

The Heresy of Rev. John Rogers and its Impact on the Congregation and Covenant of the First Church of Leominster

by Rev. Tony Lorenzen

Sixty-one years before William Ellery Channing delivered his movement defining sermon on Unitarian Christianity at the ordination of the Rev. Jared Sparks in Baltimore and 47 years before Henry Ware was elected Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard sending the Unitarian controversy publicly into full swing, Rev. John Rogers was dismissed from his pulpit in Leominster, Massachusetts in 1758 for preaching on topics Ware and Channing would have considered standard, even mild, items of Unitarian Christian theology. Indeed, John Rogers was a standard fare Arminian of the mid-eighteenth century who denied the divinity of Jesus and the doctrine of original sin, while championing the use of reason against the more emotional revivalism of the Great Awakening. Rogers and his followers established a church following a congregational split along theological lines, something that would later be commonplace in the Unitarian movement.

LEOMINSTER

The city of Leominster lies about 40 miles west and slightly north of Boston. Leominster was originally part of Lancaster, one of the oldest English inland settlements in Massachusetts and geographically, one of the largest. By the late 1730's the farmers of northern Lancaster "came to the conclusion that they could conduct their Parochial and Municipal concerns themselves" (Wilder 1853, 19) without so much hassle from Lancaster town in the south. It took a few years, but they finally persuaded the Massachusetts General Court that they should be a town of their own and "that among

other conditions required of them, they could, and they would ‘maintain a Godly Minister,’ and on the strength of the fulfillment of the last named condition, probably more than any or all others, the prayer of their petition was granted on June 23, 1740¹” (Wilder 1853, 19). The town took the name of Leominster, after Leominster England, and the “Godly Minister” they settled was a 1732 Harvard graduate, John Rogers of Boxford.

THE FIRST MEETING HOUSE AND THE FIRST MINISTER

The citizens of Leominster decided at their third town meeting to erect “God’s Tabernacle” and chose a site and a building committee. The frame was raised in the summer of 1741 and by the winter of 1742 the town had arranged to have preaching on Sundays. The building was small, only 45 feet long, 35 feet wide and 22 feet high. It had no pews and was not finished or painted on the outside until 1753 (Wilder 1853, 154-5). With the building complete, the town voted to “settle Mr. John Rogers, a learned orthodox minister, as they have been advised by the neighboring ministers” (Wilder 1853, 156).

Rogers was born in Boxford, of Essex County, Massachusetts on September 24, 1712. He was the son of the Rev. John and Susana (Marston) Rogers. He attended Harvard, for three of six year on a Hollis scholarship, received his A.B. in 1732 and began preaching in Boxford, but was not called. He did not receive a call from any of the old towns and turned his attention to the frontier. He accepted the call to the Leominster church after a month of preaching. The offer was meager compared to what an old eastern town could offer - 45 pounds a year compared to the 300 he would have made at

¹ England was still on the Old School Julian calendar so this was the 4th of July in our Gregorian calendar.

the call in Boxford – although the Leominster church call did come with forty acres of land and promises of salary increases tied to inflation and growth in the town (Shipton 1956, 189).

David Wilder, in his History of Leominster, claims that Rogers was “a lineal descendent from the martyr of that name,” and it was widely thought so by many in the Leominster community until some detective work by the Rev. George M. Bodge, minister of the Leominster church, in 1892-1898. A series of letters, now in possession of the Leominster Historical Society, between Rev. Bodge and Mr. John Ward Dean of the Prince Society shows Dean, with the assistance of the New England Genealogic Society, helping Bodge to learn that the Boxford Rogers were related to the Ipswich, MA Rogers family and that branch of the Rogers family made no claim of descent from the Anglican martyr. Rev. Bodge writes a paper outlining his findings that is later presented to the society, an abstract of which is also in possession of the Leominster Historical Society. The paper outlines how an unsubstantiated claim by the Rev. Nathaniel Rogers’ son-in-law became an oft repeated and oft accepted but erroneous family history connecting the family to the Anglican martyr.

