

# **We covenant with the Lord and one with another: a consideration of the covenant principle as the basis of a congregational ecclesiology**

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## **Introduction**

What makes the church? When the people gathered at Salem in 1629 they agreed: "We covenant with the Lord and with one another, and do bind ourselves in the presence of God to walk together in all His ways, according as He is pleased to reveal Himself unto us in His Blessed Word of Truth." For them, those gathered saints, it was the covenant that made them the church. Does the covenant concept have something to say to the churches today? Does it provide an adequate understanding upon which Christ may build his church? I believe so.

## **The Covenant Principle**

### The Covenant-Concept and the Scripture

A *covenant* is a solemn promise made binding by an oath. The oath may be either verbal or symbolic. The oath demonstrated the actor's obligation in making good the promise. Evident throughout the ancient near-East, the covenant-concept and the obligations it implied were intimately tied to religious experience. Most often the gods were invoked as guarantors of the oath and to sanction one who violated the terms of the covenant.<sup>1</sup> Covenants could take place between persons of different socio-political groups or within a distinct community. The covenant was the means by which the relationship entered into, normally inferior to superior, is regulated.

While similarities between the Hebrew covenant-concept and those of surrounding societies exist, there are profound differences in the covenant-relationship entered into with God. Typically a covenant is a bi-lateral arrangement, this is not the case with that entered into by God and Israel. The covenant is seen as a gift God makes to the people which takes the covenant-relationship beyond the level of contract into that of a bond of communion. As Th. C. Vriezen said, "the Covenant between God and the people did not bring these two 'partners' into a contract-relation, but into a communion, originating with God, in which Israel was bound to Him completely and made dependent upon him."<sup>2</sup> Israel is, then, brought by the covenant-relation into a unique position: that of intimate relationship with the Creator God. While God sacrifices none of his holiness, he extends the possibility of participation in that holiness to his people. The people may violate the covenant, may depart from the covenant, but they are forever marked by its effect. The implications of this communion are made even more profound when considered in light of the Old Testament understanding of humanity made "in the image and likeness of God" (Genesis 1.26ff; also Psalm 8).

When God speaks his Word into human flesh in the act of the Incarnation the covenant-concept is raised to a new level, as is the divine-human relationship. As George Mendenhall has pointed out: The covenant is solemnly established not in the settings of a majestic phenomenon of the power of God in nature, but in the insignificant gathering of a small group in an upper room. The covenant given is not a

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<sup>1</sup>see George E. Mendenhall, "Ancient Oriental and Biblical Law" in *The Biblical Archaeologist Reader* vol. III, Edward F. Campbell, Jr. and David Noel Freedman, eds. (Garden City: Doubleday-Anchor, 1970), pp. 3-24. Also, Gerhard von Rad *Old Testament Theology* vol. 1, (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 129-135; Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), pp. 209-216, and Th. C. Vriezen *Outline of Old Testament Theology* 2nd ed. (Wageningen: H. Veenman & Zonen, 1970), pp. 348-352. It should be noted that Mendenhall's *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh, 1955) is considered to be one of the definitive works on the subject of the covenant.

<sup>2</sup>Vriezen, *Outline*, p. 169.

mythical presentation of a timeless, divine, cosmic process, but is an historical event whereby the disciples are bound together with their Lord as the new Israel -- the new Kingdom of God. The new stipulations of the covenant are not a system of law to define in detail every obligation in every conceivable circumstance, but the law of love.<sup>3</sup>

The law of love becomes the definitive standard for the Christian community, since it was by demonstrating this law in his act of absolute self-giving on the cross that the Christ brought salvation.

