

**Freedom: the Ill-defined Expression of the Congregational Way**  
(An Argument Largely Founded on a Work of P. T. Forsyth  
for the Balance of Faith, Freedom, and Fellowship in the Congregational Way)  
Presented November 18, 2010 to the Wisconsin Congregational Theological Society  
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**Introduction**

On May 5, 2003 at the Wisconsin Congregational Theological Society, Steven A. Peay presented a paper entitled “Fellowship: The Neglected Focus of the Congregational Ellipse.” After noting Dexter’s description of Congregationalism as a ellipse with two foci,<sup>1</sup> Peay laments, “The record of the last fifty or so years would show . . . [t]here has been an emphasis more on freedom, i.e. the independence of the local church, rather than on fellowship.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed “Freedom” has become *THE* hallmark of the Congregational Way, at least in its popular expression. It is touted among the holy triad of “F-words” (Faith, Freedom, and Fellowship<sup>3</sup>) to explain the essence of the Congregational Way of being Church. However, Freedom seems to have superseded Faith and Fellowship in its popular expressions. Elizabeth Bingham states, “Congregational Christian Churches are, above all else the ‘free church.’ It is freedom which identifies the faith tradition more specifically than any of the other qualities which are signposts

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<sup>1</sup> That is, autonomy and fellowship.

<sup>2</sup> Steven A. Peay, “Fellowship: The Neglected Focus of the Congregational Ellipse” [http://www.wiscongregational.net/WCTSPapers/2003\\_05\\_15.pdf](http://www.wiscongregational.net/WCTSPapers/2003_05_15.pdf). Accessed November 11, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> See Arvel M. Steece, *A Thoroughfare for Freedom: Continuing a Short History of the Congregational Christian Churches* (Oak Creek, WI: Congregational Press, 1993), 75-78. See also, Arthur Acy Rouner, Jr., *Congregational Way of Life: What it Means to Love and Worship as a Congregationalist* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1960); Henry David Gray, *What it Means to be a Member of a Congregational Christian Church* (Oak Creek, WI: Congregational Press, 1995); Nancy W. Smart, *We Would Be Free: The Story of the Congregational Way, Faith, Freedom, and Fellowship* (Oak Creek, WI: National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, 1974); and Steven A. Peay, ed., *A Past with a Future: Continuing Congregationalism into the Next Millennium* (Wauwatosa, WI: Congregational Press, 1998).

along the Congregational Way.”<sup>4</sup> According to one recent “letter to the editor” in *The Congregationalist*, Freedom is what makes the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches (NACCC) unique. Warren R. Angel exclaims, “Any of us can find faith and fellowship elsewhere, but where are we going to find freedom to be the people Christ called us to be in his church? This is why I joined the NACCC in 1978.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, according to Angel, it is “Freedom” that defines a true Congregational church. Angel’s reductionist assertion is not uncommon. Freedom is the cherished hallmark of contemporary Congregationalism without a doubt.

But what is meant of Freedom? Daniel Jenkins aptly states, “Like most popular slogans . . . ‘Faith, Freedom, and Fellowship’ conceal as much as they reveal and many of the debates in modern Congregationalism have in effect, turned on the kind of meaning which they should carry.”<sup>6</sup> Thus Freedom, so broadly used, becomes nebulous. It is almost as if congregants play the “pick your preposition” game: Freedom of faith, freedom in faith, (freedom *from* faith?) are bantered around creating a boundless and “ill-defined” concept.

Since Freedom is so essential to the Way it must be defined. This paper attempts to set forth an understanding of what Freedom is and is not according to Congregationalism in its classic expression. It will become obvious in the paper there is heavily reliance on a work of Peter Taylor Forsyth entitled *Faith, Freedom and Future*.<sup>7</sup> Forsyth limits freedom and expresses concern over the deconstruction of the idea of Freedom in many Congregational circles. It is

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<sup>4</sup>Elizabeth E. Bingham, “Freedom and Truth: The Congregational Way Meets the World,” in *A Past with a Future: Continuing Congregationalism into the Next Millennium*, ed. Steven A. Peay (Wauwatosa, WI: The Congregational Press, 1998), 49.

