

Balfour Covenant Church

Loving God

Loving Others

Transforming Lives



Introduction

The Meaning of Membership

Welcome to *Mission Friends: The Meaning of Membership*. The

purpose of this resource is to explore what it means to become a member within the Evangelical Covenant Church. It has been developed with the understanding that becoming part of the body of Christ is a spiritual matter. The Holy Spirit draws people of all ages to congregations for the purpose of working out the will of God through the church.

This participant guide will help you track with the facilitator, give you space to write thoughts and questions, and serve as a source of information concerning membership in the Evangelical Covenant Church.

You will discover that we refer to our denomination in many ways. Initially, we referred to ourselves as Mission Friends. Later we became the Evangelical Covenant Church, which we often abbreviate as the ECC. Today, we often simply call ourselves the Covenant. You will find we use all these terms in this guide. In every case it denotes that we are a people who are “in it together,” counting on God, and on each other, to fulfill God’s mission in the world.

Thank you for taking the time to explore what it means to be a part of the Evangelical Covenant Church. It is our sincere hope that together we will grow deeper in Christ and further in mission.

the ethos of the ECC—Why mission friends?

The term “mission friends” was an early nickname given to Covenant people. Covenanters have from the beginning sought to build a culture of friendship in Christ, pursuing the mission of God together. We hope to embody that same spirit today in this congregation. We are in it together, pulling for each other, as we seek to live faithfully in response to the love and grace God extends to us through Christ.

the Covenant describes itself

“The Covenant is not a church organization in the ordinary sense, but a mission society having churches as its members. These churches have consolidated together because of the missionary spirit which led them to missionary enterprises too large for any single church to undertake”—
1893 World’s Fair

the mission of the ECC

From our inception the Evangelical Covenant Church has been in it together to see

...more disciples,

...among more populations,

...in a more caring and just world.

Table of Contents

The Mission of the ECC.....	4
The Mission of the Canadian Conference.....	15
The Mission of Our Church.....	18
The Mission of a Member.....	21
Appendix.....	22

Mission *of* the ECC:

Our Roots

What is at the heart of the ECC? What makes the Covenant the Covenant?

the enduring commitments of the covenant

Commitment	Historical Influence	Sentiment	Commitment summary
1) The Authority of Scripture	Protestant Reformation	Where is it written?	Biblical
2) New/Deeper Life in Christ	Pietism	How goes your walk?	Devotional
3) Evangelism/Compassion	Moravian Mission	Lost/found; hurting/helped	Missional
4) The Body of Christ	Founding rationale	"I am a companion to all who fear thee."—Psalm 119:63 (KJV)	Connectional

the historical influences

The Protestant Reformation: A movement in Europe in the early 16th century that began with Martin Luther, who attempted to reform the Roman Catholic Church. The influence of the Reformation can be seen in the Covenant's belief in the Scriptures, the Old and New Testament, as the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.

Pietism: A movement within Lutheranism in the late 17th and mid-18th century that focused on individual piety (devotion) and dynamic and personal Christian life. The movement sought to restore the life of the Church through the study of the Bible, the emphasis on the priesthood of all believers, kind treatment for all people, including non-believers, and prominent devotional life in schools for theological training. To reflect this, the question often asked in

Mission Friend circles at that time was, “Are you yet walking with Christ?”

Moravian mission: A movement that spanned the 9th century through the 1700s, which emphasized the joy of life in Christ and mission to those who did not yet know such joy. They also emphasized the unity of Christians.

Founding rationale: After unsuccessfully trying to reform the Swedish Lutheran churches in the U.S. and based on several factors—including a differing view of Christ’s atonement—the Covenant was founded to be a church where “we will be in mission for Jesus together as friends.”

Continuing influences of the Evangelical Covenant Church today: The Evangelical Covenant Church has always been an immigrant church. Although it began with Swedish immigrants, today people from many cultures and nationalities make up the Covenant Church, expanding our spiritual heritage. Whereas 100 years ago one would have heard Swedish spoken in Covenant congregations in the United States and Canada, today one might hear Spanish, Korean, or Nuer in addition to English. Covenanters now trace their roots to Africa, Asia, Europe, and North and South America. We are united in one body by our faith in Christ, and throughout our history we have continued to hold fast to the four commitments that shape our character.

Mission *of* the ECC: Our Character

Each of these four enduring commitments—Biblical, missional, devotional, and connectional—is dependent upon the other three and is evidenced in our Covenant Affirmations. All excerpts regarding the Covenant Affirmations are taken from the brochure “What does the Covenant Believe: A Brief Look at Covenant Affirmations.” As you discuss the four commitments, fill in the missing information in the diagram below.



Biblical

We affirm the centrality of the word of God. We believe the Bible is the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct. The dynamic, transforming power of the word of God directs the church in the life of each Christian. This reliance on the Bible leads us to affirm both men and women as ordained ministers and at every level of leadership. It is the reason we pursue ethnic diversity in our church and is the inspiration for every act of compassion, mercy, and justice.

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness”—2 Timothy 3:16 (See also: Psalm 19:7-11; Hebrews 4:12; Isaiah 55:11)

Devotional

We affirm a conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit. The Covenant Church affirms the Trinitarian understanding of one God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The New Testament tells us that the Holy Spirit works both within individuals and among them. We believe it is the Holy Spirit who instills in our hearts a desire to turn to Christ, and who assures us that Christ dwells within us. It is the Holy Spirit who enables our obedience to Christ and conforms us to his image, and it is this Spirit in us that enables us to continue Christ's mission in the world. The Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts to us as individuals and binds us together as Christ's body.

We affirm the necessity of the new birth. The apostle Paul wrote, “If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17, TNIV). New birth in Christ means committing ourselves to Christ and receiving forgiveness, acceptance, and eternal life. It means being alive in Christ, and this life has the qualities of love and righteousness joy and peace. New birth is only the beginning. Growing to maturity in Christ is a lifelong process for both individual and community believers. God forms and transforms us and it is through people transformed by Christ that God transforms the world.