While the New Testament uses the word 'covenant' (*diatheke*) only thirty-three times, and half of these are references to the Old Testament, it is still fairly obvious that the early Christians saw themselves as a covenant community. The narratives of the Last Supper (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; I Corinthians 11:25) serve as the evidence of this understanding. In establishing the Eucharist Jesus points to the "new covenant" which will be established by his death and resurrection. Thus, in the earliest conception of the church, participation in the Eucharist becomes the means for inclusion in the covenant community and its subsequent 're-membling'.<sup>4</sup>

Why, then, is the covenant-concept not more prominent in both the New Testament and subsequent writings of the Patristic period? Here Mendenhall offers a most insightful comment: ...[I]t is difficult to avoid the conclusion that for Western Christianity, at least, both the astounding creativity of the early church and the radical break with Jewish forms and associated patterns of thought very soon produced a structure of religious thought and life in which the old covenant patterns were not really useful as a means of communication, and may have been dangerous in view of the Roman prohibition of secret societies. All we can conclude is that the Last Supper is certainly the central feature of early Christian life, in which the community was bound together with Christ; but the important features of the Mosaic covenant, the stipulations, are absent. On the other hand, the history of God's act in Christ, the exclusive relationship to God through Christ, the curse done away with by the Cross, the blessings of freedom in Christ and life here and hereafter, and even the judgment of God for rejection of the covenant relationship -- all so important and constant features bound up with covenant traditions in the Old Testament -- are taken up in the New Testament and are inseparable both from the person of Jesus and from the sacrament of the Eucharist.<sup>5</sup>

The foregoing remarks answer our question and summarize very neatly the understanding of Covenant within both the New Testament and the mainstream of Western Christian tradition, up to a point. It is to this point we will next turn our attention.

#### The Rediscovery of the Covenant-Concept

The covenant-concept as an approach to theologizing lay dormant in the Christian West until the Reformation. Both Roman Catholic and Protestant scholars would undertake to examine the concept, especially as it related to the question of salvation.<sup>6</sup> It would largely fall to theologians of the Reformed

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<sup>3</sup>George E. Mendenhall, "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition" in The Biblical Archaeologist Reader vol. III, p. 52.

<sup>4</sup>see George E. Mendenhall, "Covenant" in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, vol. I, George A. Buttrick, et al. eds., (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), pp. 722-723; Cyprian Vagaggini Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy, Leonard J. Doyle and W.A. Jurgens trans. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1976), pp. 78-80; Johannes H. Emminghaus, The Eucharist: Essence, Form, Celebration (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1978), pp. 6-23.

<sup>5</sup>George E. Mendenhall, "Covenant," p. 723.

<sup>6</sup>see Jaroslav Pelikan Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300- 1700), vol. IV in The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 240-244, Geoffrey W. Bromiley Historical Theology: An Introduction (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 310-316, Jens Moeller, "The Beginnings of Puritan Covenant Theology," Journal of Ecclesiastical history, XIV (1963), pp. 46-67, Richard Greaves, "The Origins and Early Development of English Covenant Thought," The Historian, XXI (1968), pp. 21-35 and John Von Rohr, The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought American Academy of Religion 'Studies in Religion' 45 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986) pp. 1-51 and 193-196. The movement in Europe will reach its peak in the 1650s with Johannes Cocceius, professor at

tradition, and particularly those of English descent, to develop it into the so-called 'Federal Theology' (from the Latin *foedus*, covenant). And, as Perry Miller points out, it will be in Puritan New England that the movement will find the most fertile ground to cultivate. "The covenant theology becomes, therefore, the theoretical foundation for both the metaphysics and for the state and the church in New England."<sup>7</sup> Thus, it is rightly described by Miller as the "marrow of Puritan divinity."

William Ames was among the chief architects of the Federal Theology. Ames, like many others, had to flee to Holland where he became professor of Theology at the University of Franeker in 1622. While at Franeker he delivered a series of lectures which formed the basis of his The Marrow of Theology, one of the chief theological texts in use by the New England Puritan divines.<sup>8</sup> In the Marrow he articulated, as did others -- Perkins, Wollebius, the existence of a pre-fall 'covenant of works' and a 'covenant of grace' instituted by God in Christ. The covenant of grace has a unifying effect upon history, since it is "one and the same from the beginning."<sup>9</sup>

The effect of the covenant of grace was to bring about the possibility of a restored relationship between God and humanity. In the mind of the federal theologians, God had always dealt with humanity by means of the covenant. If humanity responds to the gracious invitation of God to enter into the covenant relationship with him by faith, they will enjoy all the benefits of restored relationship. Thus, Richard Sibbes could define the covenant of grace in a manner common to all the writers:

It has pleased the great God to enter into a treaty and covenant of agreement with us his poor creature, the articles of which agreement are here comprised. God, for his part, undertakes to convey all that concerns our happiness, upon our receiving of them, by believing on him. Every one in particular that recites these articles from a spirit of faith makes good this condition.<sup>10</sup>

What is more, in the covenant God pursued fallen humanity and brought it back to its original situation. As Thomas Shepard wrote:

Oh the depths of Gods grace herin . . . that when he deserves nothing else but separation from God, and to be driven up and downe the World, as a Vagabond, or as dryed leaves, fallen from our God, that yet the Almighty God cannot be content whit it, but must make himselfe to us, and us to himself more sure and neer then ever before! . . . The Lord can never get neer enough to his people, and thinks he can never get them neer enough unto himselfe, and therefore unites and binds and fastens them close to himself, and himselfe unto them by the bonds of a Covenant."<sup>11</sup>

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Leyden and a student of William Ames; see R. Buick Knox, "The History of Doctrine in the Seventeenth Century" in A History of Christian Doctrine, H. Cunliffe-Jones, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), pp. 436-7.

<sup>7</sup>see Perry Miller Errand into the Wilderness (Cambridge: Belknap-Harvard, 1981), p. 89 ff.; also his The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939), pp. 365-432 for a fuller examination of the covenant concept as it was applied in New England.

<sup>8</sup>cf. Miller New England Mind, p. 48. It is interesting to note that Ames was engaged to come to teach at Harvard in 1632, but his death from exposure after his house was flooded by the river Maas prevented it; see Bromiley, p. 308.

<sup>9</sup>"Although the free, saving covenant of God has been one and the same from the beginning, the manner of the application of Christ or the administration of the new covenant has not always been so. It has varied according to the times during which the church has been in the process of being gathered." William Ames Marrow of Theology John Dykstra Eusden ed. and trans. (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1968), p. 202. For a good overview of the Puritan understanding of the covenant of grace see Von Rohr, op. cit., pp. 53-85.

<sup>10</sup>quoted in Miller New England Mind, p. 377.

<sup>11</sup>Thomas Shepard in Miller, New England Mind, pp. 381-382.

The covenant, then, helped to mitigate the harshness of Calvin's concepts of election and predestination and provided the rationale for the pursuit of the Christian life.<sup>12</sup> Godliness is the fruit of the covenant relationship.

Ames and his colleagues in the 'federal theology' restored the covenant-concept to a place of prominence in Christian theology, at least for a time. There are occasions, as Miller points out, that the level of extrapolation needed to arrive at an absolute New Testament ground for the position is somewhat extreme.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the importance of what the Federal Theology accomplished in terms of its effect upon the development of American intellectual and religious history cannot be considered, or dismissed, too lightly.<sup>14</sup>

### Conclusion

The articulation of the covenant-concept, then, raised the individual believer to a new dignity. A dignity which, in the Western tradition, had been reserved to the corporate, institutional church and its hierarchy<sup>15</sup>. The relationship entered into by God and a "particular man" in the covenant of grace also implied a relationship between all those who had entered into the covenant. That gathering of those "called out," which is the church, also takes on a new position. Having examined the development of the covenant-concept we can now turn to the implications of the covenant relationship for a congregational ecclesiology.

### **Consideration of a Congregational Ecclesiology**

#### The Church as Covenant Community: Historical Considerations

At the time of the writing of the New Testament the term *ekklesia* denoted the assembly of the freemen of a city to hold elections. Over time this term was utilized by the Christians to denote their assembly as the followers of the Lord. It is very likely that the term was picked up by the Christians from the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament. In the Septuagint the Hebrew *qahal* was translated as both *synagoge* and as *ekklesia*. The Christians tended to use the latter more frequently and thus the term *ekklesia* was applied to the gatherings of the 'free association' of believers who met for worship.<sup>16</sup> At the core of the worship was participation in the sign of the New Covenant, namely the Eucharist. The believers who assembled had been baptized, or were in the process of catechesis. Thus, one can say that the church was "called forth" in response to the covenant.

