

COVENANT AFFIRMATIONS

GROUP STUDY PART 1

Introduction

LEADERS GUIDE

The purpose of this study is to define the central beliefs of the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC). Developing a deep theological understanding of each point is NOT the goal. The goal is to familiarize attendees with the concept of the affirmations and how they relate to the family of congregations and our fellowship of individual believers within the ECC

In preparation for this study leaders should acquire and read ‘One Body ...Many Members’ the Covenant Church in historical perspective, by Philip J. Anderson available from Covenant Publications. You should also scan the document footnotes, all references are available on line.

In addition the study leader should study in depth, the booklet ‘Covenant Affirmations’ which is available from Covenant Publications. This booklet, a 22 page document, is the focus of this study and *should* be provided for each member of the group.

Start the study by reading and discussing the INTRODUCTION in the booklet ‘Covenant Affirmations’.

Insure that everyone in the group is comfortable and understanding of all the points of the introduction “PART 1” before proceeding to PART 2. It is essential to promote an environment of freedom in Christ in this study.

COVENANT AFFIRMATIONS

GROUP STUDY PART 1

PURPOSE:

The purpose of this study is to “provide an understanding of the context for the affirmation of our living faith for people both within and outside of our fellowship.”¹

WHY DO WE AFFIRM?

First we will see why our Fellowship is **not** anchored on doctrines, creeds or oaths.

We will start with Oaths.

DEFINITION: An oath is a solemn, usually formal, calling upon God to witness to the truth of what one says. (Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary)

An oath is a serious undertaking which virtually means taking the Lord’s name in a vow. Breaking an oath carries dire consequences and removes the one taking the oath from GRACE and places them under LAW.

From scripture: [**Ask for members of the group to volunteer to read the following scriptures and relate its meaning in the context of the definition and statement above.**]

Leviticus 19:12

“do not **swear** falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD”²

Zechariah 5:3

He asked me “What do you see”. I answered, “I see a flying scroll, thirty feet long and fifteen feet wide.” And he said to me, “This is the curse that is going out over the whole land; for according to what it says on one side, every thief will be banished, and according to what it says on the other, everyone who swears falsely will be banished. The LORD Almighty declares, ‘I will send it out, and it will enter the house of the thief and the house of anyone who swears falsely by my name. It will remain in that house and destroy it completely, both its timbers and its stones.’”²

Matthew 5:34

Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made. But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne;³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes’ and your ‘No’, ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.’²

So, shall we stay in GRACE or live under LAW.

What about CREEDS?

DEFINITION: A creed is a brief authoritative formula of religious belief. (Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary)

Creeds are useful tools for training and instruction. One must use caution when adopting or following a creed that is more of a commentary of another person’s interpretation of scripture. We of the Evangelical Covenant Church do accept the Apostles Creed and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed as concise statements of biblical faith. But these creeds are not definitive enough to define our fellowship with respect to the reformation of the Church and the Pietist movement that forms the core of our beliefs. [**Have someone read the Apostles creed on page 4 of the booklet. Then discuss its completeness in Christian life. Does that clearly define our fellowship??? What about, fellowship, love, centrality of scripture, mission, new birth, grace, baptism of the Holy Spirit**]

¹ COVENANT AFFIRMATIONS - COVENANT PUBLICATIONS

² NIV

Doctrine? [Read the following, discuss it and insure that the group understands the concept and can at least agree to use the concept for the purpose of the study.]

DEFINITION: A principle or position or the body of principles in a branch of knowledge or system of belief. (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary)

A faith doctrine is a living, growing ever maturing entity that is personal between you and the Holy Spirit. As Christians we believe in the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. At the time of our baptism the Holy Spirit did not dump all the wisdom of the scriptures upon us. No, we gained wisdom at a level and rate we could understand and put into practice. A true Christian's faith doctrine is at any point in time **true**, proven by understanding of scripture for that person, at that time, in their spiritual walk. So for now can we say—a new recipient of the baptism of the Holy Spirit will have a faith doctrine which may be much different from the 40 year veteran of the walk in Grace. I might add that blindly accepting the doctrine of someone else when it goes against your own Spirit driven conscience (doctrine) opposes your freedom in Christ Jesus. Once again moving you away from grace toward law. **Briefly (this will be discussed in depth later in Part 2) discuss the example of infant baptism verses believer baptism to illustrate the point. Regardless of which side of the issue a person is on, it does not affect their salvation. If however their stand gives them peace in their faith they must be allowed that freedom. Scripturally, neither side of the issue can be proven beyond doubt.**

Covenant Affirmations:

DEFINITION: An affirmation is a solemn declaration made under the penalties of perjury by a person who conscientiously declines taking an oath. (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary) [Think about this one and discuss it with the group. How seriously does a non-Christian take an oath.]