John Rogers of Boxford was ordained in Leominster on September 14, 1743. The Rev. Thomas Parker of Dracut preached the ordination sermon from Ezekiel 3:17-19, the right hand of fellowship was given by the Rev. Willard Hall of Westford and the charge was given by Rev. John Prentice of Lancaster (Wilder 1853, 156-7). Rogers would marry Prentice’s daughter, Relief, in 1750 and they would have seven children.

The day of the ordination, a church was gathered and incorporated in Leominster. Sixteen males including the Rev. John Rogers signed their name to its covenant. The

covenant runs four, tall hand-written pages. The original document still resides in the records of the First Church in Leominster, Unitarian Universalist.

A RELATIONAL COVENANT

The original covenant to which Rogers and the 16 men from Leominster signed their names is a remarkably relational document. It is far from the doctrinal, creedal covenant that will replace it after Rogers' dismissal. The language is pastoral and encouraging, almost tender. It begins by saying that the signers are "Being persuaded that we are now called of God to come into the state of a Gospel Church." God isn't demanding or insisting, but persuading. It is an Arminian covenant that sees the church "reflecting on our own unworthiness, admiring the mercy and condescension of God and trusting in his promised Grace."

The covenant continues to express belief in the "Christian religion as outlined in the Holy Scriptures." The signers dedicate themselves to "the Lord Jehovah" and the Trinitarian nature of Jehovah is explained parenthetically as "(to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)." It is this God they take for their "eternal portion."

The covenant keepers agree to keep their consciences void of offense towards God and man and to walk together as a church in the "faith of the gospel, according to the best light we can obtain," and to watch over one another in "meekness and tenderness."

Promises are made to "sincerely and regularly" be concerned for "our neighbor's welfare, both temporal and spiritual" and to extend this benevolence to enemies as well as friends. Wrongs shall be repaid with full reparation and there should be no speaking evil of each other so that there should be no gossip or slander, "back-bitings, whisperings."

The covenant ended with a quote and explanation of the golden rule so that “we solemnly engage that we will inevitably seek the public weal and govern ourselves by the peaceful, charitable, and generous principles of our holy religion.” All of this peaceful charity and all these generous principles were about to be put to the test.

HERESY

Wilder writes that the Rev. John Rogers “was a scholar” and a “studious and learned divine” (159) while Shipton notes that Rogers “had come honestly by an inquiring mind, but he was never able to organize his confusion of doubts into a system of belief” (190). Shipton says that Rogers was not as orthodox in his theology as he had been made out to be, but Shipton makes a weak claim that Rogers was never able to organize his theology into a system of belief.

Only four of Rogers’ works survive. Three sermons in one collection entitled: *Three Sermons on Different Subjects and Occasions*, published by Edes and Gill in Boston in 1756 and the sermon “The Nature & Necessity of Spiritual Conversion” published in Boston as a pamphlet a year later by Green & Russell. To claim Rogers never solidified his theology is to overlook the fact that he was in fact dismissed for holding unorthodox views on a number of points. If these points were an occasional random utterance, it is unlikely, even in 1750’s New England, they would have led to his dismissal, so the fact he was dismissed leads us to believe there was some organization to his thought.

Shipton’s chief argument against Rogers’ intellect comes from passages from the four sermons, mostly from the collected three, as the fourth and latest is a defense against his dismissal and a critique of the doctrine of original sin. Shipton takes Rogers to task

for example in his sermon on “The Terribleness and the Moral Cause of Earthquakes” for having doubt in his theology and cites this as a negative, calls it “confusion” and proceeds to cite a passage from the sermon where Rogers states that “As earthquakes are terrible works of God, so it is the Design and Tendency of them to make people abandon their Sins” (Shipton 1956, 190). But then Rogers goes on to argue that Earthquakes are probably natural phenomena and to think they strike one group or person over another is rather ridiculous.

