



Recommendation on Covenant Resource Paper: FREEDOM, UNITY, AND RESPONSIBILITY IN COVENANT LIFE AND MISSION

“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” (PSALM 133:1).¹

“I am a companion of all who fear you, of those who keep your precepts” (PSALM 119:63).

“Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others”

(PHILIPPIANS 2:4).

“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love

become slaves to one another” (GALATIANS 5:13).

“May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (ROMANS 15:5–7).

THE CHALLENGE OF OUR PRESENT TIME

Across the history of the Evangelical Covenant Church, at moments when faith and fellowship were at stake, the commitment to freedom, within biblical authority and unity in Christ has kept our family of faith from fracturing unnecessarily while retaining the integrity of our fellowship in Jesus Christ. As our society becomes increasingly rife with division—from political polarization and economic inequalities to ruptures along lines of worldview, race, class, religion, and geography—the Covenant’s motto, “United in Christ” (Conjuncti in Christo), adopted at the formation of the church in 1885, our Covenant Affirmation regarding biblical authority, and the reality of freedom in Christ have been severely tested. We have aspired to pursue God’s mission together in the world while acknowledging that we hold diverse theological expressions within historic orthodoxy.

Disunity in the church undermines our witness to the power of the cross to reconcile people to one another, rebuilding the walls of division that Christ’s death broke down. The bitter fruits of negative partisanship challenge Covenanters, as brothers and sisters in Christ struggle to love, understand, and accept one another, within and between diverse congregations. In this context, even those foundational commitments—to the centrality of Christ, to Scripture’s authority, to unity for the

¹ All Scripture references are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

sake of mission, and to freedom in Christ—can be polarized and used against one another as false alternatives or feared rivals rather than being woven together in a creative and dynamic tension.

A pressing tension at the conception of this paper was the proliferation of conversations and controversies within the Covenant regarding biblical theology, polity, and ethics addressing same-sex unions and Christian marriage and the welcome and discipleship of LGBTQ+ persons in congregational life. To address these challenges, President Gary Walter proposed a Covenant Resource Paper that would reflect afresh, not on human sexuality² itself, but on the historical rationale for Covenant freedom and our responsibility to God's word in Scripture. This was advanced in 2018 through the Board of Ordered Ministry and commissioned by the Covenant Executive Board. Since that commissioning, many additional pressing concerns have further strained unity within and among our Covenant congregations, including heightened negative political partisanship, long-standing racial inequities, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, this resource paper has evolved to incorporate the themes of freedom, unity, and responsibility. What hangs in the balance is our capacity to remain united in faith, hope, and love in pursuit of God's mission. As Covenanters we seek first God's kingdom of reconciling justice and healing righteousness (MATTHEW 6:33). The whole mission of the whole Church for the whole world calls us to embrace a shared practice of discipleship with generous hospitality and radical holiness for all God's people.

As Christian denominations fracture over disputes regarding politics, polity, sexuality, race, and more, it is critical that we ask ourselves: How will we, as Covenant people and congregations united in mission, continue to live and serve together in the unity of the Spirit, bearing witness amid these particular challenges in congregational decision making? How will we obey Jesus's call to steward and maintain our unity in Christ within a divided church and world? Will we accept the church being divided according to social castes and political tribes, or will we proactively pursue peace and reconciliation in keeping with our founding ethos and vision (PSALM 119:63; CF. ROMANS 12:18; EPHESIANS 4:3)?

At various points in Covenant history, we have returned to reflect on our foundational values in light of new and repeated challenges. This resource paper continues in that tradition, reflecting again on Covenant freedom and our responsibility to God's word in Scripture and to one another in the church. In light of present political and social challenges that divide our nations and the churches within them, this paper addresses our diverse Covenant congregations and members. It seeks to offer resources for us to live and serve together as one body in faith and mission, extending freedom and acting responsibly toward one another. The commission and scope of this paper does not directly concern sexuality, which would require a distinct process of research and discernment.

² For a suite of Covenant resources on human sexuality, go to <https://covchurch.org/resource/embrace/>. For a copy of the 2007 Board of Ministry teaching paper on human sexuality and the marriage ethic, go to <https://covchurch.org/resource/human-sexuality-paper/>

This paper intends rather to resource the Covenant in how we can remain together while we deliberate and discern on matters that are primary and secondary to our unity in Christ.