In view of this definition along with scriptural guidance and Church tradition concerning oaths, creeds and doctrine the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC) adopted the principals of affirmations as the faith statements for the fellowship. This took place in 1976 at the ECC Annual Meeting and was ratified by the membership. Prior to this time (that is from 1885 to 1976) congregational guidance was primarily from "Spener's³ '*Pia Desideria*' and what ever by-laws each congregation agree upon and elected. In 2005 the ECC Annual Meeting added one affirmation to reflect a commitment to the mission of the Church.⁴

Why was it not until 1976 that the affirmations were formulated?—Church unity---

Prior to the adoption of the Affirmations each congregation was allowed to develop its own "doctrine". By the early 70's it was noted that there was no uniformity among congregations and denominational unity was suffering. After the formulation and election of the Affirmations each congregation was allowed the freedom to accept or reject the affirmations. Those that accepted the affirmations formed the core of the modern EVANGELICAL COVENANT CHURCH.

[Encourage the group to pursue the Covenant history on their own, footnote 4]

"The EVANGELICAL COVENANT CHURCH seeks to form and nurture communities that are deeply committed to Jesus Christ and passionately engage in Christ's mission in the world. The purpose of Covenant Affirmations is to make clear the values and principles that have guided the Evangelical Covenant Church since its founding in 1885".⁵

"**Our**" Affirmations are ten short, simple statements divided into two groups. The first four are called the COMMON CHRISTIAN AFFIRMATIONS. For the sake of understanding we will refer to these four as the *Affirmations of the Body Whole*. The second group of six statements is the CENTRAL COVENANT AFFIRMATIONS which we will refer to as the *Affirmations of the body members*. These ten statements define the **nonnegotiable** context of our living faith, for those within and outside of our fellowship.

³ (Spener was a renowned Pietist 1635-1705. For information on Spener's *Pia Desideria* go to http://www.rts.edu/Site/Virtual/Resources/Student_Theses/Ptak-Speners_Proposals.pdf

⁴ For a deeper understanding of the history of the ECC read 'One Body...Many Members' *The Covenant Church in Historical Perspective* a Covenant Publications booklet available on line.

⁵ 'Covenant Affirmations' Covenant Publications.

COVENANT AFFIRMATIONS

GROUP STUDY PART 2

THE AFFIRMATIONS

LEADERS GUIDE

In preparation for PART 2 the leader should read and study the following: **COVENANT AFFIRMATIONS**; A 22 page booklet provided by Covenant Publications that was provided to all attendees at the start of this group study.

COVENANT AFFIRMATIONS *This We Believe*, Donald c. Frisk; Covenant Publications
KNOW WHAT YOU BELIEVE, Paul E. Little; ISBN: 1-56476-755-8

Once again open with a reading of the INTRODUCTION in the affirmation booklet. Stress the importance of paragraph 4 where it speaks of the “freedom in Christ”. Plant the seed “Later we will see that understanding and living by the “FREEDOM IN CHRIST” can eliminate all conflict within the fellowship.

Now that I understand why we have AFFIRMATIONS, what do they state? What promise am I giving to the fellowship when I become a part of the fellowship? Stress the seriousness of the act of affirming these affirmations. It is paramount that every member of the body understand this commitment.

The affirmations are separated into two parts.

A, The “COMMON CHRISTIAN AFFIRMATIONS” or, of the whole body.

B, The “CENTRAL COVENANT AFFIRMATIONS” or, of the body members.

This is important. When you petition to join the ECC you are in fact stating that you will live by these affirmations and are totally in agreement with their stated purpose.

Have the group turn to page 3 of the booklet. Read the purpose paragraph in the booklet. Why is the noted statement key?

In the purpose of the booklet or for that matter this study group, the key statement is; “Such a statement is not to be construed as a creed or a formal doctrinal statement.”

_____ A doctrinal statement is a fixed finite faith statement. It leaves no room for spiritual discernment or growth. We discussed this earlier and will visit this issue often in this study.

GROUP STUDY PART 2 THE AFFIRMATIONS

Common Christian Affirmations. (Affirmations of the whole body)

Read the paragraph on apostolic church.

We are an apostolic church.

Write a simple one sentence statement that defines an apostolic church.

