

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

Lecture 2 of the 2000-01 Minns series of 6  
**Thus Do We Covenant. . .**

John Allin wrote “a breife history” of the founding into the first 24 pages of the Dedham First Church Records, Book I. In his first paragraph he says he wrote this history for us. He wrote “for future ages to make use of in any case that may occur wherein light may be fectched from any examples of things past, no way intending hereby to bind the co’science of any to walke by this patterne or to approve of the practise of the Church further than it may appear to be according to the rule of the gossell.”

How’s that for a liberal understanding of the proper **use** of any history? Allin says to us, that if we are looking for light on the lay doctrine of the free church, we might learn something useful to us, from the example of one of our earliest New England churches. But he wants to be sure we know, **he** didn’t feel we in the 21st century should feel in any way bound to follow our ancestors’ example, except insofar as we may find their example correlates with what we count as “the gossell,”” as good news for human beings.

What do we count as good news, the “gossell?” Our ancestors used the word Christ as a special shorthand term for the life of mutual love. I do not here use that word. Yet, it makes sense to me to believe that **if** John Allin and other founding members of our New England churches were alive today, they would agree with this wording: More than any other single reality, **what redeems and enhances human life is the spirit of mutual love. The good news is: We can learn from experience - our own and others’ - what the spirit of mutual love feels like and when it is present among us. And we can, in response to that learning, organize ourselves into a free church: a group religiously dedicated to giving the spirit of love a fine chance of working, among us, for our own sakes and also for the sake of the world around us.** That’s “the gossell,” in my book as I think it was in theirs.

The First Church, Dedham was founded in 1638 by one small group of English colonists from among the 20,000 or so who came here to New England in the 1630s. These 20,000 people came primarily for one reason: They wanted to establish free churches in what they called “the Liberty of the Gossell,” in which they could gather for worship, study and discussion as much as they wanted, without the restraint or control of either government or church hierarchies. These

ancestors of ours set certain patterns of organization and authority and theology whose consequences are still - very much - alive in our Unitarian Universalist churches

**The marvelous thing about our 17th century ancestors, in my eyes, is this: They saw that if the free church is about the working of the spirit of mutual love, then that fact ought to shape the organization of the church, everything from how you join, to what joining means, to how church decisions are made.** Their thinking about the organization of the church didn't just fall down whole out of the sky. "There's no such thing as the immaculate conception of ideas." Their thinking evolved from and in the midst of particular human experience, in England before they left there and in New England after they arrived here. We can't understand their thinking without some empathetic grasp of their experience. And so I want to try to narrate and view their experience and their thinking together.

I ask you to hear me on this. I **don't** claim these 17th century ancestors of ours got everything right. I subscribe to the blind-spot theory of human nature, that all of us make mistakes we **can't** see as mistakes at the time. In fact, I intend to say later in this series, our ancestors made some very big mistakes - mistakes still costing us. But I think our understanding of our own beginnings is distorted because we've focused far too singlemindedly on their mistakes. They got some really important institutional patterns right, patterns which we need very much to understand and appreciate in order rightly to understand ourselves as people of the free church tradition. Tonight I'm going to be talking about what they got right, which it has been our great privilege to inherit.

I specially wanted to tell you the story of the founding of the Dedham church for this reason: As far as I know, we don't have **any other** record, certainly not any other such ample record of the conversations and discussions concerning the free church **among the lay people before they established one.**

But does the absence of any other such record mean that the **lay people**, who founded the other free churches in New England, **did not engage** in such extended discussions? Oh, no. All these New Englanders had come out from among and left, back in England, many more thousands of others, much like themselves. In England all these folks had surely been just about the most **lay** discussion oriented and the **lay** talking-est bunch of people in history. Precisely this feature of their character drove the bishops of the Church of England bananas.

Do you know the word "gadding?" Old English phrases stayed in use in the mountains and hills of Appalachia in this country, longer than in many areas. When I was a teen in Louisville, my dad - who was from Appalachia - was always telling me there was just **no use** in my "gadding about" so much. He meant flitting

hither and yon, always off somewhere with this or that little bunch of friends, without serious purpose. That's still the dictionary definition of gadding: But I didn't think my gadding was without serious purpose, though I couldn't have said for the life of me what my purpose was. I just knew I **had to be** out looking for something more exciting and more important than what was there for me at home, or at school or at church or any place I had ever been.