Covenant Resource Papers, as described in the Covenant's bylaws, are not binding authoritative statements but rather serve as formational teaching resources to generate and facilitate communal discernment. This paper was not commissioned to resolve every tension between people, positions, or perspectives. Rather, it suggests a path for how we as Covenant people and congregations might move forward together, bearing witness to the gospel of Christ and embodying the kingdom of God in our ever-more polarized context. This paper seeks to highlight a pathway for Covenanters to talk to one another, to listen charitably to the pains and fears our brothers and sisters carry—and so to bear one another's burdens and serve one another in faith, hope, and love—so that together we can seek God's glory and our neighbors' good.

The authors pray that Covenant congregations and Covenant people reading this paper are inspired by a vision of the church that is not divided along predictable fault lines of theological or political worldviews, but is ever-more-fully a fellowship in which we are deeply committed to one another in a holy community that reflects the oneness of our Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, working in unity and mission to heal and reconcile the whole world—including us to one another. The authors pray that each Covenant congregation and person would be committed to living in the creative tension between our deep commitment to God's word and to being companions of all who fear God, including those who hold interpretations of biblical texts and ethics different from our own. The desire is to be a hospitable church where those who disagree with us charitably on points of interpretation and doctrine are not regarded as enemies but welcomed as fellow pilgrims journeying toward God's countercultural kingdom. As Covenanters we confess that "in your light we see light" (PSALM 36:9B), and we also recognize that our knowledge is partial (1 CORINTHIANS 13:9-12), and our love is imperfect.

CONJUNCTI IN CHRISTO (UNITED IN CHRIST): THE CALL TO UNITY

"How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!" (PSALM 133:1, NIV).

The visible unity of the church, as Christ's one body, stands as a public testimony to the Father and the Father's love. Jesus prayed for the unity of the family of God, "that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me...that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (JOHN 17:21, 23).

Our unity in Christ is a priceless gift, a sacred trust we steward; it is not ours to create or to set aside. It is like an olive tree we must carefully cultivate if we are to harvest its healing fruit. In Ephesians 4, the Apostle Paul urges the church to make "every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one

hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (EPHESIANS 4:3–6). In becoming children of the one God, we join one family with many diverse siblings. As Psalm 133:1 expresses so beautifully, “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!” Christian unity is centered in Christ, the living Word. While we do not seek unity at all costs, we “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit” (Romans 12:18) for the sake of Christ.

While the Covenant both emerges from and adheres to historic Christianity, we have given extra emphasis in our movement to the unity of the redeemed in Christ in the community of faith. Our name “Covenant” references the commitment we make to one another and to cooperate in the work of the gospel as mission friends. This commitment to freedom in Christ ensures that Christian unity is neither the suppression of diversity nor its denial; it is neither legislated uniformity nor tepid compromise to a lowest common denominator. Rather, Christian unity preserves distinction, drawing diverse expressions into an overarching relationship of love and mutual participation. This is one way we may reflect the unity in diversity of the Triune God. Both diversity and unity are preserved by faithful love.

Our unity is like that of an orchestra with its varied musicians. Christ, our conductor, unites us in himself and directs our performance through the Holy Spirit as we share the Father’s love. In orchestrating such a great unity of the Spirit, Christ labors with each of us to center our participation in the body and the mission by keeping us in tune and tempo with the Spirit. Just as an orchestra plays in unity by keeping eyes on the conductor, so we can only maintain unity in the church if our eyes are both opened by Christ and remain fixed on him at all times. There is no unity in Christ apart from abiding in Christ. Abiding is not passive; abiding is our active occupation as disciples, letting the word dwell in us richly and work through us faithfully.

And yet the church too often fails to be an exception to the broader polarization and division of our time, leading to sad and bitter divisions not only as hardened denominational distinctions but also, and often more painfully, within denominations and within and between local churches. Instead of bearing witness to “one body and one Spirit...one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4), the church may differ little from the world in this respect. We confess that in the Covenant we have not been immune to these broader divisive forces, and lament that deep pain has resulted, leading to lingering wounds, loss of trust, and strained credibility.