Simply put we affirm our faith through the faith of the apostles as stated in the New Testament. The entire bible, the OLD and the NEW testaments are the inspired word of God. In matters of faith “Where is it written?” is the key to acceptance and unity.

Discussion and comments. Insure clarity an understanding before continuing.

We are a catholic church. The word catholic does excite some people.

By definition the word catholic as we use it is a Late Latin term for *universal*. Late Latin is a written form of Latin used in the period from the 3rd to the 6th century AD. Writers from the 3rd to 6th century used the term to define all apostolic churches that believed in and confessed faith in Christ Jesus as their redeemer, savior. The reformation Catholic churches all hold true as a basic statement of faith, the Apostle’s, Nicene, Chalcedonian and Athanasian creeds. The Chalcedonian and Athanasian creeds are not well studied in most churches. They are deemed as heavy reading and deep. The Chalcedonian creed caused a theological split between the western and eastern churches with the eastern churches rejecting it. *Don’t go deeper on the split but offer it as an interesting independent study.* The Athanasian Creed contains the strongest affirmation of the Trinity. There is much theological dispute of the true writer and language of the Athanasian Creed. Therefore it is not commonly used in lay studies and instruction. All four of these creeds do warrant independent study. They provide a valuable insight into the thought and minds of the early church organizers and leaders.

GROUP STUDY PART 2 THE AFFIRMATIONS

We are a Reformation church.

In summery the main points are.

Driven by Martin Luther and molded by the Pietism movement the Evangelical Covenant Church is firmly rooted in the reformation church.

Justified by faith alone.

The bible is the sovereign word of God and final in all matters of faith.

All believers are members of the Priesthood of Christ. This caused a conflict in the Swedish Lutheran church. Only an ordained minister could lead a bible study or teach the word. The Pietist believed that all people should benefit from bible study and that theological education should be for all the lay membership as well as the clergy.

Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. It is a true, unearned gift.

Sanctification is through the Holy Spirit. Sanctification is not plug and play.

It is a lifetime of reveled wisdom from the Holy Spirit.

We are an evangelical church.

The bible as absolute authority and spiritual rebirth are also stated in the previous affirmations. New here is the duties of taking Christ to the world, biblical education of all members of the Body of Christ, benevolence and social justice.

Briefly discuss: Evangelism as a commission from Christ. Ask for someone to read Matthew 28:16-20 NIV. Need for Christian base educational systems open to all members of the Body. Benevolence. Social justice.

Evangelism is a commission directed by Christ.

What does it mean?

Does it mean to get them saved? _____ NO _____.

Does it mean to get them to join the Church? _____ NO _____.

It does mean that we are charged to spread the gospel, circulate the word

Does this mean that we all have to sign up to go to Africa, Indonesia or the Philippines?

Suggest: monetary support to missionaries, neighborhood and community evangelism.

How do we fulfill the need for Christian based educational systems.

Teaching from the pulpit.

Church sponsored seminars and topic studies.

Small group bible studies. Expand this, fellowship, enlightenment, support and free and confidential expression. Stress the importance of finding and joining a small group.

Retreats.

Benevolence. We have a special offering and fund to aid members of our fellowship

Social justice. Social activism is encouraged when inspired by the Spirit.

GROUP STUDY PART 2 THE AFFIRMATIONS

CENTRAL COVENANT AFFIRMATIONS. (OF THE BODY MEMBERS)

In 1976 five statements were affirmed to define the Central Covenant Affirmations. Then in 2005 one more statement was added to promote unity in thought and action among all the congregations of the ECC.

They are:

The centrality of the word of God.

The necessity of the new Birth.

A commitment to the whole mission of the Church. Added in 2005.

The Church as a fellowship of believers.

A conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit.

The reality of freedom in Christ.

The centrality of the word of God.

The bible is the word of God. It is the first and last word and only perfect rule to guide the conduct of the Body of Christ—the Church.

Read the first sentence under the heading. State side note “Philipp Jakob Spener who was the father of Small Group Bible Study led by lay members of the congregation, wrote:

Read his quote aloud. Note that so soon after the reformation he was concerned that the power of the Word was being overshadowed *again*. The Church was getting heavy into the power of universal doctrine and drifting away from the power scripture. An informed laity could oppose “agenda preaching” from the pulpit.

Spener was a very early promoter of small group studies conducted and led by lay members. Small group studies, learning, exploring and applying the Word of God have been an integral part of the Covenant Church since its founding.

Read the last 3 paragraphs and discuss each in turn.

The Word comes to us by the Holy Spirit.

Third from last paragraph. Suggest later reading of the scriptures listed.

