

BECOMING A CONGREGATIONALIST – WHAT THAT MEANS TO ME

I grew up in a divided house. My mother Catholic, my father Episcopalian, a controversial union by church standards in the heady days of 1967. This meant my brother, sister, and I attended Catholic church services, including CCD at 10:10 am every Sunday. I loathed it, all of it, with its humorless, severe, and strict comportment.

However, Christmas Eve was usually reserved for the far more welcoming farm church my Father attended, with its occasional live sheep for the Christmas Eve pageant and, unlike the Catholic church, cushions on the pews. The origin of my parents' arrangement was simple. My mother, an Irish descendent with a maiden name of O'Donovan felt obligated to carry on in Catholicism while my father, whose own mother was a Duncan likely of Scots Presbyterian descent, felt the same. Bull-headed, the lot of us.

Becoming intellectually conscious in the 1980s while growing up independently in farm country breeds suspicion of authority. Skepticism around religion ran strong in my blood and matured into cynicism. I watched Jim & Tammy Faye Baker abuse their power, Oral Roberts demand money to avoid being 'called to God' and, more closely, the Catholic church we attended spend lavishly upon an upgraded entrance driveway to celebrate the Monsignor's 25th anniversary. Our church had two collections, one for the church itself, and one for the poor. The donations for the church always well exceeded that for the poor.

In my heart, reared by fields and trees and endless skies, I felt a higher power. Yet bound in the walls of that church I, perhaps unfairly, repeatedly

found the people false and selfish. I still can not reconcile the idolatry of church architecture alongside the tolerance and ignorance of poverty. It is completely incongruous with what I understood Christianity to actually ask of its people.

My wife had a far more hospitable view of the church than I. For years it was a point of contention. I write all of the above to make it clear I resisted the walk up the hill to Plymouth. So it came to pass, as they say, when Rebecca asked if I would accompany her one Sunday. And we've come ever since that day. For the first time in a house of worship I felt spirituality, a welcoming, and an intellectual maturity about the mystery of faith.

What Congregationalism means to me is freedom from central authority and a rejection of the inevitable abuse of power that comes with structure and titles. I deeply appreciate the writing on the wall of the Reception Room:

"These buildings are presented to the people of Plymouth Church in recognition of what Henry Ward Beecher did to save the Union" John Arbuckle

Beecher had his flaws, but he was instrumental in abolishing the scourge of slavery. He made a positive difference in the world. Arbuckle made his fortune in the coffee industry but generously gave to Plymouth's people, not for the 'glory of God' to access heaven through glorious buildings, but to sustain a community. That enables Plymouth to make a positive difference in the world.

Early in [The Congregational Way of Life](#) by A. Rouner, he writes that the flaw of viewing Congregationalism through the lens of freedom and liberty is that it becomes easy to forget why we are gathered in the buildings, physical and virtual, to begin with: worship of Christ, which to me includes

the generosity of spirit in the Sermon on the Mount.

Back when we still gathered in The Sanctuary every Sunday, one Sunday Rev. Brett Younger delivered a sermon that basically told us we were probably being bad Christians for forgetting this. I thanked him afterwards. Rev. David Fisher did this on occasion, and I thanked him too. A reminder of why we are here.

Congregationalism enables the freedom to make good choices and to participate in the governing of the church at an approachable scale. My wife served on Christian Help and Council, I have served on Finance and now on the Council myself. I'd like to think we've helped the institution make better decisions with the financial capital we are so blessed with, and I appreciate greatly that I could ask Brett if we could display the United States flag on Veterans Day in the same way that I appreciate he does not have a higher up mandating that he do the same every week. I also greatly appreciate that a few weeks ago, Plymouth found its bank account less troubling than it was a year ago and we arranged for a material donation to help feed the thousands in our community so greatly in need of help in this crisis. Plymouth again, as many times in the past, makes the world better.

To the extent my CCD teachers remember me, they'd be shocked that I say the Lord's Prayer daily, with emphasis on 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us' and occasionally sing the Gloria Patria when running or riding my bike. Yet I do. Congregationalism means to me the freedom to make our own decisions while retaining the responsibility to hold closely to the original goal: keep close to Christ.

~Alex Yaggy