

**For a time like this – One Truth, One Salvation, One Church. . . Joined
in One Profession?**

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the author argues that Congregationalism is a Christocentric movement based within the doctrinal expressions of classical, Reformed, Christianity. As such, historically, it has not been opposed to the articulation of creeds or platforms expressive of what is generally believed among the followers of the Congregational Way. Where some have said Congregationalism is 'acreedal' or even 'anti-creedal,' the author seeks to demonstrate the opposite, with the distinction being that creeds are used as testimonies rather than tests and provide frameworks for conversations that are inclusive rather than exclusive.

Introduction

When Henry Barrow penned his 'A True Description of the Visible Church' in 1589 he began it by saying,

As there is but one God and Father of all, one Lord over all, and one Spirit: so there is but one truth, one Faith, one Salvation, one Church called in one hope, joynd in one profession, guided by one rule, even the Word of the most high.¹

Barrow then describes what a visible church should look like, but never really describes the 'one profession' in which the church is joined. He emphasized that the church was made up of those who were 'gathered together in the name of Jesus Christ, their only king, priest, and prophet, worshipping him aright'.² As Williston Walker comments,

The almost complete absence of a distinctly doctrinal statement in this creed is accounted for by the fact that these London Separatists were in full doctrinal sympathy with the then predominantly Calvinistic views of the English Established Church from which they had come out, and did not feel the necessity of

¹ Henry Barrow, 'A True Description Out of the Word of a God of a Visible Church' in Williston Walker (ed.), *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1991 repr.), p. 33.

² Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms*, p. 33.

demonstrating their doctrinal soundness, as they were shortly after impelled to do, when settled among strangers in a foreign land.³

What becomes clear, in even the most cursory reading of the various Congregational divines, is that their vision of the church, both particular and universal, is that of a people gathered around Christ and thus indicates that from early-on Congregationalism, as a movement, has assumed classical Christian faith.

What I hope to demonstrate is that, first, Congregationalists have been essentially Christocentric in our doctrinal stance and understanding of church, holding to the essential Biblical confession that 'Jesus is Lord'. Second, that Congregationalists have used creeds, platforms and statements of faith as testimonies of faith in a positive manner. Finally, I will suggest that a return to our historic positions and usage will ultimately aid us for a time like this.

*Congregationalism as a Christocentric Movement:
Christ, the Covenant of Grace and the Church*

Part of the genius of early Congregational (Puritan) theology was in its recovery of the concept of the covenant. Perhaps the most distinctive mark of the Congregational Way is its emphasis upon the covenant as constitutive of the church.⁴ From the beginning God has sought to disclose himself and relate to his creation; creation itself constituting a form of 'natural covenant'. Divines, like the learned Dr. William Ames, noted the covenant relationship God had established with Adam and, subsequently, with Israel. Chronicling the progressive nature of the covenant relationship, Ames wrote in *The Marrow of Theology*:

1. 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 process of being gathered.
2. In this variety there has always been a progression from the imperfect to the more perfect.
3. At first the mystery of the gospel was manifested in a general and obscure way and later more specifically and clearly.
4. The manner of administration of the covenant is twofold: One points to the Christ who will appear and the other to the Christ who has appeared.
6. While Christ was still to appear, all things were more outward and carnal, afterwards more inward and spiritual. John 1.17, *The law was delivered by Moses; grace and truth came by Christ.*⁵

³ Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms*, p. 32.

⁴ cf. Cambridge Platform chapter iv 'Of the form of a visible church & of church covenant', in Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms*, pp. 207-209.

⁵ William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology* trans. by John Dykstra Eusden (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1968), p. 202, his emphasis.

