

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

Lecture 5 of the 2000-01 Minns series of 6
Updating the Cambridge Platform

You have come to hear number 5 of the 2000-01 Minns series of six lectures. I thank you, heartily, for coming. I've said a lot in the earlier four lectures **I thought** had a bearing on how I finish. You might feel as we do when the only time we can get to a movie we want to see is **in the middle of** a showing. It is harder to figure out what the drama is about, than when we get to see the opening scenes.

So here we are, newly together **in the middle of** a something pretty far along. So, I'll begin here by saying, **Hey, welcome to the world!** For is this not part of what it means to be human? We are always born into, and come to consciousness, **in the middle of** stories. The dramas - of our families, our economy, our schools, our government - **of our churches** - began a long time ago. And the patterns of people's ideas and assumptions - especially about authority and division of labor - and the plot line, the direction in which things are moving, or not going anywhere: All these patterns were set long before we even start to understand what is going on.

We Unitarian Universalists are part of a very long story of many, many people who - **in the middle of** the complex situations they were born into - at some point fervently declared, "The way things are in this story is **not** the way things are supposed to be. There is a better way! And some of us are, by God, going to **covenant** to find and **live out** some simpler, saner, more natural, **holier ways of love.**"

We UUs derive from a long, tangled line of religious reformers. Maybe tangled is not the right word. Anyway, I think there may be few, if any, **straight** lines in the interdependent web of being of which we are a part. For sure, there **aren't any** uncomplicated, historical stories of how our "situation," the dramas we're all living out, came to be as they are now.

I am talking, in these lectures, about the historical story and the way of free churches. We Unitarian Universalists are a liberal people over on the "left" of the free church tradition. The **root idea** of our entire tradition is the covenant. **A covenanted free church is a body of individuals who have freely made a profoundly simple promise, a covenant: We pledge faithfully to walk together**

in the spirit of mutual love. The spirit of love is alone worthy of our religious loyalty, our ultimate loyalty. So, we will meet often to take counsel concerning the ways of love, and we shall yield religious authority solely to our own understanding of what these ways are, as best we can figure them out or learn or remember them, together.

The story of how this **simple** idea has been, over and over, corrupted, or all tangled up in authoritarianism, or forgot, lost, in actual lives and institutions and societies - - This story is **not** simple, at all.

The thesis of these lectures: 1) We UUs **are** the people we are largely because we inherited the covenantal free church tradition from the 17th century founders of our oldest New England churches, who themselves reclaimed the tradition, when it had been nearly lost, from centuries before their time. 2) For much of the 19th and 20th centuries we UUs almost forgot the covenant. We hardly mentioned it. So we need now a new **critical appreciation** of the best gifts and worst mistakes of our own covenantal history. And 3) we need now to **do** two things: a) to reclaim and **creatively** adopt covenants in our free churches, in our own liberal way, for our own time, and b) to **invent** what we have **never yet had as UUs, a Covenanted Association of Congregations**. We need to do these things because too many of our churches are **not thriving**, and thriving, liberal free churches are the best hope of the world!

This evening I want us to look at the gifts and the mistakes we inherited from the 17th century founders of our oldest UU churches, as these are manifest, with hindsight, in a document called the Cambridge Platform. I want first, though, to tell you a more personal story.

An Example of Institutional Inventiveness

I rejoice to be in the Southwest Conference. For people here shaped me in some ways for which I am deeply grateful. In the summer of 1973 Joe and I moved to the Texas Gulf Coast, for the second time. I was 36, an experienced lay member, and I had just begun studying for our ministry. In 1973 the Southwest had not had - in living memory - any women students for the ministry. And suddenly, you had three, two working in Dallas, and me in Chicago and Beaumont.

The Southwest ministers received us as graciously as they could - which is to say, with comical awkwardness. If you ask me afterwards, I'll tell you some funny stories about that. Even more wonderful, though, was the openness and generosity of Southwest **laypeople**. In 5 years, from 1973-78, I preached in 14 Southwest pulpits; I was secretary of the Conference board for a year; I was the "sunset" preacher at SWUUSI one summer; I interned at Houston's Emerson

Church; and I served two congregations as minister, College Station and Corpus Christi, for 18 and 9 months.

