

COVENANT AFFIRMATIONS

C O N T E N T S

Foreword iv

Acknowledgment v

Introduction 1

Common Christian Affirmations 2

Central Covenant Affirmations 6

Conclusion 16

F O R E W O R D

Both Covenanters and newcomers often seek to understand the faith of the Evangelical Covenant Church in a nutshell. Our creed is the Bible itself. Such a confession does not tell us how little Covenanters believe, but how much they believe. It does, however, make it difficult for us to express our faith in a nutshell. Some years ago the Committee on Covenant Doctrine attempted such a statement, which it entitled *Covenant Affirmations*. It is in no sense a confession or creed. It does, we believe, help to clarify the context out of which Covenant faith and life are expressed.

As you read this brief document, we hope you will come to understand what the Covenant means when it calls itself an apostolic church, a catholic church, a Reformation church, and an evangelical church.

In the years since it was first published, this booklet has proved useful and helpful to many both within and outside the Covenant.

Let us remember, however, that beyond the affirmations of this brief booklet stands the incarnate, crucified, and risen Christ of whom the Scriptures speak. It is he alone whom we worship and serve.

PAUL E. LARSEN

President

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T

This booklet was first published in 1976. It was written by the Committee on Covenant Doctrine, which at that time included James R. Hawkinson (chair), Donald C. Frisk, Paul E. Larsen, Edward Larson, A. Eldon Palmquist, Richard O. Sandquist, and Milton B. Engebretson (ex-officio). We remain grateful for their significant contribution to our understanding and expression of the faith we share. They demonstrated clearly that the faith that unites us is much greater than issues that might divide us.

I N T R O D U C T I O N

The Evangelical Covenant Church has always been more a life movement than a doctrinal movement. It takes its place among the nonconfessional churches. Its spirit is emphasized in the preamble to the Covenant Constitution:

The Evangelical Covenant Church has its roots in historical Christianity as it emerged in the Protestant Reformation, in the biblical instruction of the Lutheran State Church of Sweden, and in the great spiritual awakenings of the nineteenth century. These three influences have in large measure shaped its development and are to be borne in mind in seeking to understand its distinctive spirit.

The Covenant Church adheres to the affirmations of the Protestant Reformation regarding the Holy Scriptures, the Old and the New Testament, as the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct. It has traditionally valued the historic confessions of the Christian church, particularly the Apostles' Creed, while at the same time it has emphasized the sovereignty of the Word over all creedal interpretations. It has especially cherished the pietistic restatement of the doctrine of justification by faith as basic to its dual task of evangelism and

Christian nurture, the New Testament emphasis upon personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, the reality of a fellowship of believers which recognizes but transcends theological differences, and the belief in baptism and the Lord's Supper as divinely ordained sacraments of the church. While the denomination has traditionally practiced the baptism of infants, in conformity with its principle of freedom it has also recognized the practice of believer baptism. The principle of personal freedom, so highly esteemed by the Covenant, is to be distinguished from the individualism that disregards the centrality of the Word of God and the mutual responsibilities and disciplines of the spiritual community.

In a sense, this is the Covenant Church's sole confession. Covenanters do not, however, minimize the importance of doctrine. They affirm that correct doctrine is a necessary though not sufficient condition for vital and growing faith.

Common Christian Affirmations

It is the purpose of this booklet to provide a context for the affirmation of our living faith in language understandable to people both within and outside of our fellowship. Such a statement is neither to be construed confessionally nor to be thought of as a creed. All affirmations are subject to the authority of the word of God alone. With this as background, we make four basic affirmations concerning our faith in common with the whole Christian Church.

We are an apostolic church because we confess Christ and the faith of the apostles as recorded in the Holy Scriptures. Covenanters have always affirmed the Bible to be "the word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct." The Bible itself states that "all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). The Covenant has not chosen to be more precise than this in stating its view of inspiration. The authority of the Bible is supreme in all matters of faith, doctrine, and conduct, and is to be trusted. "Where is it written?" was and is the Covenant's touchstone of discussion with regard to faith and practice. In this sense, the Covenant Church is an apostolic church.