Shipton also criticizes Rogers for preaching against the “Perversion of Taverns,” (Shipton 1956, 190) but then saying that if Taverns can’t be remedied in any other way than by “total suppression” then “it [taverns] ought to take place.” Shipton doesn’t mention that Rogers makes this statement in a footnote and follows it with a an ethical statement of proportionality, saying that even if some things might be “good in themselves” they become “pernicious by abuse” and when faced with a dilemma of Evils (if the phrase be lawful) a wise man will ever choose the less.” Since taverns are not going away, Rogers argues, the wise man would choose the lesser of two evils and live with the existence of taverns. In essence, Rogers seems to be advocating a position that argues a wise man chooses the battles he can win and the fight against taverns wasn’t one of them.

John Rogers attended Harvard in the latter part of the first third of the 18th century. Harvard had not yet become the home of the likes of Henry Ware and the Unitarians, but Rogers would have been exposed to liberal thought. In *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America*, Wright opens his work by noting that in 1726 Cotton Mather found it unnecessary to discuss doctrine while explaining the polity of New England

churches because they all adhered, more or less, to the Westminster confession. Yet, by 1745 “the uniformity which had delighted Mather had vanished, and the heresies he had condemned were advocated by some of the most respected of the clergy” (Wright 1955, 9). Arminianism had set in among the old New England churches. “The Arminianism that Cotton Mather dismissed and Jonathan Edwards feared was the first phase of the liberal movement in theology which in the nineteenth century was named Unitarianism” (Wright, 10). This time period between 1726 and 1745 would have been John Rogers’ formative years. He would have grown into young adulthood, attended Harvard, read theology, been introduced to this Arminian way of thinking and believing, and set about his early ministry doing more reading and reflecting during this time period. Conrad Wright argues that New England Arminianism was the indigenous version of the “theology of the age of reason (10)” and that it occupied a middle ground “between orthodoxy...and infidelity” (10).

By 1714 a library of English theological and philosophical books had been given to Yale and Arminianism was infiltrating the standard reading for the ministry there (Wright 1955, 19). Although it is difficult to assess what access John Rogers might have had to the reading list at Yale, it is much safer to assume he could have read and discussed an anonymous 1719 publication attributed to a layman named John Checkley from King’s Chapel in Boston, titled *Choice of Dialogues Between a Godly Minister and an Honest Country Man, Concerning Election & Predestination*, wherein the author argues that the strict Calvinistic theology regarding predestination is “*absurd*” and “*blasphemous* against God” (Wright 1955, 20 - emphasis Wright’s).

Conrad Wright notes that other Arminian works had found their way to Boston by 1735-40, and this would have been the time John Rogers would have been of the age and had the interest to be reading them and thus come under their influence. Rogers' surviving works clearly show that he was influenced by enlightenment's use of reason and by the Arminian doctrine that "men are born with the capacity for both sin and righteousness" (Wright 1955, 3).

Rogers finished Harvard while the Calvinist revival called the Great Awakening was sweeping New England. Like many from the easternmost part of the region he was not swept up in it. "In Boston, the tradition of unemotional religion became well established, and there was developing a 'free and catholic' spirit which emphasized practical morality at the same time it maintained a gentlemanly tolerance of theological differences" (Wright 1955, 34). This is the church atmosphere from which Rogers came to Leominster. He was a Harvard educated man in opposition to the ideas of the Great Awakening, called to one of the frontier churches, during a time of revival in a place where his cool eastern religion might be suspect among the local farmers. He was a prime candidate, according to Conrad Wright, for becoming the type whose opposition to the revival led to a strong Arminianism.

The same year John Rogers accepted the call to Leominster and that church adopted its covenant, Charles Chauncy was preaching against the excess of the Great Awakening in Boston, championing reason over ecstatic religious experience. Rogers must have known the work of both Charles Chauncy and Jonathan Mayhew. Both men sat on the council that heard his dismissal case.

Rogers was most certainly influenced by Samuel Webster's "Winter Evening's Conversation" and by the work of John Taylor, a Presbyterian minister from Norwich who, according to Conrad Wright, was the most "influential and widely read" dissenter in New England. Taylor's major work was Scripture-Doctrine of Original Sin, and Rogers and his fellow Arminians around New England took two things from it: "One was a carefully worked out argument against the traditional doctrine of original sin; the other was a technique of studying the Bible which was of continuing importance, since it could be applied to other doctrines as well" (Wright 1955, 77).