<sup>5</sup> Warren R. Angel “NA Honors Freedom” *The Congregationalist: Magazine of the Congregational Way* (Vol. 162, No. 3, September 2010), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Jenkins, *Congregationalism: A Restatement* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), 40.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Taylor Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, (London: Independent Press, 1912, 1955).

hoped that a re-examination of Freedom in the Congregational Way will act as a corrective to the contemporary misuse of this pillar of the Way.

### **Unbridled Freedom is Not a Principle of Congregationalism**

Liberty to think and believe anything one wants—an “unqualified” freedom or liberty—is not true Congregationalism. Forsyth writes, “But the plea that Congregationalism exists to be an arena for unqualified theological liberty, and a cave of all the religious winds, is hardly worth discussing, as it does not seem to be put forward by any who are familiar with the genius of a gospel, the nature of a church, or the history of our churches.”<sup>8</sup> However, a century later, such pleas cannot be so easily dismissed.<sup>9</sup> Somewhere along the line, Freedom has come to be understood as a radical independency or unqualified liberty. Yet, as Forsyth said, “We [i.e., Congregationalists] have never stood for absolute and unchartered liberty. Those who did sought it elsewhere.”<sup>10</sup> Until the last hundred years Congregationalists have not embraced unchecked freedom. Yet there is a growing trend otherwise.

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<sup>8</sup> Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, 206. Rather caustically he continues, “Unqualified religious liberty is but love in a mist, and it ends in the convictions of ghosts, the energy of eccentrics, the anarchy of egoists.”

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps this is, in part, due to unfamiliarity of the genius of the Gospel (theology), the nature of church (ecclesiology), or the history of Congregational churches as Forsyth hints at. Forsyth continues, outlining another side of his contextual debate, “The second and far predominant class consists of those who say that Congregationalism came into existence only on the basis of historic, apostolic, and evangelical belief; which to abolish is to alter fundamentally its constitution, and not only make it another church but destroy it as a church altogether. For Christianity is evangelical at its centre or else it is another religion. But (they say) within the pale and by the power of such an evangelical faith there is room and need for a great development of theology. For which development a large range of freedom is necessary. And the due freedom is best secured by a belief which though positive is unwritten. This view, I say, is the dominant one in Congregationalism. And it has served well on the whole, but only on the whole. It has left some belief very nebulous, and made nebulosity too tolerable. What remains to be seen is whether it will carry us through the totally new conditions of the future as it has so far carried us through the past. For now the whole situation is altered by the fact that the great issues are not so much those of formal theology, but of the historic facts and spiritual powers which make any theology possible. They are not theological variants but two religions, not a religious difference but a different religion.”<sup>9</sup> (Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and Future*, 224-225).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 216.

The growing notion of “*Carte blanche* Freedom” has redefined the historical sense of Congregational Freedom. Congregationalism is not a “free church” where everyone is entitled to their own thoughts and opinion(s). Yet the expression “No one can tell me what to believe, I am a Congregationalist!” is far too often on the lips and in the hearts of those who bear the name. Thus is the basis for the joke: “where there are two or three gathered in his name, there are at least ten different opinions.”

Independency and freedom of thought and action are core values among the contemporary Congregationalist. A century ago Forsyth notes this attitude:

“There are some who claim that Congregationalism permits no limit of belief either tacit or explicit, unwritten or written; that it is a mere creedless polity or 'apolity,' conceived in the interests of absolute freedom and sympathetic relation in the region of religion; that it is entrusted with no charge having an unbreakable entail from a historic revelation; that our freedom, therefore, is the one thing that we have to assert and guard, in order that truths with which we have not started may emerge as supreme from a perfectly free trade in opinions, and an unhampered struggle for existence between beliefs. By a generosity which has more geniality than justice, this amorphous liberty is defended by some mild idealists who do not need its benefit for themselves. It is held, in fact, that as Congregationalism is but a polity it is not essentially different from Unitarianism; nay, it has even been claimed that it contains nothing to exclude from our pulpits the denial that Jesus Christ ever had a historic existence.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet, this has not always been the case. The Congregational founders did not embrace absolute freedom or toleration. “Puritans came to America to worship freely, but not to establish religious freedom as an absolute value. The Puritans would willingly accept the statement that they were intolerant, say that they were only intolerant of heresy—as God would have it.”<sup>12</sup> J. William T. Youngs cites Nathaniel Ward’s (d. 1652) work, “If the Devil might have his free option, I believe he would ask nothing else but liberty to enfranchise all false religions and to embondage the truth. . . . Quoting Augustine Ward said, ‘No evil is worse than liberty for the erring.’ With

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 223-224.