One aim and hope of this paper is to confess this divisiveness as sin and to encourage repentance, charting an amended path forward in a renewed commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ, to love one another, and to renew our common mission. In light of the reality of these divisions and the deep wounds that exist—not simply “out there” but within and among us—it is also timely to reexamine the resources of our history that might equip us in our time—and to renew these

foundational commitments amid the pressing challenges of our day. For it was in just such a time of deep division that the Pietist movement emerged, out of which our Covenant was birthed.

HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS: FOUNDING COMMITMENTS TO SCRIPTURE, FREEDOM, AND UNITY

“I am a companion of all who fear you, of those who keep your precepts” (PSALM 119:63).

Formal confessional statements, like the Lutheran Augsburg Confession or Reformed Westminster Confession, defined the boundaries of each tradition in the period following the death of the original Protestant reformers in the sixteenth century. Hope for the reunification of the western church was abandoned, and the theological divisions between Protestant traditions were solidified and deepened. These confessions focused on narrowing doctrinal distinctions. Consequently, the doctrines that distinguished traditions gained heightened importance and rigidity. What were once observed as distinct and complementary panes in a stained-glass window became dividing walls. As the theological divisions of the Protestant Reformation merged with political divisions among emerging European nation states, vicious wars took millions of lives.

In the wake of this destruction, the German and Swedish Pietists (among others) called for a return to the core reformations sought by Martin Luther: the priesthood of all believers, the individual’s personal appropriation of transformative faith, and the dynamism of the living word of God in Scripture. They sought to focus on the new life in Christ that united believers rather than the doctrinal debates that divided them. They did not deny the importance of what Christians believe but rather insisted that knowledge cannot stand alone without transformation; the objective truths of the gospel must be subjectively experienced. They believed that true Christian life was not a result of one’s head knowledge alone or one’s citizenship (the state church model), but rather of new life in Christ. They believed that true Christian unity emerged not from legislated doctrinal uniformity but rather from a shared experience of regeneration—a new birth in a living hope through faith in Jesus Christ.

While these emphases of the broader Pietist movement served to relativize the role of confessional statements, the atonement controversy provoked by Swedish Lutheran pastor P.P. Waldenström in 1872 called into question the value of confessional statements as such. After an extensive study of Scripture’s teaching on the atonement—having posed the question often repeated in the Covenant, “Where is it written?”—Waldenström concluded that the atonement in Christ reconciled a sinful humanity to God rather than reconciling God to humanity.³ This conclusion conflicted with the Augsburg Confession, the standard of orthodoxy for the Church of Sweden. Consequently, many who sympathized with Waldenström’s conclusions were barred from Lutheran pulpits and communion tables, in both Sweden and Swedish America. Thus, many who formed the Covenant

³ For Waldenström’s “Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity,” see *Covenant Roots: Sources and Affirmations* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1999), 97–110.

had experienced firsthand the painful consequences of exclusion when confessional statements functioned as a boundary for church membership and participation. They lamented the narrowing of church and shared mission by required doctrinal uniformity, resulting in genuine Christians remaining outside. Moreover, they were concerned that strict adherence to confessional statements might limit rather than ensure faithful interpretation of Scripture—and even replace Scripture’s authority with an authoritative human interpretation.

In February 1885, delegates gathered in Chicago representing congregations from two Lutheran synods, the Mission Synod and the Ansgar Synod. Both synods were breakaways from the older and larger Augustana Synod, and all three synods held the Augsburg Confession as their standard of orthodoxy. In deciding collectively to form something new, a Covenant, the delegates adopted as their sole confession, “the Holy scriptures of the Old and New Testament, as the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.”⁴ This decision was very intentional; in adopting Scripture alone as the confession, they were leaving behind the Augsburg Confession as the boundary of their theology and fellowship. “The Covenant Church has understood that God’s word is sovereign over every human interpretation of it—including its own.”⁵ This sole confession was not a freedom from Scripture but rather a means of focusing on Scripture itself, read in context, rather than any human interpretation of Scripture expressed in confessional form.

FREEDOM IN CHRIST: LOVINGLY EXTENDED, RESPONSIBLY EXERCISED

“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love” (GALATIANS 5:13).