Conrad Wright suggests "by the middle of the 1750's, the time at which the Leominster church dismisses Rogers, Arminians no longer pretended they were orthodox, but instead began to condemn Calvinism by name and attack its dangerous tendencies" (89). The dangerous tendencies in Calvinism being, as Wright uses examples from the writing of William Ellery Channing to emphasize, that once total depravity is accepted and predestination is the norm, well, why bother? Why try to be good if you're damned anyway and nothing you can do will change it?

CAST OUT FOR ORIGINAL SIN

Rev. John Rogers was dismissed as pastor of the First Church in Leominster by vote of both the church and the town on January 28, 1758. The controversy that led to his dismissal began as early as 1757 (documented) and lasted in legal battles that played out in the Massachusetts courts until 1762, when with the support of the legislature and the town of Leominster, Rogers and his supporters withdrew from the First Church and incorporated a second precinct and a second church, with Rogers as its minister. The basic charge against him was the heresy of denying the doctrine of original sin and the

divinity of Christ. It is also reported he denied the virgin birth. Since his surviving written record amounts to some correspondence and four published sermons it is difficult to see from the surviving papers what caused the citizenry at the time to get up in arms, but given the time – at the tail end of the Great Awakening revival, and the location – the central Massachusetts frontier, where the revival spirit was more likely to have some sympathizers than it was in the east, it is more likely that Rogers’ theology, heavily influenced by the age of reason, and the Arminianism of the his time, found an unfriendly ear that wanted to cause controversy or stand up to what it heard as false doctrine. According to Rogers, it wasn’t even a member of his own congregation that started the entire affair. In the Dedication to his 1757 sermon, “The Nature and Necessity of Spiritual Conversion,” he writes, “Neither the composer of this innocent Discourse nor, probably, anybody else, would have desir’d or thought of Printing it; had not some Persons in neighboring Towns, industriously represented it as very bad- containing pernicious doctrine. For which reason it comes to speak for itself – desiring a just and fair trial.”

Before even finishing his dedication/introduction of the “Nature and Necessity” sermon, Rogers leaves no doubt as to his approach, virtually equating reason with God in summing up his comments with, “*This is the true Protestant Confession: This is Voice of Reason: This is the Voice of **GOD.***”²

After its declaration of an introduction, “Nature and Necessity” begins in an orthodox fashion, taking as its text Matthew 18:3, where Jesus says, “Except ye be converted and become as little Children, ye shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.”

² Emphasis in the original

Not far into the sermon, Rogers says, “For indeed, many persons enter the kingdom of God on earth (many belong to the visible church, and are branches of the true vine) who, yet, will never be converted to this similitude of children and consequently, will never enter the eternal kingdom of God.” Rogers sounds rather orthodox here, and a few sentences later under a large print heading labeled “DOCTRINE” announces that the main thrust of the discourse will be how no “man shall enter the heavenly kingdom without being first converted, and becoming as a little child.”

Conversion was a big topic at the time Rogers was called to Leominster at the tail end of the Great Awakening. Ministers were not exempt from having their conversion experiences questioned. The conversion experience of the Great Awakening, like revivals in general, was based on personal, ecstatic, emotional religious experience. Rogers follows Charles Chauncy and others in arguing against a blind acceptance of such an experience as a religious experience. Rogers spends the majority of the “Nature and Necessity” sermon doing two things. First he equates the conversion experience as the lived experience of turning from ignorance and iniquity to love of God. “Conversion seems properly to be a turning from vice as well as from ignorance and error,” he writes. Human beings are born ignorant not only of “spiritual knowledge and holiness” says Rogers but also, “without any innate or original wisdom, no knowledge nor any virtue.”