<sup>12</sup> J. William T. Youngs, *The Congregationalists* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 49.

tolerance, ‘the roof of liberty stands open’ and ‘light heads’ are free to spread heresy.”<sup>13</sup> Clearly tolerance was not an absolute core value of the framers of the Congregational Way. The Founders were concerned about such unchecked freedom.

Ahlstrom furthermore notes, “The church covenants of the early Puritans, moreover, were so simple as to allow of almost any interpretation. . . .People could “walke together” into a theological world wholly removed from the covenantal faith of their fathers—and so they gradually did.”<sup>14</sup> This reality can be seen as early as the 1630’s. The Salem covenant of 1629 was a few terse lines. By 1636 the covenant statement of that church had expanded ten (10) times—from 42 words to 495 words. The increased specificity in the covenant limited the freedom of interpretation of the covenantal glue of the community of faith.

Freedom *is* limited—must be limited—by Faith and Fellowship in the tradition of the Congregational Way. Thus, to claim that Congregationalist promote a complete freedom of thought does not fit with its history. Forsyth states,

There is no right then to appeal to our traditional liberty, which has been entirely a freedom within the apostolic Gospel and not from it. And the great Church could not be expected to co-operate with a church where liberty went so far that everything was an open question if only we cultivated the spirit of tolerance and charity, or even a love of Christ. That is not Christianity but Tolstoism. It is not Christian charity but genial Judaism.<sup>15</sup>

Churches abandon the Congregational Way when they unravel the triad of Faith, Freedom, and Fellowship. Freedom is not unbounded, nor is it to be held as supreme over the other classic expressions of Congregationalism. In fact, the three alliterated “Fs” create

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<sup>13</sup> Nathaniel Ward (a.k.a. Theodore de la Guard), *The Simple Cobbler of Aggawam in America*, as quoted in Youngs, *The Congregationalists*, 49.

<sup>14</sup> Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 390.

<sup>15</sup> Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and Future*, 216-217.

boundaries for one another. Faith, Freedom, and Fellowship must be held in proper tension—we cannot afford to sacrifice any of them for the exaltation of the other.

### **Faith and Fellowship Give Boundaries to Freedom**

#### **The Faith Boundary**

Scripture speaks much of faith being grounded. Nowhere does the New Testament promote absolute liberty in matters of faith. Christians are rather, rooted in faith and built up (Col. 2:7). The metaphor of flying free (or “ride like the wind!”) is scripturally characterized as weak or immature faith. People are “blown about by every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14). Faith is essential to Congregational Freedom; giving it limits and holding it in check. “Freedom cannot live on its own apart from the content and substance of our faith.”<sup>16</sup> Forsyth states, “The Church is founded on faith, else it has no foundation at all; and on faith not as a subjective frame, but as our collective relation to a given object of holy Love, an object which gives itself in grace, and in that act creates the faith.”<sup>17</sup> The object is, of course, Jesus Christ.

Historically, the founders of the Congregational way upheld Freedom and marked it as a hallmark of the Way because of the freedom they found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It was men agreed about the substance of the New Testament Gospel that made all the claims in our past for liberty, and guarded it so jealously. It was done in the interest of a great, free, and apostolic Gospel and its development; it was not in the interest of a general and genial religion. They had no other source of their liberty than the Gospel, and no other worthy object of their sacrifice.<sup>18</sup>

This was a freedom to receive the gift of grace and pass it along to others.