We could not here even begin to get into the Reformation going on in Europe - unevenly, sometimes crazily . But to appreciate the kind of free churches from whom ours descend, you need to know something of what was going on **in England** in the early 1600s. So, I list just a few facts about the messy social intercourse in England out of which our modern free church was born.

1) The law required that **everybody** attend services in their parish (neighborhood) church every Sunday. 2) Church services in the Church of England consisted mostly of a lot of old ceremony, which had hardly any meaning for our spiritual ancestors. They considered the services - about which the lay members had no say - dull as dishwater, with ill-educated, ill-trained and poorly paid assistant ministers (curates) in charge. 3) The Bible had been translated into English. The Bible, of course, is not really a book, but a collection of many little books from many different centuries. And, as more and more laypeople in England got a copy, many of them found the Bible **very** interesting - and exciting - just full of the neatest stories. 4) Meanwhile also, the professors at Oxford and Cambridge Universities - especially Cambridge - had got very interested in the Bible. Cambridge students were a-fire with their Bible studies in Hebrew, Greek and English, and with all the new and scholarly Bible commentaries coming off Continental presses. 5) Some ministers - mostly Cambridge graduates - and some Cambridge professors were, then, doing some mighty interesting Bible preaching in some of the churches.

So, having endured for so long all those boring services in their own parish churches, the **laypeople** went gadding. On a Sunday, they left their own neighborhoods and went to hear exciting preaching in other parishes. Moreover, they wanted to discuss what they had heard with their neighbors, compare what different preachers had to say **with their own interpretations** of stories they **had read**, themselves. So, the **laypeople** met in their houses of an evening, with a few other families, for discussion. They met in groups of village and town shopowners - butchers, grocers, hatmakers and so on - and their families. The lawyers, especially, met in professional groups for discussion. Sometimes the laypeople even arranged regional meetings, for folks in several neighborhoods to meet and **discuss**. They were not plotting, or scheming, or trying to subvert the Church of England. They just wanted to hear good preaching and **talk** - and talk and talk

and talk - especially since their Cambridge professors taught them to understand that nearly all the stories in the Bible could be read as having clear political implications with regard to the **liberty** of church **laypeople**.

Well, the bishops of the Church of England did not take kindly to all this gadding about. But unlike my dad, who only fussed, the bishops **ordered** the people to stop gadding, to stay home and in the evenings, to stay in their own houses. Any preachers whose sermons the **laypeople** liked to hear and meet to talk about, the bishops were apt to remove from their pulpits. The bishops also made life as uncomfortable as possible for the Cambridge professors. So, the lawyers and business people, shop owners and crafts people established "lectureships" on marketdays, during the week, outside the churches. On marketday, when lots of people came to town, the Cambridge professors would "lecture" to the crowds who wanted to hear them. The bishops shut down these lectureships.

But the bishops didn't get near enough of the gadding about - and talking - shut down before the **laypeople** in wide sections of England had worked out, in considerable detail, what a free church would look like, and how authority would be delegated in free churches, the kind of free churches the people had in the Bible stories, without bishops.

But all the English Protestant kings and Queen Elizabeth supported the bishops, and supplied them government agents, to deal as government agents the world over tend to deal with discussion meetings their bosses don't take kindly to. King James I, especially, was always saying, "No bishops, no king." And all his royal heirs agreed with James I in that. Royal ruler after royal ruler said: Never mind what those people are taking **about**, or how innocent may be their motives. Shut 'em down! And if you can catch their leaders, those damned trouble-making ministers, string 'em up! As Defender of the Faith, I appoint the bishops, and they are the ones to tell the people what lessons to take from church history as recorded in the Bible.

Or, we might sum the story of our ancestors' experience this way. They came to experience together, more intensely and richly than they ever had before in their lives, the holy spirit of mutual love, in freely organized groups. And that experience led them to conclude, as James Luther Adams used to say, "You can't make the holy spirit work according to an organization chart. 'The spirit bloweth where it listeth.'" Freedom is indispensable to the spirit of love. Try to control it, with a centralized, top down hierarchical organization and you will kill it.

**Now right here is the point at which the free church tradition in North America begins, as a lay movement.** At some point in the reign of King Charles I - no one knows just how or where - when things got really bad in England for

free church wannabes, a little group of **laypeople** - lawyers mostly, with a few wealthy land and business owners - got together to plan a solution. They formed themselves into a new business corporation, called the Massachusetts Bay Company, for which they had to get a charter from the king. By law, if they had a charter from the king to run a business corporation, the Officers of the corporate board could run it as they saw fit, as long as they didn't do anything illegal. And, so long as the corporation stayed in business, members of the governing board could both elect their own board Governor, and change or enlarge the membership of the board. A corporation board was - by law - both self-governing and self-selecting.