The scriptures should shape our lives and community.

Second from last paragraph. What shapes our lives is what we worship.

We cannot stand alone.

Last paragraph. Only in community with believers can we stand fast in our faith. And only in a church that recognizes the truth and glory of the word of God can we truly grow close to God.

GROUP STUDY PART 2 THE AFFIRMATIONS

The necessity of the new birth.

Read the first paragraph under new birth heading.

In our natural state we are **_alive_** to the world and **_dead_** to the Lord. Our goal as Christians is to be **_ambassadors_** to the world and **_alive_** to the Lord.

Biblically speaking what is meant by dead to the Lord or spiritual death.

_separated from God______

New birth or spiritual rebirth is our connection, attachment and more important acceptance by God.

In Genesis 2:17 "...you will surely die." It is true that Adam's physical body did die. But the major inference is not the physical death. It is the separation from God, being cast out from fellowship with God.

In John 3:1-21 Jesus explains that we are first born of water, natural birth, but we must be born of the Spirit, born again, in order to see the kingdom of God.

Read paragraph 3.

Conversion is the act of turning from **_worldliness_** to **_Godliness_** by virtue of faith and repentance.

Read paragraph 4 and pause for comments.

When were you converted? _____

Does your life reflect your conversion?

Do you consciously try to reflect conversion in your life?

Give a brief overview of paragraph 5.

It is God's desire that all mankind be saved. But the ECC accepts God's work that only those who "convert to Jesus Christ shall be saved.

Read paragraph 6, 7, 8 and 9.

Christian maturity as a product of your new birth is a lifelong process. No one should expect perfection in this life. No one can experience the fullness of conversion alone. It requires living in the Word, in fellowship, within the Body of Christ.

GROUP STUDY PART 2 THE AFFIRMATIONS

Paragraphs 10 and 11 have been well covered in PART 1 and PART 2. They may be quickly paraphrased or read and discussed as time allows.

Paragraph 12 is an interesting comment it should be read and discussed.

Why does holy living not earn God's favor?

God's favor is not earned. It is a gift freely give to all who accept His Son as redeemer.

Holy living is our gift to God that He takes great joy in.

A commitment to the whole mission of the Church

We will not go deeply into this one. It has been well covered in prior discussions. The reason for its inclusion in 2002 should be stated.

This affirmation was added in 2002 to bring unity and definition to the fellowship of congregations within the ECC. It simply defines that all congregations honor the mission statement of the ECC and in turn every member of the fellowship honors the mission of the congregation.

Every congregation develops its own mission statement. Part of that mission statement must include dedication to the ECC mission statement.

The Church as a fellowship of believers.

Read the Martin Luther quote.

The ECC holds to Luther's edict with one exception. The ECC recognizes that Glory music and singing is a viable form of worship.

Two basic guidelines for inclusion in membership.

The Church is a fellowship of believers.

Members must agree with all the Affirmations.

Equality regardless of race, class or gender.

If a person cannot accept these conditions then they do not belong in our fellowship. This is a harsh but very true and valid statement.

GROUP STUDY PART 2 THE AFFIRMATIONS

A conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit.

It is a given that once you reach the point where you need and desire the fellowship that the Christian Church provides you have already acknowledged a Godly presence in your life. As Christians we know that presence as the Holy Spirit.

Read paragraph 1. On each of the following points pause for questions or comments.

The Holy Spirit is at work in every individual that has accepted Christ Jesus as the redeemer and savior.

The Holy Spirit is the Councilor sent by God to make known his desires for all mankind.

The Holy Spirit is the answer to Jesus' promise to send a councilor to abide in us.

Although we constantly walk in temptation, as Christians we also walk in the Spirit. If we consciously seek the Spirit He will, over time mold our conscience.

Our goal is to be able to affirm Paul's statement "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me."

The Holy Spirit is at work promoting Fellowship among believers.

It is the Holy Spirit that has brought you to this fellowship.

It is the Holy Spirit that produces that feeling of peace when we are in fellowship.

It is the Holy Spirit that produces that empty feeling in Christians as well as non-believers when they are not in fellowship with Christ.

Reinforced by the Reformation ideals, Covenanters abide in the knowledge that the word (that is scripture) and the Spirit are congruent and inseparable.

The Holy Spirit bestows gifts on believers, not for the benefit of the holder of the gift but for the benefit of others. Think about this a moment,, or for the benefit of God.....

It is God's plan that gifts strengthen believers and that an amalgamation of believers' gifts makes a fellowship strong and powerful.