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<sup>16</sup> Bingham, “Freedom and Truth,” 49. Although Bingham argues for a progressive understanding of Truth, she acknowledges that the content of faith holds freedom in check.

<sup>17</sup> Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and Future*, 219.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

As churches we have always supposed that we were created and organised in the interest of a final Gospel and its publication, a Gospel of historic revelation and not of future discovery; that is to say, in the interest of a religion given, decisive, personal, and practical. We are not organised in the interest of a theology, that is, in the scientific interest of developing truth, but in the interest of religion, that is, in the evangelical interest of realising it and spreading it, the interest of giving away what we already have by gift, and not of reaching by effort what we have not.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the Gospel is a *gift given*, not something to be discovered. This, of course, begs the necessity of defining “the Gospel.” Unarguably, the scriptures were the foundation of the Congregational Way and its understanding of the Gospel. The early Puritans fought for the simplicity of Church they found in the scriptures. “It was men agreed about the substance of the New Testament Gospel that made all the claims in our past for liberty, and guarded it so jealously. . . . They had no other source of their liberty than the Gospel, and no other worthy object of their sacrifice.”<sup>20</sup> Likewise the historic creeds of Congregationalism, as testimonies, can shed light on what has been passed down from forbearers. Thus, the Word of God and the Creed of Congregationalism help define the Gospel and the Faith which gives boundaries to Freedom.

### **The Word of God<sup>21</sup>**

Congregationalism is based upon the Word of God. In fact, early in Dexter’s definition of what Congregationalism is, he says plainly,

Its fundamental principle is the following: --*The Bible—interpreted by sanctified common sense, with all wise helps from nature, from history, from all knowledge, and especially*

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 204-205.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>21</sup> An initial intent for this paper was to research the scriptural foundations of the term “Freedom”. Louw and Nida’s *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* delineates ten domains for “free” in the New Testament: free (acquit); free (not restricted); free (release); free (status) free from danger, free from prejudice; free from sinning; free from worry; free of charge; free will. However, due to time and space limitations these nuances will have to be teased out in another context.

*from the revealing Spirit—is the only , and sufficient, and authoritative guide in all matters of Christian practice, as it is in all matters of Christian faith: so that whatsoever the Bible teaches—by precept, example, or legitimate inference—is imperative upon all men, at all times; while nothing which it does not so teach can be imperative upon any man at any time.*<sup>22</sup>

Forsyth, furthermore says, “Congregationalism would never have come into existence if each church had not believed itself to possess in an infallible Book, opened by an infallible Spirit dwelling in the Church, sufficient authority to protect it from the gusty vote of the hour.”<sup>23</sup>

The famous (and perhaps overused quote) of John Robinson, “there is yet more light and truth to break forth from the Holy Word” sums up the congregational reliance upon the Scriptures. Yet what Robinson meant by this passage is debated. Is there further revelation to be given (a kind of progressive theology) or was Robinson speaking about the application of what had already been given? Dexter corrects the abuse of such light breaking forth into “strange and diverse doctrines” (Heb. 13:9). He states, “It is impossible that [Robinson] should have spoken to the Plymouth men in the sense in which he had been commonly reputed to have spoken. Nothing short of insanity could have made him teach after the fashion of the self-styled ‘advance thinkers’ of to-day.” And, “I have surely pulled down the pastor of the Pilgrims from that high pedestal whereon the late generations—and more especially the heterodox among them—have delighted to exalt him as the apostle of a thought so progressive as to be quite out of sight of his own times, and the prophet of a liberalism having unlimited capacity to ‘embrace further light.’”<sup>24</sup> Robinson never would have embraced unbridled freedom reaching forward to some new undisclosed Truth. Rather, the “light to break forth” illumined the application of what had

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<sup>22</sup> Henry M. Dexter, *Congregationalism: What It is; When It is; How it Works; Why It is Better Than Any Other Form of Church Government; and its Consequent Demands* (Boston: Noyes, Holmes, & Company, 1871), 2. [Italics his].

<sup>23</sup> Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and Future*, 210.

<sup>24</sup> Henry M. Dexter, *Congregationalism as Seen in its Literature*, (New York: Burt Franklin, 1880), 402, 409.



already been given by God in the scriptures—how the Truth would be worked out in the midst of the congregation in the new world.

