

Romans 8.31-39

"FINDING OUR CONGREGATIONAL WAY"

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To begin, let's briefly rehearse the basics of the Reformation. After all, how do we commemorate what we can only dimly recognize? Martin Luther struck a hot spark of social change on 31 October 1517 by nailing 95 Theses, his public declaration of faith, on the door of the Wittenberg cathedral. Most pointedly, Luther protested against the Catholic Church's sale of indulgences. Indulgences were sold to grieving families as a 'get out purgatory free' card. If we find that merely crass, Luther found it downright blasphemous.

Luther was a brilliant, stubborn monk. He never wanted to split from Rome. But when the Pope calls you "a warthog in the vineyard of the Lord," and tries to kill you, let's just say it narrows your options. The heart of Luther's movement was 1) we are justified in God's eyes not by works but by faith, meaning, we can't buy our way to God with money or good works, 2) the authority of scripture over every human word and office of ministry no matter how fancy our robes and, 3) the centrality of God's grace freely given as a gift. God both initiates and accomplishes our salvation, so humility and gratitude are always our place. The Lutheran, or Evangelical Church, grew up in Germany, the Baltics, and Scandinavia.

The second wing of the Reformation takes us to the cantons of Switzerland where Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, a French lawyer, merged other splintered Reformation groups. The holy sovereignty of God and centrality of God's redemption in Christ were twin foci around which they reoriented the church. Calvin was clear ever to remind us, who is the Creator, and who is the creature; who is the Savior and who are the saved? We tend to confuse our place with God's rightful, unassailable place, which always turns out badly.

Calvinist churches-- a.k.a. Reformed churches--were Swiss, Dutch, Scottish, and French.

The third less familiar strand is Anabaptist, also called the Radical Reformation. Picture prayerful, pietistic, peace groups like the Quakers and Mennonites. Imitating the early church, they rejected institutional church authority. Non-violently resisting corrupt worldly powers, such as these were persecuted by Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists alike. Rosenberger is a Mennonite name. We were banished from Switzerland and unwelcome in Germany. We like to say we have been kicked out of some of the best lands in Europe.

But all this is long ago and far away. Today I want to be more practical and personal. With this lay of the land, where do we as Congregationalists fit in? What does it all mean now? I want us to understand our Congregational tradition so we can draw upon it as strength.

Our Congregational heritage traces back to England in the early 17th century. At that time some felt called to a different kind of church than what was represented in the state church, the Church of England, derived from Calvinism. The most distinctive characteristic of our way is the belief that no individual--be it a bishop, priest or lay leader--is fully equipped to discern and do God's will alone. We cling to Jesus' promise that "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." This understanding is what gives us our name, "Congregational." We discern our way forward as a community.

In a word, we believe the gathered community is the true vessel of the Spirit of Christ. As a congregation gathered in prayerful deliberation, we best discern the Spirit of Christ. Use of that word discernment has increased around here during my tenure because it's central to our Congregational Way. Welcoming neighboring churches to Gary's Ecclesiastical Council, I identified our gathering as a business meeting that required the spirit of prayer.

Whether transacting business or praising God, we're a community which gathers in expectancy and openness, hoping to become an instrument of the Holy Spirit. If we are to understand one another and—even more essentially--if we are to comprehend what the Lord God would have us do, we will forever gather in prayerful and expectant community.

Centuries ago the Church of England was not pleased with our new way of being church. Bishops reacted strongly against it as a radical undercutting of their authority and the established ecclesiastical hierarchy, which it clearly was. Early Separatists didn't submit to the state church authority, seeing it as corrupt, making room for Christ alone as our head.

Some who followed what was called "The Congregational Way" never fully gave up on reforming the Church of England. They were known as "Puritans" because of their desire to *purify* the established church. Others, called the Pilgrims, fully separated themselves from the Church of England, never looking back, creating congregations governed by The Congregational Way. Of course, both Puritans and Pilgrims immigrated to the colonies.

A central part of Congregational practice, whether in England or New England, was the Congregational Meeting. Arthur Rouner describes the unique character of our meetings: "The 'Lordship of Christ' was no mere theological formula, nor any vague, idealistic, and impractical notion with them. Christ was sovereign, the ruler of each congregation. Their conviction was that if the people of a local church gathered together in a spirit of prayer, honestly seeking to know the Lord's will for them, he would come into their midst and guide their minds and hearts in such a way that they would all know what he intended them to do, and would furthermore be made of one mind in their determination to do it."

In colonial Congregationalism every aspect of Darien's community life was taken up in the Congregational Meeting. "Middlesex" Town Meetings were held at FCC, D. All taxes were collected here. Our local civic life was also governed right here. Civic and religious life were perceived "as of one piece", a kind of theocracy, or maybe better a Christocracy. Whether grazing rights or calling pastors, all was perceived as under God's sovereignty.