“I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this

love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”—Ephesians 3:16-19 (See also: John 15:5; Matthew 21:13)

Missional

We affirm a commitment to the whole mission of the church. The early Covenanters were known as “mission friends”, people of shared faith who came together to carry out God's mission both far and near. Mission for them and for us includes evangelism, Christian formation, and ministries of compassion mercy and justice. We follow Christ's two central calls. The Great Commission sends us out into all the world to make disciples. The Great Commandment calls us to love the Lord our God and our neighbors as ourselves.

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”—Acts 1:8

“He has shown all you people what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”—Micah 6:8 (See also: Colossians 1:28; Matthew 10:39)

Connectional

We affirm the church as a fellowship of believers. Membership in the Covenant Church is by confession of personal faith in Jesus Christ and is open to all believers. We observe baptism and Holy Communion as sacraments commanded by Jesus. We practice both infant and believer baptism. We believe in the priesthood of all believers, that is, we all share in the ministry of the church. We also affirm that God calls some men and women into professional, full time Ministry. The church is not an institution, organization, or building. It is a grace filled fellowship of believers who participate in the life and mission of Jesus Christ. It is a family of equals: as the New Testament 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).

We affirm the reality of freedom in Christ. The apostle Paul wrote, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1 TNIV). This freedom is a gift of God in Christ, and it manifests itself in a right relationship with God and others. It is not a private gift to be used

selfishly, but is given to serve the community and the world. For Paul, this freedom means that we are set free from the power of those things that on their own tend to divide. United in Christ, we offer freedom to one another to differ on issues of belief or practice where the biblical and historical record seems to allow for a variety of interpretations of the will and purposes of God. We in the Covenant Church seek to focus on what unites us as followers of Christ, rather than on what divides us.

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”—Acts 2:42-47 (See also: Ephesians 4:11-16; Hebrews 10:24-25)

Covenant Affirmations

Our place in the worldwide Christian Church

We are an apostolic church.• We confess Jesus Christ and the faith of the apostles as recorded in the Holy Scriptures. We believe the 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’s touchstone of discussion with regard to faith and practice.

We are a catholic church.• The world catholic literally means universal. This means we understand ourselves to be a part of the community of believers that began with Jesus’ first followers, is alive today, and will continue until Christ comes again.

We are a Reformation church.• We stand in the mainstream of a church renewal movement of the sixteenth century called the Protestant Reformation. Especially important is the belief that we are saved by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, not by anything that we can do. The Covenant Church is also shaped by Pietism, a renewal movement that originated in seventeenth-century Europe and emphasized the need for a life that is personally connected to Jesus Christ, a reliance on the Holy Spirit, and a call to service in the world.

We are an evangelical church.• A series of religious awakenings flowered in Europe and America during the nineteenth century and provided rich soil for the early growth of the Covenant Church with our passion for mission. Evangelicals historically have been characterized by 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 a responsibility for benevolence and the advancement of social justice.

Our identity and call to serve Christ in the world

For Covenant people, our essential beliefs are summed up in what we call Covenant Affirmations:

We affirm the centrality of the word of God.• We believe the Bible is the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct. The dynamic, transforming power of the word of God directs the church and the life of each Christian. This reliance on the Bible leads us to affirm both men and women as ordained ministers and at every level of leadership. It is the reason we pursue ethnic diversity in our church and is the inspiration for every act of compassion, mercy, and justice.

We affirm the necessity of the new birth.• The Apostle Paul wrote, “If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17, TNIV). New birth in Christ means committing ourselves to him and receiving forgiveness, acceptance, and eternal life. It means being alive in Christ, and this life has the qualities of love and righteousness, joy and peace. New birth is only the beginning. Growing to maturity in Christ is a lifelong process for both individuals and communities of believers. God forms and transforms us—and it is through people transformed by Christ that God transforms the world.

We affirm a commitment to the whole mission of the Church.• The early Covenanters were known as “Mission Friends”—people of shared faith who came together to carry out God’s mission both far and near. Mission for them and for us includes evangelism, Christian formation, and ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice. We follow Christ’s two central calls. The Great Commission sends us out into all the world to make disciples. The Great Commandment calls us to love the Lord our God and our neighbors as ourselves.

We affirm the Church as a fellowship of believers• . Membership in the Covenant Church is by confession of personal faith in Jesus Christ and is open to all believers. We observe baptism and Holy Communion as sacraments commanded by Jesus. We practice both infant and believer baptism. We believe in the priesthood of all believers—that is, we all share in the ministry of the church. We also affirm that God calls some men and women into professional, full-time ministry. The church is not an institution, organization, or building. It is a grace-filled fellowship of believers who participate in

the life and mission of Jesus Christ. It is a family of equals: as the New Testament teaches that within Christian community there is to be neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female, but all are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28)

We affirm a conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit.• The Covenant Church affirms the Trinitarian understanding of one God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The New Testament tells us that the Holy Spirit works both within individuals and among them. We believe it is the Holy Spirit who instills in our hearts a desire to turn to Christ, and who assures us that Christ dwells within us. It is the Holy Spirit who enables our obedience to Christ and conforms us to his image, and it is the Spirit in us that enables us to continue Christ’s mission in the world. The Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts to us as individuals and binds us together as Christ’s body.

We affirm the reality of freedom in Christ.• The Apostle Paul wrote, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1, TNIV). This freedom is a gift of God in Christ, and it manifests itself in a right relationship with God and others. It is not a private gift to be used selfishly, but is given to serve the community and the world. For Paul, this freedom means that we are set free from the power of those things that on their own tend to divide. United in Christ, we offer freedom to one another to differ on issues of belief or practice where the biblical and historical record seems to allow for a variety of interpretations of the will and purposes of God. We in the Covenant Church seek to focus on what unites us as followers of Christ, rather than on what divides us.

Conclusion

The Evangelical Covenant Church is a pilgrim church. Until Christ comes, we worship, serve, and witness so that the whole earth may hear God’s voice, learn of God’s love, and experience God’s joy. If you want to learn more about the Evangelical Covenant Church, ask your pastor for the longer version of Covenant Affirmations or visit the Covenant Website at www.covchurch.org for more information.

