

SOCIAL, VOLUNTARY, AND CONGREGATIONAL

When, on one snowy evening early in 1841, the new Unitarian Church of the Disciples was being formed in Boston, the minister, James Freeman Clarke, wished for it to be organized on a new basis. To Clarke, a church was one body of people, united for the purpose of becoming one with God. The church should be an active, sharing community, not just the customary collection of passive listeners. To effect this change, Clarke proposed that this new church be established upon the following three principles:

1. The social principle. The church community should gather not only for weekly worship, but in smaller committees and study groups to further the purpose of the church. The first implementation of this principle was the formation of fortnightly Wednesday evening “social meetings” to discuss religious topics. Examples that first year included: “Is sin a negative or positive evil?”, “Shall we maintain and urge our opinions always, or sometimes concede for the sake of union?”, “What is the sphere of woman, and how shall she best be educated to fill it?” (We might note the influence of Clarke’s friend, Margaret Fuller, here), and “What is needed by Unitarianism at the present time, to give it greater influence and success?”

2. The voluntary principle. The church should be a voluntary and equal association of worshippers, without distinction as to wealth or social status. Traditional practice was for pews to be sold or rented, in effect giving control of the church to the pew-holders, who were often absent for worship services, and leaving the poorer members and the visitors to feel like trespassers on the absentee pew-holder’s property. Clarke wanted all people, rich and poor, to feel that the church to be theirs, as much as was the Boston Common. Therefore, there would “no pews sold, rented, or taxed, but worship supported by voluntary subscriptions.” A board of trustees would then hold title to church property for the people, while support would come through pledges and the collection plate.

3. Congregational worship. Traditionally, every word spoken during the worship service, the readings, the prayers, the sermon, would be uttered by the minister. Professionals would perform the music. The congregation remained mute throughout the service. Clarke now had the congregation join in singing hymns, reading Scripture passages alternately with the minister, and reciting the Lord’s Prayer in unison. Clarke even encouraged lay preaching. This would be a church of the people.

The congregation adopted Clarke’s suggestions, and so was born a recognizably modern liberal church.

Ref: James Freeman Clarke, *Autobiography, Diary, and Correspondence*, ed. Edward Everett Hale (Boston Houghton Mifflin, 1891), pp. 146-148, 158, 164-165; Arthur S. Bolster, Jr., *James Freeman Clarke: Disciple to Advancing Truth* (Boston: Beacon, 1954), pp. 137-141.

Will Frank