



COVENANT  
AFFIRMATIONS



## FOREWORD

### WHAT DOES THE COVENANT CHURCH BELIEVE?

On one level, the answer is quite simple. When new members join a Covenant church, they are asked two questions about belief: “Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior and promise to follow him as Lord?” and “Do you accept the Holy Scriptures, the Old and New Testaments, as the word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct?” They are then asked if they intend to live as faithful followers of Christ and members of the church and denomination.

That’s all. That is enough.

But on another level, of course, the answer is a good deal more complex. While the Covenant Church does not require adherence to any written creed, we take our theology very seriously, and our history as well. We are a Reformation church, a part of the Church universal, and an evangelical church. In that heritage, we share certain central beliefs, which draw us together in faith and fellowship and make possible a freedom among us on more widely ranging issues.

We describe those central beliefs as “affirmations,” and they are outlined in this booklet.

We hope that as you read these affirmations you will find yourself identifying with them in your own faith experience. If they raise questions for you or you would like to read further, we would encourage you to ask your

pastor (if you are already in contact with a Covenant church) or any Covenant pastor for more suggestions.

May God bless you as you seek to learn more about him through his Church.

Glenn R. Palmberg, *President*

The Evangelical Covenant Church

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

THIS BOOKLET was first published in 1976. It was written by the Committee on Covenant Doctrine, which at that time included James R. Hawkinson (chair), Donald C. Frisk, Paul E. Larsen, Edward Larson, A. Eldon Palmquist, Richard O. Sandquist, and Milton B. Engebretson (ex-officio). This revised version of Covenant Affirmations was adopted by the 2005 Annual Meeting after a revision was commissioned by the Covenant Executive Board. The current writing team includes: Philip Anderson, David Nystrom, Doreen Olson, John Phelan Jr., Mark Novak (superintendent advisor), and Donn Engebretson (facilitator). We are grateful to both writing teams for their significant contribution to our understanding and expression of the faith we share. They demonstrated clearly that the faith that unites us is much greater than issues that might divide us.



## INTRODUCTION

THE EVANGELICAL COVENANT CHURCH seeks to form and nurture communities that are deeply committed to Jesus Christ and passionately engaged 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.

The spirit of the Evangelical Covenant Church is emphasized in the Preamble to the Constitution and Bylaws:

The Evangelical Covenant Church is a communion of congregations gathered by God, united in Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit to obey the great commandment and the great commission. It affirms its companionship in faith with other church bodies and all those who fear God and keep God's commandments.

The Evangelical Covenant Church adheres to the affirmations of the Protestant Reformation regarding the Bible. It confesses that the Holy Scripture, the Old and the New Testament, is the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct. It affirms the historic confessions of the Christian Church, particularly the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, while emphasizing the sovereignty of the Word of God over all creedal interpretations.

In continuity with the renewal movements of historic Pietism, the Evangelical Covenant Church especially cherishes the dual emphasis on new birth and new life in Christ, believing that personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord is the foundation for our mission of evangelism and Christian nurture. Our common experience of God's grace and love in Jesus Christ continues to sustain the Evangelical Covenant Church as an interdependent body of believers that recognizes but transcends our theological differences.

The Evangelical Covenant Church celebrates two divinely ordained sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper. Recognizing the reality of freedom in Christ, and in conscious dependence on the work of the Holy Spirit, we practice both the baptism of infants and believer baptism. The Evangelical Covenant Church embraces this freedom in Christ 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.

The Evangelical Covenant Church has its roots in historical Christianity, the Protestant Reformation, the biblical instruction of the Lutheran Church of Sweden, and the great spiritual awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These influences, together with more recent North American renewal movements, continue to shape its development and distinctive spirit. The Evangelical Covenant Church is committed to reaching across boundaries of race, ethnicity, culture, gender, age, and status in the cultivation of communities of life and service.



## COMMON CHRISTIAN AFFIRMATIONS

IT IS THE PURPOSE of this booklet to provide a context for the affirmation of our living faith for people both within and outside of our fellowship. Such a statement is not to be construed as a creed or a formal doctrinal statement. Covenanters affirm that sound doctrine, subject to the authority of the word of God alone, is a necessary though not sufficient condition for vital and growing faith. With this as background, we make four basic affirmations concerning our faith in common with the whole Christian Church.