What We're Known For:

The ECC is known for emphasizing what unites Christians, rather than what sets them apart from each other. We affirm theological freedom, which means that we believe there are some periphery issues in Scripture that are open to interpretation. Christians everywhere differ in interpretations of Scripture, so we work to stand in the center, rather than becoming focused only on the periphery. A theologian once said, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.” The ECC embodies this sentiment.

The ECC is known for its stance on baptism. We affirm both infant and believer baptism. We see the Scriptures as unclear on modes of baptism and we have decided not to be divided over this.

The ECC is known for its affirmation of women in ministry at all levels of leadership, including the role of lead or solo pastor.

The ECC is known for its authentic and growing ethnic diversity.

The ECC is known for its congregational polity, meaning the local congregation holds the highest authority over its mission and ministry, while churches work together in mission.

The ECC is known for understanding that discipleship fully embraces evangelism together with compassion, mercy, and justice.

Denominational offices

The denominational offices have been formed to serve, support, partner and help coordinate our ministry together both near and far. Here are eleven ways the ECC serves the local congregations, at both a denominational and conference level:

- Instant connection to global mission•
- Training, care, and accountability for pastors•
- Assistance with pastoral search process•
- Consulting, seminars, and training events•
- Curricular, media, and print resources•
- Camping and retreats•
- Insurance and pension system•
- Resource center for materials•
- Conflict mediation upon invitation by congregation•
- Loan source•
- Denominational events for youth, women, families, and clergy•

Covenant Conferences



The Mission of The Canadian Conference

The Evangelical Covenant Church of Canada was founded in 1904 in Winnipeg, Manitoba by Swedish immigrants who had a passion for God's Word; for those who did not yet know God personally through Jesus Christ; for gathering to worship and for getting together with one another.



ECCC Conference at Willowbrook, 1916

The Evangelical Covenant Church of Canada, a denomination in Canada, and a regional conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church, is a community of churches in covenant with God and one another. We single-mindedly confess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and the Bible as the Word of God, the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine and conduct. As a family of churches, we enjoy diversity in all other matters of faith and practice, refusing to let them divide us or detract from our common mission.

The Evangelical Covenant Church is a rapidly growing multiethnic denomination in Canada and the United States with ministries on five continents of the world. Founded in 1885 by Swedish immigrants, the

ECC values the Bible as the word of God, the gift of God's grace and ever-deepening spiritual life that comes through a faith with Jesus Christ, the importance of extending God's love and compassion to a hurting world, and the strength that comes from unity within diversity.

The Evangelical Covenant Church is:

Evangelical, but not exclusive

Biblical, but not doctrinaire

Traditional, but not rigid

Congregational, but not independent

Biblical Mission

We are united by Christ in a holy covenant of churches empowered by the Holy Spirit to obey the great commandments and the great commission: to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to go into all the world and make disciples.

Vision for Mission

We covenant:

to cultivate communities of worship committed to: prayer, preaching, and study of the word; the celebration of the sacraments; and fellowship across gender, race, age, culture, and class.

to equip loving, giving, growing Christians to reach out with the good news of Jesus Christ – evangelizing the lost, ministering to those in need, and seeking justice for the oppressed.

Our Ministry Priorities

Make & Deepen Disciples

The Great Commission records Jesus' instruction to us to GO MAKE disciples and to GO TEACH them to follow him. We hold evangelism and discipleship closely together. Discipleship never comes down to one event or one program; rather it is about a closer walk with Jesus Christ.

Start & Strengthen Churches

Why start churches? Jesus commissioned his followers to go and make disciples: Mission and Spiritual Formation. Jesus calls us to make disciples, and his chosen vehicle for doing so is the local church. As a conference we also have a strong commitment to strengthen churches. The congregational vitality pathway is a process designed to help our existing churches with an on-site healthy missional check up, but also provide the follow-up support and resources for each local church to take next steps in moving toward becoming a healthy missional church.

Develop Leaders

The ECCC is committed to developing clergy and lay leaders. One avenue for this is through a grant the ECCC provides called Vantage Point 3 (VP3). Pastor Evan Dewald has this to say: "As a pastor, I'm excited to be moving forward with the VP3 approach to leadership development this fall because I believe the reflective practices that are taught are some of the most important practices a follower of Jesus can have. We are drawn deeper into the big story of God when we spend the time to understand ourselves, understand Jesus and understand those around us.

Love Mercy, Do Justice

The Old Testament prophets spoke out and advocated for the needs of the poor and those who treated unjustly. Interestingly, most of these prophetic words were actually spoken in times of increasing prosperity. We are fortunate and blessed to live in a place where most of those reading these words have no shortage of food, clothing or shelter. We also read and are aware that deep needs exist today just as they did in the time of the biblical prophets.

The Mission *of* Our Church

Our history

In 1996, the Nelson Evangelical Covenant Church of approximately 80 people had a vision for their extended community. The vision was to start a congregation in Balfour. The members noticed that God was moving people to live in that area. 33 individuals were then commissioned to start the work under the leadership of Pastor Dan Johnson.

After diligent work of preparation including a house to house survey, services began meeting on September 15th, 1996 in the Balfour Community Hall. It was an exciting time! The attendance was 70 for the first Sunday service and soon averaged around 55 regular attendees. It quickly became apparent that more space was needed for a growing Sunday school and nursery, as well as a need for office space with a phone. The purchase of a new portable office/trailer was approved and moved into place beside the Community Hall. Other Sunday school space was provided by donated space in the Fire Hall down the street as well as space in the Balfour Beach Inn. The community was graciously assisting to develop a new Christian congregation. It was again, an exciting time for those involved. Every Sunday, a group of people would arrive early to set up chairs, keyboard and sound system, and to make coffee for the social time after each service. It became a dream to have a building where the chairs could stay in place!

The congregation began praying and looking for land to purchase. At the January 2000 Annual Congregational meeting in Nelson, a motion was approved to purchase some property to build a new Church building. It had been agreed that the money must be in place before the plan was to go ahead. No Church had been built in the area for 100 years, and the community was skeptical. A perfect plot of land became available. God began removing many obstacles that came up and

the money required for purchase was quickly donated and pledged. This was a good indication that God was driving this new work.