And how much I learned **from you**, much of it at SWUUSI, your super week-long annual gathering, then at Lake Murray, with the largest number of folks, always, from All Souls, Tulsa. I had not before been in a district with so much affection, with such a good spirit of forbearance and cooperation **among** our churches. Sure, there were differences, sharp differences, among the ministers and congregations. But here in the Southwest you had **well instituted** and **high** expectations for - what our Puritan forebears called - **orderly** sharing of views and responsibilities. And the results were occasionally stunning.

I know one of our now strong, lively congregations would likely have remained a weak little group, a "Sunday talking club," but for SWUUSI. Members of this small fellowship used to tease one of their lay leaders and laugh. "Buddy went to SWUUSI and got religion!" But they laughed while they were glad to have their whole membership **transformed**, over time, by the deeper understanding of the free church and the enthusiasm Buddy brought home, from having been with more experienced, more able and more committed liberal churchpeople than he had known.

Having come, myself, from a district where there was no institution like SWUUSI, it was clear to me - **SWUUSI was the main reason** the spirit **among** Southwest churches was so much better than I was used to. Every year **every one** of the ministers was there, not all but most, **with** several of their members, with as many as 30 or 40 - of all ages, kids and elders - from All Souls. I had not till then, and have not since, seen that anywhere else. And I've been, many times, to other summer institutes. They all have their good points, but **none** so much affected the spirit **among** the churches of their region - **because** they are **not** the kind of **lay and ministerial** enterprise SWUUSI was.

So I asked about SWUUSI. "How did this fine thing come to be?" The answer was: "Daddy" Bob. "Daddy" Bob was Robert Raible, long-time minister of First, Dallas, who retired in 1964. He hadn't been to SWUUSI in years. But in the late '40s, "Daddy" Bob had kept urging and **persuading** until he got fixed - **set** - a pattern of **high** expectations or, as the Puritans called it, an **orderly** rule: The ministers **elected** to lead our congregations **will all be there with** our gathered people from many churches, for a seven-day, rich meeting, every August, without fail, no excuses accepted. And **other** ministers, not those he persuaded, **still** were **there**, every August, without fail, **30 and 35 years later**, when I got here and when I left. Nowhere written down, this rule was part of the covenant in the Southwest!

And the results **showed** throughout the region. Why? Because **this** is a rule **of commonsense** and **natural law**: When free churchpeople **regularly** and **freely**

cooperate - **elected leaders and members together, in the spirit** of mutual love **and in** healthy patterns - good happens and **keeps on happening**, in **wider** circles! That is the faith and the hope of every single, distinct free church. This natural law holds, as well, for **any** association of free churches: For we just don't get the **measureless** but **real** spirit of mutual love **among** our scattered and distinct churches, unless our bodies are, regularly, together in the same place - as we are in our home churches only less often. Nothing could be plainer or more commonsensical than this: When **elected** ministers and members, of **a few** or **many** free churches in a region, associate **in** healthy patterns - all the churches benefit richly from the spirit generated, together.

How do we **tell** whether our patterns of association are good and helpful, or a little helpful, or an awful waste of time, or downright counter productive, even **way** off-track? The test: Look to what happens **in the congregations** as a result of associating **in these patterns**. See any more vim and vigor, more forbearing engagement, **growth** in membership, **in the congregations**? If not, we'd **better change** our patterns, because our patterns of association as congregations matter.

Did you know this? In the 1930s, during the Depression, as many as a third of our churches died. John Wolf used to boast that in the '70s, there were **more** UUs - real live bodies - gathered on Sunday mornings in just the Southwest's five largest churches, than in all New England where we have many more churches. **There's a historical connection in the interdependent web of being between set patterns and spirit and live bodies.** It matters **how**, in what spirit and in what patterns, we do what we do now. And, it's **going to** matter in future generations. You probably know, better than I, to what degree John Wolf used to exaggerate. But **certainly** something quite good was going on here.

Free churches **are** patterned ways of loving, thinking, of organizing and of doing. Often, living participants have no notion how these patterns got started, for the sake of what principles, or to meet which **misjudged** exigencies, or at the persuasive insistence of what **wise or foolish** leaders. But **if** the patterns - in **and among** us - are good ones, there's **lots** of room in them for creativity, **varied** and **innovative** response to challenges, and **new** talent coming on and taking hold. And the churches of a **region** will thrive. **If** our patterns are poor, our churches will be corrupted. Instead of giving and taking counsel when differences arise, the people will quarrel, viciously and divisively. Or, whole congregations will get stalled in ineptitude and isolation and **never learn** how to do better.