- We are an apostolic church.
- We are a catholic church.
- We are a Reformation church.
- We are an evangelical church.

**We are an apostolic church** because we confess Jesus Christ and the faith of the apostles as recorded in the Holy Scriptures. Covenanters have always affirmed the Bible to be “the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.”<sup>1</sup> The Apostle Paul writes that “all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). The Covenant Church has not chosen to be more precise than this in stating its view of inspiration. The

<sup>1</sup>From the Preamble to the Constitution and Bylaws of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

authority of the Bible is supreme in all matters of faith, doctrine, and conduct, and is to be trusted. “Where is it written?” was and is the Covenant Church’s touchstone of discussion with regard to faith and practice. In this sense, we are an apostolic church.

**We are a catholic church.** The word *catholic* literally means *universal*. We are part of the universal Church that has existed from the days of the apostles until now. This includes all who confess faith in Christ. In the first several centuries of the Christian era, the Church developed a series of affirmations concerning the faith that has been accepted by Christians throughout history. The Covenant Church considers itself a part of that catholic tradition and recognizes its indebtedness to the early creeds and confessions of the Church as concise statements of biblical faith. We refer especially to the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed, though the same could be said for the Chalcedonian and Athanasian creeds.

#### *The Apostles’ Creed*

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

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

I believe in the Holy Spirit; the holy Christian Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

#### *The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed*

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

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our

salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

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

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

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

The Covenant Church continues to be shaped by Pietism, a renewal movement that originated in seventeenth-century Europe and emphasized

the need for a personal life in Jesus Christ, sanctification through the Holy Spirit, and call to service in the world. Pietism, in seeking a balance between the head and the heart, affirmed that correct doctrine is a necessary though not sufficient condition for vital and growing faith.

A leading spirit in this movement was Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705), who through his widely influential writings challenged the Church to deeper spirituality. Particularly important was his call for widespread reading and study of the Bible; greater participation by lay people in the work of the Church; simple, clear, and direct preaching geared to the needs of the people; and the abandonment of theological hair-splitting in favor of practical concern for living the Christian life. The influence of Pietism extended throughout northern Europe and enriched the lives of many through its emphasis on the new life in Christ.

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

Many have defined evangelicalism as Protestantism. It is more accurate, however, to view it as a religious awakening that flowered in Europe and America during the nineteenth century. Waves of spiritual revival have swept the Protestant West for more than two centuries. The Covenant Church has grown out of these awakenings, and Covenanters have enjoyed cooperating in mission at home and abroad with all who follow Christ. In this they are true to the spirit of the text expounded at the birth of the Covenant in 1885: "I am a companion of all who fear you" (Psalm 119:63).

Evangelicals historically have been characterized by a number of significant emphases: a strong insistence on biblical authority; the absolute necessity of new birth; Christ's mandate to evangelize the world; the continuing need for education and formation in a Christian context; and responsibility for benevolence and the advancement of social justice.

## CENTRAL COVENANT AFFIRMATIONS

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

- the centrality of the word of God,
- the necessity of the new birth,
- a commitment to the whole mission of the Church,
- the Church as a fellowship of believers,
- a conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit, and
- the reality of freedom in Christ.

**The centrality of the word of God.** The Covenant Church states its view of Scripture as follows: “the Holy Scripture, the Old and the New Testament, is the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.”<sup>2</sup> When Philipp Jakob Spener presented his proposals for the renewal of the Church in 1675, his first concern was with the centrality of the word of God in the life of the congregation and of individual believers. He wrote:

Thought should be given to a more extensive use of the word of

<sup>2</sup> From the Preamble to the Constitution and Bylaws of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

God among us. We know that by nature we have no good in us. If there is to be any good in us, it must be brought about by God. To this end the word of God is the powerful means, since faith must be enkindled through the gospel. . . . The more at home the word of God is among us, the more we shall bring about faith and its fruits.<sup>3</sup>

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

The dynamic life-shaping power of the word of God has been at the heart of the Covenant Church since its founding. That life-changing word gave birth to the conventicles—the small groups that met for Bible study in confidence that the word would shape the life of the believer and the believing community. It provided the motive for private devotional reading of the Bible, a practice for which our forebears received the nickname "readers." It prompted the concern for faithful preaching, not of human opinion, but of the word of God, which has power to convict of sin and unrighteousness and kindle the desire for new life. This dynamic life-shaping power of the word leads us to affirm that both women and men are called to serve as ordained ministers. It is the reason we intentionally pursue ethnic diversity. It is the motivation behind every act of compassion and justice through the life of our shared ministry.