In the fall of 2000, a sod-turning ceremony was attended by many interested people at the newly purchased land at 7741 Upper Balfour Rd. Much sooner than anyone expected, people began offering their services to help with the construction of the new building. Time skills, equipment and material were promised and it was again very obvious that it was God's time to build in Balfour. The foundation was laid in November 2000, and the work progressed rapidly. The project attracted the notice of many members of the community, who first watched and then day-by-day, they came closer, until finally they were on the building site enjoying the camaraderie of working with the Church workers. The winter weather cooperated and work continued every week day without stop. In only a few months, the 5800 sq. ft. multi-purpose building was finished and the First Service was celebrated by 180 people on Easter Sunday April 15th 2001. Those assembled gave all the praise and honour to God's mighty work in Balfour. It was an amazing experience for all involved. The building serves the community until today as a Christian worship centre and meeting hall for many community events.

Since the building was completed in 2001, The Balfour Church has had two additional Pastors. First, Andrew Fourtine and Jason Ashley. The church has been cultivating the soil for the kingdom of God through Alpha courses, community events, Playground build projects, community gardens and countless other conversations and dinners and service projects.

Our mission:

Loving God. Loving Others. Transforming Lives.

Our Values

By Loving God, we mean gathering Sunday mornings to praise and worship our LORD. We also want you spending time daily with God and growing in your relationship with Jesus.

By loving others we mean gathering in small groups where we want you learning how to follow Jesus and growing in your relationship with Jesus and the members of your group.

By transforming lives, we mean using your God-given gifts to bless others and cultivate God's kingdom in our community. Take a look through this guide and let us help you get connected. We're glad you're here.

Our structure

We are one church with three sites. Our in addition to the Balfour site, we also have sister sites in Nelson and at the Playmore Junction. Each is led by a Site Leadership Team (SLT), and is supported by the Leadership Board. The SLT oversees the ministries at each site while the Leadership Board supports the sites and oversees administrative tasks pertinent to all three sites. The SLT is made up of 4-6 elected members and the pastor. The Leadership Board is made up of 1 SLT member and 1 Member at Large from each site. The chairs of both the SLT and the Leadership Board are elected from within their respective groups. As one church we share a common budget. And while each site is responsible for their own budget, all the budgets are rolled up into one overall church budget. At the end of the year, any surplus is used to first cover shortfalls of any of the sites and then redistributed proportionally back to the churches. This is how we help one another in the event one site has a shortfall. We are one church, with three sites, bound by one common mission to love God, Love others and transform lives in the Kootenays.

The Mission of a Member

Reasons for Joining the Church

A Christ-Honoring Reason: It is a tangible expression of a spiritual reality. It helps us make public declaration of a spiritual truth about our identification with Christ and other believers. Christ loved the Church and gave his life for it. As we commit to the Church, we join Christ in that commitment. Mark 10:45, Luke 24:46-47, Hebrews 10:25, Colossians 2:19

A Missional Reason: Quite simply, we are better together. We can accomplish more by joining with others than we would ever be able to accomplish on our own. Matthew 28:18-20, Romans 12:5-8, Acts 11:19-26, Ephesians 2:10

A Spiritual Growth Reason: It's part of the progression of faith. First, we commit to Christ, and as part of that we further commit to Christ's family. Additionally, there are 39 "one another" commands in the New Testament about how to live life as brothers and sisters that cannot reasonably be fulfilled without a commitment to a specific group of people. John 13:34-35, 1 Corinthians 12:14-22, Ephesians 4:15-16

A Biblical Reason: Membership is inferred from the New Testament. For example, in one case the Apostle Paul was so broken-hearted at the persistent, flaunting, egregious immoral behavior of a member that he instructed the Corinthians to expel him. You can't be expelled from something of which you are not an initiated member. It can also be inferred in Acts 6 and 1 Timothy where some leaders could choose others to minister, or restrict the ministry of others. Acts 2:44-47, Ephesians 4:11-13, Ephesians 5:19-20

A Cultural Reason: It swims against the current of consumer religion in which, with no commitment to a congregation, people feel greater freedom to move from church to church. However, when hopping from church to church, people curtail their own growth. They never

grow roots, and fail to see the kind of growth that can be produced by persevering even in difficult times. Public commitments cause us to review the depth of bonds even in tough times. 1 Corinthians 12:22-26, Galatians 6:2, Philippians 1:29-30

Seeking to fulfill the will of God

Together we...

1. Strive for spiritual health as a congregation by:
 - a. being committed to GROW personally
 - b. praying for the church regularly
 - c. faithfully participating in the life of the church
 - d. protecting unity
 - e. supporting the spiritual growth and personal care of others
 - f. worshipping together
2. Serve together in ministry as a congregation by:
 - a. discovering and using our spiritual gifts
 - b. engaging in discipleship opportunities that help us be more effective in our service to God
 - c. caring for one another
3. Support the mission of our congregation by:
 - a. giving regularly of finances, time, and talent
 - b. actively participating in congregational decision-making
 - c. inviting non-churched friends
 - d. being externally-focused in seeking opportunities for evangelism and compassion/mercy/justice to the lost and hurting in our community and beyond

Appendix

Covenant Affirmations.....	23
Policy on Baptism.....	46
The Biblical and Theological Basis for Women in Ministry	48

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 e 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.”¹ 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 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

¹ From the Preamble to the Constitution and Bylaws of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

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.”² 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 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.³

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

² From the Preamble to the Constitution and Bylaws of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

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

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 (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.”⁴ New birth is more than the experience of forgiveness and

⁴ From *The Journey: A Leader's Guide for Discipleship/Confirmation* (Chicago; Covenant Publications,

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 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."⁵

⁵ From the Preamble to the Constitution and Bylaws of the Evangelical Covenant Church .

This mission belongs to the whole Church, the spiritual priesthood of all believers—women and men, young and old, laity and clergy.

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, reproved, 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.⁶

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:

- 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,

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

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 servant-like 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.