Well, these **lay** lawyers and businessmen got their charter, from King Charles I, and a royal grant of land in North America. (The grant was way bigger than they or the king knew, since nobody in Europe had a clue in the 1600s how big the North American continent was.)

Of course, the Mass Bay Company was really no ordinary corporation. What these lay corporate board members did - and intended all along to do - was to set up a colony, actually an independent government only nominally under the king's jurisdiction, **and** far enough away from London that English **laypeople** who wanted could settle in the New England colony and **here** establish a whole community of free churches, without bishops.

Or, as these **laypeople** put it, **they** had a charter - not from the king, but from **the Holy Spirit of Love** - to gather themselves into corporate bodies of faith, into churches. These **laypeople** hoped they could, in New England, **show, illustrate, demonstrate** to all England - to all the world - how just, how peaceful and how comfortably well ordered a society could be **if** in that society the people were free to found and establish free churches governed by the spirit of love, the kind of free churches there had once been in other long forgotten times of history, when the great free church tradition had been well understood **by the laypeople**.

Once the new Company had its charter from King Charles, word spread fast in England, but so quietly that it was a few **years** before the bishops and the king figured out what the people were up to. Not too long after the Company and the people got the colony in North America established, the board of the corporation simply made every man of the churches - and some years later every owner of a piece of land, even one little town building lot - a member of the Company board, and so eligible to vote in annual elections choosing their Governor. By these acts, they made the government of this royal colony, New England, in effect, a **proto-democracy**.

So, these 20,000 **laypeople**, by the end of **one** decade in the 1630s, had planned and pulled off a very clever - and very expensive - legal scheme, indeed.

Of course, the very success of their scheme meant they had one hell of a big anxiety-producing problem to live with. For the king had the power to withdraw, at any time and for any reason, the Mass Bay Company's charter. Which fact - even if many things went well - made all life in New England **very** chancy. The colonists feared - far more than the native Indians - entrance into the Massachusetts Bay of armed English ships, sent by the king's government to seize royal control of their costly experiment. Many of the people had not only left friends and relatives at home, whom they could never hope to see again, in civilized and mostly orderly England, to come out to this wilderness. Many of the people had also risked every shilling they owned. But if he chose, the king could simply declare all deeds to New England property invalid.

And that is why the people of New England were so obsessed with having an orderly, quiet society. They didn't want any scandalous disputes that might end up in the law courts back in England, and thus attract government attention to what was going on over here. That's why they worked so hard to involve many people, for example, in setting up their town councils and forms of representation in the General Court. They wanted laws and regulations **everybody** could agree on and willingly obey, so that all New England would be - not contentious or argumentative - but orderly and quiet. Not to give the king any excuse for intervention.

And, it makes sense to me to believe, that is also why they so overreacted to Anne Hutchinson. Any doctrine of the church grounded in experience of the holy spirit of love is dangerous. Why? Because always some few - or maybe many - will get the idea that if their heart is in the right place, they can do anything they want, without a lot of tedious reasoning about consequences: Have sex with whomever, just so you're feeling romantic. Get drunk (or take illegal drugs), just so you feel "spiritual release," and so on. Which is not to say Anne Hutchinson advocated this kind of wildness. But back in Europe this had happened. The word "Munster" hung over all church reformers as a threat of doom. Munster was a city in the Netherlands which, a hundred years earlier, in 1534, was caught up in Protestant enthusiasm. Their devotion to the all sufficiency of the spirit of Christ - without need of reason or history or good works - turned into an orgy of irrationality, the dictatorship of a talented demagogue, communism and polygamy. Neighboring authorities were shocked and outraged. After a long siege, the inhabitants were massacred.

And in England there were groups who didn't go anything like as far as the Munsterites, but whose personal morals were pretty disorderly. These groups were called "familists." Our New England ancestors meant to protect themselves from the threat of "familism" by structuring their churches so that all religious

leaders would be elected, authorized, by established congregations of **lay** members, with all these leaders subject to discipline by the lay members who elected them, and could dismiss them. So, when Anne Hutchinson began attracting a large group of these same lay members - by preaching that if you had Christ in your heart, you didn't need anything else at all - other New Englanders wondered if their brave experiment could survive any better than other reform efforts which had failed disastrously.

