

The Pilgrims and The Spirit of the Covenant of the Free Church

By The Rev. Alice Blair Wesley

(Originally published as a chapter in the book *Myths of Time and History*)

(Reprinted with permission of the author)

Shortly after he resigned as Minister of the Second Church in Boston, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his journal in 1831,

As fast as we use our own eyes, we quit these parties or unthinking corporations, and join ourselves to God in unpartaken relation.

On another occasion he wrote,

No facts to me are sacred, none profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no past at my back. ["The Oversoul"]

Both those sentences are close to complete nonsense, albeit eloquent nonsense. Thinking "corporations" — his family, congregations, schools, publishing and book selling companies, Harvard College — groups of dedicated, cooperating people, taught Ralph Waldo Emerson "to use [his] own eyes" and taught him of possible experience of God. Humans are social creatures. We cannot "partake" in anything outside relation with other human beings. And life requires of us discernment of which experiments have worked and which haven't, discernment we continually work out — if we live at all — in cooperative dialogue with the perspectives of others.

Some life! With no need for others' insight or correction! Life as a shopping spree, a casual hunt for what pleases the unfettered "seeker," with no ties to past or future. Impossible!

But the fact is the whole Protestant development and, in particular, Puritan varieties of the Protestant development from which Ralph Waldo Emerson and we derive, have always tended to run off toward excessive individualism.. It's one thing, a wonderfully healthy thing, to take the inherent dignity and worth of every individual so personally to heart that one gains a heightened sense of one's own value. It's another, a kind of selfolatry —a form of idolatry —to say as Emerson did,

Foolish people ask you.. "How do you know it is truth, and not an error of your own?" We know truth when we see it, from opinion, as we know when we are awake that we are awake. . . . Ineffable is the union of man and God, in every act of the soul. The simplest person who in his integrity worships God, becomes God. ["The Oversoul"]

Members of the Second Church of Boston, in 1830, would almost certainly have disputed that statement had their young minister voiced such an utterance in their pulpit. He had to get himself out onto the lecture circuit, away from the disciplines of the "unthinking corporation," before he could say such as that unchallenged.

The word spiritist is a technical name for certain Puritans so sure of their personal communications with God that they held their opinions to be — not opinions susceptible to error— but directly revealed truth without need of testing, for sense, in the church

community. The spiritists — Anne Hutchinson, e.g. — simply dismissed two all-important and related questions:

How do you know what you claim to know? And will it stand shared, critical inquiry in the community? “I have prayed and ‘become God;’ so I just know” was not a reply to those questions which either the corporate-minded Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony or their direct descendants, the great majority of Emerson’s fellow Unitarians in the early 19th century, accepted as adequate.

Emerson was an irenic spiritist. He spent his years, after he left his pastorate, quietly penning splendid, if often airy, words. He never used his claim to have “become God,” at least from time to time, to justify any wild actions. But plenty of other spiritists did, in the 16th and 17th centuries. In short, those were pretty wild times.

In Chapter 1, by way of telling you about my personal religious background, I began by saying that common, ordinary people in the 17th century got hold of the Bible in their own language. They gained from it a tremendously heightened sense of their own Individual worth. They soon deemed themselves worthy, their status as commoners notwithstanding, not only to interpret the Bible for themselves, but also to measure, according to their reading, everything from the local preacher’s sermon to the policies of the King.

What was that experience like, that “getting hold of the Bible”? Maybe this: Imagine yourself as Dorothy, living on that dry prairie, and all of a sudden you begin to be transported to Munchkinland several times a week. Heady stuff!

An imagination explosion was begun with unauthorized translations of the Bible in 16th century England. Along with those translations came the beginning of rowdy challenges to authorized interpretations, which would eventually shake the foundations of every social structure inherited from medieval times.

Thomas Hobbes, looking back on this era, wrote in *Behemoth*,

After the Bible was translated. . . every man, nay every boy and wench, that could read English thought they spoke with God Almighty, and understood what he said, when by a certain number of chapters a day they had read the Scriptures once or twice over.¹

“Every man ... boy and wench” who thought she or he “spoke with God” and “understood what he said” did not, however, agree on what “he” said. In 1588 a Jesuit priest, one William Weston, was in jail in England. From his cell he watched an outdoor Puritan gathering. Wrote Weston,

Each of them had his own Bible, and sedulously turned the pages and looked up the texts cited by the preachers discussing the passages among themselves to see whether they had quoted them to the point, and accurately, and in harmony with their tenets. Also they would start arguing among themselves about the meaning of the passages from the Scriptures — men, women, boys, girls, rustics, labourers and idiots — and more often than not . . . it ended in violence and fisticuffs. [This took place] on a large level stretch of ground within the precincts of the prison. Here over a thousand of them sometimes assembled their horses and

pack animals burdened with a multitude of Bibles.²

If you infer from this account that the various religious groups into which the Puritans split were nearly all a fractious and factious lot, you are correct. Here we see the beginning or the tradition from which American Unitarian Universalists spring.