I name some realities among us: A **lot** of **expensive, time-consuming** meetings among various **"representatives"** of quite differently constituted UU affiliates, not congregations. UUA programs having little if any effect **in our churches**. An overall church growth rate of **only** .6% last year, when the

population is growing much faster. **Not much** ongoing exchange of wise counsel **among many** neighboring churches but, lots of bitter complaint, in print and on the internet, about the UUA. Not a few but, **hundreds** of UU congregations stalled in ineptitude and isolation for years. **I say, there something seriously awry in the patterns of association among our churches.**

I am glad I began learning how to be a UU minister in the Southwest. You set my standards. You were my example of what relations **among** our free churches ought to be, and how rich and fruitful they **can** be. So “thirty” years later, I sought your invitation to give Lectures 5 & 6 of the Minns in the Southwest. I want to try to call you to a yet higher standard of **explicitly covenantal** patterns, not only in but, **among** our churches. I figured, if anywhere in the land are UUs who can understand what I am trying to say, it must be in the Southwest.

I have said we need a **critical appreciation** of our history, of how our good and poor patterns got set as they did, and a historically informed and **inventive** imagination, something like Robert Raible’s in the 1940s.

What is a critical appreciation? Just this. I know you didn’t suppose, a minute ago when I was praising Southwest churches, that I left these parts thinking - here there were no stubborn problems or deficits. I did not. I wasn’t that dumb. I never thought everybody here was flawless. I simply **saw** that your spirit and some of your practices were of a piece, that in **some** really important ways you really “had it together.” And I was better off as a new minister, for being less parochial than I had been in my understanding of what is **possible among** us.

Our notions - of what free churches **are** and could do - **always** come from **concrete human experience**, our own or other live peoples’, **or** those recorded in **history**. And that’s why it’s important that, as liberal churchpeople, we not be geographically or **temporally** parochial. There are things we need to learn from looking at our churches’ patterns, set long ago.

A Critical Appreciation of the Cambridge Platform

So, who were the 17th century founders of our oldest UUA churches? They had been churchpeople in England - many tens of thousands of ordinary members and ministers and University students and professors - **appalled**, not by all but, by **many** of the institutional patterns they were born into, in the Church of England.

These were already long set before they came to consciousness. But they learned of - what looked to them like - very different and much **better** patterns from history, from the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, which they understood as the record books of the free church. Having tried mightily and failed to reform the Church of England - because they were thwarted and persecuted and

punished by the kings, the queen and the bishops of England - our ancestors made the amazingly brave and costly choice to remove - some 20,000 of them - to the wilderness of New England in the 1630s. They came to this continent to gather themselves into free churches, in what they called the “liberty of the gospel.” Most of these very churches **are** the churches which in the 19th century first became, on this continent, Unitarian. And we UUs have kept ever since **many** - not all - of the of free churches, just as they were set in the 17th century.

We could put this way what happened in our UU story, before you and I came into the movie. Our Puritan ancestors left England for New England, **not** because they disagreed with the Church of England - or other Protestants in Europe - over theology or anthropology. That is, over the nature of God or of humankind. They left because they disagreed over **the theology of organization**, over the question of **how** churches ought to be organized **in the spirit of mutual love**, over who should have authority and **why** - in churches **rooted in** that spirit. Two hundred years later, in the early 1800s, when we Unitarians separated from more conservative churches of the Standing Order, it **was** because we disagreed over the nature of God and human humankind. We unanimously **kept** - and **have kept** to this day - the covenantal congregational polity set by our **17th** century ancestors, for the same theological reason: Covenantal polity is **rooted in** the spirit of mutual love.

There were many more dissenters in England from episcopal polity - control of churches by a hierarchy of bishops - than the 20,000 who came here in the Great Migration of the 1630s. Our folks fervently hoped they might be joined in New England by many more. But the whole scene in England changed drastically in the 1640s with the outbreak there - twice - of civil war, the beheading of Charles I, and the rule of Parliament and Oliver Cromwell as Lord Protector. In all that turmoil, there emerged - in Cromwell’s army, the guys with weapons - passionately **religious** advocates for a far more revolutionary re-organization **of the whole society** than England was anything like ready for. So, opinion concerning **church** governance, even among the dissenters from episcopacy, shifted toward presbyterianism. That is, a pattern of authority **over** the churches, by “representative” bodies, who could **deal with** any wild-eyed folks who might spring up in the churches and gain followers within them!