Conclusion

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.⁷

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

Policy on Baptism

The Evangelical Covenant Church has no formal creed to which

it expects all of its members to subscribe other than the acceptance of the Scriptures as the “Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.” The Covenant, however, has traditionally valued the historic confessions of the Christian Church particularly the Apostles’ Creed, as useful summaries of the essential message expressed in the Holy Scriptures.

This position of freedom within the limits set by the Scriptures and the central tradition of classical Christianity allows the Covenant to maintain unity within a diversity of secondary biblical doctrinal positions. Prominent among these in its potential for creating disunity and misunderstanding is the doctrine and practice of the sacrament of baptism. While the Evangelical Covenant Church comes out of a tradition in which infant baptism has been the primary understanding and practice, the Covenant chooses to respect the biblical positions of both infant and believer baptism equally. The Covenant recognizes this choice as a great challenge for the unity of the church in that these positions as classically stated become mutually exclusive at critical points of theology and practice.

The weight of the challenge to maintain the unity of the church within this diversity becomes the responsibility of Covenant pastors. If the Evangelical Covenant Church is truly to maintain this freedom of conscience for all Covenant people the pastors must be willing to submit their conviction and conscience concerning the doctrine and practice of baptism to the cause of the doctrine and unity of Christ’s church. Since Covenant ministers are the servants first of their Lord, but also of the church, it is their privilege to administer both infant baptism and believer baptism. Devoted Christians have held each of these views and there is room for both in the Body of Christ. As representatives of the denomination pastors give to each its own dignity and legitimacy as an

accepted interpretation of biblical baptism. This they do by administering both believer and infant baptism themselves. In this way they maintain the privilege of being the pastor of their entire flock.

Since the Covenant recognizes both infant and believer baptism as true baptism it requires all of its ordained and licensed pastors to respect and administer both of these recognized forms of baptism. In accordance with the above principle the following requirements apply to all Covenant pastors:

- 1) While Covenant pastors may, and must hold their own convictions concerning baptism, Covenant pastors must guard against presenting their own view in such a way as to disparage the other.
- 2) A Covenant pastor must be willing to administer both infant baptism and believer baptism.
- 3) A Covenant pastor must protect the right of the minority or majority (whatever its persuasion) to full participation and expression within the life of the church, always within the limits set by the Holy Scriptures and the principle of Christian freedom.
- 4) A Covenant pastor has the responsibility to exercise pastoral discernment in individual cases. All Covenant pastors are called to be conscientious stewards before God of their biblical convictions. At the same time pastors must place the freedom of conscience of his or her whole flock and the unity of the Church above personal convictions in all matters which do not disturb the central truths of the faith.

This policy was adopted by the Covenant Annual Meeting in June 1998, is now the general policy for the Covenant, and is the standard for future credentialing.

The Biblical & Theological Basis for Women in Ministry

At its 1976 Annual Meeting The Evangelical Covenant Church

voted to go on record as favoring the ordination of women. At the 1981 Annual Meeting a motion to rescind that action was overwhelmingly defeated. However, some Covenant people still have questions about the role of women in the ordained ministry. Were the decisions made legitimately or were they merely a reflection of new movements in our society?

The changes affecting women in the modern era have obviously influenced the Church's thinking, but the ministry of women is neither derived from society's ideas nor a partner to its extremes. For a tradition that is based on the question "Where is it written?" only one foundation is satisfactory for having women minister in the name of Jesus Christ. Women ought to minister not because society says so but because the Bible leads the Church to such a conclusion. A legitimate biblical and theological basis for women in ministry is, therefore, crucial to the ongoing implementation of the Covenant's decision regarding the ordination of women.

Biblical Passages on the Ministry of Women

Usually when people speak of biblical texts on the ministry of women, they refer to only two texts, the two that appear opposed to the idea. These texts will need to be treated justly, but all of the Bible must

be included in the discussion, not just two verses. Moreover, as with the interpretation of all Scripture, these two texts must be understood in their proper historical and biblical contexts. The Bible is not like a flat landscape, but is more like varied terrain, and each part must be dealt with in its own right. This is not to suggest that some parts may be ignored or are more important than others, but merely to stress that all the Bible must be treated fairly.

The issue of women in ministry is primarily a New Testament discussion, but there are Old Testament texts that deserve attention. Genesis 1:26-28 indicates that man and woman were created together in the image of God and that dominion was given to both of them. In various contexts (such as Exodus 38:8 and 1 Samuel 2:1-10) women are mentioned as playing a part in Israel's worship. More important are the women who functioned in leadership roles and consequently provide an Old Testament basis for women in ministry. Miriam and Huldah are both referred to as prophetesses who had significant roles in God's purposes (Exodus 15:20-21 and 2 Kings 22:14-20). Deborah is also referred to as a prophetess, but she is best remembered for her activity as a judge of Israel and a leader in a time of conflict (Judges 4-5). These texts do not legitimate the ministry of women by themselves, but they do provide important precedents.

The New Testament texts referring to women present a view that is markedly different from the negative view of women predominant in ancient societies. Women in biblical times usually were not educated, and rabbis warned against teaching the law to females. The limited information from ancient sources indicates that women who were considered respectable did not take part in public life. Rather, such women were expected to spend most of their lives within the confines of the home. Women were viewed as temptations to sin. They were not counted in the number of persons needed to have a synagogue, nor was their testimony accepted in a court of law. But Jesus' attitude and practice was in direct contradiction to that of his contemporaries. He initiated conversation even with unrespectable females like the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). Because of her witness, many of the townspeople believed in Jesus. Jesus had women disciples who accompanied him from Galilee to Jerusalem and helped finance his ministry (Mark 15:40, 41 and Luke 8:1-3). Jesus taught Mary and defended her choice to learn (Luke 10:38-42). Women were the last at the cross and the first at the tomb. After his resurrection Jesus appeared first to women and gave them the task of telling the good news to the disciples (Matthew 28:7).