We are a catholic church in that we are part of the universal Church that has existed from the days of the apostles until now. In the first several centuries of the Christian era there were a series of affirmations concerning the faith of the Church that have been accepted by the mainstream of Christians throughout history. The Covenant Church considers itself a part of that catholic tradition and recognizes its indebtedness to the early creeds and confessions of the Church as concise statements of biblical faith. We refer especially to the Apostles' and Nicene creeds, though the same might be said for the Chalcedonian and Athanasian creeds.*

THE APOSTLES' CREED

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth:

and in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; he descended into hades; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God, the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

THE NICENE-CONSTANTINOPOLITAN CREED (A.D. 381)

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. We believe in the one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

We are a Reformation church in that we see ourselves as standing in the mainstream of the Protestant Reformation, particularly with reference to the doctrine that justification is by faith alone. While affirming with the reformers the sovereignty of the word of God over all creeds, and the priesthood of all believers, the Reformation emphasis on salvation by grace alone through faith alone—apart from the works of the law—has been particularly important. This is well stated in the following excerpt from the Augsburg Confession of 1530, a Lutheran confession with which other Reformation churches would generally have agreed:

It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfaction, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5.

The Covenant Church also remembers its debt to Pietism, a renewal movement that originated in seventeenth-century Europe and emphasized the need for a personal life in Christ and sanctification through the Holy Spirit.

A leading spirit in this movement was Philipp Jakob Spener, who through his widely influential writings challenged the Church to deeper spirituality. Particularly important was his call for widespread reading and study of the Bible; greater participation by lay people in the work of the Church; simple, clear, and direct preaching geared to the needs of the people; and the abandonment of theological hair-splitting in favor of practical concern for living the Christian life. The influence of Pietism extended throughout northern Europe and enriched the lives of many through its emphasis on the new life in Christ.

We are an evangelical church. Four hundred years have passed since the Reformation. New issues have arisen upon which Scripture has shed light. The Covenant Church, consistent with its background in Pietism, sees in the emergence of evangelicalism a movement that gives expression to several of its basic emphases.

Many have defined evangelicalism as Protestantism. It is more accurate, however, to view it as a religious awakening that flowered in Europe and America during the nineteenth century. Waves of spiritual revival have swept the Protestant West for more than two centuries. The Covenant has grown out of these awakenings.

Evangelicals have been characterized by a number of significant emphases: 1) a strong insistence on biblical authority; 2) the absolute necessity of new birth; 3) Christ's mandate to evangelize the world; 4) the continuing need for education and training in a Christian context; and 5) the inescapable responsibility for the advancement of social justice.

At times the emphases have been one-sided or imbalanced. However, the evangelical movement today is the fastest growing element in the Christian Church. Always closely allied with the modern missionary movement, Covenanters have enjoyed cooperating at home and abroad with all groups whose spirit is evangelical. In this they

are true to the spirit of the text expounded at the birth of the Covenant in 1885: “I am a companion of all who fear you” (Psalm 119:63).

Central Covenant Affirmations

Consistent with its affirmation of classical Christianity and its own historical experience, the Covenant Church affirms as central to its life and thought a number of evangelical emphases. Foremost among these are the following:

The centrality of the word of God. When Philipp Jakob Spener laid down his famous proposals for the renewal of the Church in 1675, his first concern was with the centrality of the word of God in the life of the congregation. He wrote:

Thought should be given to a more extensive use of the word of God among us. We know that by nature we have no good in us. If there is to be any good in us, it must be brought about by God. To this end the word of God is the powerful means, since faith must be enkindled through the gospel. . . . The more at home the word of God is among us, the more we shall bring about faith and its fruits.

What was new in Spener’s proposal was not another doctrine of inspiration (there was general agreement on the divine inspiration of Scripture in his day), or a new recognition of the authority of Scripture (that was accepted by other clergy). What was new was his recovery of the *living nature* of the word of God. The word is the “powerful means” to the creation of new life through the Holy Spirit. For many in Spener’s day the word of God was simply information, or law, or rules; for Spener the word was *power*—power to effect change in the life of the hearer through the Holy Spirit.