The second major undertaking of the sermon is a syllogistic argument against original sin. Rogers lays out his argument in this fashion: true converts must become as infants, infants are humble and innocent; the humble and innocent infant can be neither mischievous nor injurious, such creatures as are not injurious and are humble and innocent have no malice and by *reason* therefore cannot be born sinners. In a footnote

along the way, Rogers writes that “it doth not become the wise Governor of the world to make men wicked in order to make them holy.” Near the end of the sermon Rogers argues, “Our original parents were not fit for heaven.” Yet, he says Adam was not fit for heaven because he lacked knowledge not because of any ontological depravity due to his humanity. “God made Adam a rational creature,” Rogers argues in another footnote, and until and unless Adam has use of his reason, he can’t be expected to know and love God. Rogers ends with a clever twist, saying “For nothing is more evident to a man that will use his *reason* than the necessity of regeneration for an entrance into the kingdom of heaven (emphasis Rogers).” As far as the accusation of denying the doctrine of original sin, it appears Rogers is guilty as charged.

THE COUNCILS

Rogers denied a request for a meeting with his accusers on May 5, 1757, but admitted that if they persisted, the matter would likely lead to a church council. Rogers wasn’t kind in his response. He called his opponents “disorderly brethren” and said their complaint “mattered not two straws” to him (Shipton 1956, 191).³

Citing the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court files on the case Shipton, writing in his Sibley’s Harvard Graduates, reports that

A great many of his people were dissatisfyed with his Doctrine and Came to talk with him time after time and I heard some of them ask Mr. Rogers to Call a Church meeting, but he refused. Afterwards they asked Mr. Rogers to join with them in Calling a Council which he refused... I

³ Quoting Early files in the Office of the Clerk of the Supreme Judicial Court (of MA), 81, 153

heard Mr. Rogers Say he would have no Council for they never did any Good...it was not the business of Councils to determine matters of faith, -- and that councils had done a vast deal of mischief in the world and that it was no proper method to make peace and besides he knew it was morally impossible at the present to get a council of honest men.

To say that a great many were dissatisfied with Rogers belies the later record that the vote of both church and town to dismiss Rogers was by only a slim majority. In any case, Rogers knows he is a liberal. He's been to Harvard and studied for the ministry. This presumed he knows some church history. He knows that when liberals stand against orthodoxy, the history has been that they usually lose in the court of church councils. Rogers is also probably familiar with the case of Robert Breck from farther west in Springfield, Massachusetts ten years earlier in 1748. Breck was a 1730 graduate of Harvard, thus probably personally known to Rogers. Breck was called to the First Parish in Springfield, but his preaching drew the attention of Rev. Thomas Clap who mobilized others against him. Breck turned to the Boston ministers for support and the affair ended up in a church council. Before all was said and done, some in the Breck/Boston faction, including Breck, ended up being arrested and put in jail by civil authorities, "only to be quietly released" (Wright 1955, 24). Breck's theological crime? Breck believed that "God will judge and reward or punish men according to their works" (Breck qtd in Wright 1955, 24). As for being able to get honest men, David Wilder reports in his history of Leominster that some men who served on the council to dismiss him including Timothy Harrington of Lancaster and John Mellen of Sterling were of the same theological opinions of Rogers but wouldn't admit so publicly. These men would later

openly express Arminian, if not Unitarian theology. That Rogers knew of their sympathy with his theology and also of their reluctance to openly support it in public is only my conjecture, but also completely plausible.

The council that Rogers feared met in Leominster on July 14, 1757 and consisted of 14 ministers and 26 laymen from 15 different towns. The council concluded that Rogers had indeed departed from orthodoxy, as my examination of the “Nature and Necessity” sermon clearly shows. The council also concluded that Rogers “had hedged suspiciously” (Shipton 1956, 191) on the question of Christ’s divinity, or according to Stebbins’ reporting of the events, “The Rev. Mr. Rogers did not hold or believe the essential Divinity of Christ as it is revealed in the Divine Word.” Rogers registered a letter of protest that Shipton (192) records from the Massachusetts Historical Society:

It can’t convince a sober man that the Doctrine Voted is true.. for every man is Commanded by the Scripture to study the whole of it himself and to judge for himself the comparing all Doctrines with that ...if we don’t judge directly with our own Eyes, but depend on the Interpretation of Other Men, we don’t Judge at all... Your proposed method is directly opposite to the...principles of Protestants.