“Freedom” can mean many things, from political freedom to freedom from sin or oppression. The freedom described in Covenant Affirmations (“the reality of freedom in Christ”) refers to something very particular: the freedom we extend to one another in the places we differ in our understanding of God’s word. This freedom enables the true freedom that is found in submission to God’s will and preserves the unity of Christ’s body. The Covenant’s historical commitment to freedom in Christ is not limitless nor an end in itself but rather exists to preserve the unity, clarify the orthodoxy, and extend the faithfulness of the church. It exists to enable the church’s hearing and obeying of God’s will in Scripture, and to guard our responsibility to cling to Christ and to one another in community. The Preamble to the Covenant Constitution describes this freedom “as a gift that preserves personal conviction yet guards against an individualism that disregards the centrality of the Word of God and the mutual responsibilities and disciplines of the spiritual community.”⁶

The hope of Covenant freedom is that we might offer “to one another theological and personal freedom where the biblical and historical record seems to allow for a variety of interpretations of

4 *Covenant Roots: Sources and Affirmations* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1999), 15.

5 *Covenant Affirmations* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2005), 19.

6 The Evangelical Covenant Church, Constitution and Bylaws, “Preamble.”

the will and purposes of God.⁷ The intent is that such freedom might allow continued fellowship and ministry together across differences that have historically or might presently divide Christians from one another. Biblical expressions of freedom in regard to matters that should not divide Christians are found most clearly in Romans 14:1ff. and 15:1-3 and 1 Corinthians 7-10. In those passages Paul discusses a Christian's freedom in regard to marriage and singleness, what one may eat or drink and, more briefly, the observance of holy days. We are not to misconstrue freedom as license to commit immorality or to participate in idolatry (1 CORINTHIANS 10:23-24 AND ACTS 15). Mature freedom serves the weak and the vulnerable as Christ and his apostles have done for us (1 CORINTHIANS 11:1).

There are secondary areas in which, after careful study, earnest Christians do come to different conclusions on Scripture's teaching. It is in precisely these areas that extending freedom to one another enables us to remain united—and, as we remain united amid our diversity and the tensions of disagreement, preserve the possibility of growing in faithful obedience to God's word. In Christ, unity does not imply or require uniformity but allows for rich diversity. We value dialogue with one another to help us hear the full counsel of Scripture, praying for the illumination of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, Covenant "freedom in Christ" has especially focused on making adequate space for conscience and conviction to mature together in community. The Covenant has recognized that "Christian vitality has not always been maintained by the majority" and so has sought to respectfully consider dissenting voices.⁸

Respect for dissenting voices exists in dynamic tension with the responsibility of the Christian body to discern the Spirit of truth. Working together we are called to distill truth from error, to practice restorative discipline, and to train ourselves in godliness. As the Covenant understood in 1963, "Therefore, whether the body be one of our local congregations or the denomination itself or any other organization within the denomination, it must have some way of determining that its freedom remains within the bounds of biblical authority."⁹ In the polity of the Covenant this communal discernment rests in the authority of the Annual Meeting (congregational, conference, and denominational) and the elected bodies and leaders called and accountable to shepherd the church and to direct ministry and mission.

Such freedom and responsibility enable a living orthodoxy and application of faith and learning (HEBREWS 4:12). We do not attempt to fill in all the spaces in our Christian understanding with neat and simple answers. The same Spirit who inspired the authors of Scripture to write is present to illuminate its faithful application to our contemporary situation. Extending this freedom to one another protects and honors dissenting voices and enables godly diversity to flourish within the unity of the Spirit. Covenant freedom seeks to realize Christ's prayer for our unity (JOHN 17) and

7 *Covenant Affirmations*, 19.

8 *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom* (Chicago: Covenant Committee on Freedom and Theology, 1963), 13.

9 *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 14.

the Apostle Paul's counsel that we do everything to maintain this gift of unity in the bond of peace (EPHESIANS 4:3). Such extension of freedom to others also requires a faithful and reflective reading of Scripture that holds individual passages within the whole of Scripture.¹⁰ This is a profound call to respect truth and extend grace to those with whom we disagree in the name of a shared life in Christ and the creation of a gracious, loving community that reflects the profound unity of the Triune God.