Eventually the two split, with civic functions taken up by what we call the Town Meeting, and church concerns in our Congregational Meeting. Over time civic and religious forms of the Congregational Way took on different characteristics. In the civic arena, cut off from its religious roots, new language emerged, terms like "self-determination", "one man, one vote," and "majority rule". The Town Meeting--today our Board of Selectmen--was a great experiment emboldening the founders of our land to try this new thing, called democracy. Yes, our way of church governance deeply contributed to shaping democracy in America. But today the Town Meeting has become a distant cousin to the Congregational Meeting.

For within our Congregational Meeting discerning the Spirit of Christ remains essential. It was a prayerful, worshipful expression of an understanding that had deep biblical and spiritual roots. This brings me to a great irony. *When I hear people in our church or other Congregational churches talk about what is distinctive about our way of being church, most often what I hear is a reflection of the civic practices that originated in, but departed significantly from, the unique understandings that gave rise to the Congregational Way.*

For instance, people say: "Here we don't have bishops to tell us what to do. We local churches order our own affairs and do what we believe to be right." *No, not quite, we look to God, not ourselves to know and do what's right. Or "here individuals are free to believe whatever they want. It is up to each of us to decide God's will for ourselves."* No, our way always affirms the discerning community, and not the individual, as the basic unit of faith. And the community was unashamedly and unabashedly affirming of classic Christianity.

Or we say, "a Congregational Church is a democracy. We share our own differing points of view and then make important decisions by voting." *Again, that's more than slightly off. More accurately, we are a Christocracy and working by consensus is preferable to voting.*

Similar statements and other misunderstandings don't reflect the richness or depth of our way. Rather, they represent little more than the shell of Congregationalism. I want to re-claim the distinctiveness of the Congregational Way. Our meetings best sound and feel less like Board of Selectmen and more like a place where Christ is present and speaking.

The Congregational Way isn't about the individual. It's not about exalting self-assertion as an abstract good. It is not that no one can tell us what to do. Rather, together we

seek to discern what Christ would have us do, the same Christ who promises to be in our midst. The reason we listen to individuals receptively with respect is that we never know whom the Spirit of Christ might choose to speak through in any given time. It could be anyone!

In the secular world governed by democracy things are different. I speak my opinion. I try to convince you I'm right and you're wrong. I seek out others believing like me. I assert my will through something like a caucus. But again, *this approach assumes that we already know, apart from the gathered community, how we should believe and what we are to do.* That's what happens when we take God out of the Congregational process. It becomes less about discerning the Spirit of Christ and more about self-assertion. Put another way, *it worships the individual in a way that our Congregational forebears would not recognize.*

The Congregational Way uses votes to *test* consensus, but *decides* by consensus. I've learned over time what happens with overemphasis on voting. Let's say we consider a matter, voting 55% yes and 45% no. What we've created is a divided house. We've made winners at the expense of losers, polarizing the community. I say, if we're that undecided, have the Moderator table the vote. For we clearly need more discernment time to build consensus. Consensus means that despite disagreeing, we see a path forward together.

"Majority rules" is what we have as we remove God from our process of deciding. We seek not majority will, but the will of Christ. Mind you, sometimes it's a slow, inexact business. At times discernment, understanding, and unity are only slowly realized. But the abiding promise is if we wait on the Spirit something like discernment, understanding and unity will result in ways that are impossible apart from God's presence. If these subtle shadings of meaning are lost upon you, trust me, all of these distinctions are compelling.

People roll their eyes at theology, dismissing debates about how many angels can dance on a pin. I get it that trying to speak of God in paltry words is absurd. But the difference between right and wrong paths is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug. In every generation, the church faces the same dilemma. Will we take on the soul of the world and become unrecognizable from ordinary views of salvation? Or will we remember who we truly are, and with humility and compassion give the world the soul of the church?

As Congregationalists, we believe that the Lord works in mysterious and wonderful ways, his wonders to perform. Yes, we can use Bylaws and Robert's Rules, if we must. But our attitude and posture are key. Can I hear God speaking through you? Can you hear God speaking through me? Can we recognize it and say as much whenever it happens?

That's what unity out of diversity means to us, not a theoretical affirmation of pluralism.

It's even bigger than starting and closing our meetings with prayer, which we do more and more, setting a wonderful tone. *It is being prayer-infused in how we listen to one another.* Can we bring an open attitude of mutual acceptance, letting God work through us? Can we see each other as God's own? Can we respect each other as vessels of revelation?

Friends, that is the Reformed church you seek. And it is certainly the one I want to serve. Amen.