What if everyone in the fellowship had the same gift? I propose that the fellowship would soon dissolve.

In fellowship we each aid the others in discernment of our gifts.

A spiritual gift cannot be learned or taught, it is a gift given by the Holy Spirit.

I visited a church that had a weekly class to teach people how to speak in tongues. What do you think about the concept of learning a Spiritual gift?

In fellowship we aid each other in putting our Spirit given gifts into practice.

GROUP STUDY PART 2 THE AFFIRMATIONS

The reality of freedom in Christ.

“The Covenant Church seeks to focus on what unites followers of Jesus Christ rather than what separates them. The center of our commitment is a clear faith in Jesus Christ. The centrality of the word of God, the necessity of the new birth, a commitment to the whole mission of the church, the church as a fellowship of believers, and a conscious dependence of the Holy Spirit form the parameters in which freedom is experienced. Here followers of Christ find the security to offer freedom to one another on issues that might otherwise divide.”

In the realization of our freedom in Christ we fortify our beliefs in the scriptural truths. We also recognize that we all have the freedom, as led by the Holy Spirit, to follow our hearts where our hearts do not conflict with scriptural truth. We do not own this freedom. We use this universal gift and more importantly we pass this gift on to all in the fellowship.

So if someone in the fellowship holds a belief that does not conflict with the proceeding 5 affirmations WE MUST allow them that freedom.

Examples: Ask for ideas from the group and discuss.

Infant baptism

*Did the new covenant, the Church age, end or delay the Abrahamic covenant?

When did God breath a soul into your being, at conception, birth or 8 days later?

***This is a deep theological question. Extremely gifted and knowledgeable theologians around the world are split on this question. Does this question impact our salvation? No. does it impact our relationship with God? No. Should it affect our fellowship relationships? No. Explain how a dispute on this issue caused a split in our church. A group of people who held one belief actually left the church. Although they held the same belief as the majority in the church, they could not allow others in the church the freedom in Christ to follow their conscience. Some of these people are still drifting, searching, church hopping. They are seeking a freedom in fellowship they are not willing pass on.**

Spiritual freedom Grows and matures as we walk in the word.

What does it mean to walk in the word?

The way we live should reflect who we profess to be

GROUP STUDY PART 2 THE AFFIRMATIONS

Can you walk in the word alone? Read paragraph 2 and 3. If appropriate ask a member of the group to read.

What does it mean to “continue in my word”?

Does this mean reading the Bible every day?

A lady in one of the small groups once told me, “I read the bible every day. I don’t know how many times I have read it cover to cover.” Sadly she said “I still don’t understand most of what it is saying.” So in that small group we spent the next few session learning how to “read” the bible. We explored the fact that the Bible we read today is a translation of the scriptures from Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek tests. Exploring different translations, using study bibles and Commentaries can clarify the intent of the writers of scripture. Caution should be exercised with commentaries. The personal doctrine of the writers are heavily reflected in commentary. Back to the confused lady, she now is developing an understanding of the Word. She understands that reading and studying translations other than the King James is not sacrilege. This example illustrates two important principles. First, continual reading of something you do not understand is not productive. Second, it illustrates the value of fellowship, in particular small group involvement. Had she not made the comment in small group, she might still be struggling with the Word.

Liberation in the Old Testament establishes a theme of freedom to worship and serve God. Is that theme different in the New Testament? No, the theme is the same, the process is new .

In the Old Testament the process was by Law .

In the New Testament the process is by Grace .

Summary of paragraphs 4 and 5.

By virtue of Christ’s death and resurrection Jesus has opened a new realm of light, life and joy. By Grace we are free, subject to none but servant to all.

How can you be subject to none, yet a servant to all?

Read paragraph 6 carefully and slowly inviting and offering comments as you read.

The ECC offers theological and personal freedom where those freedoms do not conflict with biblical and historical record. This theme seems to repeat over and over again. Therefore it must be a very important concept.

Strong doctrine verses affirmations.

Discuss spiritual growth under both systems.

GROUP STUDY PART 2 THE AFFIRMATIONS

In conclusion:

The Covenant Church cherishes this freedom in Christ and recognizes, as one of our forebears put it, that freedom is a gift and the last of all gifts to mature. In the meantime there will be questions and conflicts.-----

Granting freedom in Christ prevents the conflicts from becoming wars.

----- Full maturity and full understanding await 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” (Revelation 11:15). In the meantime we offer freedom to one another, since for Covenant people freedom is not something we claim for ourselves, but offer to the other. In this we are simply sharing the gift of freedom God has given us in Jesus Christ.