And - as if that weren't enough to worry about - the king's ministers all too soon began to request, repeatedly, that the officers of the Mass Bay Company bring that charter back to London. The king's ministers had a few questions to ask about it. Over and over again, the board of governors chose to "misunderstand" that little request - and stall. Their hope was - that if they could just get enough English to immigrate and build up economically viable farms, towns and businesses - even the king would find it politically impossible to dismantle their colony. Their fear was, if the inevitable government intervention came too soon, the political price of dismantling New England would be one the king could well afford, in which case the colony would not have a political leg to stand on.

Is it any wonder that Governor John Winthrop recorded a sad little story in his journal? One cold winter's night, a good woman awoke to find her good husband sitting bolt upright in the bed. Of course, she asked what was the matter. Without a word in answer, he jumped out of bed and out their bedroom window, wearing just his nightshirt, and took off at a dead run. He was in the throes of what we now call a full-out anxiety-attack. Out in that bitter cold, in just his nightshirt, the poor man kept running, for hours. The people followed his tracks in the snow. The next morning they found him, twenty miles from home, dead of fear and exhaustion. Now that's anxiety! It makes sense to me to believe that much of the famous religious anxiety recorded in many a New Englander's journal, was induced by the political and economic riskiness of their peculiar colonial context. Anxiety was a sub-text of every thing they did and every word they wrote.

To me it seems no wonder that New Englanders occasionally went on "witch hunts." Severe and long anxiety, concerning real threats, is itself a threat, to public as well as private sanity.

I just skip entirely the **additional** political, and especially economic risks added to New England's string of things to worry about, by the English Civil War. Its outcome effectively ended any further immigration for years. Suffice it to say, a few more years after that, their stalling tactics exhausted, the General Court finally delegated the Rev. Increase Mather to take their precious charter and, after a two or three month-long sailing trip to England, hand it over to the government

of King Charles II. Now, there was absolutely nothing for it but to wait, for months and months and months, while a few individuals - the king and his advisers 3000 miles away - decided their fate. The king chose not to break up this highly irregular social experiment - with its huge number of electors and all those churches uncontrolled by the bishops of the Church of England. But he did take away the colony's right to elect their own Governor. Henceforth the colony would clearly be a Royal Colony, with a royally appointed Governor.

The hysteria of the Salem witch trials broke out within days of the day the new Royal Governor arrived in Boston, not in any of the churches but in a court of law, and rapidly escalated, to the unending shame of all New England.

The Rev Increase Mather's son, the Rev. Cotton Mather, lodged a written protest against the witch trials, but too mildly, too politely for anybody important to notice. After all, it was an anxious time for the Mathers', too. Some blamed Increase Mather for the loss their charter, and besides that, the new Royal Governor was a member of Increase and Cotton Mathers' church. King Charles II had even allowed Increase Mather to nominate New England's first royally appointed governor. Pretty sticky issues here! Imagine the messy politics involved in asking **your** colonial allies to petition this brand new Royal Governor to intervene in a **bizarre** law case, with all that suspicion, distrust and fear in the air! Innocent people died in Salem, as much of **other peoples'** fear and exhaustion as that lone runner in the night had died of his own. Increase Mather, himself, put an end to the Salem trials with a sermon on convincing and unconvincing evidence. Your minister, David Johnson, told me that Samuel Sewall, the only judge in Salem to make public confession and annual penitence for his errors in Salem, ended his life as a frequent attendant of this church, in Brookline. I wish more of our churches today could welcome more penitents for the deaths we have caused in time of craziness.

But back to the matter of money in the decade of the 1630s. It took a **bunch** of money to pay for shipping the bodies of 20,000 people - as well as their livestock, tools, furniture, seeds and some food - 3000 miles across the Atlantic Ocean. But, there were plenty of laypeople ready to sell all their possessions to make the trip because they had **talked together as laypeople** so very much - about the ancient free church tradition **and the politics** - or polity - **of the free church**. When they got to New England, especially given all else they had to do, they needed to do very little more talking specifically about **how** a free church should be set up and governed. They knew, very clearly, what kind of free churches they wanted to found.

(A digression. They did, however, keep up their gadding and talking habits. They kept their University educated ministers lecturing, on all sorts of topics, in

late afternoons, during the week - over and above their morning and afternoon Sunday sermons. The laypeople went to one another's churches to hear late afternoon lectures and often stayed, to talk about the issues raised, into the night. Governor Winthrop, their own colonially elected governor, decided all these lectures and discussions were taking too much time away from work. And so **he** moved to suppress them.