We can see in this anecdote two aspects of our inheritance, one of which we still proudly claim, the other of which is still somewhat embarrassing. Namely: our fierce insistence on owning and defending our individual views, and the fact that, given this insistence, agreement among us is not always readily forthcoming.

Or, to put that with less understatement, while the whole Protestant development— and in particular the Puritan part of that development — meant new visions of a new world, of enormously creative power, it also carried within it, and carries still, a strong strain toward anarchy. In other words Protestantism is, in significant measure, a problem of authority and politics. How do we define the authority of truth, and, on the basis of that authority, how do we organize our communities?

(Parenthetically, apart from the subject of this essay on the spirit of the covenant, it is fascinating to read in histories of the radical left-wing of the Reformation how many in these groups were universalists, finding the doctrine of universal salvation biblical.³)

In the disruption and confusion and argument of 16th and 17th century England. we find the birthing of both American Unitarian and Universalists' immediate ancestors, as well as those of the Baptists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians and others. Of particular relevance now, I find, is the story of one particular group; the story I would have us acknowledge is our myth.

In 1607 William Bradford was seventeen years old. He was present at the formation of an unlikely new community, a church that would be known to history as the Pilgrim Church of Plymouth. The seventeen-year-old, a man, would be later elected many times Governor of Plymouth Colony. The congregation's remarkable beginning came to be in this wise.

A young minister named John Robinson had been a Cambridge student and a brilliant scholar. Married, probably with a couple of children, he had been appointed to serve St. Andrews parish in Norwich of Norfolk. A fine preacher, he was attracting such crowds that many extra chairs had to be brought into St. Andrews' sanctuary.

But he was troubled in conscience. He could not agree with a number of recent rulings of the bishops and the magistracy. These rulings imposed certain doctrines and practices on the Church of England, to which all citizens were obliged by law to belong. Robinson slowly became convinced that the church could not really be a church at all under such circumstances. He became convinced that the church is misconceived if it is conceived as something done by reason of any outside authority.

"The Lord's people is of a willing sorte," he wrote. Therefore, they need no outside authority. The church should be entered into freely, its work supported financially by its own members, its doctrines and practices worked out by members without compulsion or coercion of any kind, under the guidance of the Spirit as the local members should be persuaded to follow it.

In terms I used in Chapter 2, Robinson believed in religious transformation, a more or less sudden, positive and permanent change in persons, making them spiritually at home —or at one — with God, in this world and the next. He spoke of a salvific transformation in his own life and urged it in his preaching upon others. But he did not believe the validity of this experience could be at once discerned. Only the fruits of time would disclose the validity of any experience. So, he disagreed with other church reformers and radicals of the day, that a transforming — or any other — experience should serve as a test for entrance into the church. He said “the judgement of charity” is not ‘causelessly suspicious.’ The church should assume any who wished to join, “faithful, and holy in deed, as in shew pretendeth.”

To understand by analogy Robinson’s doctrine, recall the story of Dorothy in the Land of Oz. She was transformed in her encounter with that transcendent realm of the imagination. So were 16th and 17th century Bible-reading Puritans in their encounter with biblical myths. Robinson, however, put the emphasis, not on the transformation which happened “in Oz,” but on what needed to happen after Dorothy got to be “at home’ in Kansas. Namely: personal growth. (The phrase personal growth transposes a 16th and 17th century term: sanctification.) It was well and good, absolutely necessary in fact, for Dorothy to be transformed in Oz from a lonely and frightened child into one capable of sympathetic and courageous partnership with others. But she was, after all, when she got back to Kansas, still a child, with much to learn.