Over time the understanding of what was constitutive of the church would change, however. The development of the hierarchical structure of the church, largely in response to the involvement of the Roman empire, would place greater and greater emphasis upon its continuity as the guarantor of the presence of the 'true church'.<sup>17</sup> The relational construct implied by the covenant-concept was replaced

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<sup>12</sup>cf. Miller and Pelikan, op. cit.; Von Rohr, op. cit., particularly pp. 155-191, and Richard A. Muller, "Covenant and Conscience in English Reformed Theology: Three Variations on a 17th Century Theme," *WTJ*, v. 42-#2 (Spr. 1980), pp. 309-335.

<sup>13</sup>see Miller, *New England Mind*, p. 434-5.

<sup>14</sup>see Miller *New England Mind*, p. 388-9.

<sup>15</sup>In the Christian East, however, the preservation of the more holistic, Patristic approach to both anthropology and spirituality allowed for the concept of *entheosis* or 'divinisation' of the individual believer. There are some interesting similarities between the Puritan understanding of 'godliness' or personal holiness and this Eastern concept. More study on the matter is needed, however. See Vladimir Lossky *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: Clarke, 1957) and John Meyendorff *Byzantine Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1979).

<sup>16</sup>Edward Schillebeeckx *The Church With A Human Face* (New York: Crossroads, 1985), p.42; also Hans Kung *The Church* R. and R. Ockenden trans. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), pp. 107ff.

<sup>17</sup>see Kung, Schillebeeckx, also Kenan Osborne *Priesthood: A History of the Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), Raymond Brown *Priest and Bishop: Biblical Reflections* (New York: Paulist Press, 1970).

with an institutional or societal understanding of the church which transcended that of the 'assembly of the called.'<sup>18</sup>

While the Reformation would once again open up consideration of the nature of the church, the pressure of church-state relations would mitigate against a return to a more localized understanding of church. The situation in England would lead to the development of the Puritan movement, which sought to restore the notion of the church as the 'assembly of the called.' Volumes have been written documenting the rise, progress, and various permutations of this movement, what concerns us here is how they considered the church to be constituted.<sup>19</sup>

#### The Church Covenant

When Ames wrote his Marrow of Theology in 1623 he included two chapters on the nature of the church. One he entitled, "The Church Mystically Considered," the other "The Church Instituted." By taking this approach Ames notes that there is an invisible and visible reality to the assembly of the faithful. The invisible denoting the underlying reality of the relationship of all believers, including those past and present, to Christ. The visible reality denoting the extant, local assembly of believers.<sup>20</sup> Further Ames notes,

6. The church is first of all constituted by calling, whence both its name and definition.

7. The church is indeed the company of men who are called. . . because the end of calling is faith and the work of faith is the grafting into Christ, and this union brings with it communion with Christ, the church can be defined at once as a company of believers, a company of those who are in Christ, and a company of those who have communion with him.

30. Their acts of communion among themselves are all those in which they strive to do good to each other. These acts are especially those which further their communion with God in Christ.<sup>21</sup>

So the church is a reality at once both visible and invisible and the 'assembly of the called' in communion with Christ and one another. What serves as the guarantor of that communion? Ames addresses this question in the chapter on the "Church Instituted." Here he notes that while the church is a particular, local, gathering it has relation to the broader expression of the invisible church in the total company of believers. It is important to note, however, that such a relationship does not constitute a church. To speak of the "communion of saints" or the "catholic church" does not imply the reality of the church.

6. Such a congregation or particular church is a society of believers joined together in a special bond for the continual exercise of the communion of saints among themselves.

7. It is a society of believers because the same thing makes a church visible in profession which in its inward and real nature makes it a mystical church, namely, faith.

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<sup>18</sup>Beginning with the absolute ascendancy of the Roman Pontiff, and especially the declaration of Innocent III, this concept would reach its peak in the Roman tradition with the development of an understanding of the church as 'perfect society' in the ecclesiology of Vatican I; cf. H. Denzinger Enchiridion Symbolorum (Freiburg: Herder, 1937), pp. 501-511, cf. Ad. Tanquerey, Manual of Dogmatic Theology vol I. J.J. Byrnes, trans. (New York: Desclee, 1959), pp. 104-132. It should be noted, however, that there have been some changes, most notably the Vatican II 'Constitution on the Church' (Lumen Gentium) which begins to see the church as the 'people of God.'