(The laypeople's reaction was swift and to the point. They said, We came 3000 miles across the ocean, Governor Winthrop, for the liberty of the Gospel, not to have you tell us we do too much gadding about. Note: The "liberty of the Gospel" by their reading included liberty to learn about and discuss many more topics than the Bible.

(Well, Governor Winthrop offered a compromise, which the churches accepted. Lectures would mostly be on Thursday afternoons, thereby reducing the gadding somewhat, and discussions would, as a "safety precaution," break up in time for people to get home before dark - and up early the next morning to work. These Thursday lectures continued in our Unitarian churches well into the 19th century.)

But in the 1630s, when the New England laypeople first got here, most of them didn't need the kind of discussions, specifically about the free church, which they had in Dedham. When most of them settled here in a new neighborhood, they already knew one another. Why? Because they had been gadding about in the same neighborhoods in England, attending the same marketday "lectures," and talking, talking, talking, about the right ordering of free churches, for years. And that is doubtless why we have no records of their discussions on the matter, **here**.

Dedham settlers, however, did not know one another. These **laypeople** had come from "divers parts" of England, and wanting to be sure they were agreed on so important a matter, they felt they had better talk through the whole idea of the free church, very slowly and thoroughly. But you couldn't ask for stronger proof than the Dedham Church, itself, that the Dedham **lay discussions** - in their year of weekly meetings - were **very** characteristic of the **many, many** other earlier lay discussions which had already take place in England. For the Dedham Church, once it was independently founded, fit the organizational pattern - the covenantal pattern - of all the New England churches of the period, to a tee.

**The covenantal organizational pattern of the free church was the key element of our ancestor's doctrine of the free church.** It is a doctrine grounded in an understanding of **how the power of mutual love deepens and works among individuals in free religious groups.** That is, **in free religious groups loyal, before all else, to the spirit of love.** Moreover, the organizational pattern of the free church is precisely the **one element** of our ancestors' doctrine **we liberals**

**have most consistently kept in our liberal free churches.** It's just a remarkable thing that this should be true. Many liberals, by the early 19th century, had **forgot** the originating meaning of the word covenant. And by the mid 20th century, many if not most liberals had all but completely **forgot** where we got the organizational pattern of our free churches, and had **forgot** - as the Little Valley Church did - that **no** free church organization can work very well **if it is not consciously, explicitly grounded in the spirit of love.**

Here's how I first realized how much we have forgot. The term we now use for covenantal free church organization is congregational polity. As a seminary student, I had got really excited upon starting to learn, for the first time, about the theological origins of congregational polity, way back there on the radical left wing of the Reformation in the 17th century. I was talking with my own UU minister, a wonderful, able minister, who had himself grown up in - not a UU - but another congregational church. He listened to me emote and effuse a while, and then he said, "Congregational polity: That means our churches are democratic. But what does that have to do with our religion?"

I was dumbfounded. I could not say one word. In a way you could say, I am trying now, nearly 30 years later, to answer that question. In one sentence, it has **everything** to do with what we hold, even if unconsciously, is **most important** religiously. Here is a one sentence summary of the lay doctrine of the free church as it was developed by laypeople, our institutional ancestors, in the 17th century: **Show me the patterns of your church organization, and I'll show you what the people of the church find worthiest of their loyalty as church people.** Our organization and our theology are not two different things. **Our organization is a function of our actual theology.**

The **patterns** of thought and action visible in the story of the Dedham Church's founding, their **lived teaching**, their doctrine of the free church: Here I'll list eight of these patterns, though I want to be clear: This list does not yet include all of them. There are additional patterns of the free church - very important ones, some of which our ancestors not long after the 1630s and in the 19th century got wrong. I'll pick up these others later on in the series. But for now, these are eight **key** patterns which - I believe - our Dedham ancestors and others, right at the beginning of our North American free church tradition, got so very importantly right.

1) Right at the heart of the free church tradition must be the spirit of love. **The free church is a group of people who want the spirit of love to reign in their lives.** To quote the Dedham Church record, the desire for a "further & neerer union & communion" of love they conceived to be **the** one good reason for founding a free church, or for joining a free church already founded. It still is.

2) **The free church is entirely self-governing, free from any outside control whatsoever.** Whatever authorities or imperatives members think they need or choose to obey outside the church - governments, responsibilities of the larger community, family duties, bosses at work, whatever - these have no authority **in the church**. Local members elect their own officers - ministerial and lay - and by their decisions govern every facet of their local church community's life.