Some in attendance, such as Rev. Ebenezer Bridge of Chelmsford and Rev. Ebenezer Pemberton of Boston thought Rogers ill mannered. Rogers, himself, it seems couldn’t bring himself to participate but sent his case and statements in by letter with his followers from the church (Shipton 1956, 192). Rogers and his supporters in the church

thought the council illegitimate as it was brought about by a minority in their number and because the council was not a mutual council. The council ruled against Rogers in the end, not because he had strayed so far from his flock in terms of theology, but because he seemed to be “a useless leader” (Shipton 1956, 192). Forty-one of the delegates present voted unanimously to accept the result of the council. Rogers and his supporters did not accept its results and the Leominster church voted by only a slim majority to accept the result and suspend Rogers for two months. Rogers took to visiting neighboring ministers who had voted against him and quarreling with them.

Now it was Rogers’ turn to call a council. A second meeting of the council was called for November 9, 1757. Rogers proved to be his own worst enemy in terms of reconciliation, if that was indeed what he sought. The council found that instead of addressing his doctrinal errors, he persisted in them and the council recommended that the Leominster church suspend Rogers for two months to give him time to reflect and retract his errors, but if this should not happen, the council recommended that the church vote on “dissolution of his Pastoral relation to them” (Shipton 1956, 193-4).⁴

On November 16, 1757 the church in Leominster voted to act on the recommendations of the council and the town supported it. Rogers was even violently turned away from trying to enter his church and pulpit while guest preachers led services, including Timothy Harrington from neighboring Lancaster. The anti-Rogers faction then moved too quickly. Instead of waiting two months, this faction summoned the council again only three days after its dissolution for the purpose of removing Rogers. The council met again on November 29, 1757, but this time sided with Rogers, telling the

⁴ Quoting records of the First Congregational Church of Canton, MA

church at council to dismiss a pastor should be mutual, not called by factions. Rev. Jonathan Mayhew, a known Arminian and known to Rogers was the secretary of this session.

Instead of calling a mutual council Rogers and his supporters called a new council on Dec. 7, 1757. Mayhew, Rev. Ebenezer Gay, and Rev. Charles Chauncy dominated this session of the council. All three men were known Arminians and the council pronounced that the first had been unfair to Rogers. Rogers charged that many on the first council voted against him even though in private they shared his theology (Shipton 1956, 194).⁵

THE COURTS

After this council, the case then went to the civil court, Rogers and his followers asking on January 12, 1758 that Leominster be divided into two parishes. The anti-Rogers faction in the church didn't wait. The church and the town voted to dismiss Rogers on January 28, 1758. Shipton, using records from the Massachusetts Superior Court and Massachusetts archives, reports that the procedure was highly irregular and so "were documents of both parties, which were signed by minors, non-voters, non residents, and even a dead man or two" (Shipton 1956, 195).⁶

Rogers and his group went to court again on March 4, 1758, asking the Massachusetts General Court to separate Leominster into two parishes. The Council favored such an arrangement, but the legislature, which was much more orthodox, did not. Rogers and his group tried again the following year, but this time emphasized that Rogers was still the legal town minister and that his followers shouldn't have to pay taxes in support of another minister. The court ordered a mutual church council represented by

⁵ Also David Wilder and Sherwin Drury et al.

⁶ Citing Massachusetts Superior Courts files Miscellaneous Manuscripts

both factions to hear the case, but this pleased neither side. So, “in the July 1759 session of the Court of Pleas at Worcester, members of the Rogers faction sued to be released from church rates, and he [Rogers] himself sued the town for 100 pounds back pay. The court found for the town, but the Parson promptly appealed to the August session of the Superior court” (Shipton 1956, 196).⁷ All the clergy who attended the original councils were called as witnesses.

THE SECOND CHURCH IN LEOMINSTER

Rogers won his suit against the town for back pay for the sum of 82 pounds in September 1760. By 1761 the town of Leominster was so tired of the dispute it agreed to the division of parishes and friends and supporters of John Rogers agreed to pay half the 82 pounds assessed by the 1760 ruling.