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

The union of word and Spirit is a central theme in evangelical faith. It was by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that the written word came into being

<sup>3</sup> Philipp Jakob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964) 87.

(2 Timothy 3:16). Through the Spirit the word of God does not return empty but accomplishes that for which it was sent (Isaiah 55:11). It is through the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit that the sinner who responds to the word is assured of being a child of God (Romans 8:16-17).

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

On every side attractive and persuasive voices urge us toward conformity to the spirit of this age. There is no escaping from these pervasive influences. Only the church that hears and responds to the word will be able to be a prophetic voice in this wilderness and bring healing to a confused and troubled world.

**The necessity of the new birth.** When the Covenant Church affirms that it is evangelical, it proclaims that the new birth in Jesus Christ is essential. We teach that “by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God conquered sin, death, and the devil, offering forgiveness for sin and assuring eternal life for those who follow Christ.”<sup>4</sup> New birth is more than the experience of forgiveness and acceptance. It is regeneration and the gift of eternal life. This life has the qualities of love and righteousness as well as joy and peace.

Jesus said to Nicodemus, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (John 3:3). To enter the kingdom is not only to have a right relationship with God but to be enlisted in Christ’s service. God’s purposes entail the transformation of persons, as well as the transformation of God’s world into a place of truth, justice, and peace.

As an evangelical church we believe that conversion results in eternal life. Conversion can be defined as the act by which a person turns with repentance and faith from sin to God. Conversion involves a conscious rejection of the life of sin and involves a commitment of faith. Eternal life is not given through assent to creeds alone, but through a personal commitment to Jesus Christ.

Such a high doctrine of conversion does not mean that all believers have dramatic conversion experiences. While no one remembers the moment of

<sup>4</sup>From *The Journey: A Leader’s Guide for Discipleship/Confirmation* (Chicago; Covenant Publications, 2001).

physical birth, one's present life is evidence of its occurrence. So a person may be truly converted even though he or she has no memory of the moment of new birth. The vitality of life is the proof of birth, not its memory or recollection.

It is the will of God that all should be redeemed: "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Yet it is only through the grace of Christ that we can be saved. Our Savior declared, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). The apostles concurred: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The Covenant Church shares God's concern for the salvation of all, but accepts God's word that only those converted to Jesus Christ shall be saved.

The new birth, however, is only the beginning of life. Growing to maturity in Christ is a lifelong process called sanctification. Being formed in Christ is the goal, for both individuals and communities of believers. The Apostle Paul agonized as a woman in labor, that believers might express Christ's character and goodness in their whole being (Galatians 4:19).

On this journey of being transformed by the Holy Spirit into Christ's likeness, God's people experience and express love for God and others. Healthy and effective spiritual growth takes place in the context of relationships, both within and beyond peer groups. The desired outcome of this formational process is described by the Apostle Paul: "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

Being a disciple of Jesus implies costly obedience to all of his teachings. Such obedience, together with the Spirit's work in us, equips us to do the work of the kingdom, giving witness to the good news and serving others in Jesus' name.

Though there is no state of final perfection in this life, there is a process of growth from beginning to end. This growth is as much a gift of God as the gift of life itself (Galatians 3:3). Together with the gifts of life and growth, the child of God receives the gifts of assurance of salvation and confidence in the faith. The Apostle Paul declares: "I am confident of this, that the one who



began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6).