The new-found freedom and role of women in Christ is clear also in the writings of the early Church. The book of Acts frequently mentions the presence and activity of women in the founding of the Church. From the praying in the upper room (1: 14) to the persecution by Saul (8:3) to the reception of the Gospel by Greeks (17:12), women were involved. Of major importance is the quotation of Joel 2:28-32 which is used in Acts 2:17-21 to explain the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost. With this event the promise had been fulfilled that God would pour out his Spirit so that both sons and daughters would prophesy. The church at Philippi was founded on women, and one of them, Lydia, obviously played an important role in the origin and growth of this church. The four prophesying daughters of Philip, who are mentioned in Acts 21:9, are further examples of the ministry of the Holy Spirit through women.

The ministry of women becomes even clearer in the writings of Paul. In Christ racial, societal, and sexual barriers have been broken down so that all are made one. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is not male and female, for you all are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). This newly found oneness does not refer merely to our standing before God or to a oneness to be found at Christ's second coming. It refers also to the present, for it is the basis of Paul's rebuke of Peter's hypocrisy in no longer eating with Greeks in Antioch (Galatians 2:11-21). In the American Civil War era some people argued that this verse had no social implications for the question of slavery, but most Christians have come to see the error of this judgment. There is nothing in Christianity that relates only to our salvation; our faith relates to all of life, including the roles of male and female. The issue is whether our attitudes concerning race, social class, and gender will be determined by our oneness in Christ in the new age or by the barriers and values of the old age.

In Paul's letters we encounter a significant number of women who were engaged in the work of the Gospel. We are not told the details of what any of these women did in their ministries, but the same language that Paul used of himself and his male helpers is used of them. Romans 16 mentions ten different women who were engaged in various kinds of ministries. Phoebe, who was probably the person who delivered the letter to the Romans, is described with the Greek word *diakonos* (which can be translated as "deacon" or "servant") and as one who helped many, including Paul (Romans 16:1-2). Prisca, also referred to as Priscilla, is called a fellow worker of Paul in 16:3. She and Aquila, her husband, had a church in their house, and the two of them instructed Apollos in Christian doctrine (Acts 18:26). Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis

were all women that Paul described as ones who labored in the Lord (Romans 16:6 and 12). It is also probable that Romans 16:7 refers to a woman, Junia, as an apostle, rather than to a man named Junias as in many translations of this text. (Since there is no evidence of this name being used for a man, the charge of a male bias in some translations is difficult to avoid.) In Philippians 4:2-3 two other women, Euodia and Syntyche, are said to have struggled along with Paul and his other fellow-workers in the Gospel. Such evidence cannot be discounted.

First Corinthians 11:5 is one of the most important passages regarding women in ministry. This text is often overlooked because of other questions, but it is clear that women were praying and prophesying in the early Church. The only concern about their activity was for proper decorum in the way they dressed. We cannot easily argue that women were allowed to prophesy but were not allowed to preach or teach. The New Testament does not make such a distinction between prophesying and teaching (See 1 Corinthians 14:3 and 31).

Biblical Passages Used Against the Ministry of Women

One of the beneficial aspects of the discussion of women in ministry is that it has helped us to become more conscious of the way we understand and apply Scripture. Our concern in interpreting any part of Scripture must go beyond a superficial reading that violates the original intention of the passage. Our focus should be on why the words of the text were written. Only if we understand why a text was written will we be able to apply it appropriately. For proper interpretation texts must be read in context and in light of the rest of Scripture. To isolate texts from their contexts or to deal only with passages suitable to our ideas leads to distortion. In such instances we may do justice to the letter of Scripture without ever discerning its spirit.

A case in point is the way some people have viewed 1 Timothy 3:1-7 as a barrier to women in ministry because it states that an “overseer”(or bishop) should be the husband of one wife. To suggest that this injunction excludes women from ministry is to ignore the text’s intention. The passage focuses on the necessity of fidelity in a monogamous relationship as one of several tests of the moral character of an overseer. There is no attempt to provide an eternal decree that overseers should always be married men. Certainly no attempt has been made on the basis of this verse to exclude single men from ministry. Nor

has the guideline that an overseer should rule his own house well (verse 4) been automatically used to prevent fathers of rebellious children from ministering. A literalistic interpretation is inappropriate.

First Corinthians 14:34-36 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12 are of a different character, however, and must not be brushed aside. These two texts are well-known for their imposition of silence on women, and clearly seem contradictory to the passages supporting women in ministry.

With regard to 1 Corinthians 14:34-36, how can we understand the fact that within the one epistle, 1 Corinthians, Paul both gave directions for proper dress when women were praying and prophesying and asked for their silence? People have often attempted to explain away either 1 Corinthians 11:5 or 14:34-36 to remove the difficulty. They have suggested that two different kinds of service were in mind or that one of the texts was added by someone else later or that Paul did not really mean what he said in one or the other of the texts. None of these explanations will do, and justice must be done to both passages. We cannot allow ourselves to ignore the texts that do not fit with our preconceived ideas.

The context of 1 Corinthians 14:34-36 begins with verse 26, and it is clear that the worship of the early Church was different from our usual services. When the church met for worship, all the people were encouraged to make a contribution to the service by offering some item for praise or instruction. Paul's concern in 14:26-36 is the disruption of the service. Women are not the only ones asked to be silent. Anyone who was going to speak in tongues is told to keep silent if no interpreter were present (14:28). Also, if one prophet were speaking and revelation came to someone else, the first prophet should be silent (14:30). Nor were women the only ones told to be in submission. The various prophets were to be submissive to each other as well (14:32). The service was to be orderly because God is a God of peace (14:33 and 40). The last part of verse 33 ("...as in all the churches of the saints") should probably be read with the rest of verse 33, rather than with verse 34 as in some translations.

The issue with regard to women is clearly within the context of the disruption of the worship service. The new-found freedom of women in Christ no doubt caused difficulties in the Corinthian church and elsewhere, as passages like this and 11:2-16 show. Apparently married women were disrupting the service by asking questions of their husbands, so they were instructed to wait and ask their questions at home. It seems from 14:36 that this disruption of the service was one of several ways that pride was manifesting itself in the Corinthian church.