3) **Loyalty to the spirit of love simultaneously commits members of the free church to the best understanding of truth we can attain, and that means reasoning.** Precisely **because** they loved, the laypeople of New England wanted **to reason well** about truth and about facts, and that is why a **learned** ministry was so important to them. They did **not** elevate their ministers, just because of their learning. Rather, they figured if a learned minister spoke the truth **plainly**, it would convince **them**. And that is why they often listened to a prospective new minister for months, and discussed and discussed every aspect of his addresses before they agreed to elect him. And of course, the laypeople kept for themselves the power to dismiss **any** elected officer - ministerial or lay - if a lot of high sounding words proved meaningless, **to them**.

4) Reasoning about what we love, together, and about all the social implications and complexities of love, in continuous consultation, has been a built-in part from the very beginning of the free church tradition from which we Unitarian Universalists have come. Continuous consultation our ancestors called "walking together." **And herein lies the free church concept of discipline.** If any member's actions, or their **attitude** - "carriage" as our ancestors called it - if any member's "carriage" seemed scornful or sarcastic or sullen or ungenerous, he or she would most likely be called upon the next afternoon by the Elder to "clear" things. **Members of the free church discipline one another by reasoning together in love.** Membership requires such loving and disciplined reasoning whenever any members see it as needed. Not long ago on the UUMA chat, somebody asked one of our newer ministers to define discipline in the free church. I thought he gave a wonderful answer. He said discipline in the free church is: forbearance and engagement. No member of a free church is to be "cast out" for dissent on some proposition. Rather, a persistent refusal to engage with forbearance is the only proper cause for removing any members from the roll, whether they say they still want to belong or not.

5) **Membership in the free church is open to individuals willing to sign a covenant - or promise - to be together, insofar as they are able, as a beloved community.** The covenant summarizes, in clear and simple language, an

understanding of points 1, 2, 3 and 4. And that the authentic free church is always covenanted means two other things.

6) The free church is an **organized** group, not an organic group. You're not a member just because you happened to be born in the parish and your parents brought you up in the church. No. **The covenanted free church is an organization you must freely choose individually, to join.**

7) When you sign the membership book of a covenanted free church, you are **not** signing any list of propositions, such as make up a creed: "I believe this, that, and the other and maybe forty-'leven other things." No. **To join a free church is to sign a promise that may sound simple - it should sound simple - but which, if you really mean to "keep covenant" with the other members, brings you into intimate companionship with others who have promised to live with all the integrity you and they can together muster, in all the years of your lives.**

No simple matter this. Rather entrance into the covenantal community summons a lifelong, forbearing engagement of heart, mind and body. So why would anybody ever **rejoice** to sign such a promise and regard it as a great **privilege** to do so? Because we human beings, social creatures through and through, are **gifted** individually, each and every one of us - such is the **dignity** of human nature - to experience and to learn and to claim as our own these wonderful truths: **Ultimately the only freedom adequate to human dignity is the freedom to choose to do what love asks of us. And the greatest blessings of life come to us and through us to all the world, when, with intimate and freely bonded companions, we are trying together to live with the integrity of faithful love.** And all this is what it means to say together in our church

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

8) Still another characteristic of the most basic pattern of thinking, about the doctrine of free church, is there in the record of the Dedham laypeoples' discussion. I mean the **large place** given - in the earliest thinking of our own New England beginnings - **to natural law. That is, to thinking about, insofar**

**as we are able, what faithfulness to the ways of love means to the whole human race and world.** I related in Lecture 1 how the Dedham laypeople started their discussions by considering the **conditions** requisite, in **any** society, for justice, peace and reasonable laws or “comfortable proceedings,” as they called them. But also, even when the Dedham laypeople began to talk about the **covenant**, the basic document of the church they would later compose and sign, they **first** cited a natural law argument for such a covenant. “The ground of which covenant was shewed from the nature of the thing \* \* being no union of many p’sons into one body that can be made without mutuall consent or some kind of covenant.”

Then, “2ly,” they went on to cite from history, from the Bible, “the stories of Abraha’ & his family constituted a church by covenant Gen 15 & 17. the people of Israel coming out of Egypt Exod: 20 &c. & when thei brak that covenant this caused ther divorce from the lord, & when they were restored againe in any way of solemn reformation it was by renewing this covenant as many examples shew.” Then, “3ly,” they went on to cite five passages in the New Testament which they took to indicate clearly or to imply clearly that the earliest Christian churches were “such as agree together” in a covenant.