New Englanders were very aware of this shift, among their own friends in England, **away from** New England’s **scrupulous** congregationalism, a pattern in which **all** religious authority is **located in** each **single**, distinct **congregation**. To deal with all the issues of the Church in England, Parliament called on 109 “divines” and 24 members of Parliament to meet in Winchester Hall in London and agree on what would be the faith and church order of England. This Assembly

began to meet in the summer of 1645, concluded in the fall of 1646, and published the results, the Winchester Confession of Faith. Two widely respected New England theologians, John Cotton and Thomas Hooker, were invited, but did not go because they knew, on the very matter closest to New England hearts, they would now be in a **small** minority.

So, after publication of the Winchester Confession - which included prescription of a presbyterial church order - and at the request of the magistrates of the General Court, New England churches sent elected lay and ministerial officers, or “messengers,” to convene, at Harvard College, as the Cambridge Synod. Others could also attend if they wished. This assembly “thought it good to present unto them, & with them all the churches of Christ abroad, our professed & hearty assent & attestation” to the Winchester Confession, “**Excepting only some sections.**” [Preface] Namely, those sections having to do with church organization.

That is how we came to have the Cambridge Platform, a Preface and XVII Chapters, each chapter footnoted with many references to passages from the Scriptures proving, to the unanimous satisfaction of the “elders and messengers,” that the **substance** of the congregational way is the same as that of the very **first** free church, the family of Sarah and Abraham. In our terms they meant - **some** things have **not** changed for as long as people have been coming together, either out from under or in the midst of corrupted, hierarchical societies, to live in **free** groups called churches, whose free and orderly ways are the ways of love, **not** the coercion of **any** hierarchy. Our church ancestors understood the Bible to be mainly about - the free and covenanted, **social** practice of love. They were **not**, by any means, ignorant of all other history. Their University trained ministers were saturated, especially, with Greek and Roman history. But their periodization of **church** history they expressed as follows: “The state [of] the members. . . walking in order was either [1] before the law, Oeconomical, that is in families; or [2] under the law, Nation; or [3], since the coming of Christ only congregational. (The term Independent, we approve not.)” [Chapter 2:5]

Paraphrase that. Say that in words we use now. Free churches are made up of people who have covenanted to “walk together” - live together or meet often - in patterned ways, or “in order,” **in the spirit of mutual love**. People have covenanted to do this, over a great stretch of time, first as families, beginning with Sarah and Abraham; then as the nation of ancient Israel, beginning with Moses; and, since the time of Jesus and his disciples, as local congregations. As our forebears understood it, the holy spirit of mutual love, or the “**substance**” of a free church - an Aristotelian term - has always been the same, in all three periods. (That is why they found the Old Testament as instructive as the New.) The “**matter**” of a free church is the live gathered bodies of the members. And the

“**forme**” of a free church, the covenantal promise, is that which sets its boundary, defines the membership and imbues it with promise, the potential, to be a life-giving organization for the larger world .

Again from the Platform: “The partes of Church-Government are all of them exactly described in [the Scriptures] being parts or means of Instituted worship **according to the second Commandment**: & and therefore continue one and the same. . .” The “second Commandment” is: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” So, our forebears were saying, the **substance** of the free church is **the spirit of** neighborly love. And everything in the free church’s “administration” - **everything** - follows naturally and logically from the primacy of this **one** experienced, central, holy reality, **the spirit of neighborly love**, which in other places in the text is the called “the supream power,” or Christ. In the Dedham Church Record, John Allin actually used one X, the Greek letter *chi*, to denote Christ and two XXs to denote the gathered free church, **plural Christs**, or the **spirit of love in live bodies meeting in one place**, two names for the same reality. The **one “end,”** or purpose, of everything the gathered members do, says the Cambridge Platform, is “**mutual edification.**” That is, mutual learning and teaching concerning **the ways of love**, one topic with an infinite number of sub-topics since the ways of love are to be sought in **all** life’s complexities. The people must be **gathered** - meet in the same place at the same time - for mutual learning to take place. Otherwise, the “spirit of love” is just a fuzzy, sentimental head trip, a bodiless abstraction - or as some irreverently say - Sloppy Agape.