This activity was considered shameful, particularly in an ancient culture where any public exposure of women was considered a disgrace.

There are still unanswered questions about this text, such as which Old Testament passage is referred to with “as the law says” in 14:34. But regardless of such questions, clearly this passage says what it does because of problems in the Corinthian church and attitudes in the ancient world and not because women should never speak in church. To suggest otherwise removes 1 Corinthians 14:34 from its context and creates an insurmountable contradiction with 11:5.

The text in 1 Timothy 2:11, 12 is more difficult to understand, but the issues are the same. There is no question that in this passage women were prohibited from teaching men. The question is “Why?” Were there reasons in this circumstance why women were prohibited from teaching, or were women never to teach men? If the latter, there are blatant contradictions between this text and other texts like 1 Corinthians 11:5. A commitment to the unity of Scripture, and indeed an assumption of the unity of Paul’s thought (assuming some form of Pauline authorship), requires a closer analysis of this passage.

There are specific indications as to the reason why women were prohibited from teaching in this circumstance. Clearly the pastoral epistles were not written to be manuals of church government. Rather they were written to combat false teaching and heresy. Approximately one-fifth of the two hundred and forty-two verses in the pastorals explicitly treat false teaching. If false teaching is a concern of the pastorals, it is the concern of 1 Timothy. Immediately in 1 Timothy 1:3 the concern to prevent false teaching is expressed as the reason Timothy was left in Ephesus. Speculations about myths and genealogies, along with emphasis on knowledge and asceticism had led many astray. Some of the best successes of the false teachers were among women. First Timothy 5 treats a number of problems caused by women in connection with false-teaching. The concern in 5:13 is not merely for gossiping, but for spreading the false teaching which has “turned some aside to follow Satan” (5:15). Second Timothy 3:6-7 speaks of false teachers who creep into houses and take captive “silly women” who are ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.

The whole of 1 Timothy 2 must be interpreted within this context of false teaching. The focus of the whole chapter is prayer, but the concern over false teachers is clear in 2:8, where men are told to pray without wrath and disputing, and in 2:14, where the issue is fear of deception.

Even with this recognition of the context of false teaching, 1 Timothy 2:8-15 still has several debated issues. In 2:9 it is preferable to

understand that women are to pray with proper decorum in the way they dress, which is the same subject as in 1 Corinthians 11:5. Alternatively, some translations would suggest that the concern is merely for the way women dress with no thought about their praying. (The issue is whether with “likewise” in 2:9 the meaning is “likewise I desire women to pray” or “likewise I desire.”) Also some translations say in 2:11 that a woman should learn “in silence,” but “in quietness” would be more appropriate. The same root word is used in 2:2 with regard to the quiet and tranquil life that all are to lead. The desire is that both men and women pray and that women in Ephesus learn in submission and quietness, as indeed is expected of all Christians.

The most difficult part of this passage is 2:12, which is usually translated as: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have dominion over a man, but to be in quietness.” The problem is with the word translated “have dominion over” (*authentein* in Greek), for it does not occur anywhere else in the New Testament. This is not the usual word for authority. Outside the Bible the word is used of murder, suicide, having dominion over, and, some argue, of sexual offenses. The original idea seems to have been “to thrust oneself.” The uses of the word for murder and suicide obviously are not pertinent for this text. If the reference is to authority, as seems likely, the negative connotations of this word would require a translation such as “domineer.” Whatever the meaning, what is prohibited of women with this word seems so negative that it would not be permitted of men either.

The words of 1 Timothy 2:13-15 are difficult on any understanding of the text, but they seem to be caustic comments directed at women influenced by false teachers to leave their responsibilities. The only other reference to Eve in the New Testament is in 2 Corinthians 11:3 which is also concerned with seduction by false teachers. Elsewhere when the fall of humanity is discussed, reference is always to the disobedience of Adam. In a society where women were not educated and had not previously been full participants in everyday life, without doubt women would have been easy targets for false teachers.

There is no need, therefore, to see a contradiction between 1 Corinthians 11:5, where women are viewed as praying and prophesying, and 1 Timothy 2:12 where women are prohibited from teaching men. The prohibition in 1 Timothy 2 was required by conditions in that time and place. Specifically the prohibition was required because false teachers had led women to leave their domestic responsibilities, to be disruptive, and to be nonproductive in the community. These words should not be used as a universal prohibition of teaching by women.

Those who are quick to argue against women in ministry on the basis of texts like 1 Corinthians 14:34-36 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12 need to ask why they do not imitate the kind of church service described in 1 Corinthians 14:26-36 or why they do not institute widows' roles and care for widows according to the instructions of 1 Timothy 5. Using proof-texts out of context and using only the parts of the text that we like are not suitable practices for a church claiming to believe the Bible. Likewise, we ought not to set some texts against others as if to suggest that we may choose the one group and ignore the others.

Further Theological Considerations

In addition to a discussion of the relevant biblical texts, there are several theological issues that are decisive for the position one takes on women in ministry. Often assumptions are made about these topics that are informed more from our society or traditions than by the Bible and the Gospel. A reconsideration of these topics can lead to the removal of many of the barriers to effective ministry in our time.

Authority

Often when people are opposed to women in ministry, the real issue is not the Bible, but authority. They argue that women ought not be in positions of authority. Such people need to ask themselves what authority really is and why men may have it and women may not. Misunderstood texts dealing with husband-wife relationships have wrongly been applied to the question of women in ministry. For example, people have viewed the term "helpmeet" in Genesis 2:18 as a basis for arguing for the inferiority of the woman. The words in question, however, mean "a helper suitable for him" and do not suggest inferiority, for the same word "helper" is also used of God (Deuteronomy 33:7). Similarly, people argue that women are not to be in positions of authority because in Genesis 3:16 Eve was told that her husband would rule over her. However, these words are descriptive of life after the fall, not descriptive of what God had intended for humanity.

The biggest offense is that people have assumed this world's understanding of authority and applied it to the Church, but in Christ authority must be understood differently. The classic text dealing with authority is Matthew 20:25-28 in which Jesus instructed his disciples that the world's views on authority and greatness ought not be their view.