The covenant was thus seen to be first a covenant of works and subsequently a covenant of grace. The guarantor of this covenant of grace is Christ. The Father has rooted the covenant in the person and the work of Jesus; as one Puritan document has it the covenant is, 'more fixed in his Sonne, than the Sonne and Moone are fixed in the Heavens'.⁶ As the covenant of works could not be kept by human beings, who have shown themselves consistently unfaithful, it had to be replaced by a covenant which could be kept by One who is everlastingly faithful. Robert Bolton saw this in the analogy of Christ as the shepherd tending his flock (i.e. the Church). Bolton wrote, 'The covenant is not thus only: as long as you keep within the boundes, and keep within the fould.' Rather the covenant is more expansive as God declares, 'This is the Covenant I will make, . . . if anything bee lost, if a sheepe loose it selfe, . . . I will finde it: If it be driven away by any violence or temptation, I will bring it back againe. . . I will heale them, and binde them up.'⁷

Christ, then, is the primary agent of the covenant of grace and the One who provides assurance to the believer who enters into the covenant relationship. The word of assurance is extended beyond persons to a people. The covenant is not simply an individual act, but is, as Ames noted, involved in the gathering of the church which is the result of entering into this relationship. As a consequence of the lasting nature of the covenant, the church's continuity is also assured. So long as God opens God's self to relationship there will always be a 'people of God'. Richard Sibbes commented on the implications of the church as the mystical body of Christ which continues in covenant with God. He said, 'Always God will have some in covenant with him. He will have some to be a God to, when we are gone, so long as the world continueth.'⁸ God's 'gathered people', then, are the witness to God's covenant faithfulness.

According to a later Congregational theologian, Peter Taylor Forsyth, the root of the covenant of grace and of the church's witness, in what earlier writers would call 'federal holiness', is the cross of Christ.

The Church's foundation, and the trust of its ministry, is not simply Christ, but Christ crucified. . . . The Church rests on the Grace of God, the judging, atoning, regenerating Grace of God, which is His holy Love in the form it must take with human sin.⁹

Elsewhere, he writes:

⁶ Henry Finch, *The Sum of Sacred Divinity* quoted in John Von Rohr *The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought* American Academy of Religion: Studies in Religion no. 45 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), p. 47.

⁷ Robert Bolton, *Comforting Afflicted Consciences*, p. 373 in Von Rohr, *The Covenant of Grace*, p. 48.

⁸ Richard Sibbes, *Faithful Covenanter* in *The Works of Richard Sibbes* 6:20 quoted in Von Rohr, *The Covenant of Grace*, p. 49.

⁹ P.T. Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments*, p. 30 quoted in Stephen Sykes, 'P.T. Forsyth on the Church' in Trevor Hart (ed.) *Justice the True and Only Mercy: Essays on the Life and Theology of Peter Taylor Forsyth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p. 6.

As the Holy One He went wholly into His work of the Cross for the sin of the world. The whole value of Christ's Person for the world entered in by that strait gate. He is our God because He is our Redeemer. Our approach to Christology is through the office of Christ as Saviour. We only grasp the real divinity of His person by the value for us of His Cross.¹⁰

The cross becomes both focus and locus of the church as covenant community. Gathered around the cross, the church begins to live the new life to which God has called his people in Christ.

As the early Congregational divines understood this 'federal holiness' to imply the development of a new and holy commonwealth; so Forsyth saw it generating a new public ethic. In *The Church and the Sacraments* Forsyth articulated a view which made the connection between the covenant of grace and the church's power in the social order quite explicit:

We need more religion of the kind that gathers about a holy Cross; the kind of religion that goes to the roots of the moral soul, both in God and in man, and does not soften the issue; the kind of religion whose intrinsic nature and property is, by its very origin, to cope finally with the last evil of the world, to turn all that tragedy to victory in our hands, and to make such power, by a real Church, unmistakable to the public.¹¹

It is only recapturing the holiness of God made real in relationship with Christ and present in the life of the 'gathered people' that will allow for 'its public ethic from the same authority in Christ as creates its public worship'.¹² What Forsyth argues for is what early Congregational divines simply called the 'visible church' made up of 'visible saints' who have come into covenant with God through Jesus Christ.

To bring home the centrality of the Lordship and Headship of Christ as essential to the Congregational understanding of church recall that Miroslav Volf writes,

A church is an assembly, but an assembly is not yet a church. An indispensable condition of ecclesiality is that the people assemble *in the name of Christ*. Gathering in the name of Christ is the precondition of the presence of Christ in the Holy Spirit, which is itself constitutive for the church: '. . . where two or three are gathered *in my name*, I am there among them' (Matt. 18.20).¹³

Volf's understanding stands in the shadow of what Ames wrote about the nature of the church:

7. The church is indeed the company of men who are called. 1 Cor. 1.24 and 10.32, *Those who are called, both Jews and Greeks. . . to Jews, to Greeks, and to the church of God*. Because the end of calling is faith and the work of faith is grafting into Christ, and this union brings with it communion with Christ, the church can be defined at once as a

¹⁰ Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments*, p. 30, in Hart, *Justice*, p. 7.

