

One of the central beliefs of the Covenant Church is the reality of freedom in Christ. We often say that as a church we focus on that which unites us—a clear faith in Jesus Christ—and not on the things that can wound and divide us. “If you continue in my word,” said Jesus, “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31-32). But what does this look like in day-to-day living? What does it mean in our Christian walk to be free in Christ? We invited ten Covenant pastors, laypersons, missionaries, and educators to share what the reality of freedom in Christ means to them.

# Understanding Freedom

## Kerith Weld

To find true freedom in Christ we must first have some understanding of who we are created to be in him. From early childhood our identities are forged by many forces. Among these influences are religious beliefs, our surrounding social cultures, and our own families, to name a few.

I grew up in a loving Christian

family, which truly was a gift; however, I was also raised in an environment where women had their “special role.” I was taught that my place as a woman was mostly to be a submissive and silent partner in the church and home. Men were the leaders and decision makers. Anyone who knows me is laughing out loud right now—obviously these ideals didn’t work for me and couldn’t because of the person-



Kerith Weld

ality and identity God had created for me and certainly for all women. I gained a reputation for being a bit of a rebel as I questioned and argued with my parents and church leaders.

I realize that freedom in Christ represents many things to each of us and this is also true for me. Praise God that I am now set free in the truth that I am an equal opportunity daughter of Jesus Christ and there is no doubt about it! Galatians 3:28 says, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” ■

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**Kerith Weld** is a Covenant missionary in Mexico.

## Bob Hoey

“The Covenant Church has understood that God’s word is sovereign over every human interpretation of it—including its own” (*Covenant Affirmations* 2005, p. 19).

Coming from outside the Evangelical Covenant Church about a dozen years ago, I began investigating these things, and statements like this one arrested, gripped, surprised, and convicted me. As the Lenten hymn suggests, “sometimes it causes me to tremble!”

Could there be a group of Christ followers so mature and secure in their faith as to say, “We don’t have all the answers. The gospel of Jesus Christ is so big that we couldn’t possibly claim to have inerrant interpretation and practice on all secondary matters, however important”? Could this group at the same time maintain a high and reverent view of Scripture and the authority of God’s word? Could it seek and save us who are lost, calling us into a lifelong formation of discipleship as followers of Jesus?

Could this same group give one another freedom to follow Jesus, not in identical, cookie-cutter fashion, not simply following someone else who is



following Christ, but truly becoming like Christ?

Could we be like spokes in a wagon wheel with Jesus as the hub, recognizing that only as we get close to him do we draw closer to one another?

In 1999, our church, Messiah Church in Detroit, was received into the Covenant by adoption. Our congregation no more has all the answers than I do as a pastor and Christ follower. It has been great to be joined to a denomination that feels the same way.

We are free to follow Jesus the best way we know how, and to love one another by extending that same freedom.

“I am a friend to all who fear you” (Psalm 119:63, TNIV). ■

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**Bob Hoey** is pastor of Messiah Church in Detroit.

## Kris Carlson Bruckner

My freedom in Christ is a reality that allows me to be more honest with myself. The truth of the “safety” of Christ’s love, grace, and forgiveness makes me free to tell the truth about—and face—my sin: conflicted loyalties, manipulative motives, or misplaced anger. My freedom in Christ has helped me face my own culpability in disagreements and bad attitudes, lessening (at least to some degree!) my urge for self-preservation

and rationalization. The freedom comes when I am able to recognize my sin, and my need for Christ in the midst of my weakness. It is ironic freedom, and gift-freedom, because it comes only when I can admit that old confession from the catechism, “I confess that I am in bondage to sin and cannot free myself.”

In Christ, I am also free to be honest about my limitations and fears. For many years, deeply schooled in the high ideals of the Sermon on the Mount, I felt I could never do enough to serve God. I often fell short or failed in my many earnest attempts to help people or to be generous or to think of others more highly than myself. This idealism became a sort of bondage for me. Only when I realized, in my late thirties, that Christ needed to free me, as well as everyone else, did I have a sense of freedom that acknowledged my limitations. Jesus came so that I would be free to love others as a created human being. It was freeing to realize there were things I might never be able to change and that it is not a sin to have human limitations. Quite the opposite. These are the personal ways I have been freed by Christ’s love. Free to confess, free to say I can’t do everything, and free to serve and love without obligations and constraints. ■



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**Kris Carlson Bruckner** is an adjunct professor at North Park Theological Seminary and attends Edgebrook Covenant Church in Chicago. ▶

## Dawn Burnett

“Hi, we’re looking for a church. What does your church teach about \_\_\_\_\_?” At Prairie Hills Covenant Church we answer such questions in light of the Covenant’s emphasis on freedom in Christ. We refer to the resolutions on the Cov-



enant website, but we also make clear that there are people in our congregation from a wide variety of viewpoints and that we don’t try to make people conform in every particular.

