary in miniature during worship. But, the covenant between minister and a congregation is different, and its symbol is the free pulpit. The free pulpit is the responsibility primarily of the clergy.

The free pulpit is the compliment to the free pew. Jeopardize either, and the other is in peril! As there cannot be any theological constraints in the pew, there can be none on the minister in the pulpit. He or she must be free to speak from the depths of conscience, the truth as it is seen, in love. Not because it is assumed the hearers will adopt what is said. But, because an individual wrestling with the dictates of conscience, with the exigencies of culture and historical time, with personal anxiety, and hope, despair, and grace, will of itself invigorate each individual in the pew to do likewise. Freedom is a necessary condition for truth, though it needs be fulfilled by personality. For the pulpit to be free it must be a place where such spiritual searching is supported by the pew. The pulpit is not a debating forum, where the minister presents one view one week, and a lay person presents a counter view the next. The free pulpit does not mean free access to the pulpit by anyone. The free pulpit is loaned indefinitely by the congregation to the minister with the expectation that the minister will honor that pulpit (and its relationship to the pew) and treat it with the dignity worthy of the loan! It is the most sacred public relationship in our society. Where in this world can an individual disclose the greatest, most tragic, most profound moments of life? A preacher can unsettle all preconceived notions of right and wrong, good and evil, only through this most authentic and honest of all public relationships. And, thereby, inspire the pew to do likewise. Life is a journey. We do walk together in relationship, though our roles and responsibilities differ. But, life certainly is not a debate where we try to "one-up" each other every week.

The third relationship that makes freedom possible is the covenant amongst ministers. This is a tricky one to negotiate today because of "professionalization." The

relationship amongst ministers is increasingly going the way of the other two traditional professions. The commonalty among doctors, lawyers, and clergy, as the traditional professions, was that each had its origin and its authority from a relationship: doctor to patient, lawyer to client, pastor to lay person and God. Doctors have given this up to organized medicine and the insurance companies. Lawyers have given this up to consumerism now that the law is a "good place to make some money." Only ministry remains rooted in relationship, although this, too, is changing, especially when it comes in the form of "community" ministers in our tradition, as relationally based as it is, being ordained without a single congregant with whom to relate. Or, when ministers say they 'have a ministry' like it's something akin to having a car!

The responsibilities that attend the covenant between ministers concerns our reminding one another of who we are, what we are responsible for, and to whom. In other words, it is the responsibility of minister to minister to keep focused on the refreshing destiny of the free spirit, and the relationships that preserve and strengthen it:

Let me remind the reader that [we are] only experimenters... [We do not] pretend to settle any thing as true or false. [We] unsettle all things... [We] simply experiment, [are] endless seekers, with no Past at [our] back.

Finally, the relationship of congregation to congregation makes religious freedom possible. Conrad Wright noted that the covenant amongst autonomous congregations was one of the two ingredients of congregational polity. But, in our time, the chief (and maybe only) means of congregational association is through the Unitarian Universalist Association. I think this is dangerous. It leads to the appearance that the only way congregations can gather is through the structure of the UUA. And some people come to believe this so deeply, that gatherings like this one are labeled schismatic! It indicates that the "lateral relationships" between congregations are weak or non-existent, as is knowledge of our history and the nature of congregational polity. Eventually that will weaken individual congregations. In times past, pulpit exchanges and periodic church councils or gatherings like this one fulfilled this function. It gave congregations the opportunity to develop real, ongoing relationships. Unless these lateral relationships are strengthened, we will at best continue to misunderstand who we are, and at worst lose the purpose for which free churches are formed. (See Alice Blair Wesley's article in UUMA Essays, 1994, A Response to the Commission on Governance, for a good discussion on congregational relationships.)

All four relationships form a balance. Freedom is so fragile that when one relationship falters, they all can serve tyranny! A lay person who takes on the role and responsibilities of a minister without being called by the congregation, threatens the covenant all individuals have with their congregation. A minister who gives away the role and responsibilities of a minister cuts off the covenant he has with his church. A minister who desires to be liked by other ministers above fulfilling her responsibilities as a colleague in covenant with other colleagues, ruptures this relationship. And when the association of independent congregations is seen by anyone as an entity distinct from the covenant between congregations, then a denominational bureaucracy has replaced

a relationship. It is all a delicate balance designed to keep our spirits free.

A REVOLUTION AND AN EXPERIMENT

Until recently, the radical nature of the American Revolution was largely muted. In the over 200 years since the colonists became Americans, history has witnessed catastrophic revolutions more deadly, more chaotic, even deeply tragic. And because the American Revolution was waged largely in confined locations, and fueled by aristocratic concerns, we do not now associate it much with the radical social change it occasioned. But, historian Gordon Wood, in his book *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, noted that if radicalism means "the amount of social change that actually took place," it was "as radical and as revolutionary as any in history" in that it transformed "the relationships that bound people to each other."

It is characteristic of freedom that it intimately involves relationships, because it is impossible without them. Its revolutionary power consists in its awesome effect on the lives of individuals. And if we consider the church to be an organization whose central purpose includes the maintenance and strengthening of freedom, then we must always seek a knowledge of what kind of relationships fulfill that purpose. That is our central task together, coming from the different, independent congregations that we do. It is the one thing, and maybe the only thing that constitutes our common concern. What kind of relationships form a community that keeps the individual and the free spirit in possession of itself?

When Henry Whitney Bellows orchestrated the National Conference of Unitarian Churches in the late 1800's he aimed the free church towards answering the question, "How are we going to be in the world, as it is?" with a remarkable sermon, "The Suspense of Faith." The answer for us then, as it was for most Protestant groups, was the concentrated power of a national organization; at least as nationally organized as we independently minded folk could become! The cultural by-product was the age of ecumenism. Now, we are suspended once again. Both the century long age of ecumenism and the age of strong national religious organizations are past. Independent congregations of all stripes are now "where the action is," and we ignore this at our peril! But, this can be a time of immense opportunity for free congregations, if we understand and claim both the revolutionary nature of our heritage, and the creative experiment called the free church.

In 1882, in the attempt to resurrect the remnant of a south side Chicago congregation, Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones, father of one of the founders of this church, called forth a stirring image of the free church that captured the larger purposes of free religious association:

[The Ideal Church is] a free congress of independent souls... It is the thinker's home... Over its portals no dogmatic test is to be written to ward off an honest thinker or an earnest seeker... [It would welcome all] on the

basis of a common Humanity, a common Moral Law, Conscience and Duty... Given the freest thought, the widest outlook and the most wholesome desire to help one's kind but wanting that sensitiveness to things divine, the soul is till deficient in character... [Therefore, this Ideal Church] will be founded on Reverence.¹⁰

I like that. The Ideal Church is "a free congress of independent souls." What a radical revolution free churches are! And what a noble experiment free churches will continue to be, in the course of human events and the ceaseless unfolding of the divine.

ENDNOTES

- 1 "Colonial Sermons Laid Groundwork for the Revolution." Robert Marguand, Christian Science Monitor
- 2 *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, Williston Walker, pp 103-104
- 3 Walker, pl
- 4 Walker, pp 9,10, 13
- 5 UUMA Essays, 1994, p.39
- 6 Walker, p 144 7.
- 7 Walker, p 131
- 8 Walker, 116
- 9 "Circles," Ralph Waldo Emerson
- 10 *Freedom Moves West*, Charles Lyttle, p 158-59