So, said our forebears, to gather and go about a church’s “administration,” the members needed three things: 1) personal **experience of the spirit of mutual love** between the individual and God, often described in Puritan sermons as a “marriage of the heart” with the spirit of love; 2) to be individually, one by one, called - or drawn - by the spirit of love **to enter the covenant** with other members to love faithfully; and 3) to **elect officers, lay and ministerial**. And there you have - said they - a whole, complete free church in **all** its “partes,” **just two** “partes,” ordinary members and ordinary officers - meaning that free churches have no need, **in church affairs**, of **any higher** authorities. Or, as they put it, “[I]t is not left in the power of men, officers, Churches, or any state in the world to add, or diminish, or alter any thing in the least measure therein.” [Chapter 1:3]

This formulation eliminates any such thing as the outside **interference of** the civil government, **or** the bishops of an episcopacy, **or** the authority of any provincial presbyterial body, **or** - we might add - the UUA board/ staff.

Question: Why, since they were patently describing here, **independent** congregations, did the Cambridge synod “approve not the term Independent”? Because, in the 17th century, those churches which **named** themselves

“Independent” in England had taken the position that whatever happened anywhere else than in each distinct free church was of **no concern** to them. “Independent” churches would say to other churches, “We don’t care about and have nothing to do with you.” But in the minds of our congregationalist founders, strong convictions, about the autonomy of each church, did **not** imply sectarian isolation. For they also had, from the Bible, a concept of the church universal - the “Catholick Church” - that great measureless company of people, the living and the dead of every age and land, who have ever experienced and walked in the spirit of mutual love, in whatever church - or no church. They would not **make an idol** of a church organization, even one they believed to be the **only right** “forme.” God **was**, in their experience, the spirit of mutual love, which hardly justifies “hardness of heart.” “[I]s difference about Church-order become the inlett of all the disorders in the kingdom? . . . that we cannot leave contesting & contending about it, till the kingdom be destroyed? . . . surely, either the Lord will cleare up his own will to us, . . . or else we shall learn to bear one another’s burdens in a spirit of meekness.” [Preface]

Those lines nicely illustrate that strong-minded congregationalists can certainly see the need for and plead for tolerance, as 17th century Puritans did in regard to many matters, though not in as many as we wish they had.

But even more emphatically did the independence of free churches **not mean** isolation from other free churches, according to the Cambridge Platform. Though all churches were “distinct. . . & therefore have no dominion over one another,” they are to be a **community of** independent churches. They were to “take thought for one another’s wellfare.” “[W]hen any church wanteth light or peace among themselves it is a way of communion. . . to meet together. . . to consider and argue the point in doubt or difference; and, having found out the way of truth and peace, to **recommend** the same. . . to the churches whom the same may concern.” It was **not acceptable** “if a church be rent with divisions . . . and yet refuse to consult with other churches for healing. . .” If a divided church does refuse to “consult,” **other churches** - not a staffperson from headquarters-- **other churches** are to “exercise a fuller act of communion by way of admonition.” I.e., the churches are **not** to regard challenging difficulties in free congregations - either their own or others’ - as none of anybody else’s business. Rather each is to listen to other churches’ counsel. “[S]o may one church admonish another, and yet **without usurpation**. . . [Chapter XV]

In all times it is a good thing, said our founders, if members of two or several churches - all the members - occasionally come together. A church with two ministers should lend one to a congregation whose minister is ill. When members move, even temporarily, to another town, the church should send a letter

of recommendation to the congregation in that town. In case of need, one church should furnish another with officers, or sometimes money. And by all means, neighboring churches should help a new church get started well and rightly. If any one church gets too large to meet all in one place, some of the members should form a new congregation, “[a]s bees, when the hive is too full, issue out by swarms, and are gathered into other hives. . .”

Question: Did they really get all this from the Bible? They really thought they did. It is fascinating to read the closely reasoned argument of the Platform, which often uses the **terminology** of Aristotelian and Ramist logic, and look up, as you read, the many biblical passages footnoted in every paragraph. What you see is - they read the Bible with a very different interpretive key than you or I might use. The books of the Bible are mostly, of course, **not** lists of rules, but poems, lyrics of hymns, strung-together pieces of the prophets’ sermons and narratives, **stories** of events. But our 17th century congregationalists were obsessed with issues of **authentic** authority. So they read **every** word of the Bible asking of the texts, “What was decided here? Whose counsel was sought? Who decided? Which people had to be involved if a decision was to be considered legitimate? What did people in these stories do if they disagreed?” They inferred that answers to these questions were to be taken as illustrating **the rules** of **authentic** authority in free churches.