It is the awareness of this dynamic, life-giving, and life-shaping power of the word that has been at the heart of the Evangelical Covenant Church since its founding. That awareness lay behind the formation of the conventicles—the small groups that met for Bible study in confidence that the word would shape the life of the believer and the believing community. It provided the motive for private devotional reading of the Scriptures, a practice for which our forebears received the nickname “readers.” It prompted the concern for faithful preaching, not of human opinion, but of the word of God, which has power to convict of sin and unrighteousness and kindle the desire for new life.

The Covenant Church believes that the effective power of the scriptural word is inseparably associated with the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit never works independently of the word, and the word is made effective through the Holy Spirit.

The togetherness of word and Spirit is a central theme in evangelical faith. It was by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that the scriptural word came into being (2 Timothy 3:16). It is through the Spirit that it does not return empty but accomplishes that for which it was sent (Isaiah 55:11). And it is through the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit that the sinner who responds is assured of being a child of God (Romans 8:16-17).

It is essential, then, to the life of the Church that it be a company of people who want, above all else, that their lives be shaped by the powerful and living word of God. The alternative is clear. Not to be shaped by the word is to be shaped by the world.

On every side attractive and persuasive voices urge us toward conformity to the spirit of this age. There is no escaping from these pervasive influences, which exert a constant and subtle pressure to submit uncritically to the standards and lifestyles our culture imposes upon us. Only the church that hears and responds to the word will be able to be a prophetic voice in this wilderness and bring healing to a confused and troubled world.

The necessity of the new birth. When the Covenant Church affirms that it is evangelical, it proclaims that the new birth in Christ is necessary for a right relationship with God. Jesus said to Nicodemus, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above (John 3:3). We teach that “justification is that act of God in Christ wherein he forgives us our sins and accepts us as righteous.” But the new birth is more than the experience of forgiveness and acceptance. It is regeneration and the gift of everlasting life. This life has the qualities of love and righteousness as well as joy and peace.

The question may well be asked, “When is this gift of life bestowed?”

As an evangelical church we affirm that it is bestowed in conversion, which can be defined as the act wherein a person turns with faith and repentance from sin to God. It involves a conscious rejection of the life of sin. No converted person takes an indifferent attitude toward sin. But conversion also involves a commitment of faith. Eternal life is not given through assent to creeds alone, but in the moment of personal commitment to Jesus Christ.

Such a high doctrine of conversion does not mean that all believers have dramatic conversions. No one remembers the moment of physical birth; one’s present life is evidence of its occurrence. So a person may be truly converted even though he or she has no memory of the moment of new birth. The vitality of life is the proof of birth, not its memory or recollection.

But what is the destiny of the unconverted? It is the will of God that all should be redeemed:

The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

Yet it is only through Christ that we can be saved. Our Savior declared, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). The apostles concurred: “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The Covenant Church shares God’s concern for the salvation of all, but accepts God’s word that only those converted to Christ shall be saved.

But the new birth is only the beginning of life. Growth and maturity are a lifelong journey. This process is called sanctification, which can be defined as that act of the Holy Spirit whereby the believer is continually purified from sin, is renewed in his heart, and grows in the good according to Christ’s example. There is no state of final perfection in this life, but there is a process of growth from beginning to end. This growth is as much a gift of God as the gift of life itself (Galatians 3:3). Together with the gifts of life and growth, the child of God receives the gifts of assurance and confidence. St. Paul declares: “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6).

As there is no new birth without repentance and faith, so there is no healthy spiritual growth without a life of discipline. Discipline is the cultivation and nurture of the spiritual life. The private exercise of devotion, the use of the sacraments, the study of the word of God, and the fellowship of believers all enhance the Christian’s growth. The life of discipline spurns moral and spiritual indifference on the one hand and oppressive legalism on the other.

In his first letter to Timothy, the Apostle Paul declares:

But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which 5 the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

(1 Timothy 6:11-12)

The pursuit of holy living buys neither favor nor merit with God. But it pleases him, allows his Spirit to fill the

Christian with joy, and makes the Christian an effective agent of reconciliation.