Covenant freedom is exercised within the church as a fellowship of believers for the sake of improving our faithful reading of Scripture. But the flower of godly dissent bears the fruit of the Spirit. The personal exercise of dissent does not exist in isolation from the unity and discipline of the church. The stewardship of dissent requires wisdom and discernment. In the Covenant, dissent exists within and is accountable for what it proposes under the polity adopted by the Covenant. The people of God share the responsibility of exercising godly discernment and self-discipline. This is especially necessary when errors in teaching or practice threaten our witness, worship, and unified mission. Local congregations, regional conferences, denominational boards, and ultimately the Covenant Annual Meeting help us discern and determine that the exercise of freedom remains faithful and fruitful.

To be free then is not to be independent but to be devoted to one another in the bond of love, sharing in a common grace extended by the faith of Jesus Christ. That same responsible concern for unity may require restraints on the personal or local exercise of freedom. Since a principle of Christian freedom has as a primary aim the unity of Christian fellowship, there needs to be great care not to exercise such freedom in ways that damage or break fellowship (1 CORINTHIANS 8:7-13; ROMANS 14:13-23). "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another" (GALATIANS 5:13). Freedom in Christ is not selfishly demanded; it is selflessly given, stewarded for the building up of the body of Christ.

This is now and has always been a difficult and challenging freedom. Our stewardship of this freedom for more than 130 years has profoundly shaped the identity of our denomination. It has enabled sacramental unity between those who affirm the validity of infant baptism and those who hold to baptism only for believers. It has upheld theological unity among Christians holding diverse interpretations of the end times. It has upheld ethical unity among Christians holding diverse interpretations of justice and just war versus non-retaliation. It enabled the Covenant to weather controversies of the 1920s and 1950s over dogmas of biblical inspiration and interpretation that divided many other Protestant denominations. It has facilitated the Covenant's shift from a predominantly Swedish American denomination to a body increasingly reflecting the multiethnic mosaic of people that is the Covenant Church today.

Historically, we have understood primary doctrines of orthodoxy that shape our understanding of

¹⁰ See the first Covenant Resource Paper, *The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible* (2008).

salvation to follow the framework of the confession of the historic Church in the Apostles' Creed. "On the central issues of our faith, doctrine, and conduct, the biblical message is sufficiently clear: the creation of all things by God, humanity made in the divine image but fallen in sin, their consequent moral inability to achieve redemption, the incarnate and sinless life of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, his atoning death and resurrection, redemption through faith in him, the regenerative and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, and the promise of Christ's coming again to consummate his kingdom and judge the world. These affirmations constitute the essential core of the biblical message and are sufficiently clear for our salvation."¹¹

As stated earlier, the presenting tensions that occasioned this paper's commissioning surround the ongoing pastoral questions and ethical guidelines that arise from the biblical meaning of marriage and how best to welcome and disciple LGBTQ+ persons in our communities. How do the central issues of our faith, doctrine, and conduct bear on our understandings of sexual orientation, gender identity, marriage and parenting? Which of these qualify as primary or secondary matters in the Christian faith? In what ways are the ordering of our sexual relations connected to "the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit"? How should biblical perspectives about our bodies and marriage lead us in these questions? A review of existing Covenant resources can provide a helpful starting point.¹²

Our ongoing discernment involves the integration of beliefs and values all Covenanters hold dear: the commitment to biblical authority, the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves, the avoidance of sexual immorality, the honoring of chaste vocations in singleness and marriage, and the commitment to human dignity and rights. Some Covenanters fear that these may be discounted or compromised. These debates highlight both our values and our fears. Let us acknowledge them, recognizing the hopes and hurts behind them, naming them honestly in the church. Neither preemptive condemnation nor presumptive affirmation reflects the grace and liberation of Jesus Christ. Let us enter into genuine dialogue with one another, truly listening to both values and fears.

