

## **PLYMOUTH IS A CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH. WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?**

When I first started attending Plymouth Church one of things that seemed unusual to me was the Salem Covenant of 1629 sometimes used as part of the worship service. We still recite this Covenant together when new members join and other significant occasions. And it is printed in the front of our current hymnals.

*We covenant with the Lord and one with 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.*

I had never heard this covenant before. It seemed a quaint oddity from the Puritans. I was raised in the Methodist Church and this was a new and interesting covenant to me. In the Methodist Church the regional Annual Conference was the governing body we were aware of and Bishops and District Superintendent carried out the church governance: assigning ministers, determining financial assessments, etc. Spiritual leadership tended to be top down. So what was this Salem Covenant all about and what did it mean?

After many years of Plymouth membership I have grown to appreciate this covenant with its many pluses but also its many challenges. Binding ourselves together as a church to walk together in all of God's ways is a most appealing idea. I think that's what we all seek in a church. But the second part, "as He is pleased to reveal Himself unto us in His Blessed word of truth" was always more problematic to me. Wow, that seems to leave a lot of latitude. I always thought God's word of truth to be black and white: a list of "Thou Shalts..." and "Thou Shalt Nots..." But it's not that simple. And we all feel at times that we have the direct line to God's word of truth and that others are wrong or misguided. Who decides what God's truth is? As

members of a Congregational Church we realize that we are in a continual struggle to discern God's truths for us.

In the simple, rural Methodist Church where I grew up life seemed simpler with the "shalts" and "shalt nots." But upon reflection, even that was not really the case. The oldest generation in that church still believed dancing, playing card games and, heaven forbid, drinking alcoholic beverages were all cardinal sins. But each of these taboos slowly faded out over following generations. Times change. The challenge is what can or should change and what is God's eternal truth.

How does this work in our Congregational Church with no pre-defined orthodoxy and no higher earthly power telling us what to believe spiritually? It can be liberating and opens our minds to always be listening to God and each other in discerning what it means to follow Christ. It allows for a diversity of spiritual views and discussions. But it can also sometimes make for messy governance. I have seen some barn-burner budget discussions where God's blessed word of truth seemed to be revealed radically differently to different people. In the Methodist Church you could always blame the Bishop or District Superintendent. In our Congregational Church without a hierarchy we like to blame "them" when "them is really "us."

So at times I'm still a little uncomfortable with the Salem Covenant. But as members of a Congregational Church may we continue to walk together to find His blessed word of truth---as difficult as that may be. It is challenging but it keeps the Church alive.

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