Robinson’s vision of the church was of many Dorothys; of people who — having become individuals capable of courageous partnership—should now freely bind themselves into a group of promised partners in further adventures of learning and service. Again, without any compulsion or coercion, but only as they should be persuaded, through study and argument and prayer, together. He conceived the demands for growth in wisdom to require a vigorous fellowship of mutual teaching. And he held the spirit of this fellowship of mutual teaching to distinguish the true church from all other bodies as a unique kind of communal order sustained by the Spirit. If any doctrines were to be approved as true or any condemned as foolish, if any practices were to be commended as wise or stopped as folly, the local members would decide that together, in their own face-to-face group.

Therefore, this church was to be constituted, not by obedience to hierarchical authority — bishop or king; not by assent to a set of propositional statements — a creed; and not by confession of a transforming experience — of salvation. This church was to be constituted by a promise, a covenant to venture, together as individuals, in the ways of the Spirit, with entire integrity.

By 1607 John Robinson had had his parish taken away, and was preaching illegally. and others from “sundry towns and villages,” searching for a better way, met anywhere and everywhere they might, now here, now there.

In 1607, meeting in the manor house of a patron in a little town called Scrooby, the congregation formed. One writer described the event this way: “There was first one stood up and made a covenant, and these two joyned together, and so a third, and these became a church, say they, etc.” Bradford’s account includes a paraphrase of the covenant. Wrote Bradford,

The Lord's free people joined themselves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a church estate, in the fellowship of the gospel, to walk in all His ways made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavors, whatsoever it should cost them...⁴

The congregation continued for about a year to meet wherever they might. (Other radicals were doing the same; some even met on shipboard!) Some members were fined and imprisoned. There were warrants out for others' arrest. In 1608 about 100 of them left England together for the Netherlands. They were in Amsterdam for about a year, but in 1609 removed to Leyden, probably to put some distance between themselves and other religious groups in exile from England, whose constant dissension and turmoil over questions of doctrine and morals threatened the whole reform movement with scandalous failure.

In Leyden they were called the Church of the Green Door. The congregation grew, numbering some 300 at its largest. In 1620 about 100 of these set sail, as Bradford said, "for those vast unpeopled Countries of America." These were the Pilgrims who landed and built their community at Plymouth, Massachusetts. Sometime after Channing's Baltimore sermon, the congregation added the word Unitarian to its name. So the congregation of the First Parish Plymouth, established there in 1620, is named to this day, now Unitarian Universalist. The Pilgrims were, of course, much criticized for their withdrawal from the Church of England. How arrogant, said their accusers, to suppose knowledge of the true church to be reserved to themselves exclusively.

Robinson vigorously denied charges of exclusivism. He and other members did not make themselves a church because they were certain everybody else was wrong or should be abandoned as "unthinking." No, said Robinson. "Our faith is not negative; nor [that] which consists in the condemning of others, and wiping their names off of the bead-roll of churches, but in edifying ourselves."

To transpose Robinson's doctrine of the church into our terms, they were looking for personal growth in themselves which they believed could only come as they patiently practiced, together, searching out the truth, deciding on and obeying the right as It should be "made known unto them." They understood the fundamental note of the free church to be in the spirit of self-administered disciplines of face-to-face preaching, study, prayer and discussion.

A quotation from Robinson:

If ever I saw the beauty of Sion, and the glory of the Lord filling his tabernacle, it hath been in the manifestation of the divers graces of God in the Church, in that heavenly harmony, and comely order, wherein by the grace of God we are set and walk.⁵

A question, it seems to me, of great pertinence: In such disputatious and factious times, when the charge of reactionary conservatives seemed borne out — that the congregational order was not "comely," but unstable and unworkable — when many other religious radicals either justified the worst conservative fears and actually wound up in destructive and violent situations or themselves gave up in disillusionment and reverted to submission to a hierarchical order— Why did this unlikely congregation

work? And continue to work as the decades passed, in face of extraordinarily difficult decisions and trials?

Bradford, an old man, wrote his Dialogues on the Pilgrim Church to offer a plausible account of “the very root and rise” of the enterprise which had led them into “those remote parts of the world . . . as stepping-stones unto others to the performing of so great a work.”

The “so great a work” was the exemplary establishment, for future generations, of the free church, its directions belonging to its own members. They didn’t join the church as consumers of a certain amount of “fellowship and intellectual stimulation” for which they paid a token 1% of their income! Nor were they lone “I’s” in “unpartaken relation” with God! Rather, they bound themselves as individuals who understood their free fidelity to each other to be the means of nurturing the integrity of each and of realizing the promise of the peaceable Kingdom fulfilled among them. That word “stepping-stones” bespeaks a world view. It shows the Pilgrims understood themselves, not as seekers only, but also as participants in a historic, even cosmic struggle — for corporate freedom and excellence.