Valuing our freedom in Christ means we intentionally resist the desire to control other people that is so endemic to fallen humans. Although we hold to Scripture and the historic faith of the church, we have the maturity to accept the variety of opinion on many issues that aren’t absolutely central—politics, worship styles, baptism practices.

These topics carry great emotional weight, and because of that, people feel the urge to persuade others to think as they do. Open discussion is good, but we cannot use church authority or even the desire to “fit in” to a church to pressure people.

Upholding freedom in Christ means that, as pastors, we are careful about expressing our own views. When we adopted our daughter, Althea, from China, we had to decide—baptism or dedication? After much prayer and discussion, we made a decision, and

then we wrote an article for the congregation explaining that decision and affirming both courses of action.

Valuing freedom, we do not as a church officially endorse voter guides. Individuals are welcome to pass things out, wear buttons, and start up lively conversations at the potluck, but we try to avoid anything that looks like official sanction (e.g., inserts in the bulletins). We don’t want anyone to feel they don’t belong because of how they choose to vote. The variety and the challenge to live together in love are both precious gifts. ■

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**Dawn Burnett** is co-pastor of Prairie Hills Covenant Church in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

## Max Lee

I never forgot the day when my Spanish teacher in high school rocked my world. The class was reading a novella about an impoverished family who immigrated to the United States. When Mr. Pacheco asked me about my thoughts concerning the ending, I remarked that I felt some sadness. “It’s a bit tragic how the children don’t appreciate their mother and what she sacrificed to...” Before I could say another word, Mr. Pacheco turned around, pointed an accusing finger, and shouted: “Maximiliano Juan Lee, I’m so glad you said that. Because I don’t care how successful you are in life, if you do not know what compassion is, you will be nothing! Nothing!” I was shocked. Where did this out-



burst come from? I thought: “¿Qué es tu problema? Why are you yelling at me in Spanish class?”

But looking back, I’m grateful for what Mr. Pacheco said that day, and he was right: I did not have much compassion. I was a gunner. I had an agenda to achieve and pave my own illustrious path. I thought pursuing my ambitions was true freedom, but I did not know how enslaved to them I was until I entered college. Through the outreach of a Baptist student group at the University of California, Berkeley, I surrendered my life to Christ and experienced a most profound paradox. When I lived my own way, I did not feel free at all. Instead I was anxious and haunted by the drive to succeed. But when I surrendered my autonomy to God, I was liberated (Galatians 5:1). I no longer had to prove my significance to the world. Instead I felt free to start loving and serving my neighbor (Galatians 5:13). It is this same freedom that spurs me in my teaching today. It is a freedom that allows me to say “No” to selfish me, and “Yes” to the pressing needs of others. ■

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**Max Lee** is associate professor of New Testament at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago.

## Andy Larsen

Freedom in Christ as practiced and encouraged in the Covenant is a precious gift. But I’d like my words to be more than an advertisement for “I love the Covenant,” because as soon as we brag about our denominational club, I get claustrophobic.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:17-18, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (TNIV).

I am both an artist and a Covenant minister who works in interfaith bridge-building with Muslims. Free-



Andy Larsen

dom in Christ gives me tremendous latitude to explore God's limitless creative expression throughout the warp and woof of his creation. That includes relationships I'm building with Muslims as well as visuals I capture with my camera.

As I work with Muslims I often bump into other Christians who are uncomfortable outside a certain theological box. They want to nail down doctrinal points with Muslims, or with me, before relationships are established, short-circuiting the chance to truly engage beyond hackneyed stereotypes. In the Covenant I find a freedom to explore the landscape of culture and religion, how Muslims live and practice their daily faith, without prejudging meaning and motive. This yields a wonderful platform to build open relationships of trust where I can engage in substantive interchange. My relationship with Christ provides a secure anchor that lets me paint outside the lines, trusting the Holy Spirit to guide each step of the way.

Dutch statesman and theologian Abraham Kuyper famously said, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'"

"For we are God's handiwork, cre-

ated in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10, TNIV). ■

**Andy Larsen** is a Covenant minister working with the Mosaics Project in inter-religious dialogue. He lives in Seattle where he attends Quest Church.

## Walter Gast

To celebrate freedom in Christ can mean being in a church fellowship where at last I can express my belief in infant baptism or perhaps in a non-premillennial view of Christ's return. I know that is real.

Freedom in Christ is a precious thing. It was precious for the Apostle Paul too. He tells the Galatians, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.



Walter Gast

Stand firm, then..." (5:1, TNIV).

Freedom implies that we are free *from* something that bound us in the past. For us this may mean freedom from a kind of burdensome legalism or from a crippling fear or nagging guilt.

The kind of freedom I celebrate has not come suddenly and dramatically like that of a Corri ten Boom or a Natan Sharansky who, after years in concentration camps, were suddenly told, "You're free. You can go home." My freedom has come more gradually, though it is just as real.

