

WHY CONGREGATIONALISM IS IMPORTANT TO ME

Historians credit the Puritans with having brought the Congregational tradition to America in the 1600s. Regardless of its precise origins, there is no doubt that Congregationalism has had a significant impact on the religious, political, and cultural history of this country. Being a Congregationalist is important to me for at least two reasons: first, the local autonomy it guarantees churches like Plymouth, and, second, the reliance on voluntary covenant rather than required creed to bind church members together in faith and works.

Congregationalism affords each church the right to identify, develop, and implement their own vision of a faithful community. It was this tenet of local autonomy that cloaked and protected Plymouth in the Civil War Era, liberating its founders and Henry Ward Beecher to create a Cranberry Street church with the courageous calling of ending American slavery. It is this same Congregational right of local autonomy that has led today's Plymouth to serve our community creatively through the Racial Justice and Anti-Human Trafficking Ministries, Bloom Again Brooklyn, Brooklyn Delivers and so many other good works.

Congregational churches like Plymouth are bound together by voluntary acceptance of a covenant expressing their promises to God and to each other. As William Ames described: "Believers, simply as an assembly, do not constitute a church even though they may regularly meet together. Only unification through covenant, with its shared commitment to perform requisite duties toward God and toward one another, creates church

estate.” Congregationalism challenges local churches to develop their own, unique covenants of faith and rejects the use of a preordained creed to test one’s faith. Plymouth has embraced this challenge and fashioned a covenant calling us to know God, to grow together, and to live out our faith boldly and generously in the world.

Congregationalism grants Plymouth the right to be self-governing and to choose its own covenant but also the responsibility that comes with those rights. What does that responsibility mean for us today? Plymouth’s founders accepted their responsibility and chose conviction against slavery, risking their fortunes, their reputations, and their own freedoms in the process. What will we choose at the new Plymouth? How will we continue to action the words of our modern Plymouth covenant through our daily lives? What are we prepared to risk?

To me, whatever answers we prayerfully divine to these questions, Congregationalism is important because the questions are ours to ask, and ours to answer. And I take strength and comfort from knowing that our Plymouth family will struggle with all of these questions together.

~ Boyd Johnson