An example. An elected officer in our oldest churches was called the “ruling elder.” An ordained lay member, he was primarily responsible for “discipline.” That is, for talking privately, tenderly but firmly, with any member whose ways of behaving were not ways of the spirit of love. We might take an example from one of our churches. What if an **angry** member starts loudly saying **harsh** things about what the RE committee and teachers have carefully chosen to teach in a church school class? I’ve been in weak churches, scared to death that anyone might resign. The RE folks would dump a curriculum in a minute, to avoid a fuss with **one** viciously rude person who had no understanding of what the teachers were trying to do or why. But they put in its place some bland, uncontroversial curriculum; then **other families** quit coming because the kids said church school was boring! By whatever name, “ruling elders” insist on a better response to any members’ unruly anger than church-lite! That better response is the work of free church discipline.

Once, a super UU couple joined a church I served. They came every Sunday, but without their middle school kids. So I said one day, ‘Where are the kids?’ Well, the parents’ work had required them to move often. And three times, after a move, the kids went to a new church school class doing a unit on the Hopi

Indians. So these kids decided UU churches are weird. Fixated on the Hopis. They wouldn't come to ours!

Our earliest free churches elected and ordained the "ruling elder" to deal with such as that first **harsh** member. If the member refused to listen, even when, later, two or three others members could not persuade him or her to listen either, the ruling elder took the issue to the whole church, all the members together deciding whether a reprimand, or even dismissal, was in order. The "ruling elder" couldn't just **pronounce**, by himself, on any issue.

The model for this office and "rule" was one of Jesus' sermons, but "discipline" was not **solely** the ruling elder's responsibility, even to initiate. **Every** member should use his or her persuasive power, as appropriate, to speak candidly to any member whose ways were unloving. This "rule" they inferred from a story about Paul, who, though he had **no authority over** Peter, told Peter, in front of the whole church, it was wrong of him not to eat with the Gentile members at church suppers.

But for all their reverence for the Scriptures, there is, in the Platform, a rather impatient sounding admission that **not every** "necessary circumstance" of the free church is clearly indicated by some biblical passage. If any procedures seem only practical, or "necessary," two tests of reason are to be applied: 1) Is their "end" "unto edification"? And 2) "in respect to the manner," are these things to be done "decently, and in order, according to the nature of the things them selves & **Civil and Church Custom**. [D]oth not even nature it selfe teach you? [Y]ea they are in some sort determined particularly,. . . so, **if there bee no error**. . . concerning their determination, the determining of them is to be accounted **as if it were divine**." [Chapter I:4]

Well, let it be said at once, some of the **worst** mistakes our founders made, **very costly** to later generations - were precisely those patterns they "accounted as if [they] were divine," when, for all their careful reasoning and logic, they were merely habits **of Civil and Church Custom**, very **bad cultural habits**, brought from Europe, which they ought never to have continued here, **not** because Bible stories contain no precedent for them, but because they would **work ill** in the long run. These practices were "determined," not in accordance with the **substance** of the free churches, the spirit of mutual love - but in accordance with an **authoritarian** expedient of coercion.

Money is certainly "necessary" for churches, whose mission of "edification" - or teaching and learning - is needed by and beneficial to the whole town, or parish - they called it - in which the church was located. So, our ancestors concluded, it is perfectly reasonable that the magistrates, as they had done in England, should **coerce** all land owning citizens to pay the parish rate, taxes, to

support free churches. That is, churches properly constituted according to the Cambridge Platform. So, while the laws of New England didn't **forbid** organization of churches not part of the Standing Order, members of these other churches - including our **Universalist** ancestors - had the very devil of a time getting an exemption from **also** supporting, with their taxes, the **legally designated** "free churches."

And who fought hardest to maintain the "necessary" rule of tax support for the **right** free churches in the **1830s** in Massachusetts? Why, the Unitarian heirs of the Puritans. So, why did all those New England Unitarian churches die in the **1930s**? Because, after they lost public tax support in 1834, Unitarian churches were heavily dependent financially for the next **100 years** on a few **wealthy** members or "pew owners." When these few lost their money in the Depression, a third of our churches collapsed.