Extraordinary “stepping-stones,” indeed! The marvel that they should have come to think, in opposition to the whole church/state structure of their time, that they could find the way to model free community! That they should have conceived the true church to be a thing of carefully nurtured mutuality! That they should have grasped the primary purpose of the free church to be: ever greater maturity and spiritual growth of the members! That they should have dreamed of a church constituted by a freely made promise of spiritual partnership! How unlikely, indeed!

Neither the wonder of nor the credit for these ideas belongs to the Pilgrims alone. Many another radical group had a part in the terrific historical importance of these religious concepts, eventually applied to many another social realm besides the church.

But the Pilgrims ought to be especially important to American Unitarian Universalists. They are our ancestors. We misapprehend our own Identity, and miss out on a great richness, if we do not understand our derivation from their extraordinary spirit. I believe we could much diminish the fruitless and sterile individualism among us and instead foster together far richer varieties of authentic individuality in community. If we should, through the 17th century Pilgrims, set about reclaiming, for today, a fresh, dynamic commitment to the spirit of the covenant of the free church.

A *very* brief account of how and why liberals lost this precious heritage from mind, would go something like this.

Others of our ancestors, the more technically labeled Puritans of Mass Bay, more numerous by far than the Pilgrims— The Puritans distorted the noble notion of the covenant and got off into the labyrinthian deadends of federal theology. That and an undue obsession with something the Pilgrims did not stress —namely: the exact nature of the needed transformation — led in the liberal rejection of Calvin-*ism* in the 19th century (a late label put on a calcified form of Reform doctrine which didn’t yet exist in the 17th century).

Since the 19th century, in the 20th, their heirs have so consistently bad mouthed the

Puritans — most often with little or even no firsthand acquaintance with the vast literary legacy the Puritans left us — that liberals in our time are largely ignorant of our great debt to the religious radicals of the 17th century.

Calvin-*ism*, if that term is used to indicate one dead limb at the great branching work of 16th and 17th century reformers, we are well without. We need as much as ever the spirit of the covenant of the free church. What follows is intended as a kind of prose hymning of this spirit in contemporary terms.

Individual members of a coherent free church may be ever so singular and diverse: young or old; rich or poor; famous or little known; little schooled or many degreed; liking Bach or rock or both; pray-ers or atheist; of any race; of many backgrounds; management or labor; or changing degrees of these at different times. The more singular and diverse the better.

Individual members of a coherent tree church may position themselves in any number of different patterns —of office or ceremony or ad hoc committee or study group — for different purposes at different times. Picture us in shifting, lateral designs, without hierarchy. We mean to have varying, not rigid, forms of authority.

But if the whole has integrity — and a whole is a thing of integrity — the free church coheres, howsoever flexibly, around a center. What is the center of the free church? And by what power are its individual members held together? What gives the free church its integrity? I offer you this answer. You will say whether it persuades.

The center of the free church, the heart of the whole thing, is a promise of fidelity, a covenant, which each member freely makes upon joining. Actually also, each member begins again with, or renews or re-negotiates, his or her promise many times in the course of the life of the church, in the privacy of renewed conscience or spiritual growth.

Too often our promise, or covenant, is implicit, not consciously explicit. But it doesn't really matter whether it is verbalized. It matters whether it is faithfully meant.

Our covenant is simply (Simply! What a word!) our promise that we shall together seek truth and support one another as we dare, whatever the cost, to live by the truths we cannot help believing we have found at any particular time, and to support one another in doubt in those times when we can't find or can't decide what the relevant truth is.

The free church is held together by, insofar as we live by, the spirit of this promise.

I think I should put in here that when we use the word spirit, we speak, not of anything that can be pinned down and tightly specified, nor of anything spooky either. The spirit simply (Simply!) is: that whole inseparable complex of ideas, understanding, memory, hope, will, learned social skills and affection — as these are actual and at once both products of and responses to reality, the results of our engagement with the world. The word spirit points to the interior life, which makes for the quality of our visible, exterior actions, The word spirit points to that with which we must freely cooperate to meet the conditions of our own fulfillment, or violate our own integrity.

There is a recognizable spirit of the free church. It is the spirit of persuasion. It is both free and freeing. By its fruits you know the church wherein it reigns.

I'll try to describe this spirit.