WEAVING FREEDOM, UNITY, AND RESPONSIBILITY TOGETHER

"Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." (PHILIPPIANS 2:4)

In exercising freedom and responsibility, we are accountable to God as we form disciples prospering in the work of the Lord. Both freedom and responsibility derive their necessity and purpose from the unity of the word of God and the royal law of love (James 2:8). Endowed with these gifts, we are responsible to build up the unity of the Church in the knowledge and love of God. To claim one is to claim the other also. There is no freedom in Christ without responsibility to Christ. The reverse is equally true. As beloved children of God we are both free and responsible. As siblings one to another in the body of Christ, all Covenanters are called to exercise these gifts in unity and in love.

¹¹ *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 10.

¹² See note 2.

In Christ, freedom, unity, and responsibility form a cord of essential strands that weave the strong bond of peace between us. Taken in isolation, any of the three (freedom, unity, or responsibility) can break down into distorted absolutist claims. Joined together they make possible the giving and receiving needed to live as one body in Christ.

In granting one another freedom in interpretation, we also hold one another accountable in application to the way of Jesus being practiced in our congregations. Covenanters find Scripture to be the only perfect rule for conduct, as well as faith and doctrine. In affirming the vows of baptism¹³ and vows of congregational membership, we promise to follow Christ as Lord by how we live among God's faithful people, hear God's word and share in the Lord's Supper, proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, and strive for justice and peace in all the earth. We promise to support the ministries of our church, including the conference and denomination to which we belong.¹⁴

Covenant congregations commit to work with each other in regional conferences and faithfully support the mission and ministries of each. Likewise Covenant ministers, in assuming the common vows of ordered ministry, pledge to live in conformity to Christ and his teachings, to be a faithful witness and wholesome example for God's people, to submit to the church's discipline, to pledge loyalty to and support for the Covenant and its mission, and to follow the ethical guidelines for Covenant ministers.¹⁵ These are all sacred vows voiced in the presence of God and one another. They qualify positively how freedom, unity, and responsibility work together in harmony in the Covenant Church. The burden and blessing of local church leadership, of all conference and Covenant boards, and of the Covenant Annual Meeting is to steward these commitments.

Freedom in interpretation does not exempt any individual or congregation from the fundamental koinonia of the church: our devotion to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, to prayer, to generosity, to acts of mercy, to doing justice, to mutual submission, and especially to the transcending law of love, which is the stem on which grow all the fruit of the Spirit. For both laity and clergy, the yoke of Jesus tethers disciples together in communal participation in the way of Christ because we form the body of Christ.

HOW THEN SHALL WE LIVE...TOGETHER?

“May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” (ROMANS 15:5-7).

¹³ *The Covenant Book of Worship* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 2003), 131.

¹⁴ *The Covenant Book of Worship*, 361.

¹⁵ *The Covenant Book of Worship*, 402.

At the denomination’s centennial anniversary in 1985, Covenant president Milton B. Engebretson could report that “the challenge to abandon [the Covenant’s] insistence on maintaining a mystique of freedom within the bounds of biblical Christianity and exchange it for a doctrinal system has ever been present. The fact that it has not been abandoned—even though it has been tested and altered by such challenges—puts it, I believe, in a unique position to influence the whole evangelical world on its path to unity and strength.”¹⁶ The need for unity and strength within the church is no less pressing today, and the Covenant remains in a unique position to contribute to the strengthening of Christ’s church amid the heightened polarizations of our time.

As previously stated, Covenant Resource Papers are not binding statements but rather serve as formational teaching resources to generate and facilitate communal discernment. This paper is an invitation to commit anew to our founding values described above, for the sake of our present and future unity, identity, obedience, and witness. At this juncture in our history, it is essential that we establish a listening posture from which we can invite the Holy Spirit to do God’s work in and through us as we cry out, “Lord, have mercy!” In the ways described in this section, every Covenanter and Covenant congregation is invited to remain in community, in conversation, and in mission with one another. If we are to live and serve together, to maintain the bond of unity as brothers and sisters within congregations, this is a solid starting posture. Certainly, it requires more than this, but it does not allow for less.

Every Covenanter is invited to begin with humble self-reflection. To those “who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else,” Jesus offered this parable (LUKE 18:9-14):

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.” But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Even as we lament divisions broadly, our goal should not first be to point out the sins or failures of others but first to recognize and repent of our own. Let us implore God’s mercy so that the Holy Spirit might work in us toward our transformation and through us toward a transformed church and world.