As there is no new birth without repentance and faith, so there is no healthy spiritual growth without a life of discipline. Discipline is the cultivation and nurture of the spiritual life in both its personal and corporate dimensions. Public worship, participation in the sacraments, prayer, Bible study, service to others, stewardship, fellowship, and other spiritual disciplines all enhance the Christian’s growth. A life of discipline prepares us individually and communally for passionate engagement in the work of Christ in our world. It is through transformed people that God transforms our world. It is for this reason we are called into new life. A life of discipline seeks to avoid moral and spiritual indifference on the one hand and oppressive legalism on the other.

In his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul declares: “You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:22-24).

While the pursuit of holy living does not earn God’s favor, it pleases God. It allows the Spirit to fill the Christian with joy and makes the Christian an effective agent of reconciliation.

**A commitment to the whole mission of the Church.** The Covenant Church has always been characterized by its involvement in mission. The earliest name attributed to Covenanters was “Mission Friends,” people who covenanted together for the purpose of common mission both far and near. They understood the work of mission to be evangelism and Christian formation, as well as the benevolent ministries of compassion and justice in the face of suffering and oppression. This is the legacy of Pietism, which was instrumental in pioneering the Protestant missionary movement. An early Pietist, August Hermann Francke (1663-1727), described this when he said that the Christian lives for God’s glory and the good of one’s neighbor. At Halle in Germany, Francke was instrumental in developing a Pietist university that educated pastors, teachers, and missionaries. Pietists there founded orphanages, a hospital, a pharmacy, a printing press, and a great library devoted to a global vision of Christian service. We remain a community of friends committed to

this whole mission of the Church.

Jesus made it clear that if his followers were to love him, they must keep his commandments. He said, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40). This is the great commandment.

The Covenant Church is also committed to the great commission of Jesus Christ: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Established by the gospel and grace of Jesus Christ, the Church exists by doing mission—the great commission and the great commandment—as fire exists by burning. The church’s mission is faith active in love, and the two cannot be separated without diminishing the gospel. As Christ’s representative in the world, the Church is to be an agent of grace, entrusted with the message of reconciliation, hope, justice, and peace. At the end of his life, Jesus declared his disciples his friends, meaning they shared with him a common passion for his mission in the world (John 15:13-15). Covenanters, as Mission Friends, have broadly understood mission to be the befriending of others, and all that God has created, in the name of the One who first befriended us.

Covenanters, like all Christians, are called to proclaim this good news with their lives and words, and by the love and integrity of their communities. In faithful witness, the lost are found in Christ. In acts of generosity and compassion, people are ministered to and justice is proclaimed. In the work of evangelism and mission, we seek to embody the presence of Jesus Christ with head, hands, voice, and heart. Jesus called on his disciples to carry their own crosses, and in this joyful way of suffering and service we embody his ministry of reconciliation and proclaim the reality of the kingdom, which extends to every person in every land and to the whole of creation. The Covenant Church, therefore, is “committed to reaching across boundaries of race, ethnicity, culture, gender, age, and status in the cultivation of communities of life and service.”<sup>5</sup> This mission belongs to the whole Church, the spiritual priesthood of all believers—women and men, young and old, laity and clergy.

<sup>5</sup>From the Preamble to the Constitution and Bylaws of the Evangelical Covenant Church .

The Covenant Church seeks to hold together proclamation and compassion, personal witness and social justice, service and stewardship in all areas of life. God makes all things new and calls God's followers to share this mission. Those who neither know nor love the Lord Jesus as well as those enduring poverty, suffering, inequality, and injustice cannot be ignored. In the incarnation of Jesus Christ, "God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (Colossians 1:19-20). This bears witness to God's boundless passion for both the souls and earthly lives of all people, and for all that God has made. When we address not only the consequences but also the causes of suffering, we live out what it means to be the body of Christ in the world.

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

[Christians] should sign their names and meet alone in a house somewhere to pray, to read, to baptize, to receive the sacrament, and do other Christian works. According to this order, those who do not lead Christian lives could be known, reprov'd, corrected, cast out, or excommunicated, according to the rule of Christ (Matthew 18:15-17). Here one could also solicit benevolent gifts to be willingly given and distributed to the poor, according to St. Paul's example (2 Corinthians 9). Here would be no need of much and elaborate singing. Here one could set out a brief and neat order for baptism and the sacrament and center everything on the Word, prayer, and love.<sup>6</sup>

Luther saw the ideal church as a gathering of those who confess faith in Jesus Christ, commit themselves to each other, and submit to no authority other than Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Church. The Covenant Church seeks to realize the value of this ideal.