“The New England parish system was strictly territorial except in Boston. There was but one church in each town or precinct. All the inhabitants were expected to attend and required by law to support the public worship in the meetinghouse. The minister was customarily settled for life, and an inhabitant of the town had no opinion as to the preaching he would hear” (Wright 1955, 38).

“By the 1730’s, to be sure, breaches had been made in this system, and exceptions granted under certain circumstances to Quakers, Baptists, and members of the Church of England. But the system itself was still the normal and accepted thing” (Wright 1955, 38), so when John Rogers’ followers petitioned the General Court of Massachusetts (a name the Commonwealth’s legislature uses to this day) for the right to form a second precinct with a second church with John Rogers as its minister, they were not setting a

⁷ Referencing Ebenezer Parkman diary among other sources, the account is also supported in David Wilder, 1853.

precedent, but it was still a highly unusual circumstance. The fact that the church was formed after a theological controversy where the doctrines in question were central issues of what would later be Unitarian and Universalist belief (the humanity of Jesus, a more universal approach to salvation in the denial of original sin) make the Rogers story an even more interesting one for those interested in Unitarian Universalist history.

The second church in Leominster set up in Rogers house and at times, after 1768, with the town's permission, in the schoolhouse north of the Nashua River. The second church included a larger portion of the membership of the first church than those members of the congregation staying behind with the orthodox church, yet Rogers' congregation never drew any new adherents. In spite of his quarrelling with the ministers who opposed him during his trial by council, Rogers' relationship with the minister who replaced him at the First Church, Francis Gardner was reported to be professional and "kindly" (Shipton 1956, 196).

COVENANT RENEWAL

For all the bombast created by the Rogers heresy and the accompanying councils and trials, the aftermath was peaceful. The second church and first church had brotherly relations, as did their ministers. Even the court case became such a bother to the people of the town of Leominster that for all the rancor that surrounded it at its beginning, it settled in a spirit of compromise, which makes it different from the congregational splits that accompanied some of the Unitarian Controversy congregational quarrels decades later.

The biggest impact of the event was felt in the First Church covenant. The original, creedless, document was, in the aftermath of the Rogers dismissal, replaced with

one that upheld the Westminster confession and asserted the doctrines that Rogers had been accused of neglecting. The second covenant of the Leominster church speaks in its preamble of “confessing and bewailing our sins and loathing ourselves for our apostacy from God in Adam.” This is a covenant of a church that does indeed believe in original sin, let there be no doubt.

The covenant takes a creedal position in the body of the document. Among the beliefs upheld are “we do avouch the Lord to be our God whose name alone is Jehovah, Father Son, and Holy Spirit, three persons in one God.” Following John Rogers, there would also be no doubt as to the church’s position on the trinity or the divinity of Christ.

David Wilder, in his *History of Leominster*, points out that at some point, this second covenant fell out of use. Shipton says it was within ten years of its adoption, but gives no source for that claim. It is telling, however, that the third covenant of the Leominster church was in vogue by the time second parish dissolved and reunited with the first. The third covenant states:

You openly and publicly confess your belief that there is one God who is a being of infinite and eternal perfection. That the scriptures of the old and new testament are the word of God, and perfect rule of faith and manners. You own God as your God and Father, Jesus Christ as your Redeemer and the Holy Ghost as your sanctifier to lead you to the truth as it is in Jesus Christ, and to build you up in holiness and comfort. Finally, you promise to walk orderly in the communion of this church so long as

opportunities to be hereby edified shall be continued to you. You promise this (Drury et al, 1993).

John Rogers died in 1789. By the time of his death, his second congregation had dissolved and had been peacefully and uneventfully reabsorbed into the First Church in Leominster. This third covenant of the Leominster church may have been in use by that time. Perhaps it came back to a unified First Church from Rogers' second parish. There is nothing in it that would have contradicted his Arminian theology. There is much in it that points to the Unitarianism that was to follow. A Unitarianism built on the freedom of conscience, the use of reason, and the willingness to start a new congregation, if necessary, in order to follow one's conscience in the use of reason in practicing one's faith, just as John Rogers and his followers did in Leominster, Massachusetts in 1758.

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