¹¹ Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments*, p. 33 in Hart, *Justice*, p. 8.

¹² Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments*, p. 33 in Hart, *Justice*, p. 8.

¹³ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 145.

company of believers, a company of those who are in Christ, and a company of those who have communion with him.¹⁴

The framers of the Cambridge Platform also understood the nature of the visible church to be that of a covenanted community and at the root of the covenant there must be the profession of the Name. However, it must be more than a 'bare profession', but an incorporation into a community.

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? because that is invisible: 2 not a bare profession; because that declareth them no more to be members of one church than of another: 3 not Cohabitation; Atheists or Infidels may dwell together with believers: 4 not Baptisme; 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 wildernes without it, seals presuppose a covenant already in being, one person is a compleat subject of Baptisme: but one person is incapable of being a church.¹⁵

The covenant community, the church, in turn serves to continue the presence of Christ. If Christ is *ursakrament* (primal sacrament) as some have argued, then it follows that the community gathered under his Headship, his body, shares, to a degree, in this sacramental understanding.¹⁶ Thus, while the church does not have any independent sacramentality on its own, it does reflect the sacramentality of Christ through its preaching and the administration of the sacraments. A presence, as it were, through Word and Sacrament.¹⁷ This would seem consonant both with the classical Reformed definition of the church as the locus of the Word preached and the sacraments rightly administered and with the notion of the visible church articulated by the Cambridge Platform.

If the church continues the presence of Christ, then it follows that it should show forth certain 'fruits' or evidences of his presence. This was certainly taken up in the notion of 'federal holiness'. However, as Volf points out and which the experience of the New England's 'holy commonwealth' demonstrated, there is a danger when the 'saints' begin to make the determination as to what these fruits are.

If the connection between faith and the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5.22-23) is to be preserved while simultaneously avoiding hypocrisy, it is better to speak about the necessary *commitment* of believers to take the path of *imitatio*. Without an *acknowledgment* of Christ as Lord, there is no church.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ames, *The Marrow of Theology* pp. 175-6.

¹⁵ Cambridge Platform in Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms*, pp. 208-9.

¹⁶ See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* volume III Geoffrey W. Bromiley, trans. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 38-42.

¹⁷ See Daniel Jenkins, *Congregationalism: A Restatement* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1954), pp. 72-74.

¹⁸ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p. 148, his emphasis.

So, as Volf points out, it is the Lordship of Christ which is determinative and the fruits follow from the community's participation in Christ.

How is this compatible with the great emphasis on freedom and voluntarism which has become perhaps the greatest mark of the Congregational Way? P. T. Forsyth addresses the issue of freedom and democracy in *The Church and the Sacraments*.

Analyzing Forsyth's thought on the church, Stephen Sykes writes:

. . . Forsyth returns to his earlier insistence that Congregationalism's basic instinct was obedience to Jesus Christ in the face of all the powers and majorities about it, and that it was the mother of political democracy, not its child. Indeed he repeats and again italicizes a proposition which encapsulates his objection the establishment of democracy in the Church: '*Democracy will recognise no authority but what it creates, the Church none but what creates it.*' Forsyth evidently sees democracy as the 'civil religion' of freedom. However, in his view all freedom is to be judged by the Word, which is no 'vassal or colleague of the world.' That proposition is as true for the Free Churches who mistakenly glory in the word 'free,' as it is of political democracies. The slavish celebration of freedom and democracy robs the Church of its fulcrum outside the world.¹⁹

In short, where the centrality of the Cross and the Lordship of Christ are not acknowledged the freedom the church is given declines into an empty voluntarism. To declare that 'Jesus is Lord' is a precondition for the Congregational Way of being and doing church.