<sup>19</sup>A mere sampling of these works: C.Burridge The Early English Dissenters (New York: Russell and Russell, 1967), H. M. Dexter The Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years, As Seen in its Literature (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1879), B.R. White The English Separatist Tradition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), R. W. Dale History of English Congregationalism (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1907), R.J. Acheson Radical Puritans in England 1550-1660 (London: Longmans, 1989), Leland Ryken Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) along with the works of Perry Miller cited above. The distinction between 'separating' and 'non-separating' Puritans, as first advanced by Burridge in 1912 will have to be examined at another point.

<sup>20</sup>Ames, p. 175 -- note especially nos. 1 and 5.

<sup>21</sup>Ames. pp. 175, 176, 178.

14. Believers do not make a particular church, even though by chance many may meet and live together in the same place, unless they are joined together by a special bond among themselves. Otherwise, any one church would often be dissolved into many, and many also merged into one.

15. This bond is a covenant, expressed or implicit, by which believers bind themselves individually to perform all those duties toward God and toward one another which relate to the purpose [*ratio*] of the church and its edification.

21. No sudden coming together and exercise of holy communion suffices to make a church unless there is also that continuity, at least in intention, which gives the body and its members a certain spiritual polity.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, according to Ames, the church can only be church when it is constituted of individuals bound by a particular covenant. This understanding does not preclude fellowship with other believers, but it more accurately incarnates the reality of the New Testament understanding of a local or particular church.

Twentyfive years after Ames' published his work a synod met at Cambridge in Massachusetts and issued a 'platform' on the nature and government of the church. The second, third and fourth chapters of the Cambridge Platform dealt with the constitutive nature of the church. The second chapter, which clearly showed Ames' influence, delineated the "nature of the Catholick Church in Generall, and in speciall, of a particular visible Church."

6. A Congregational-church, is by the institution of Christ a part of the Militant-visible-church, consisting of a company of Saints by calling, united into one body, by a holy covenant, for the publick worship of God, and the mutuall edification one of another, in the Fellowship of the Lord Jesus.<sup>23</sup>

Here, again, what calls the saints is faith, but what sets them apart is the covenant into which they enter. The covenant becomes the guarantor of the assembly -- first in Christ, then to one another.

The fourth chapter of the Cambridge Platform took up the nature of the church covenant. It stressed that each local church had its own particular 'form,' i.e. society, officers, virtues and corruptions. The covenant entered into by the members was what gave the church its form, as its members had "given themselves unto the Lord, to the observing of the ordinances of Christ together in the same society."<sup>24</sup> Thus, within the context of the "publick worship of God" and the living out of the ordinances of God the church expressed its covenant relationship. The covenant, then, defined and articulated what it meant to be the church.

5. This forme then being by mutuall covenant, 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? becaus it 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: because it presupposeth a church estate, as circumcision in the old Testament, which gave no being unto the church, the church being before it, & in the wilderness without it. seals presuppose a covenant already in being, one person is a compleat subject of Baptism: but one person is incapable of being a church.<sup>25</sup>

This last phrase, "but one person is incapable of being a church," gets at the heart of the communal aspect of the church implied by a covenant. Within the classical Roman mindset, if a member of the church was there, so was the church (especially if the member was one of the hierarchy) because of

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<sup>22</sup>Ames, p. 179, 180. Ames' understanding of the church's constitution is echoed, in briefer form, in the first question and answer of John Cotton's The True Constitution of A Particular Visible Church, Proved by Scripture (London, 1642): "What is the Church? The church is a Mystical body whereof Christ is the Head the members and the saints called out of the world and united together into one congregation by an holy covenant to worship the Lord and to edifie (sic) one another in all his ordinances."

<sup>23</sup>"The Cambridge Synod and Platform" in Williston Walker The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969), p. 205.

<sup>24</sup>Cambridge Platform, IV.3, Walker, p. 207.

<sup>25</sup>Cambridge Platform IV.5, Walker, pp. 208-209. Note the statement on Baptism, "seals presuppose a covenant already in being," the covenant-concept implies a rather 'heady' sacramentology with a sense of presence that is far more than merely symbolic, reflecting the original Patristic notion of mysterion. Like the implied spirituality, this sacramentality merits further study.

the participation in the communio sanctorum. This rejects that notion. There is a communion of the saints, but the reality of the communion is only extant where the saints are together.