The spirit of persuasion is, by definition, has to be, can't be other than — a spirit of affection, love, for two kinds of things. It is love for other living creatures, people, and so, love for all that sustains and enriches people. And even more, it is love for truth itself, our ultimate spiritual sustenance, without which no people can long live, no matter what else they may have,

The primary characteristic of the spirit of persuasion, because it is of love, is this: It can only exist in a partnership of unforced mutuality with others. Therefore, it only uses methods proper to its nature, to freely given assent, to conviction, to the satisfaction of our longing for the rightness of sense and meaning and value. The power of the spirit may be — should be — vigorous and rigorous, persevering. It hangs in there! Yet though it may urge and press, it will never knowingly force. It refuses ever to be coerced itself, or to try to coerce another.

Yet, precisely because it is of love, the spirit of persuasion may sometimes be very angry at what — as it appears to informed and reasoning love — it won't sustain, can't sustain people, angry at what diminishes rather than enriches people, angry at what is therefore wrong, sinful, deadening. The power of the spirit of persuasion can be fierce in its prophetic judgment of what must be changed for good to happen in people.

Yet again, precisely because it is of love, and because it can only exist in a partnership of mutuality, therefore, often as the spirit of persuasion is actively engaged, trying to lure, alter, move, it is just as often merely open, engaged passively, just listening, feeling, contemplating, watching and waiting, in silent stillness. -

The spirit of persuasion is hardly limited, though, to either righteous indignation or quietude, though it knows both and welcomes both in the appropriate time. Rather, it moves back and forth, all the time, between the poles of needful doing and mere openness. Whatever its direction, it works in individuals, as each does with others or is merely open to others.

In these alternations between doing and stillness, between acting and being acted upon, consist the famous rhythms of the spirit, often compared to the movement and stillness of the winds.

Like the rhythms of the wind, the spirit of persuasion cannot be artificially manipulated. Attempts to divert or subvert naturally arising issues and concerns, or any effort to “work” the tree life of the church according to some preconceived blueprint or set of rules, is but self-defeating. The spirit of persuasion can only be worked in, as a sailor at once works skillfully with and yields to the wind. It blows where it will.

And yes, we know: Sometimes the spirit of persuasion blows up a gale that destroys all before it and sometimes it is an equally killing, dead calm. We would be lying pollyannas if we did not admit this, too. Every human group, including ours, is susceptible both to false hysteria and to self-satisfied or disillusioned apathy that will go — nowhere, There are dangers and no guarantees with the spirit of persuasion.

And yet, as the winds hold out both threat and promises of rich reward to sailors, so do the rhythms of the spirit of persuasion to us.

So, in the spirit of the covenant of persuasion, in the free church each member is called to give utterance, to ask, say, explain, defend what is the truth she or he sees. To be

unforthcoming is to be disloyal; for how can we learn from one another without candor! Each member is also called to yield the floor with humble courtesy, to listen, be open to, and try again and again to imagine what others see. To be unwilling or to forget to hear is to betray; for how can we receive what others may impart without their counsel! Our covenant is an abiding commitment to take and to give counsel.

In the spirit of the covenant of persuasion, as individuals together we heed our call to listen and to speak to one another faithfully so that— for this is our whole purpose — singly and together we may follow what we are persuaded are better ways.

The spirit of persuasion is the spirit of a free religious people. It is holy to us. It holds all together, insofar as we live by it, in the embrace of the free church, in the generous embrace of people who are centered — in ever changing and responsively creative ways — around a promise of fidelity together to search for and dare to live by truth.

If the center holds, if the spirit lives, there are no limits to what we may constructively do together — for the sake of inspiration and mercy, justice, art, personal growth, or plain fun. So there are no limits to the difficulties the free church may overcome, or to the richness of its interior life, or to the effective work we may do to refashion and recreate our world.

What follows is an adaptation of the covenant of the Pilgrims, written for contemporary Unitarian Universalists, covenanted pilgrims yet, in a great religious tradition.

We pledge to walk together
in the ways of truth and affection,
as best we know them now
or may learn them in days to come
that we and our children may be fulfilled
and that we may speak to the world
in words and actions
of peace and good will.

Notes

1. Timothy George, John Robinson and the English Separatist Tradition, Mercer University Press, 1982.
2. George.
3. See George Hunston Willims, The Radical Reformation, Westminster Press, 1962; Philip F. Gura, A Glimpse Sion's Glory, Wesleyan University Press, 1984.
4. George.
5. George.