Rather than leaders lording over and having authority over others, the leaders should be their servants. This teaching is valid, not only for the ministry, but for family relationships and all other kinds of leadership roles.

Ephesians 5:22, however, is often used to argue that women should not be in authority since wives should be in submission to their husbands. It is questionable whether texts dealing with the marriage relationship should be applied to the question of women in ministry. But apart from that, the more important point is that Ephesians 5:22 is one of the most abused texts in the Bible. The submission of wives must be seen only as one example of the mutual submission that is required of all Christians in 5:21. In fact, in the manuscripts of 5:22 followed by most editions of the Greek New Testament, the word “submit” is not even present; it is assumed from verse 21. From this world’s perspective-mutual submission does not make sense but it is merely another way of expressing the point of Matthew 20:25-28. In the context of the ancient world, wives were instructed to submit to their husbands because Christianity with its call of total commitment to Christ was viewed as a threat to the family. In Titus 2:5 wives are asked to submit so that the word of God is not blasphemed. Husbands are referred to as “head” in Ephesians 5, but only to place greater responsibility on the husband in caring for the wife. He is to give himself for her in love as Christ gave himself for the Church. Both in the family and in the Church mutual submission is the controlling principle.

In recent times some people have granted that women may minister, but argue that women ought not be in positions of ultimate authority. Such a distinction cannot be defended, for no biblical texts indicate two levels of authority in ministry. We do not need a view of authority that will keep women from functioning in ministry. We need a view of ministry that subverts what this world understands by authority. Mutual submission is the Gospel in action.

Ministry

Often when people are opposed to women in ministry, their opposition is based on their view of ministry. Particularly if the Old Testament priesthood is taken as the model for ministry, women will hardly be accepted as pastors since only men were priests in the Old Testament, and only men who were Levites at that. Even in the Old Testament, however, the original intention was that the Israelites should

be a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6), and this idea becomes important in the New Testament. While there are some parallels between the Old Testament priesthood and Christian ministry, the former is not an appropriate model for the latter. As Protestants, we do not have priests; rather, we stress the priesthood of all believers. Stress on the priesthood of all believers ought to require the ministry of women.

Focus on passages such as Ephesians 4:12 has rightly emphasized that ministry is the task of the Church and not just the task of the clergy. Distinctions of value, sanctity, and privilege between clergy and laity ought to be rejected, and the ministry of women is one way to emphasize the ministry of all the Church.

Ordination, because it has been viewed as conferring special status on pastors, has often functioned as a barrier both to the ministry of women and to the ministry of the laity. This practice of ordaining certain people for ministry has antecedents in the New Testament, but it is not taught explicitly. This is not to argue against ordination and certainly not to argue against a professional clergy, but the Church needs to discuss what ordination means and make sure that ordination does not become more hindrance than help in proclaiming the Gospel. Ministry is not some privilege to which the few are called. It is the task of all Christians as they identify with the ministry and love of Jesus Christ.

A Gifted Church

Closely related to the discussion of the ministry of all the Church is the focus on the variety of gifts in the Body of Christ. By recognizing the diversity of gifts within its fellowship the Church recognizes that the Spirit of God functions in different ways in different people. A person's task in the ministry of the Church is determined by the way the Spirit is manifested in that person's life and actions (1 Corinthians 12:11). Whether a woman or a man is granted the privilege of serving the Church as a pastor is not based on that person's choice to do so, but on the recognition that the Spirit of God has led and empowered that person for pastoral ministry. The requirement for pastoral ministry is manifestation of the Spirit not being a male. Nowhere in the New Testament are the gifts of the Spirit determined by gender. If women are encouraged to affirm their gifts for ministry, the Church will have new resources for evangelism, service, and discipleship. Such a new power for the spread of the Gospel could be decisive for the growth and health of the Church.

The Development of Doctrine

Some people have opposed women in ministry merely because the Church rarely has had women ministers before. There were exceptions, but basically this is true. Still it is not a valid objection. While tradition should be valued, only the Scriptures are authoritative. At numerous times in the history of the Church Christians have realized that the Gospel in their time required new thoughts, definitions, and actions that had not been expressed in earlier times. The doctrine of the Trinity is an obvious example of such developing theology. In the sixteenth century the understanding of salvation and the role of the Church were redefined. In the last century the abolition of slavery in the United States took place as a result of the application of the Gospel in new ways. In focusing on the authority of Scripture, we do not believe that God is prohibited from doing new things. Our God is alive and continually leads his people to apply the Gospel to their own time. The Gospel does not change, but the way that it is applied in a particular time and place may.

Final Considerations

Our society faces numerous problems, many of them related to sexual roles and distinctions. These problems are also problems in the Church. The extremes in our society create fears about a deterioration of family structures or other changes that might occur. The encouragement of women in ministry does not derive from these extremes and should not contribute to the fears. Women in ministry not only will release the energies of the Church for the proclamation of the Gospel, but having women in ministerial roles will also help the Church deal honestly and much more wholly than before with what it means to be a man and with what it means to be a woman.

The ministry of the Church is an enormous and sometimes difficult task. The gifts and abilities of women are needed as much as those of men. Women will encounter the same kinds of problems that men do, but the Church cannot afford to erect additional obstacles that will inhibit their ministry. It is time to let the Spirit of God work through all of God's people, including women. Enjoying the freedom of the Spirit will not only mean that women are allowed to minister, but that God's people will also allow themselves to be ministered to by all those who are gifted and called by God.

*“A Biblical and Theological Basis for Women in Ministry” is
Copyright ©1987, Covenant Publications.
Used by permission. All rights reserved.*

*This statement was prepared for the Board of the Ministry of the
Evangelical Covenant Church by a committee consisting of Robert
Johnston, Jean Lambert, David Scholer, and Klyne Snodgrass. The
original draft, biblical translations, and the subsequent editing were
done by Klyne Snodgrass. The statement was approved by the Board on
October 19, 1984 and was subsequently revised after discussion with the
Covenant Ministerium and then was approved again by the Board of
Ministry on February 12, 1987.*