The freedom I celebrate is a freedom from preoccupation with hurts

and resentments of my distant past—hurts that seemed to cripple me, hurts that stemmed from a lack of affirmation. That hunger for affirmation and approval seemed to enslave me for many years. They affected everything, including my effectiveness as a parent. I just couldn't get free from them.

But I have learned that "if my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up," as the psalmist says (27:10). This is a glorious freedom. God does not abandon us. In fact, he is the great affirmer. He frees us from being slaves and treats us as his children. The Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 8:15, "The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father'" (TNIV). This is wonderful! This recognition of being adopted by God, and being freed from the hurts of the past has been a long and wonderful process for me. It is a freedom I celebrate.

You may wonder how this process took place. Much of it has come—and continues to come—through meditation and prayer. However, as you might expect, people were involved in my healing too. I am greatly indebted to the love and wisdom of caring women and men, both colleagues and counselors, who have helped me to step out into this freedom. ■

**Walter Gast** is a member of Winnetka Covenant Church in Wilmette, Illinois.

## Beth Ernest

Christ unites us in our theological differences, so I often share bread and wine with people of differing views. Some disagreements are of no real consequence, but one, at least, directly impacts my call and livelihood.

Individuals are free to interpret scriptural texts regarding female submission positively, while at the same time interpreting adjoining passages on slavery negatively. Citing Covenant



Beth Ernest

freedom, churches may disregard our denomination’s resolution to consider both male and female candidates for pastoral ministry. I serve alongside some colleagues who maintain belief in the spiritual headship of men.

Because of our Covenant freedom, we coexist and, I hope, share mutual respect in other areas. Ironically, that same Covenant freedom to interpret Scripture is what allowed women in our denomination to be ordained in the first place. Covenant freedom inspires eloquence in many of our leaders on behalf of women clergy. It blesses me with the friendship of colleagues who enrich my life and ministry and has provided support from gender-blind lay leaders. For all that, I am profoundly grateful.

As a child at Zion Covenant Church in Jamestown, New York, I was inspired by Gertrude Joÿson, our immensely talented parish worker. She was, to me, as much a pastor as our “real” pastor, Eldon H. Joÿson, a man who exercised his freedom to encourage me in my calling. Would Gert have sought ordination had that path been open for her? I don’t know where Covenant freedom would have taken her, especially in that day. How will our view of freedom change as we learn more about the unchanging, yet ever more revealed, grace and truth of God? ■

**Beth Ernest** is the interim pastor of Trinity Covenant Church in Livonia, Michigan.

## Jim Peterson

Living with roots in two cultures often allows me to see things from two distinctly different perspectives.

Freedom is one such “thing.” When I’m in the United States, I am always reminded of how much Americans love to talk about freedom. I also note that in the American perspective the word *freedom* is almost always followed by the word *to*. Freedom tends to be defined by way of the things that we are free to do.

In Japan I don’t hear people talk about freedom nearly as much; but when I do, it is more often followed by the word *from*. The emphasis tends to be on the things from which we are set free.



Jim Peterson

Scripture certainly reminds us that God has chosen to give us free will; the freedom to choose to live and act as we will (and face the consequences). Nevertheless, my hunch is that freedom in Christ has more to do with being liberated, set free—from the wages of sin, from the power of sin, and from my own inability to fight back and resist it.

My prayer is that people in Japan will hear the gospel of Jesus Christ and come to experience the freedom offered by Christ. Freedom from fear, freedom from hopelessness, freedom from loneliness, freedom from meaninglessness. ■

**Jim Peterson** is a Covenant missionary to Japan.



Marcia Carlson Corner

## Marcia Carlson Corner

When I was a teenager, I thought for sure that everything in life fit into nice, neat boxes and categories. I thought for sure that the things of God and the world were crystal clear, right and wrong, good and bad. And I also thought for sure that by the time I was as old as I am now, I’d have it all figured out. But as I experience more of life, I’m finding that the more I know, the more I realize I don’t know!

Freedom in Christ allows me to be okay with not knowing everything because it pushes me to seek truth, justice, and love in each church, community, and situation. I may land at a different point on the theological spectrum from my family, my high-school youth group friends, or my college’s InterVarsity community, but that is okay because one thing always stays the same—my commitment to love God with my whole heart, soul, and mind, and to love my neighbor as myself. Freedom in Christ lets me be who I am today and change my mind tomorrow. Freedom in Christ allows me to listen to someone’s story, learn from his or her experience, and make sense of my own story within the larger context of God’s story. Freedom in Christ gives me the gift of being transformed as I learn more about God’s word and God’s purposes in the world. Freedom in Christ allows me to be continually refined into the person God has created me to be. ■

**Marcia Carlson Corner** attends Salem Covenant Church in Washington Depot, Connecticut.