



Essential Elements

There is a distinct ethos to the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC). It is something you can sense. It transcends location and style. An earlier generation called it “Covenant mystique,” a phrase popularized by Karl Olsson, former president of North Park University.

Pastor Paul Cunningham once gave me a bottle of cologne. He affectionately changed the label to read “Covenant Mystique.” Not being a cologne wearer, I’ve never dabbed it on. But if you were to place a few drops of the ethereal idea of Covenant mystique into a spectrometer to do a chemical analysis, what might it reveal? The presence of four elements, which in their particular interaction result in the distinctive spirit characteristic of the ECC.

Each of these ingredients is a historic and abiding commitment of the ECC. They frame our life and practice. *The uniqueness is not any one in isolation but what they produce in combination.* If you were to remove any of these, you would fundamentally alter both who we have been and who we seek to be.

First, we are a biblical people. This traces to the historic influence of the Protestant Reformation. Among other emphases, the Reformation recovered the idea of *sola scriptura*, “Scripture alone,” as the highest authority in the life of the church, not a person or office. This commitment is captured in our phrase, “Where is it written?” By this we mean, “What does the Bible say?” We humbly search Scripture and then humbly do our best to align with its truth as authoritative.

Second, we are a devotional people. Intellectual assent to truths *about* God in the Bible is not the same as a living faith *in* God. God invites us not to a dry study of words on a page. God invites us into relationship through the grace of Jesus Christ. The historic influence is Pietism, the particular renewal movement in Sweden from which the ECC was ultimately birthed. In contrast to intellectual assent to a creed or set of beliefs, Pietism recovered the sense of cultivating a deeply personal faith in all the moments of life. This commitment is captured in the question, “How goes your walk with the Lord?”

Third, we are a missional people. It is not enough to know about God. It is not enough even to know God. We are called to join God in

God’s mission to the world. The Moravians are the historical influence. They were instrumental in sparking the Swedish renewal movement. They holistically passed on a heart for both lost and hurting people, doing it with hope and joy. This is captured in an early name for Covenant people: Mission Friends. We have sought to be gracious friends in Christ, united for mission.

Finally, we are a connectional people. Even joining God in mission is not enough. We do it best by joining together. That sentiment stands behind the term “Covenant.” We use it to denote our commitment to one another, living in partnership and mutuality. When faced with the question of whether to form a new movement in 1885, the churches represented resoundingly affirmed the value of life together to do more together. The text of the very first sermon preached at that organizational meeting was Psalm 119:63, “I am a companion of all who fear you.” It is that same spirit of companionship which gives rise to the name of this magazine.

Biblical. Devotional. Missional. Connectional. The interplay of these commitments, more than doctrine and structure, has given us our bearings. We are less than the ECC if we lose focus on any of these. Their enduring interaction gives rise to our distinctive spirit.

At our twenty-fifth anniversary in 1910, President C. V. Bowman looked back over the first quarter century. He attempted to describe what characterized this fledgling movement. He called his address, “About the Principles of Mission Friends.” He basically enumerated these same four elements. One hundred years later, we affirm that we really are a movement of intersecting principles, living at the convergence of love for God, love for God’s word, love for God’s world, and love for God’s people.

In his essay, “Images in Covenant Beginnings,” Eric Hawkinson, dean of the seminary from 1949 to 1961, wrote, “our weakness in sharp organization and dogmatic definitions might well be our strength if we have the courage to be ourselves in the strong surrounding headwinds.”

I put it this way: being a principled people of principles will lead us in mission than being a dogmatic people of dogma. ■

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