

Unitarian Universalists say that we are a covenantal religion. What exactly does that mean? What does it require of us?

The Hebrew Bible, the Christian Old Testament, is filled with covenants made and covenants broken. Covenants between God and humankind and covenants between humans.

After the flood, in which only Noah and his family and the animals they brought on board were spared, God made this promise. Gen 9.9-11 reads, <sup>9</sup>“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, <sup>10</sup>and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. <sup>[a]</sup> <sup>11</sup>I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

In Genesis 15.18, God promises Abraham that his descendants shall have the land "from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates." Boy, has that one caused trouble for a long time.

In Exodus 23.32-33 God warns Moses against mixing with the people whose lands the Israelites were conquering: <sup>32</sup>You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. <sup>33</sup>They shall not live in your land, or they will make you sin against me; for if you worship their gods, it will surely be a snare to you. Again, more long lasting trouble.

The repeated disasters that befell the Israelites through the centuries were seen to be the result of breaking this covenant with God, of not following the rules God set down and that the Israelites had promised to fulfill.

The birth and death of Jesus was seen by his Jewish followers, the early Christians, as the fulfillment of God's promise that there would be a messiah who would lift from Israel the burden of Roman occupation and lead them in a new way. Zechariah 9.9 is but one of many examples.

9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!  
Lo, your king comes to you;  
triumphant and victorious is he,

humble and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

In the ensuing centuries, Christianity, as it came to be known, became less about covenant and more about creed. One had to believe thus and so. The Nicene Creed explicitly spelled this out when it was adopted at the Council of Nicea in the year 325 and revised at the Council of Constantinople in 361. "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible, And in one Lord Jesus Christ," it begins. In the concluding paragraph it states "And I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church."

... I remember this one from being raised Episcopalian, where recitation of the creed was a regular part of worship.

As institutions often do, over the centuries and millennia, that one holy catholic and apostolic church became corrupt. The Protestant Reformation was pushback against this corruption. Martin Luther may or may not have nailed his 95 theses to the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany, in 1517. In any case, he did send them to the bishop.<sup>1</sup> John Calvin was another influential theologian of the Protestant Reformation. He broke from the Catholic Church in 1530 and his theology included the Doctrine of Predestination, in which the fate of one's soul has been determined by God since the beginning.<sup>2</sup> This kind of put a crimp on the idea of free will. Our Unitarian forebears in New England, the Puritans, were in some aspects, Calvinists, and rejection of the doctrine of predestination was one of the several ways they evolved in becoming what came to be known as Unitarians.<sup>3</sup>

The Puritans were a part of the Free Church tradition that emerged in the 16th century. According to former Starr King seminary president Rebecca Parker, they resisted "the corrupt hierarchical power of the church and the economic alliance between the feudal aristocracy and the church." To do this, they formed covenants that "asserted the power of people to determine their own lives, and to choose who would govern them."<sup>4</sup> These ideas were not so popular with the

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ninety-five\\_Theses](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ninety-five_Theses) Accessed 2/10/17

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Calvin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Calvin) Accessed 2/10/17

<sup>3</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puritans> Accessed 2/10/17

<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Parker. *What They Dreamed Be ours to Do: Lessons From the History of the Covenant*. 1998. <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/1998/123808.shtml> Accessed 2/10/17

English monarchy. Persecuted, about 80,000 of them left England over several decades between 1620 and 1640. Some 20,000 of them ended up in New England.<sup>5</sup> In the summer of 1830, John Winthrop, with about 1000 followers, landed at Massachusetts Bay.<sup>6</sup>

If the name John Winthrop rings a bell, it should. If not from your American History class in high school, then from David Sammons' sermon last week. Winthrop advised his colony that " wee must delight in each other, make Others conditions our owne, rejoyce together, mourne together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our Commission and Community in our worke, our Community as members of the same body."<sup>7</sup>

According to Dr. Parker, these Puritans "organized their church life to include the free conscience of each individual in a mutual commitment to the common good. They manifested an alternative to the oppressive use of power by a small elite, uninterested in the welfare of all, exercising economic and religious power without consent or accountability."<sup>8</sup>

Does this sound like what we do now, what we are called to do now?

Again, Dr. Parker: "As matters evolved, what the Puritans first practiced in their congregations transformed nations." She quotes Puritan scholar, A.S.P. Woodhouse, who said that "the congregation was the school of democracy."

A democracy now under siege. Our national covenant, our Constitution and Bill of Rights, are thought not to apply to our new administration--at least by members of that administration. Fortunately, we have courts, at least for now. The covenant among Senators as to how they are to be with one another has been eroding for years, with members on both sides of the aisle responsible. The House of Representatives has been a mess for far, far longer. In this last election, civil discourse was markedly absent; hysteria and hate speech reached new heights.

For most of us, there is little we can do to affect covenantal relationships gone sour on the national stage. But the Puritans and the Unitarians that evolved from them were a grass roots organization. What they did changed history.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puritan\\_migration\\_to\\_New\\_England\\_\(1620%E2%80%931640\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puritan_migration_to_New_England_(1620%E2%80%931640)) Accessed 2/10/17

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winthrop\\_Fleet](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winthrop_Fleet) Accessed 2/10/17

<sup>7</sup> John Winthrop, quoted in David Sammons, Being Worthy of the Living Tradition, remarks at UUFC, 2/5/17.

<sup>8</sup> Rebecca Parker. What They Dreamed Be ours to Do: Lessons From the History of the Covenant. 1998.

So what can we do? Says Dr. Parker, in this extended quote:

The history of covenant-making shows that the means for tremendous influence for the common good are in our hands. We do not need more money, though it always helps when we are as liberal regarding money as we are in other matters. We do not need more people, though it would be good to have them, and many in our society need what congregational life can give. To be an influential force for good, what we need to do is establish more strongly in our congregational life the practices that embody loving, just, and sustainable community. We need to be what we want to see, and make visible an alternative to the forms of oppression, alienation and injustice alive in our time.<sup>9</sup>

We are doing this here at UUFC. In recent history, we have marched for MLK and what he stood for and with the Women's March in Chico. We provide meals at the Torres Shelter and support them, Planned Parenthood and other social justice organizations financially.

Internally, we support "an organized church life to include the free conscience of each individual in a mutual commitment to the common good."

We covenant with each other. We recite a covenant of relations between new members and our existing members. Our choir has a covenant of how they are to be with each other. Same for your Board of Trustees and your minister. In a few minutes, you will hear the covenant that your retired ministers emeriti, Sydney Wilde and Dennis Daniel, and your settled minister (that would be me) have written for our relationship.

Back at the beginning of this sermon I asked what it meant that we are a covenantal religion? What does it require of us? This is what it means. We promise how we will be with one another. It requires of us good intentions and constant vigilance, asking ourselves, to paraphrase John Winthrop, if we are delighting in each other, making Others conditions our owne, rejoicing together, mourning together, laboring and suffering together, always having before our eyes our Commission and our Community in our worke, our Community as members of the same body."

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<sup>9</sup> Rebecca Parker. *What They Dreamed Be ours to Do: Lessons From the History of the Covenant*. 1998.

May it be so