

BECOMING A CONGREGATIONALIST: WHAT IT MEANS TO ME

I was not raised in a religious household. It was quite the opposite, religion was not only absent it was poorly explained and misrepresented. As a child growing up in progressive Silicon Valley in the 90's, any mention of God, any mention of a divine moral influence, was being actively removed from my surroundings, the public school system. Left in the twilight of darkness, I was on my own when it came to developing an understanding of the nature of God.

By the time I reached my mid 20's and into my 30s, I had led a rough life of all "logic" and little "love" that was starting to take a toll on me. A curiosity for a higher nature and spiritual truth was unfolding within me. It started with the beauty of Church architecture catching my eye. I would enter these beautiful churches across the US and Europe but they still felt empty and cold. I knew the seed was in me but I was still lost as to my own transformation process: germ, bud, blossom and fruits. It still seemed far-fetched.

In 2018 I moved to Brooklyn Heights from Chelsea, Manhattan. I needed a slower pace of life in my neighborhood. Shortly after moving, I went on a walking tour to learn about the history of my new neighborhood. One of the last stops was Plymouth Church. The guide tells the story of Henry Ward Beecher as a abolitionist showman conducting staged, reverse slave auctions. He mentions that the Plymouth basement was still intact as it once was when it served as a station on the Underground Railroad. Later that day I began researching Mr. Beecher and the story of our

congregation. The next day, which was a Sunday, I attended Plymouth Church and upon arrival met the wonderful Grace Faison. It was a simple church visit but the beginning of a journey.

Beecher's story was brilliantly laid out for me after reading Debby Applegate's book, "The Most Famous Man in America'." However, it was Beecher's own words to his congregation that sparked in me a new found thirst for spiritual knowledge. I started reading his sermons from the 1860s and 70's. The more I read, the more I felt my conception of God building itself up with new attributes, dispositions, a clearer character, and a recognizable line of conduct.

My evenings and weekends became dedicated to hunting down and consuming the body of work left behind by Beecher's stenographers. This meant constantly scanning eBay for old books and a lot of time spent dwelling in the library archives of the Brooklyn Historical Society.

So what does being a Congregationalist mean to me? It means to me love, loving myself, my neighbors, my family, and all of the wonderful surroundings that God has blessed this earth with. It is the foundation of my faith that we are God's children and that the kingdom of God is within us. It has helped me understand the fruits of life's suffering and the benefits of giving back to our collective community.

Here are a few examples of books from Plymouth's archives that, for me, capture the essence of what it means to be a congregationalist: "[Sermons by Henry Ward Beecher](#)," "[Freedom and War](#)," "[Evolution & Religion](#)," and "[The Life of Jesus, The Christ](#)."

~ Keith Wright