The Use of Creeds and Platforms in Congregationalism

As has been said, even the most cursory reading of the early advocates of the Congregational 'walk' or 'way', as John Cotton called it, will show a reliance on classical, Reformed, theology. By and large there was no need to assert a body of doctrine or to prove its orthodoxy because it was the same as the other party's with whom the Congregationalists or Independents were contending.²⁰ The framers of the Cambridge Platform (1648) were at pains to demonstrate their orthodoxy only because charges had been raised in England, yet their platform contained no explicitly doctrinal statement, save the acknowledgment of the Westminster

¹⁹ Sykes in Hart, *Justice*, p. 9.

²⁰ See William E. Barton, *Congregational Creeds and Covenants*, (Chicago: Advance Publishing Company, 1917), pp. 9-11; Henry M. Dexter *Congregationalism: What It Is; Whence It Is; How It Works: Why It is Better Than Any Other Form of Church Government and Its Subsequent Demands* (Boston: Nichols and Noyes, 1868), pp. 4-7 and 459-63; and Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms*, pp. 420-2. Additional evidence can be gleaned from George Punchard's *A View of Congregationalism, Its Principles and Doctrines; The Testimony of Ecclesiastical History in Its Favor, Its Practice and Its Advantages* (Boston: Congregational Board of Publication, 1853; University of Michigan: Michigan Historical Reprint Series). Punchard argues that there is a connection between purity of religious practice and purity of church order (p. 7 ff) and the entire section devoted to 'Congregational Doctrine' is actually an explication of church governance and the officers appropriate to achieving it (pp. 69-132).

Confession in the preface (though chapters 30 and 31 of Westminster on church discipline were excepted). To take it a step further, it had been said that the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England were better kept in New England than in Old England.

The issues and concerns of Congregationalists tend to be practical (e.g. polity, observance of church discipline, approaches to worship, etc.) rather than doctrinal. The practical concern is to bring people into an encounter with the living God through the agency of the living Christ in the midst of his gathered people. This sense of vitality and immediacy was wonderfully articulated in a sermon given to the National Council of Congregational Churches in 1913, the year the Kansas City statement of faith was presented. The Reverend Doctor Charles E. Jefferson preached 'The World's Need and Christianity's Offer' on the dual texts of Job 23.3, 'Oh that I knew where I might find him!' and John 1.39, 'Come and see.' Jefferson articulates quite clearly the freedom that Congregationalism seeks – a freedom *to* as opposed to a freedom *from*. He points out that what our spiritual ancestors sought was the freedom to believe and to do so passionately and authentically, rather than the freedom from belief.

Our history as a denomination began with a vision of God. Our fathers saw the Lord high and lifted up. They heard him say, 'Who will go?' and they answered one after another, each man for himself, 'Here am I; send me.' But they could not go. They were hampered by the restrictions of a worldly church. It then occurred to them that possibly the church might be altered. They tried to alter it, but it was not possible, and so they came out of it, and organized another form of government under which they could do what they believed God wanted them to do. Our history is rooted in a vision of God. . . . Our attitude to the church is determined by our conception of God.²¹

What Jefferson preached in 1913 echoes Henry Martyn Dexter's *What It Is; Whence It Is; How It Works: Why It is Better Than Any Other Form of Church Government and Its Subsequent Demands* which says at the outset, that Congregationalism is not a doctrinal system and thus relies 'more directly upon the Bible, and the Holy Spirit, and the Saviour than any other system'.²² Dexter is quick to say that doesn't mean others don't rely on them, but they have the additional question, 'is this in accordance with the Book of Discipline – with the established order of our Church' as well as, 'does it accord with the Word of God, and the promptings of the Spirit, and the example of Christ?'²³ However, Dexter also talks about the Way's ability to deal with 'heretical churches' and 'false doctrine' which,

²¹ Rev. Charles E. Jefferson, 'The World's Need and Christianity's Offer' in *The National Council of Congregational Churches of the United States: Addresses, Reports, Statements of Benevolent Societies, Constitution, Minutes, Roll of Delegates, Etc., of the Fifteenth Triennial Session, Kansas City, Mo., October 22-30, 1913*. (Boston, MA: Office of the Secretary of National Council, 1913), p. 20.

²² Dexter, *Congregationalism*, p. 257.