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

<sup>6</sup>Ulrich S. Leopold, ed., *Liturgy and Hymns* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965) p. 53.

- The Church is a communion or fellowship of believers, characterized by mutual participation in and sharing of the new life in Christ. Paul calls the Christian community the body of Christ, a community composed of many members, each different and mutually interdependent (1 Corinthians 12:12-30). It is when we are in community with one another, when all of God’s people are interacting with one another in worship and service, that God’s will is most clearly revealed and discerned.
- The New Testament also teaches that within Christian community there is to be neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, but all are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28). These three areas—race, class, and gender—are to be of no advantage or disadvantage within the body of Christ. This is a multiethnic, classless, gender-equal vision. We recognize our need for ethnic diversity, for fellowship and mutual ministry across artificially constructed socio-economic boundaries, and for the gifts and leadership of women and men. It is the desire of the Covenant Church to pursue this biblical vision.

The Church is a gathered community set apart for involvement in Christ’s mission to the world. “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). The “priesthood of all believers” means that every believer is called to be part of a fellowship of believers and to participate in evangelism, formation, worship, and service.

The believers’ Church is not simply a human institution or organization, but a people whom God has called. Emphasis does not fall on buildings or hierarchical structures, but upon a grace-filled fellowship and active participation, through the Holy Spirit, in the life and mission of Christ.

Membership in the Covenant Church is by confession of personal faith in Jesus Christ. It is open to all believers. We do not expect that all believers will agree on every detail of Christian belief. What is required is that one be born anew “into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). But if membership is open to all believers, it is also

open only to believers. “The doors of the church are wide enough to admit all who believe and narrow enough to exclude those who do not,” said our forebears.

This is not to claim that members of the believers’ Church are perfect. The Church knows itself to be always a company of sinners, but sinners who have experienced forgiveness and are seeking wholeness in a new relationship to God. At the same time we affirm that all people at all stages of belief and unbelief are welcome to participate in the life of the church.

The Covenant Church believes the Holy Scriptures to be the source of the Church’s life, its preaching and teaching, and the means for its renewal. Jesus said, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31b-32). Included in the ministry of the word is the observance of baptism and Holy Communion as sacraments of the church expressly commanded by our Lord. They are visible signs of the invisible grace of Jesus Christ. The Covenant Church is open to all believers and recognizes infant and believer baptism as biblical forms of that sacrament and includes the practice of both in its ministry.

The local congregation is of crucial importance in God’s redemptive work in the world. While God is at work elsewhere, it is particularly in the close personal relationships of the fellowship that people are opened to the healing, convicting, and life-giving ministry of the Holy Spirit. Here, biblical nurture and discipline occur in the context of love and concern.

The Covenant Church is a communion of interdependent member congregations. Each local congregation seeks the guidance of the Holy Spirit in matters of common life and mission. In accordance with congregational polity, every congregation is free to govern its own affairs. At the same time, every Covenant congregation has committed itself to participate responsibly in the fellowship, decisions, and shared ministries of the regional conferences and denomination.

The Covenant Church holds that there is only one indispensable ministry—that of Jesus Christ. All members of the body are called to this ministry. It is a ministry of proclamation and evangelism, Christian formation and nurture, stewardship and servanthood. Both concern for personal salvation and for social justice are involved in the ministry. At the same time, we recognize that God calls certain men and women to be set apart as servants of the word,

sacraments, and service. This does not give credentialed ministers superior status. It does recognize their call from God and gives them a special function in the Church, enabling the Church to fulfill its mission.

**A conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit.** The Covenant Church, rooted in historic Christianity, affirms one God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit continues the creative work of the Father and the redeeming work of the Son within the life of the church. It is for this reason the Covenant Church has emphasized the continuing work of the Spirit.