The Church as a fellowship of believers. Martin Luther, in the midst of the Reformation era, made a daring suggestion for the organization of the Church:

[Christians] should sign their names and meet alone in a house somewhere to pray, to read, to baptize, to receive the sacrament, and do other Christian works. According to this order, those who do not lead Christian lives could be known, reprov'd, corrected, cast out, or excommunicated, according to the rule of Christ (Matthew 18:15-17). Here one could also solicit benevolent gifts to be willingly given and distributed to the poor, according to St. Paul's example (2 Corinthians 9). Here would be no need of much and elaborate singing. Here one could set out a brief and neat order for baptism and the sacrament and center everything on the Word, prayer, and love.*

While the church under Luther did not see fit to organize itself along the lines of this proposal, the suggestion has remained as a continuing challenge to the organized church bodies. The Evangelical Covenant Church is one of several fellowships that seek to realize the values of this ideal—to be a free church of believers, not under the power of the state, and committed ultimately only to Jesus Christ its Lord.

The roots of this view of the Church are found in two basic New Testament emphases:

- The Church is a communion or fellowship of believers, characterized by mutual participation in and sharing of the new life in Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-13). Worship is central in maintaining the quality and vitality of that new life.
- The Church is a gathered community set apart for involvement in Christ's mission to the world. "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). To be a fellowship of believers and to participate in evangelism, nurture, and service are essential elements in the Covenant's understanding of the Church.

The believers' Church is not simply a human institution or organization, but a *people* whom God has called.

Emphasis does not fall on buildings or hierarchical structures, but upon a grace-filled fellowship and active participation, through the Holy Spirit, in the life and mission of Christ.

Membership in the Evangelical Covenant Church is by confession of personal faith in Jesus Christ. It is open to *all* believers. Considerations of class or race, education or pedigree, wealth or prestige do not enter. Uniformity in creedal details is not expected. What is required is that one be born anew "into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3). But if membership is open to all believers, it is also open *only* to believers. "The doors of the church are wide enough to admit all who believe and narrow enough to exclude those who do not," said our forebears. We affirm no less today.

This is not to claim that members of the believers' Church are perfect. The Church knows itself to be always a company of sinners, but sinners who have experienced forgiveness and are seeking wholeness in a new relationship to God.

Three emphases have been central in the Covenant's understanding of its life as a church.

1) The Holy Scriptures are the source of the Church's life and the means for its renewal. By continuing to listen to, accept, and reflect upon the word of God, it keeps its ministry vital and its witness clear. "If you continue in my word," said Jesus, "you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31b-32).

Included in the ministry of the word is the observance of baptism and Holy Communion as sacraments of the church, expressly commanded by our Lord. They are visible signs of the invisible grace of Jesus Christ. Since the Covenant Church is open to all believers, it recognizes both infant and adult baptism as valid forms of that sacrament and includes the practice of both in its ministry.

2) The local congregation is of crucial importance in God's redemptive work in the world. While God is at work elsewhere, it is particularly in the close personal relationships of the fellowship that men, women, and children are opened to the healing, judging, and quickening ministry of the Holy Spirit. Here nurture occurs and discipline is exercised in the context of love and concern in accordance with Matthew 18:15-17:

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

The local congregation seeks the guidance of the Holy Spirit in matters of polity and mission. It is free to govern its own affairs, but every Covenant church has committed itself to participate responsibly in the fellowship, decisions, and ministries of the denomination's congregational system.

3) The ministry belongs to the whole Church. The Covenant holds that there is only one indispensable ministry—that of Jesus Christ himself but in that ministry all the members of the body are involved. It is a ministry of proclamation and evangelism, education and Christian nurture, stewardship and servanthood. Both concern for personal salvation and for social justice are involved in the ministry.

We recognize that God calls some to be set apart, or ordained, as servants of the word and the sacraments for the enabling of the Church. This does not give the ordained ministers superior rank. It does recognize their call from God and gives them a special function in the Church, "to preach the word, to administer the sacraments, and bear rule in the Church," thereby enabling the Church to fulfill its mission.

A conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit. The Covenant Church believes in the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity.