The Gospel in the Word of God has been given as a gift. Although the Puritan forbearers may have viewed the scriptures in a different light, their principle still holds true—the Gospel comes from the scriptures. Forsyth says “The infallible book has gone, but the infallible and historic Gospel in it has not gone, nor, as we believe, its infallible and present Spirit. We have a Gospel historic, positive, decisive, and final, and we have the living action among us of the Spirit Who put it there.”<sup>25</sup> Thus the scriptures are essential to Faith. Our Freedom to interpret comes with boundaries. It is not an “anything goes” venture.

### Creed

The phrase “Creeds of Congregationalism” often invokes the ire of the Freedom loving Congregationalist. Congregationalism is popularly conveyed as a non-creedal faith. Yet the testimony of Williston Walker’s and William Barton’s books *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*,<sup>26</sup> and the *Congregational Creeds and Covenants*<sup>27</sup> logically proves Congregationalist have held creeds. Forsyth says, “As to a creed it has never been denied by Congregationalism that it has a creed,” yet this is no longer true. Forsyth continues,

[T]he only question is how it holds it. . . . Must a church have a belief? And to that we can only answer that so long as it remains a church it must. The Church did not create its belief, it was created by it and not by a vague religious impulse; therefore it cannot discard it and remain a church. . . . It has a creed but it is not a written one. Like the pope it embodies its tradition of belief. Its creedal cohesion has rested on an honourable, tacit, and evangelical understanding. And a written creed it is not likely to have, either until events show that the unwritten understanding is unable to secure the apostolic Gospel, or

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<sup>25</sup> Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and Future*, 210-211.

<sup>26</sup> Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1991).

<sup>27</sup> William E. Barton, *Congregational Creeds and Covenants* (Chicago: Advance Pub. Co., 1917).

until the other churches, before entering on closer relations of union and co-operation, think fit to adopt a common expression of their basis, message, and purpose to offer the world.<sup>28</sup>

Thus the Church *does* have a creed, whether written or not—a belief that is rooted in the Gospel.

Certainly the freedom of the churches was not bound to a particular statement. William Barton notes,

Doctrinally, Congregationalism stands for orthodoxy with liberty. It holds to no one [hu]man-made creed as of perpetual authority. It rejoices in the right of the churches from time to time to compare their faith with the essential faith of the past, and has repeatedly declared itself in essential accord with the historic symbols of Christendom. But it holds to the right of [people] to be wiser tomorrow than they are today, and to revise all creeds, and to use them as a testimony rather than as a test; believing in the immortal words of the Pilgrim pastor, John Robinson, that God has much more light to break from His Word.<sup>29</sup>

The Faith of any creed provides necessary boundaries to people's freedom of belief—for their own safety and security. Paul tells Timothy to watch his life and doctrine carefully (1 Tim. 4:16). Countless passages in the New Testament warn of false teachings, false beliefs, and the consequences of them. The creeds of Congregationalism have been offered as testimonies to be seriously considered by individuals and their faith communities so as to prevent them from freely wandering from the Truth handed down from the Apostles (the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints Jude 3—"that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all" St. Vincent of Lerins). The creeds serve as safety nets, fences, leashes, and warning gauges to keep freedom from harming the community of faith by leading that community from the Truth.

Creeds combined with the Scriptures give shape to the understanding of the Gospel.

Barton states, "Congregationalists hold reverently to the final authority of the Word of God in all

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<sup>28</sup> Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, 225-226.

<sup>29</sup> William E. Barton, *The Law of Congregational Usage*, (Chicago: Advance Publishing Company, 1916), 28.

matters of faith and conduct; and they hold co-ordinate with this faith a belief in the right of the church from time to time to place itself on record in the language of its own time and on doctrines of current interest.”<sup>30</sup> Congregationalists have freedom to believe within these boundaries—but not outside of them. One becomes something other than a Congregationalist when he or she walks outside of the boundaries. Again, as Forsyth unabashedly states, “We have never stood for absolute and unchartered liberty. Those who did sought it elsewhere.”<sup>31</sup>

### Fellowship Boundary

Freedom is likewise held in check through the fellowship of the community. As the body of Christ covenants together each individual commits her or himself to the other. “Ideally, covenant is the sharing of each other’s person.”<sup>32</sup> Fellowship is not merely being together, but this sharing of each other’s person. There can be no freedom without relationship. God has given the body of Christ as a “checks and balances” system.