“God, have mercy on me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13). Humbly acknowledge and repent of thoughts, speech, and actions that have diminished Christian unity, denied freedom to

¹⁶ Milton Engebretson, “Foreword” to Karl A. Olsson, *Into One Body*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1986), vii.

others, or asserted personal freedom without due regard for the larger community. Ask for God’s Spirit to transform your thinking, speaking, and acting in the areas you have confessed. Where possible, seek reconciliation and repair of relationships with those you have injured.

Every Covenanter is invited to seek truth and transformation. The call to Christian unity—and to extend freedom for its sake—does not foreclose the reality of truth. It is not concession to the lowest common denominator for the sake of conflict avoidance. Nor does the simple fact of personal disagreement about any matter of theology or practice automatically entail that it is open for church-wide debate or disagreement. Racism and slavery once had their theological and biblical defenders, but faithful Christians of all denominations have recognized that one cannot simply “agree to disagree” about racism or slavery. There are issues of clear conviction where we must not give moral equivalence to all sides.

In the Covenant Church, “Where is it written?” remains our primary question as we seek to hear and obey God’s will. “We believe that the Bible is the place where God is to be met, where his forgiveness is proclaimed, and where his will is made known”¹⁷ and that “to read it properly, therefore, is to find it an altar where one meets the living God.”¹⁸ Christ is our living Bread (JOHN 6), Truth itself (JOHN 14:6), and we are called to come to him continually, to trust in him, to listen to him, and to follow his full teaching in a life of disciplined obedience. This is the way of freedom.

As we pursue the living Truth, it is imperative that we read Scripture within community since each of us sees in part (1 CORINTHIANS 13:9) and none of us alone has the final word on all matters of faith, doctrine, or conduct. Moreover, our Pietist roots remind us that it is insufficient merely to know or speak the truth; we must also do the truth. We must be transformed, moving beyond isolated statements or legislated changes to lived, communal transformation through the work of the Holy Spirit. This is the call to be doers of the word and not merely hearers (JAMES 1:22-25). This is a living faith in the risen Lord.

Reflect anew on the first Covenant Resource Paper, “The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible.”¹⁹ We encourage frequent encounter with God at the altar of Scripture, seeking to read “faithfully, communally, rigorously, charitably, and holistically, with commitments to grace, transformation, and mission.”²⁰

(See fuller descriptions within that paper.)

Every Covenanter is invited to honor every person as God’s image-bearer. One clear message of

17 *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 6.

18 *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 5.

19 Available at <https://covchurch.org/resource/covenant-resource-papers/>

20 *The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible*, 2.

God's word is that all people are equal in creation, equal in human dignity, equally addressed by the gospel, and equal in welcome before the cross and throne of the Lamb. This truth compels us to honor every person as created in God's image, and to extend to every person the life-giving gospel and ministries of the church. Christ's life and death is for all people, tearing down the dividing walls of hostility between diverse peoples and opening the ministry of reconciliation. The church must not rebuild the walls Christ himself tore down or reject someone whom Christ himself has welcomed. We are called to embody the radical hospitality of the kingdom of God in which the first are last and the last are first (MATTHEW 20:16).

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3). Regard every person as God's child, honoring God's image in them by treating them with the utmost respect and value. Assess how your congregation can more fully reflect gospel hospitality in its worship and ministries.

Every Covenanter is invited to hold fast to diversity in community. True unity preserves faithful diversity. As our society becomes increasingly polarized, we must be especially attentive to Christ's call to unity within the single family of God, in witness to the one gospel. We must actively resist the pull to reduce the one church of Christ, in which dividing walls are torn down, into affinity groups of shared thought, functionally disenfranchising those who disagree with the prevailing view. Our congregations should reflect the fullness of our local communities in ethnicity and socioeconomic standing. We cannot claim for ourselves the privilege of comfortable fellowship among those with whom we have only minor disagreements while failing to work for and offer to everyone the gift of freedom and responsibility to love one another in Christ. We cannot grasp what it means to love those with whom we disagree while failing to desire and strive for the liberation of those who are most different from us.