Now I want to say this carefully. I do not mean to say or even to suggest that our New England ancestors in the free church tradition did not believe the Bible to be a book of “special” revelation. I say only this: The word revelation is not mentioned in the Dedham Church Record, Book I. Moreover, **the whole structure of the argument in these discussions is one in which common sense or natural law and the Bible are taken to be entirely compatible.** There is no talk recorded at all of any miracles or anything else hard to believe - **except** how strangely and wonderfully love works. Love deepens in committed, religious relationships in the free church. **Deep love and careful, social, shared reasoning in the church evokes deep loyalty to love’s end which is meaningful freedom, freedom within boundaries defined by a high degree of tender caring and within which all are fully included, as equals.** Once the Dedham Church, at long last and after all their talking, was founded and the founding members were ready to accept new members, they were joined by servants and the richest people in their town, by young apprentices and the very aged, by people of all occupations, by women and men. No matter their status in civil society, in the church all members took part in their discussions and each member had one vote.

Our ancestors in **this** church believed that the **laypeople** in **one** ancient land had been inspired - or had learned - or had invented - however you want to put it - **Laypeople** in one ancient land had embraced the covenant of the free church which **fits so well** the very nature of human beings as individuals **and** as the social

creatures we all are, that once you grasp the idea - of the spirit of love which may reign in a free church of equal members - the truth of it will **naturally** appear to you as self-evident. And more, that taken together in all its strands and lived, the covenanted free church is **the best hope of the world**.

The laypeople of Dedham in 1637-38 did **not** know, and had no way of knowing that a few non-Judaic-Christian peoples have also embraced the idea of the covenant. People in ancient Switzerland, *e.g.*, and the Iroquois among the Native Americans on this continent have been covenanted peoples, and some others. The laypeople of Dedham in 1637-38 **did** know, correctly, that an understanding of the covenantal idea cannot be taken for granted as something “once and for all delivered to the saints,” and so good people can set that notion aside and go on to other things. On the contrary, the people of Dedham understood that **the covenantal idea of the free church has been nearly lost many times, and the results of the loss have always been political tyranny and corruption**. The idea of the free church has to be articulated in clear, fresh language and taught and lived, if the free church is to live, and the freedom of whole societies with it. In later lectures, I shall try to make sense of our later church history, to suggest why and how we Unitarian Universalists came close to losing it.

But I want to turn now to our present. How might we come to a wide **lay** understanding of the idea of the covenant in our churches now, and embrace one another in our own contemporary covenants, specially written by the members of our churches, for our churches? Then I’ll come back to the free church covenants or New England in the 1600s, and say a bit more of them.

In our time our liberal Unitarian Universalist churches are not only quite diverse theologically, as we want, on principle, to be. It would not occur to most of our people to look in the Bible - or any other history book - to see what we might want to promise each other in a church covenant. And even if we did, we probably would not see, without a lot of help from some liberation theologians, the **political** meanings of biblical history, which our ancestors learned from their Cambridge scholars to read from it. We live now in very different political times than those of 17th century England. Your minister in the Brookline Church, David Johnson, could tell us some horrible 20th century stories about government infiltration of activities in churches. **But in general** government agents do not now come banging on our doors to break up church discussion meetings. Nor is there any law in our land that we all have to attend Sunday services, whether dull and boring or exciting. And all that means that any discussions we might have among laypeople in our churches now - in the hope that these might lead to the

writing of a church covenant - would need to have a very different starting point than the 1637-38 discussions of the Dedham laypeople.

Even so, our times now **are** like those of the 17th century in some important ways. People who show up at our services as potential members - many of them - sure have been doing a lot of gadding about. Popping in and out of all kinds of religious and other social groups, looking for what? Not finding what? Still looking for what? What, besides our economy, makes people in our time so dissatisfied and socially volatile?

And, though the anxieties of our times do not have the same sources as did those of 17th century New England, it seems to me anxiety is anxiety. People in the United States and Canada are not now - since the fall of the USSR - so afraid of a catastrophic enemy attack, possibly ending our "world." Nor do the great majority of us worry that we might lose every dollar we own, though we might fear losing our jobs to downsizing. Most of us could get another job, though it might not pay as much, or we might get a better paying job.