Another mistake of our founders. Early in the text, the Cambridge Platform makes about as strong a statement as one can imagine on the importance of the covenant. **Only** each member's promise, made freely and one by one - to walk together with other members in the ways of love - makes the people a free church. "[It] followeth, it is not faith in the heart, nor the profession of that faith, nor cohabitation, nor Baptisme: 1) Not faith in the heart? because that is invisible: 2) not a bare profession; because that declareth them no more to be members of one church then of another: 3) not Cohabitation; Atheists or Infidels may dwell together with believers: 4) not Baptism. . . , as circumcision in the old Testament, which gave no being unto the church, the church being before it, & in the wilderness without it."

That's point 5 in Chapter IV. I say, "Great! Wonderful!" But then, in Chapter XII, titled, "On Admission of members. . ." are sentences like these: "[S]uch as are admitted therto, as members, ought to be **examined & tryed** first; whether they be **fit & meet to be received**. . . [T]hey must profess & hold forth in such sort, as may satisfie **rational charity** that [repentance and faith] are there indeed. . . A personall & publick confession, & declaring of Gods manner of working upon the soul, is bothe lawfull, expedient, & usefull, in sundry respects, & upon sundry grounds."

This part of the Platform makes me want to cuss. When new people are thinking of joining a free church, **those already members** need to be "examined and tryed." If the members, I say, can't explain - in very simple and **appealing** words - what is so fine about the covenant of their free church, that church is not "fit & meet" to be **joined**! I said in Lecture 3, I can be empathetic with the existential reason our earliest congregational ancestors thought they had to bust a gut to keep free churches "pure." And it's only fair to add, **if we had seen** what

they saw in their time what an **awful** institution the Church had become - in their eyes - maybe we would have thought the only hope of keeping free churches from morphing back to horrible hierarchy, was to keep them “pure.” But this horrible requirement for membership - that old members test and **judge** the **substance** of new members’ neighborly love - soon gave the founders and their children no end of trouble, starting in the 1650s, only a decade after they wrote the Platform. But it’s not much comfort that they suffered for it. For **this** dreadful mistake is the main historical reason we liberals almost **forgot** the covenant 300 years later, in the 20th century.

Here’s what happened. The founders tied entering the covenant to a very special kind of experience, an **ecstatic** “falling in love with God.” But even in the second generation, **most people never had** that **ecstatic** experience. So, in the 18th century preachers like Jonathan Edwards and other “revivalists,” thought they had to **make** this thing happen, with hellfire and brimstone preaching of a sort which would have horrified the dignified **17th** century Puritans. And because the covenant became so linked, in liberals’ minds, with **18th** century “revivalism,” **though** our **19th** century liberal churches kept the old, earliest covenants **on the books** - beautiful, simple promises to walk together in the ways of love - the covenant was mostly **not** talked about. And this **bad** pattern **works ill** yet **today**.

For if you don’t **talk about** the covenant - the members’ basic agreement, the **simple promise** that constitutes the church as a church, the promise all who will are cordially invited to enter with us - what **do** you say is the basis of a liberal church? **A creed?** Tens of thousands of liberals have never been able to respond to that question any better than by saying, “Oh, no! No. Not a creed! We don’t believe in creeds.” You know the question which follows that **empty** negation. “What do Unitarian Universalists believe?”

Will the day ever come when many, many of us can say: **Ours is a covenantal church. We join by promising one another that we will be a beloved community, meeting together often to find the ways of love, as best we can see to do. We have found there’s always more to learn about how love really works, and could work, in our lives and in the world.** I hope that day comes.

One more mistake of our founders. Our founders, ready as they were to defy the kings and bishops of England to establish free churches, nevertheless **assumed** that tiered levels of privilege and authority in society - and in the churches - were “natural.” So, the Platform said the free church had a “mix’t government.” “Kingship” of the holy spirit of Christ made the free church a “monarchy.” And because the members elected, and could dismiss, their own officers, the free church was also a “democracy.” But then, since the members were to “**obey**” their

officers, once elected, the “elders” - elected ministers and lay officers whom we call board members - were the “**aristocracy.**”

My response to that is: What a crock! Members not elected to any office in our earliest churches could be, and often were, anything but “obedient,” if they didn’t agree with their “aristocracy.” Even if the members got talked into adopting some measure by their “elders,” if they **really didn’t** approve it, they just wouldn’t **do it**, no matter how often they were “admonished” to **do it. Phony democracy** worked then as now, when our members, year after year, **do nothing** with all those “study issues” we keep “democratically” voting to take up, these “votes” really involving very few members. Most of our members **don’t agree** that these issues are well handled in this poor **pattern**. And the many admonitions of our “aristocracy” can’t get the members of our free churches “**do it,**” either.