The Spirit is the inspirer of the word and the guide into its truth, the wise and insightful convicter of the world, the testifier to and witness of Jesus, the bringer of new life in Christ Jesus. The one Spirit fuses the Church to Christ its head, gathers that body, occupies that temple, disperses gifts in sovereignty to and within the Church, directs its ministries, empowers its life for mission and witness (2 Timothy 3:16; 1 Peter 1:10-12; John 16:13; John 16:8-11; Romans 8:16; John 3:5-8; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 4:3; Acts 2; 2 Corinthians 6:16; 1 Corinthians 12:11; Acts 13:1-4; Acts 1:8; Acts 4:29,31).

The Spirit is the prevenient actor in the drama of salvation, the creator of hunger for Christ's life, and the fulfiller of that hunger. The Spirit baptizes the newly "born of the Spirit" into the Church, and is the indweller of every Christian, the creator of the likeness of Christ in individual believers, the bearer of Christian character through the believer. The Spirit is the indwelling monitor of morality and conduct, the enabler for every Christian responsibility. Ultimately, the Spirit is the glorifier of Jesus Christ (John 3:8 [the wind]; Acts 8:26-40 [Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch]; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 4:6; Romans 8:9; 2 Corinthians 3:16-18; Galatians 5:22-23; Ephesians 4:25-32; John 16:14).

Do all Christians possess the Holy Spirit? This is the crucial question. The answer from the Bible is a resounding "Yes!"

To profess a belief like this implies that those who have received Jesus Christ have also received the Holy Spirit. It is as Jesus said about himself and the Father: "Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me" (John 13:20). "And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Galatians 4:6). Paul also writes in

Romans 8:9, “But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.” It is Christ himself who tells us that the Holy Spirit “will be in you” (John 14:16-17). All believers have the Holy Spirit. Receiving Christ is to have all that he is, including his gift of the Holy Spirit. It is hard to imagine less when one reads, “In him [i.e., Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him” (Colossians 2:9-10).

One cannot even confess with meaning that “Jesus is Lord” without the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3). It was to unexemplary people that Paul wrote, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God?” (1 Corinthians 6:19). Paul tells these same people that they have been baptized into one body by that one Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). Believers are joined to Christ’s body by the Holy Spirit and indwelt by that same person!

The Holy Spirit supplies sovereignly with the Father and the Son all the enabling gifts for the Church and the individual in the Church to exalt Christ in his body. Several listings of gifts are made in the New Testament.

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. (Romans 12:6-8; cf. also Ephesians 4:1-16 and 1 Corinthians 12:4-30) These gifts are given for the completion of the body and not for personal status.

Such gifts are not a measure of spiritual stature or the criteria for evaluating spiritual maturity. Gifts of the Spirit, such as tongues, are not to be confused with the fruits of the Spirit, which are evidence of Christian character available to all. The fruits, not the gifts, measure the fullness of the Spirit.

As the Holy Spirit ministers power to Christ’s servants for proclamation (Acts 1:8), the Spirit also makes the character of Christ emerge in a growing way. The living Spirit struggles in the souls of Christians to bring out a quality of life experienced only by those who walk in the Spirit. These qualities are called the fruit of the Spirit.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. (Galatians 5:22-25) We are commanded to seek the fullness of the Spirit in the common worship of the Church (Ephesians 5:18ff.). We are to manifest the gifts imparted and the fruit bestowed by the Spirit. We believe in the Holy Spirit.

The reality of freedom in Christ. Freedom in Christ is a basic life principle in the Covenant Church. No one can be free in total independence, apart from right relationships to God and other people. Freedom is a gift of God in Christ to all who are willing to receive it from his hand. “If you continue in my word,” said Jesus, “. . . you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31b-32).

Christ sets us free by delivering us from the *power* of sin to condemn, control, and destroy. It is not to sinlessness that our experience bears witness, but to that glorious liberty of the children of God who know in the midst of their sin that Jesus died and rose to forgive them.

But there is more. Christ also moves us by the power of his Spirit into a whole new realm—a new kingdom, where light and life prevail and darkness no longer reigns. “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1a). The believer can actually be empowered to serve God’s will for his or her life in the world.