²³ Dexter, *Congregationalism*, p. 257.

again, assumes that there is a canon, a standard, an articulation of what is to be believed, as well as to be practiced.²⁴

Nowhere in the literature of classical Congregationalism are creeds, platforms, or statements of faith denigrated or outlawed. Rather, they are assumed. As William Barton, and others, point out, even without formal creeds admission to covenant membership came after careful examination of the faith experience and belief of the seeker.²⁵ Some churches even adopted so-called 'creed covenants' which included a doctrinal statement, though these tended to emerge later, especially so after the Unitarian departure in the early nineteenth century.

Richard Mather seems to sum up the general attitude toward creeds when he says that churches 'may have a platform by way of a profession of their faith, but not a binding rule of faith and practice'. This is amply illustrated by his grandson, Cotton Mather, who observed,

The churches of New England make only vital piety the terms of communion among them; and they with all delight, see godly Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Anti-pedoBaptists, and Lutherans, all members of the same churches.
26

The best way, perhaps, to say how Congregationalists have used creeds and platforms and statements of faith is to say testimonies not tests. When various statements have been written, like the various creeds of 1865, 1871, 1883, and the Kansas City Statement of 1913, and the little-known Statement of 1945, they have been attempts at saying what is generally believed among us; a place to stand so that the conversation and the walk may continue. William Barton sums the point in his *The Law of Congregational Usage*.

There is no creed which Congregational churches are bound to accept, but there are creeds which Congregationalists receive as containing the substance of doctrine generally accepted among us. These written symbols are of value, each as recording a high water mark of Christian opinion of the age in which it was written. Congregationalists claim their full heritage in the common creeds of Christendom. All these are ours. The early fathers, the great leaders of the Reformation, and the saints and scholars of the past are part of our priceless heritage. All of them expressed, each in the language of his own time, great common truths of the Christian faith. Congregationalists receive these creeds and later creeds with respect; but no one of these, either ancient or modern, stands in such authoritative relation to our Congregational system that it can be imposed upon the conscience of any Congregational worshipper.²⁷

Congregationalism's use of creeds and platforms is as testimonies, not tests, which allow us to enjoy, as Cotton Mather said, 'variety in unity'.

²⁴ See Dexter, *Congregationalism*, p. 277ff.

²⁵ Barton, *Congregational Creeds and Covenants*, p. 9.

²⁶ Barton, *Congregational Creeds and Covenants*, p. 12.

²⁷ William E. Barton, *The Law of Congregational Usage* (Chicago: Advance Publishing Company, 1916), p. 377.

Why a Return to our Christocentric Emphasis and Historic Use of Creeds and Platforms as Testimonies and Not Tests Would Aid Us For a Time Like This

I would contend, as I have in issue 4.2 of *The International Congregational Journal*,²⁸ that Congregationalism is a movement at once postmodern and postdenominational when we allow it to be. What we read in all the literature on the ‘emergent church’, such as Brian McLaren’s delightful, and almost whimsically titled, *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I am a missional + evangelical + post/protestant + liberal/conservative + mystical/poetic + biblical + charismatic/contemplative + fundamental/calvinist + anabaptist/anglican + methodist + catholic + green + incarnational + depressed-yet-hopeful + emergent + unfinished Christian*,²⁹ or Robert Webber’s *Ancient Future Faith*, tells us that in this age people are looking for a conversation and part of that conversation is what one believes and why. As Anthony Robinson points out in his new book *What’s Theology Got to Do With It?* when he cites Christian education professor Richard Osmer and ethicist James Gustafson, what is lacking in many lives is ‘the knowledge and skill . . . to allow them [people] to make moral and religious meaning of their everyday lives’, and that theology provides a perspective, ‘a way of construing life’.³⁰

We simply cannot have a conversation if we don’t have a common language and once we have a language we have to agree on what the words means. This is the whole point made in the late sixties by sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality*³¹ and later by Berger in *The Sacred Canopy*.³² Berger would also give us the masterful study of American religious life, *Habits of the Heart*,³³ which introduced us to ‘Sheilaism’ – a religious phenomenon which continues in all our churches, as people make-up their faith as they go along. This is what happens when theology becomes only the property of one class, one group and is not taken seriously or discussed regularly or

²⁸ See Steven A. Peay, ‘Heart to Heart: Congregationalism as a Post-Denominational Ecclesial Spirituality Expressed through Relationship, Worship and Fellowship’ *The International Congregational Journal* 4.2 February 2005, p. 17-40.

²⁹ Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004.