According to the Gospel of John, the earthly Jesus promised that the same Spirit of God that “remained on him” (1:32) would one day live in his disciples as a result of his crucifixion and resurrection. The Spirit “abides with you,” he said, “and will be in you” (14:17). It was this Holy Spirit that came to abide in Paul, filling him with the presence of God and directing him, just as it had Jesus. For this reason Paul could claim, “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). It is the spirit in us that enables us to continue Christ’s mission in the world (Acts 1:8).

The New Testament affirms that the Holy Spirit works both within and among individuals. It is the Holy Spirit that draws together those who are far off and estranged, causing them to be made one in Christ (Ephesians 2:11-22). It is the Holy Spirit that stirs within each of us a deep sense of familial affection for one another, so that we are beloved to one another (1 Corinthians 15:58). It is because Christ has become our brother (Romans 8:29) that we are together members of the family of God (Ephesians 3:14-16). It is the Spirit of God within us that cries “Abba,” as we have been adopted into the family of God, sisters and brothers one with another (Galatians 4:4-7). It is the Holy Spirit, Paul asserted, that affords a sense of unity and common purpose among Christians (Philippians 1:27; 2:1-2).

The Covenant understanding of the Holy Spirit, rooted in the New Testament, is further informed by the Reformation idea that word and Spirit are inseparable. It is the Spirit of God that enlivens the preaching of the gospel within the community of faith and grants efficacy to the sacraments participated in by the community of faith. The Covenant also draws upon its Pietist heritage for understanding the Holy Spirit. We believe it is the work of the Holy Spirit to instill in the human heart a desire to turn to Christ. We believe it is the

work of the Holy Spirit to assure believers that Christ dwells within them. We believe that the Holy Spirit, in concert with our obedience, conforms us to the image of Christ (Romans 8:28-29).

The early Covenanters in Sweden were linked by a common awareness of the grace of God in their lives. They spoke of the Holy Spirit communicating this warm sense of God's grace to each one individually and directing them to a common devotion to God in Christ through the reading of the Bible and frequent meetings for the purpose of mutual encouragement and edification. They perceived the Holy Spirit leading them corporately to common mission and purpose.

The early Covenanters in North America were conscious of the presence and purpose of God through the activity of the Holy Spirit among them. They were certain the Holy Spirit was at work in their churches and particularly in leading them to form the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant denomination. At the organizational meeting of the Covenant, C.A. Björk spoke to the effect that an organizational meeting can never produce unity; God's people become one, he said, through the leading of the Holy Spirit. The early Covenanters believed that each Christian needs to await the voice of God as revealed not only to the individual, but also through the witness of other believers. They believed the Holy Spirit is alive and active, working through preaching, the sacraments, the Scriptures, and in the witness of one another.

The Covenant Church believes that the Spirit of God is active and "blows where it chooses" (John 3:8). The Spirit is the prevenient actor in the drama of salvation, the creator of hunger for Christ's life, and the fulfiller of that hunger. We are often surprised at the unfolding of God's purpose, suggesting that our ways and thoughts are not always the ways and thoughts of God. For this reason Covenanters desire to cultivate a healthy humility before God open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. When God is about doing a new thing (Isaiah 43:9), we wish to perceive God at work rather than be found dull to the divine purpose. We wish to see with the eyes of the Spirit, and not merely with our own. The Covenant Church believes with Paul that the Holy Spirit endows believers with spiritual gifts, the purpose of which is to serve the Christian community that is the very body of Christ. As a believer's church the Covenant has valued the Reformation concept of the priesthood of all believers, and sees it rooted in the idea of mutual interdependence expressed

in Paul's notion of the body (1 Corinthians 12:12-31). The Spirit bestows gifts on individual Christians for the benefit of others, not the benefit of the one who has received the gift. It is the plan of God through the work of the Spirit that within the body of Christ we need one another. Accordingly, while recognizing the legitimacy of all the spiritual gifts, the Covenant Church has historically been unmarked by an emphasis on any one or one type of spiritual gift. This deep trust in the gentle leading of the Spirit has remained true of the Covenant Church through the years.

**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.

Freedom is a frequently misunderstood concept. In western culture freedom is often understood as autonomy and independence. No one, however, can truly be autonomous and independent. Authentic freedom manifests itself in a right relationship with God and others. It is for this reason that freedom in Christ is so highly valued in the Covenant Church. Freedom is a gift of God in Christ to all who are willing to receive it. "If you continue in my word," said Jesus, "you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31b-32).

