

Charge to the Congregation

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Editorial Note: *Dr. Leonard, as Northern Illinois Area Representative for the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference, was invited to give the “Charge to the Congregation” at the installation of Mark C. Alvis as minister of Union Congregational Church.*

Numbers 20:1-8 NIV

In the first month the whole Israelite community arrived at the Desert of Zin, and they stayed at Kadesh. There Miriam died and was buried.

Now there was no water for the community, and the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron. They quarreled with Moses and said, “If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the LORD! Why did you bring the Lord’s community into this desert, that we and our livestock should die here? Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!”

Moses and Aaron went from the assembly to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting and fell face down, and the glory of the LORD appeared to them. The LORD said to Moses, “Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink.”

The effective spiritual leader of a congregation has to perform many functions. He must be a *visionary*, looking ahead to where the Lord wants to take his people. He has to be a kind of “*cheerleader*,” encouraging the people to take on the mission God has for them. He needs to be an *intercessor*, laying the needs of his congregation before the Lord in prayer. He should be a *teacher*, interpreting the faith to his flock and expounding the Word of God. Perhaps above all, he needs to be an *example* of faithful living and commitment to the work of God. And the list goes on.

Moses, who led the Israelites out of Egypt, was all of the above. But in addition to these he had one more function. He was head of the Israelite Complaint Department. It seems the people were constantly badgering him about something or other. You name it, they griped about it — whether it was the desolation of the wilderness they were traveling through, or the fact that the promised land was full of giants, or some guys that were prophesying in their camp, or their monotonous menu of manna. They even complained about Moses’ wife, that she wasn’t their kind. Here, in our passage from the Book of Numbers, they’re complaining again about their menu, and about the shortage of drinking water.

It seems that the Bible story of Israel’s beginnings is one big record of complaints. The people of Israel had trouble catching onto Moses’ vision for where the Lord was taking them. All they could see were their present hardships, and all they could voice were their gripes. They had no long-range perspective.

The Bible is telling this story to make a point: It wasn’t the people who left Egypt who made it into Canaan, the land of promise. Those people weren’t fit for the “land of milk and honey.” It was a new generation of Israelites, the ones born in the wilderness who didn’t remember Egypt, that crossed the Jordan. The “gripping generation” all died in the wilderness — all except Joshua and Caleb, who had a more positive attitude.

I think there’s a warning here for any Christian congregation. The Israelites were shortsighted, they had no vision. They were constantly complaining *to* their leadership, and *about* their leadership. And as a result they stayed in the wilderness, and there they died. And *if we do what they did, we will stay where they stayed*. We’ll stay in a wilderness of unspiritual and unfruitful negativity, and never see that blessed land of promise where the church lives in the awesome and beautiful presence of God, and his people prosper in the overflow of his grace.

Having served this church as Interim Minister, I know the generous and positive spirit of this congregation. But unless we stay continually open to the workings of the Holy Spirit, we’re never far from falling back into that “wilderness” mode. We know that, because we’ve seen it happen a few times in recent years with very painful results. The installation of a new pastor is a good time to remind ourselves

that if we do what the Israelites did, we'll stay right where they stayed. We need to get out of Egypt, yes — but we also need to *get the Egypt out of us*, that attitude of negativism, that “we can't do it” mentality, that complaining spirit that continually finds fault with the leadership.

As Interim Minister, I helped formulate a vision statement for this church, a statement that envisions a *worshiping* church, a *teaching* church, a *sharing* church and a *caring* church. But that's really a kind of generic vision that needs to be filled out and refined into specific goals and plans for this congregation. Your pastor and other leaders will be working with you to do exactly that. They will need your support, your input, and your ownership of a new vision for this church.

We are a Congregational church. That means the congregation and the boards aren't rubber stamps for a pastor's vision. Moving ahead into the promise and purpose of God for this congregation is a task that involves every member. Will you, each of you, engage in that fruitful task together with your leaders? Or will you sit by in critical judgment of others more willing than you are to undertake the journey that lies ahead?

Yes, we're a *Congregational* church. I hardly need remind you that the Congregational principle isn't independence, it isn't democracy, and it isn't domination by powerful or influential members. The Congregational principle is *the headship of Jesus Christ* over his church. Jesus leads the church through the Word of God and through his Holy Spirit, active in the life of the entire body of believers.

At the end of our passage from Numbers 20, after the people complain about their lack of water, the Lord tells Moses, “Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community . . .” Recall what the apostle Paul says about this passage, in 1 Corinthians 10:

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert (1 Corinthians 10:1-5).

Having served in other types of churches, I believe strongly in the Congregational way. As I've said to you, I'm not Congregational by default, I'm Congregational by conviction. But if the Congregational way is to succeed, and to result in a fruitful ministry that blesses God and builds his kingdom, then *we all need to drink from that rock, which is Christ*. Pastor, elders, board members, all worshipers need to partake of Christ. That kind of living water is what washes away the stains of division and transforms the barren sands of the wilderness into soil yielding a fruitful harvest unto the Lord. Drinking together, pastor and people, from that Rock of Christ, we need not do what the Israelites did, nor need we stay where they stayed.

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