It makes sense to me to believe this: **In our time our major source of anxiety is that we don't know what matters most to us, what we love most.** Many of us don't know what might be worthy of our faithful loyalty, or which people might deserve our trust, or which are the people - or causes or institutions - for whom we might want to be trustworthy. So, with all that in mind, I describe a year-long series of discussions laypeople in our time might find wonderfully helpful and "edifying," orienting us toward a new or renewed covenant of a liberal free church, today.

There are really only two questions, each with many answers, and then finally a third, in this proposed discussion series. In these discussions, each person in a group of - say - 20 or 30 people is given a sheet of paper, blank except for the heading at the top: **The realities of my life to which - or to whom - I really want to be loyal or faithful.**

To help people get started with their thinking, we might post a list up on the wall, of realities to which some might want to be loyal or faithful: my children's education; my aged parents; my life mate or partner; my ideal of an informed citizenry; my career; some field of study - literature or science or music; greater economic justice for minorities; my church community; God - or that which I hold sacred or holy; honesty and commonsense; my physical or emotional health . . . Such a list is not meant to be in any way exhaustive, but only suggestive of the kind of realities people might want to list for themselves.

The rules of our discussion would need to be very like those of the laypeople of Dedham. Rule 1: We'll decide each week which one or two people will speak next week, so that everybody comes having given some thought to what

they want to say. Rule 2: We stick to our agenda and not allow ourselves to get off talking about all sorts of other matters than our own personal loyalties. And Rule 3: Here we speak our own understandings and doubts. No arguing.

Then, in the weeks following, **each person, one at a time**, would share his or her list and try to tell others **why** he or she wants to be faithful to these realities **and how**. All other group members would then be invited, exercising the discipline of forbearing engagement, gently to ask the speaker for clarification, or to cite different or varied loyalties of his or her own in a particular regard, and so on, always **without argument**. When all have asked whatever questions they wish, and shared with the evening's speaker whatever variations or differences in their own lives they wish, then the group would need to discuss a second question: How could we help a person wanting to be faithful in the ways Person X has spoken of? This time, with any persons speaking to the question who wish, and including personal demurrers, such as, "I'm not sure that would be very helpful to me, or I think I would want another kind of help."

When everybody in the group has spoken about his or her own list, then we might go round again, to see whether having listened to all this discussion, some might now want to share **emended** lists. "I've changed my mind. Or, I see not that I left off something very important earlier. I have a changed list of realities in my life to which - or to whom - I really want to be faithful." A second go round of emended lists, observing the same rules as before, would need to follow, this time probably taking quite a bit less time than the first go round, but taking us deeper into what matters most **to us**.

At this point, then, we might move our discussion to the level of **natural law**. We could make one list of all the realities to which - or to whom - the laypeople of this one group of liberal church people really want to be loyal or faithful. Then we could try to think about any neighborhood or society. And here is **our third question: If everybody in a society were faithful to these realities, would this society be a civil society of "just, peaceable & comfortable proceeding"?** Whose needs for the mutual love of a covenantal society would be left out and whose needs would be met?

Would these be deeply religious discussions, having to do with the realities of our lives **worthiest of our love?** And of the loyalty deep love asks of us and summons from us? I think so. I really think very much so. I think these discussions would help us to get to know one another very well, perhaps faster than any other means we might use. And such discussions as these would lay the appropriate ground work for meetings to follow, designed to elicit the writing of, or the renewing of, our own liberal free church covenant.

What would a new covenant look like, written by and signed by all the members, constituting a free and liberal congregation of Unitarian Universalists of our times? How would it be worded? I like very much this adaptation of the Pilgrims' covenant.

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

At issue is: What covenant or promise might our members enter into gladly, after a long and slow, exceedingly loving and gentle and disciplined conversation about **our deepest loves**?

Most of our oldest Unitarian churches - those of our founders in the 1630s in New England - were gathered as signatories of very short covenants, promises of a few words. Unfortunately for the purposes of a neat narrative, the Dedham Church had a very long covenant, too long to include here. The covenant of the Salem Church, written in 1629, is a good example of others very like it. "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 waies, according as he is pleased to reveale himself unto us in his Blessed word of truth."

The radical thrust of the Salem covenant is given voice especially in two words, "unto us." They granted ultimate religious authority solely to that convincing power of truth evident in the understandings reached and tested over time by a body of **deeply loving** individuals **mutually pledged** faithfully to seek and to heed truth together, in ongoing community, so long as their earthly life should last.

However we might write our covenants, after much discussion, in liberal free churches today, I am sure the words we choose would make it quite obvious: We belong to and at our best want passionately to be loyal to our long free church tradition and to keep it live and strong, in our time.