Liberation is one of the Bible's major themes. Early in their story, God's people were liberated as slaves from Egypt and began their long journey to the promised land. The story continues with the liberating work of the judges, who delivered Israel from its enemies. Israel's greatest king, David, liberated them from the Philistines and established a kingdom committed to Israel's God. But this kingdom did not stand. The Hebrew Scriptures end with Israel once again in bondage to their enemies, but living with the promise of God's deliverance. Throughout this story the freedom of God's people is not just freedom from, but freedom to. They are set free from Egypt to worship and serve their God. In their law they are called not only to serve one another,



but the stranger, the alien, the widow, and the orphan—all who suffer and are marginalized by the bitter circumstances of life.

Jesus came as God's anointed one to continue God's program of liberation. He sets us free, according to Paul, from the power of sin to condemn, control, and destroy. God's people are not without sin, but find in Jesus's death and resurrection the glorious liberty of the children of God. But, as in the Hebrew Scriptures, this freedom is never simply personal and individualistic. By the power of his life-giving Spirit, Christ moves us into a new realm—a new kingdom where light and life and joy prevail. "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1a). Thus empowered, the believer not only seeks to obey and follow God, but to effect the liberation of others from the sins and oppressions of their lives. This freedom is "in Christ." By grace God makes a person, with Luther, "a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none" and at the same time "a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." For Paul such freedom means believers are set free from the binding restrictions of culture and creed to live into a new reality: "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" (Galatians 3:28).

True freedom is found in this creative tension between the "lordly" and servantlike spirit. God wants individuals to be who and what they were created to be in perfect freedom. This freedom is not for self-indulgence but to serve the community and the world out of love for God (Galatians 5:13).

The Covenant Church has sought to honor the tensions inherent in this freedom. The Covenant Church has understood that God's word is sovereign over every human interpretation of it—including its own. Covenant freedom operates within the context set by other principles the Covenant Church regards as primary, particularly the authority of Scripture. Within these parameters the principle of freedom applies to doctrinal issues that might tend to divide. With a modesty born of confidence in God, Covenanters have offered to one another theological and personal freedom where the biblical and historical record seems to allow for a variety of interpretations of the will and purposes of God. This has at times led to controversy over such matters as baptism, the second coming of Christ, the precise nature of inspiration or how the atonement may be understood, and various matters of life and practice. Nevertheless, commitments to the Bible as the word of God and the historical

interpretative consensus of the Christian Church have remained a constant. This commitment to freedom has kept the Covenant Church together when it would have been easier to break fellowship and further divide Christ's body.

To some such freedom is no freedom at all. They would rather have the marching orders clear and an unimpeachable source of authority to bear the whole burden of responsibility. It is not easy to be free. But such limitations of freedom show not wisdom, but immaturity. They show a people who have not come into their majority as heirs of God's good gifts (Galatians 3:23-29). Nevertheless, to seek freedom for its own sake is to lose it. Freedom is not for self-indulgence or self-aggrandizement but to serve and love God, in whom alone is found true freedom.

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. 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.

## C O N C L U S I O N

FROM ALL THAT HAS BEEN SAID in this booklet, it should be clear that the Evangelical Covenant Church is a pilgrim church. We believe with the writer to the Hebrews that this world is not our home, and we look forward with eager anticipation to “the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10).

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

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

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

O let your soul now be filled with gladness,  
your heart redeemed, rejoice indeed!

O may the thought banish all your sadness  
that in his blood you have been freed,  
that God's unfailing love is yours,  
that you the only Son were given,  
that by his death he has opened heaven,  
that you are ransomed as you are.

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

It is a good ev'ry good transcending  
that Christ has died for you and me!  
It is a gladness that has no ending  
therein God's wondrous love to see!  
Praise be to you, O spotless Lamb,  
who through the desert my soul are leading  
to that fair city of joy exceeding,  
for which you bought me as I am.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Peter Jonsson Aschan (1726-1813), trans. Karl A. Olsson (1913-1996), *The Covenant Hymnal: A Worshipbook* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1996) No. 494.