³⁰ Anthony B. Robinson, *What’s Theology got to do with it? Convictions Vitality and the Church* (Herndon : VA: Alban Institute, 2006), p. 21.

³¹ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1966).

³² Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1969).

³³ Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 235 ff.

openly by all of those who say, on an almost daily basis, with or without formal creed, 'I believe.'

Houston Smith, the well-known scholar of world religions, has written a new book on his own faith: *The Soul of Christianity: Restoring the Great Tradition*.³⁴ It is a masterful, generous book which reminds us that the great hunger we see around us is for the Other, the Transcendent, the Holy. He says, and I agree, that both Christian liberals and fundamentalists go too far – I would say that they have far more in common than they realize – and that what we need is a language so we can talk. Smith argues that the language is symbolism, with storytelling as one of its most important parts. May I remind us, at this point, that the historic designation of creedal statements is 'symbols'? If we're going to tell the story we need at least to find a way to talk about it. Smith, and also the late Jaroslav Pelikan in his massive magisterial study *Credo*,³⁵ and Bible scholar Luke Timothy Johnson in *Creeds: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters*³⁶ all say the same thing: tell the story, use contemporary explanations, find common ground for conversation.

If we go way back to Vincent of Lerins we see some of the same things we're reading in books on emergent or postmodern church. First, we see *lex orandi; lex credendi* – the law of prayer is the law of belief. I like to paraphrase it this way, show me how you pray/worship and I'll show you what you believe. Second, we see *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est* – what has been believed by all, at all times, and in every place. In short, consensus. So, what have Christians believed, taught, practiced from the beginning? First, Jesus is Lord. Second, what we find in the ancient symbols and liturgies. What we find there is pretty basic stuff. Perhaps that's why Congregational divine John Owen described the rationale of our movement as seeking to 'restore the old, the beautiful face of Christianity'?³⁷ I would also add Pastor Robinson's wise words about remembering that 'the Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth out of His holy Word'.³⁸ To use another figure, platforms are most often made of wood, which means they are often rebuilt. We need to be open to development that is authentic and grounded in the deep soil of the Christian story, but flexible enough to last and to be renewed.

³⁴ Houston Smith, *The Soul of Christianity: Restoring the Great Tradition* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005).

³⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

³⁶ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

³⁷ John Owen 'A Vindication of the Animadversions on "Fiat Lux"' in *Works* vol 14 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), p. 311.

³⁸ John Robinson, *Words of John Robinson. Robinson's Farewell Address to the Pilgrims upon their Departure from Holland, 1620 (and other sermons)* (Boston: Directors of the Old South Work, 1903), p. 361.

I would suggest that we have lost a bit of this because of various controversies we have fought through over the past half century or so. We've been so concerned about keeping the movement together that the only thing we could focus on is allowing everyone the freedom to do as he or she likes. We've all heard it, 'Congregationalists can believe whatever they like.' One of my Lutheran colleagues once told me that he thought the reason we had a weather-vane rather than a cross on our steeple was so that we'd know which way our theology was blowing! So, it's time to look at our roots and realize that such thoughts are just not true. I would suggest that we become a bit more serious about doing theology, together. Not just clergy -- ALL of us. I would suggest that we learn the way of Christian faith, that we learn the ancient and the modern and that we talk. I would suggest that we understand that our covenant-oriented Way allows us to be generous, loving and inclusive, because what we seek is a living relationship with the living God through the living Christ present in the living Spirit. We need not be afraid of saying, 'This is what is generally believed among us', so long as we do not use what we say as tests to exclude.

I'd like to close my argument with these words from the twentieth century English Congregational theologian Nathaniel Micklem. In his wonderful little book, *Congregationalism and the Church Catholic*, he says that when we say we are a 'creedless denomination' it does not mean 'that we stand for no common, positive, definite faith . . . We are intellectually free *in* the Gospel but not *from* it; we are not anarchical.'³⁹ Barrow wasn't wrong when he wrote that we were joined in one profession. We simply have to recover and articulate what that profession is -- what is generally believed among us. So, let the conversation begin and continue, but let it be Christ-centered, Spirit-led, generous, loving, and rich.

³⁹ Nathaniel Micklem, *Congregationalism and the Church Catholic* The Forward Books (London: The Independent Press, 1944), p. 14, his emphasis