Freedom, in the democratic sense, implies a right to vote one’s conscience. The democratic nature of the Congregational Way is intrinsic to its existence. However, “majority rule” was never the intent of God in the leading of his people. Nowhere in scripture do we see this type of freedom. Forsyth asks, “Can its majorities be trusted to keep the faith, the word, and the power once for all committed to the faithful, and to keep it whether it succeed or not? Majorities may be naturally religious; they are not naturally Christian.”<sup>33</sup> Furthermore

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, 216.

<sup>32</sup> John English, *Spiritual Intimacy and Community: An Ignatian View of the Small Faith Community* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 18-19.

<sup>33</sup> Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and Future*, 208.

Majorities and minorities are not the calculus of the Spirit. . . we must look for a power which is immune from a mere majority. We look to an electorate in no form, but to an Elector, His choice, His historic gift, and His Holy Spirit in His church, and no majority vote can guarantee the presence of His Will. The church has in its past an eternal charge and final revelation, which can never change by [hu]man's short estimate of social utilities without ceasing to be. Majorities may and should settle business in a church only if it is composed of [people] who would be sure of the Gospel if it were a minority of one, and who would administer it only by the votes of [those] whom the Gospel itself had made.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, the church gathers in freedom around Christ as its elector. Christians obey his will, not their own. They listen to Christ and follow his commands (John 14:15). Any vote they cast must be based on what they hear Christ saying in their midst, not on their own wishes and whims. As much as we may define our polity as a democracy, in reality Congregationalism demands a Christocracy.<sup>35</sup> Christ is the head of the church. He is the center around which the church is gathered. Christ is the authority, not the individual as is communicated by members claiming their rights to believe or act as they want. "A real authority therefore is even more needful to our loose-hung liberty than it may seem to be for churches more organised."<sup>36</sup> That authority is Christ—he limits freedom. Christians are free, not to do what they want, but what Christ wants! Thus the Congregational Way is founded upon a Christocracy—with Jesus Christ as the head with his followers gathered about him seeking his will and way.

The church thereby must be comprised of regenerate people—those who have embraced saving faith in Jesus Christ. The founders of the Way "believed that the church should consist only of "visible saints" and their children, with a knowledgeable profession of faith and

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<sup>34</sup> Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority*, 234.

<sup>35</sup> "Passing by the doubt whether a church gathered about a King can be a real democracy, we ask whether the Gospel is there for the uses of the democracy or the democracy for the uses of the Gospel, whether it invites mankind to exploit God or to glorify Him" (Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and Future*, 211).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

consistent God-fearing behavior as the tests of visibility;”<sup>37</sup> those set free by the Gospel to become slaves of Christ. “For Freedom Christ set us Free” (Gal. 5:1). Only one in relationship with Christ—one who has been regenerated, born-again, converted—can hear the Spirit’s voice. The Apostle Paul says, “Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14 NRSV); thus underscoring the essential regenerate faith in Christ of the Congregationalist. With regeneration the believer becomes part of the body of Christ. The body is a system to hold one another accountable. If one part suffers the whole suffers (1 Cor. 12). The acceptance of the Gospel grants freedom to belong to the Body of Christ—to belong to the fellowship of Christians. But there must be genuine connection—the body must be bound together lest it cease to be a body. If there is unchecked freedom the very nature of the body unravels and fragments or worse (imagine the hand claiming its freedom to go apart from the rest of the body).