True community amid difference is not simply coexisting—sharing space in a pew or on a membership roster. True community requires that we listen to one another, that we know and actively bear one another's burdens—that our brother's or sister's burdens become our own. We are forced to break down stereotypes, surrender privileges, and see life from other points of view. This is a task of tearing down and of building up, a task that is messy...and beautiful! But it is a precondition for fulfilling the whole mission of the church. Our unity in Christ for the sake of witness and mission must be greater and more important to us than our differences, disagreements, or debates over secondary matters of interpretation.

Evaluate to what extent your congregation reflects the full diversity of your wider community ethnically, socioeconomically, politically, etc. Seek opportunities for shared mission and respectful conversation with people with whom you disagree. What can you learn from that person? How can you together pursue Christ's mission?

Every Covenanter is invited to maintain the practice of love in all things. The pursuit of unity does not circumvent disagreement or conflict. Yet it is imperative that if we disagree, we do so in love. No degree of conviction or perceived rightness excuses us from the command to love, not only our neighbor but also those whom we perceive as enemies. “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing” (1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-3).

It is crucial that we learn and practice respectful forms of conversation with each other around disputed matters, and that we speak respectfully both to and about one another in person, in absentia, and in social media. “Christians cannot discern soundly or witness winsomely while on the rhetorical attack against one another. Whatever convictions we hold or passions we feel, we must remember that at the other end of our words stand sisters and brothers—and that our words are overheard by a listening world.”²¹

If we find ourselves differing to a significant degree in how we read and understand Scripture’s meaning and application, we remain responsible for stewarding our disagreements in ways that avoid provoking division or expressing disrespect toward one another. We must resist making enemies out of our brothers and sisters in Christ, instead asking God to grow our love for each other. We must resist toxic polarities that caricature those who disagree with us, instead allowing Christ to develop mutual respect and affection among us. If the Covenant is to be an agent of God’s kingdom in the twenty-first century, we must learn anew to see one another as Christ sees us and to treat one another as Christ treats us: with mercy, grace, and love.

Commit to renewed obedience to Christ’s command that we love one another in imitation of and participation in his own limitless, sacrificial love (John 13:34; Ephesians 3:16-19) and to active cultivation of the Christlike love described in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7: curbing envy, boasting, arrogance, rudeness, irritability, and resentment in order to practice patience and kindness, to rejoice in the truth, and to bear, believe, hope, and endure all things. We encourage within Covenant communities the formal adoption of practices that embody charity in conversation and action.

Every Covenanter is invited to seek God’s grace for our common life, mission, and witness. Above all we must act and interact in conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit. This is not work we can accomplish with human effort. We need one another and together we need the Spirit of our Lord to help us keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We must make space for the Holy

²¹ Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, *Marriage, Scripture, and the Church: Theological Discernment on the Question of Same-Sex Union* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021), xiii.

Spirit to act and to transform. Apart from God we can do nothing. For this reason, this paper does not offer solutions to particular debates. Rather, it offers a starting point to prepare the way for God to act, forming and transforming us, as individuals and congregations bearing witness in local communities.

Commit to frequent prayer for the unity, fidelity, and witness of our denomination and every regional conference, congregation, and individual within it. Pray that the world would know we are Christ's disciples by our love for one another (John 13:35) and that God would be glorified in all we do and say.

Holy Father, whose incarnate Son prayed for his disciples that they would truly be one, as you and he are one, gather and uphold us in holy covenant, united in Christ, empowered by one Spirit, as true companions and friends, to obey the great commandment and the great commission, for the sake of God's glory and the pursuit of neighbor's good. Amen.

COVENANT RESOURCE PAPER WRITING TEAM

Appointed Members

Dr. Stephen Bilynskyj, Eugene, OR, Secretary
Doug Bixby, Attleboro, MA
Howard K. Burgoyne, Cromwell, CT, Chair
Donn Engebretson, Chicago, IL
Nilwona Nowlin, Chicago, IL
Dr. Hauna T. Ondrey, Chicago, IL (NPTS)

Ex-Officio Members

Angela Yee, Tustin, CA
Lance Davis ('18-'22), Chicago, IL
Herb Frost ('22-'23), Chicago, IL
Dr. John Wenrich ('18-'22), Vancouver, WA