The key to freedom, then, as Covenanters have understood it, is to be “in Christ.” By his grace, he is able to make a person, as Luther says, into “a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.” At the same time, he is able to make the same person “a perfectly dutiful servant of all subject to all.”

It is in the creative tension between that lordly and that servantlike spirit—with Christ as the focus—that true freedom is to be found. God wants his children to be themselves, and he gives them that right. Yet what he gives is always for a purpose—that they might serve not themselves, but his mission in the world and *the body* into which he has brought them by his grace.

Historically, Covenanters have honored that tension—if not always and everywhere, at least in crucial

moments when faith and fellowship were at stake. They have understood—if not always accepted the fact—that God’s word is sovereign over every human interpretation of it, including their own. And understanding this, they have been free to allow for differences of opinion where the biblical record itself can be differently read. Though such freedom has often led to controversy—over how to interpret the Lord’s second coming, for example, or practice baptism and observe the Lord’s Supper, or understand the precise nature of biblical inspiration—it has never led to a denial of the basic truths of Scripture in any of those areas. It has kept Covenanters together in times of strain when it would have been far easier to break fellowship and further divide the body.

The same creative tension manifests itself in areas of practical church membership and everyday Christian living wherever Covenanters gather. Their concern for the unity of the whole Church wrestles with their faith in the congregational principle, and vice versa; their deeply felt desire for consistency in life and witness struggles with their innate fear of creeds and codes where the Scriptures have not spoken clearly; and their desire to cooperate—to “covenant” with each other—competes with a hesitance to adopt concepts and programs that limit their individual freedom.

To many, such freedom is no freedom at all. They would rather have all the marching orders clearly defined from the beginning, preferably by someone on whom they could lay the whole burden of responsibility. It is not easy to be free. To seek freedom for its own sake is to lose it. What matters are the relationships—to God, to oneself, to one another, to one’s work, and to life in the world—that beget freedom or prevent it.

Covenanters cherish this freedom in Christ and recognize, as one of our forebears put it, that freedom is a gift, the last of all gifts to mature. Full maturity awaits the day when the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ, when he shall reign forever and ever.

From all that has been said in this booklet, it should be clear that the Evangelical Covenant Church is a pilgrim church. Covenanters believe with the writer to the Hebrews that this world is not their home, and they look forward with eager anticipation to “the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10).

Until he comes, they will continue to worship, work, and witness to the end that the whole earth may hear his voice and know of his love. Like their forebears, they leave the door to the future open, preferring life by God’s promise to life by human guarantees. With the Apostle Paul, they have renounced “the shameful things that one hides,” but “by the open statement of truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God” (2 Corinthians 4:2).

Covenanters believe the time is always right to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. For in every changing scene that awaits us, “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. . . . So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:17-20).

A Covenant hymn expresses both the joy of new life in Christ and the invitation that Covenanters love to give to all who are seeking him:

O let your soul now be filled with gladness,
your heart redeemed, rejoice indeed!
O may the thought banish all your sadness
that in his blood you have been freed,
that God’s unfailing love is yours,
that you the only Son were given,
that by his death he has opened heaven,
that you are ransomed as you are.

If you seem empty of any feeling,
rejoice—you are his ransomed bride!
If those you cherish seem not to love you
and dark assails from every side,
still yours the promise, come what may,
in loss and triumph, in laughter, crying,
in want and riches, in living, dying,
that you are purchased as you are.

It is a good every good transcending
that Christ has died for you and me!
It is a gladness that has no ending
therein God's wondrous love to see!
Praise be to you, O spotless Lamb,
who through the desert my soul are leading
to that fair city of joy exceeding,
for which you bought me as I am.

Peter Jonsson Aschan, 1726-1813

Tr. Karl A. Olsson, 1913-1996

The Covenant Hymnal: A Worshipbook, No. 494

* See Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*.

*Ulrich S. Leopold, ed., *Liturgy and Hymns* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), p. 53.

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3200 West Foster Avenue

Chicago, Illinois 60625

(773) 478-4676