Accountability is what Fellowship brings to Freedom. Yet all too often individuals or churches buck this accountability, and in the name of freedom claim a right to do as they please. This can be seen both on an individual and a corporate level—church members and churches one-with-another. In addressing the lack of accountability of churches, Leonard Bacon said,

According to our principle, the church elects its pastor and ordains him and it is the business of all the churches who he is and what he is; and the church that ordains him is responsible to all the churches to give an account whom it is that they elect to that office, and of his ordination — what he is, what theology he holds, what faith, what principles of order — what qualifications he has by nature, by education, and by the grace of God for the performance of that duty; and if a church falling back on its reserved rights, its extreme powers, says: "We will have nothing to do with other churches, we will elect

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<sup>37</sup> Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 145. Note that despite claims to the contrary there *HAVE* been “tests” of belonging in the Congregational Way.

whom we please to be our minister, and we will turn him away when we please," we say, "Very well, only you don't ride in our troop, that's all."<sup>38</sup>

What a bold move. What an "uncharitable" statement. Yet how necessary is the accountability of Fellowship in the Congregational understanding of Freedom! Congregationalist need to accept the inherent accountability of Fellowship with their cries for freedom. Congregationalism has not embraced the *carte blanche* freedom many have laid claim to. Fellowship binds Freedom.

### Conclusion

Faith and Fellowship provide the boundaries to Freedom. "Liberty can only exist as qualified."<sup>39</sup> Freedom needs Faith and Fellowship to qualify it. While "The 'Marlboro Man' or the 'High Plains Drifter' are our cultural archetypes of the free person,"<sup>40</sup> Congregationalism does not need this kind of thinking. In fact, unchecked freedom will be detrimental to the Congregational Way.

As Forsyth said, "We have never stood for absolute and unchartered liberty. Those who did sought it elsewhere."<sup>41</sup> However, it may be worth trying to redeem (Jude 23) those with false notions of Congregational Freedom, rather than simply encouraging them to find their Freedom elsewhere. The community of faith is the testing ground for the free notions of the individual believer. "If freedom allows us to believe that there is 'yet more light to be shed', it also obligates us to share those insights with others in order to verify that God is indeed the source of

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<sup>38</sup> Leonard Bacon, "Report of the Committee on Church Polity" in *Debates and Proceedings of the National Council of Congregational Churches Held at Boston, MA (June 14-24, 1865, American Congregational Association, 1866)*, 452.

<sup>39</sup> Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and Future*, 207.

<sup>40</sup> Terry L. Bascom, "The Free Church in a Free Society: What Does It Mean to be Free?" in *A Past with a Future: Continuing Congregationalism into the Next Millennium*, ed. Steven A. Peay (Wauwatosa, WI: The Congregational Press, 1998), 64.

<sup>41</sup> Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, 216.

the light and that we are receiving with eyes of faith.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, the faith of the community (the Truth which has been handed down in conjunction with the whole body listening to the Spirit) becomes the safety net for the believer in her or his Freedom to belong to Christ. Such relationships must be intentional however. They do not happen by accident. “If membership in the church is intentional, then the church becomes a live circuit for the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>43</sup>

This paper has proposed that Faith and Fellowship offer the boundaries to keep our Freedom in check. Without them, Congregationalism is doomed.

“We are Congregationalist with good ground and hope that we do on the whole have that Holy Spirit and that living Word which make the real authority over authoritative majorities, and preserve them from the spiritual suicide to which they naturally tend. We take many risks. Faith always does. Liberty always does. They can easily be abused and travestied. But we believe that Congregationalism is worth keeping, and worth sacrifice; though only for its possession and service of that which makes a church a church and for its facilities in applying it to the public situation.”<sup>44</sup>

Our Faith, our Fellowship, and our Freedom are gifts from Christ. We possess them only because of Christ—because of his Gospel. The moment they become “ours,” or the moment we assert our “right of Freedom” we have strayed from the Congregational Way.

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<sup>42</sup> Helen Paulus Gierke “With What Shall I come Before the Lord?” in *A Past with a Future: Continuing Congregationalism into the Next Millennium*, ed. Steven A. Peay (Wauwatosa, WI: The Congregational Press, 1998), 18.

<sup>43</sup> James William McClendon Jr., *Doctrine*, vol. 2 of Systematic Theology (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press), 371.

<sup>44</sup> Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and Future*, 209.