The Savoy Declaration of 1658, which is largely a Congregational edition of the Westminster Confession of Faith, adds very little to what we have seen in Ames and from the Cambridge Platform. It does more clearly articulate the relationship between the universal ("catholique") church and the particular church, however. In the twenty-sixth chapter, 'Of the Church' it states:

The Catholique or Universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the Elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ, the Head thereof, and is the Spouse, the Body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.

II. The whole body of men throughout the world professing the faith of the Gospel and obedience unto God by Christ according unto it, not destroying their own profession by any Errors everting the foundation, or unholiness of conversation, are, and may be called the visible Catholique Church of Christ, although as such it is not intrusted with the administration of any Ordinances, or have any officers to rule or govern in, or over the whole body.<sup>26</sup>

The Savoy Declaration deals with the particular church in its twenty-seventh chapter, 'Of the Communion of Saints.'

A brief examination of the covenant-concept in these representatives of the classical Congregational understanding demonstrate a firm foundation for a theology of church. The church is a particular assembly made-up of those who have come into communion, first with Christ and then with one another. The covenant itself can be seen in the foregoing as taking on almost a sacramental character, as does the gathered people, since both constitute a visible reminder of the presence of Christ.

Thus, the church is seen as primarily a communal, and consequently a relational, reality. A Congregational ecclesiology does not place an emphasis upon the church as institution, hierarchy or society. Rather, it is the relationship of the believers to Christ and to one another that makes the church what it is. When the body of believers is engaged in the living-out of the covenant, that is through acts of worship ("the Word preached and the sacraments rightly administered") or service, then Christ is present in and to the church. To believe in the "communion of saints" as a congregationalist implies a this-worldly faith in the presence of Christ in one's brothers and sisters within reach and not just in the abstract of universal presence or the hereafter.

#### The Covenant and the 'Marks' of the Church

Does the concept of church as a 'covenanted people' meet the criteria of the four traditional 'marks of the church': the church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Based on the foregoing, it shouldn't be difficult to see that the covenant-concept does indeed meet the traditional criteria for what is constitutive of church.

The oneness of the church is evident in the gathered local body, but also in the possibility of unity within the midst of diversity. While it is not the Congregational Way to mandate creeds or confessions as tests of membership, the oneness of faith can still be present within the realm of tolerance, freedom of conscience, and charity.<sup>27</sup> In addition, the emphasis upon 'visible sainthood,' as Alan P. F. Sell notes, also implies a certain oneness of life within the gathered community.<sup>28</sup>

That the church is holy is certainly implied in the repeated emphasis that the church is "set-apart" for Godliness. The holiness of the church is also present since it is the place of encounter with God in Christ. When the community comes together in the act of worship -- the Word preached and sacraments

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<sup>26</sup>Savoy Declaration in Walker, pp. 395-396.

<sup>27</sup>The position of being 'non-creedal' does not, however imply being 'anti-creedal.' The earliest documents indicate the assumption of the standard creedal positions, and in other places replicate or mandate them as a condition of covenant. It is also important to note that this position is the result of particular developments within the Congregational Way which, in themselves, merit further study. Cf. "Report of a Study by the Committee on Free Church Polity and Unity to the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches of the United States." June, 1954, pp. 10-11.

<sup>28</sup>See Alan P. F. Sell Saints: Visible, Orderly, and Catholic, The Congregational Idea of the Church (Allison Park: Pickwick, 1986), p. 119-120.

administered -- it is at that moment "set-apart," made holy for the service of God. Here, again, one can reflect upon the sacramental nature of the church. If Christ is the ursakrament (foundational sacrament) then the extension of his body in the midst of the world should carry some of the same effect.<sup>29</sup> Yet, this holiness is not without flaw and the community is also the place of forgiveness. In the gathered people the one who has wandered apart can find the welcome and presence of the forgiving Lord. Holiness, then, does not imply a "sanctified snobbery," but consecration for service and willingness to make present the all-present God.