But it is simply a fact that nearly all colonial and later New Englanders - of all classes - **assumed**, for a **long** time, that status once acquired is status deserved in perpetuity. So, a pattern early developed that lasted, among Unitarians, into the mid-**20th** century. Once officers were elected in the earliest churches, and - in our lifetimes - once people were just **appointed** to some position in the AUA or the UUA, unless they did something really awful, ministers **and lay leaders** tended to stay in office a **long** time **and** pass their status on to their children. The same was true, from the beginning, of civil offices in New England towns and in the legislature. Connections and influence then, often, led to wealth.

So, rather quickly, New England developed something like a European aristocracy, a class, wealthy and politically privileged by birth. Many members of our earliest-named Unitarian churches - after a long history in the Standing Order and named Unitarian in the **19th** century - were of this class, **directly** related to old patterns of privilege in their churches and state. There are advantages to a culture in having a well educated, sophisticated and wealthy class, but in the long run patterns of assumed privilege **work ill**. Without new leaders, without **fresh** connections and language - **fresh words** of abiding truth - churches get stale, complacent, dull and stuck. Then, trying to wake the people up - develop new **lay** leadership, start new programs and bring in new members - is like pulling whales’ teeth. Established authority figures don’t like it and they will fight you, tooth an nail.

Trouble is, of course, **if** there’s **no way** to get leaders off **elevated** boards and staffs - except to mount an insurrection and have a big fight - even “free” churches are **not free** to do anything but creak along, blindly repeating the same boring, counter productive, **set** pattern of **mistakes working ill in the churches**. This **old** pattern - of regarding “leaders” as an “aristocracy” or referring to “leadership at the **highest continental level**” - has proved a **bad** pattern of

organization, for all of us. We have kept variations of it way too long. For ultimately, in the long run, “leaders” of this type can’t get members of **free churches** to do diddley squat.

I trust you see that I have hardly gone ga-ga over our flawless 17th century founders, though I have come to love them. Courageous, intelligent, brilliant even, creative and **right on** about many things, they failed to see the consequences of their share of mistaken assumptions. The love in their hearts and the human capacity to reason about and learn together the ways of love, they rightly saw as **divine gifts**. Yet, they also believed it was fine to take their **reasoning** about practical, “necessary circumstances” as divine “**if there be no error!**” A rather large **if**, you and I would say. But then, of all the changes between the 17th century and our lifetimes, the greatest may be due to our learning - given all the ghastly tragedies of the 20th century - that human reasoning often fails the test of time. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t use our heads! It means we need to be humble about **the fact** that **the best of us** tend to institutionalize procedures we think are only “practical,” when these poor “procedures” are nothing but a convenience to some, a pattern of governance which is working ill in our liberal free churches, even now.

If the Platform authors’ over-confidence, that with close enough attention to logic and rules, they could find **the** truth, we need to remember - in that they were quite at one with the prevailing spirit of their age. The 17th century was a time of great scientific discovery and the **doctrinaire** belief in certain circles that the logical, mathematical discoveries of Newton, e.g., **certainly** heralded our coming acquisition of the **absolute** truth about everything. The Puritans were not the only ones in their time - or later - to be rather awfully sure of themselves.

How much more, then, do we need to remind ourselves, that unrecognized and **false** assumptions characteristic of our time - **such as the notion that the non-profit corporation pattern of board/staff governance is “natural” for our Association** - must be part of who we are, too. It is terribly arrogant to suppose that because we can see, with hindsight, mistakes of the generations before us, it’s okay to demonize them. Without demonizing them, we need to be as clear as we can be about their gifts to us and their mistakes, because the consequences of both **still** shape us.

Then we can try to answer, not ever flawlessly but better than we have, the questions: What reclaimed patterns of governance might be good for us, especially in our ways of associating as liberal free congregations in our time? Could we **invent** patterns based in the spirit of neighborly love **among** our churches for our time and appropriate in our society?

In the morning I'll try my hand at those questions in Lecture 6. I hope you will be here then, too.