The catholicity of the church is found in its fellowship, especially among other churches, both congregational and of other persuasions. Because of its covenantal nature, the congregational church is in a better position to be catholic, i.e. universal, in its outlook than many of those which are denominated as such. The Cambridge Platform, and in a much firmer way than Savoy, seems to provide for a broad fellowship/catholicity among the distinct gathered/covenanted bodies by means of councils and synods. Chapters fifteen and sixteen of the Cambridge Platform give some very directive advice on how the communion of the churches is to be achieved. The Platform states that the churches can share communion by means of mutual care, consultation, admonition, participation, recommendation, and by help-in-need.<sup>30</sup> If Christians were first identified by their love, then the catholicity of the church should proceed from it.

The church is apostolic by nature not of its succession, but of its profession. The guarantor of the apostolicity of the church should proceed from that faith of the apostles professed by the gathered believers. The apostolic nature of the church is to be found more in the response to the question asked by Jesus of Peter in Matthew 16 ("Who do you say that I am?") than in a successive laying-on of hands. The understanding of apostolic succession as vested in a hierarchy is the result of the emergence of the monarchical episcopacy and is no guarantee of the succession of the apostolic faith. The covenant of faith which brings one into communion with Christ and with other believers makes the apostolic faith more present.

So, the congregational concept of church does indeed meet the ancient criterion of what constitutes the church. The marks are met, because the emphasis is on the lived, rather than the theoretical, reality.

#### Conclusion

A congregational ecclesiology is simply the covenanting of professing believers. It then is worked out in the ways in which the believers are called upon to grow within the context of their particular gathered community. It is fairly safe to say that congregational ecclesiology is really more an ecclesial spirituality -- or disciplined way of entering into the life of faith and manifesting that life in the midst of the world from the midst of a gathered community.

#### **A Concluding Pastoral Postscript**

We have set forth a particular understanding of what it means to 'be church' in the world, which revolves around the concept of covenant. What implications does this ecclesiology hold for the "church catholique" in the United States? There are several.

First, much of church growth literature<sup>31</sup> emphasizes the need for developing 'relational groups' or 'small groups.' The primary concept these theorists say is needed for churches to relate to the current situation is already in the congregational understanding of church. Congregational churches need to emphasize the unique understanding of what it means to be the "gathered people" and articulate this in a manner people can understand.

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<sup>29</sup>John Zizioulas Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Press, 1993) offers some interesting insights on the nature of communion/holiness and the development of personhood within the church. From an Eastern Orthodox perspective, but quite good.

<sup>30</sup>See Cambridge Platform in Walker, pp. 229-235.

<sup>31</sup>For example: Kennon L. Callahan Twelve Keys to an Effective Church, Carl F. George Prepare Your Church for the Future and Lieth Anderson Dying for Change. Perhaps more relevant to a covenant understanding of church is Loren B. Mead's Transforming Congregations for the Future (NY: Alban Institute, 1994) where he speaks of *koinonia* as "a power to support the development of disciples and a sign to society of God's intent that we live in community..." (p. 58).



Second, studies have shown that people are looking for churches which are non-judgmental, yet spiritual. As one individual put it, "a church that doesn't whack you on the can."<sup>32</sup> The tolerance which has developed as a result of the covenantal rather than creedal nature of the congregational churches provides an ideal spot for these people to experience the reality of spiritual life. J.S. Griffith's words, written almost sixty years ago, speak to this ideal:  
 The glory of our Congregationalism is that we refuse to make the Church of our Lord a theological sect. Our position, which has grown gradually clear through the centuries, has been that the basis of fellowship is common experience of Christ and not identity of thought about Him . . . That exclusion of fellow-Christians would be schism . . . This is the trust that has come down to us, and a stewardship for which in our day we have responsibility; the stewardship of the Church Universal, to save the Church from becoming a sect . . .<sup>33</sup>

In short, it is time for God's "gathered people" to recover the tradition, while understanding the process of development which has been and is at work. The 'Federal Concept' of Church is one that is eminently culturally relevant. The covenant-concept can provide a means by which the historic Christian tradition can be made accessible to seekers in the present day.

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<sup>32</sup>Quoted in Wade Clark Roof A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), p. 207.

<sup>33</sup>J. S. Griffith The Congregational Quarterly, April 1939, pp. 189 f. quoted in "A Report", p. 11.

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