

Comment

*Hauna Ondrey, assistant professor of church history,
North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois*

At its founding in 1885, the Covenant Church committed itself to a single confession: “This Covenant confesses God’s word, the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, as the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.” This statement was as significant for what it did not confess as for what it did: implicit in its brevity was the decision not to adopt a formal, human-made confessional statement that specified precisely how Scripture must be interpreted. Rather, Scripture itself would be the Covenant’s only confession. The founders were not naïve to the uniqueness of this freedom nor to its vulnerability. Yet they were too wary of the dangers potential to confessional statements they had experienced in Sweden and within prior attempts at organization in the United States.

This freedom—freedom from any human confession in order to enable freedom for submission to Scripture—constituted the Covenant. In its most essential nature, the Covenant was founded as a believers’ church whose only confession was Scripture. This boundary intended to encompass within the Covenant only believers while not excluding any believer, as articulated in 1942 by E.G. Hjerpe (Covenant president 1910–1927): “The Covenant’s principle in this matter, we may say, is very narrow and at the same time very broad. It is so narrow that there is room only for believers in Jesus Christ, and so broad that there is room for all such believers and they on that ground are entitled to membership and all the privileges of the Christian Church.”

Across Covenant history, this precious and precarious freedom has been challenged and maintained. Current debate regarding the nature, extent, and limitations of Christian freedom within the Covenant is not

new; rather, it occupies a succession of such debates that span a century and beyond.

In this current context, the work of the Covenant Committee on Freedom and Theology (1958–1963) has resurfaced from relative obscurity. The committee's final report, *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, sought to “inquire into the nature of Christian freedom, the way in which [the Covenant] has experienced that freedom, and the ways in which that freedom may be maintained” (p. 9). While frequently referenced, the significance and ongoing relevance of this document are interpreted variously. To facilitate this critical discussion, we offer here the entire report along with excerpts from the 1958 and 1963 Annual Meeting minutes relaying the report's origin and reception.

It was announced at the 2018 Annual Meeting that the Executive Committee of the Evangelical Covenant Church has commissioned a new resource paper regarding the intersection of freedom and responsibility. As this new work unfolds, the questions raised in 1963 face us once again:

Can we continue to look upon ourselves as a fellowship of believers bound together only by our common life in Christ and conformity to Christ as Savior and Lord? Can we maintain the kind of personal relationships required in a Christian fellowship without any limitations other than that we submit to the authority of the Bible as the revelation of God's will, or must we return to uniform dogmas and carefully defined interpretations of Scripture to help us understand one another? (p. 12)

It is always up to those in the present to determine whether continuity with the past is desirable—and, if so, which course of action in fact offers such continuity. It is our hope that these historical documents will resource this dialogue.

A sustained attempt to interpret and apply the 1963 report and the broader history it represents is offered by Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom, professor of theology and ethics at North Park Theological Seminary. In “Covenant Freedom: Freedom for All or Free-for-all?” Clifton-Soderstrom explores the necessary relationship between freedom and the Covenant Affirmations of Scripture's authority and the necessity of new birth. Within this framework, she then offers a theological account of, and criteria for, faithful dissent within Christian freedom. Her final

argument is that such faithful dissent is essential to the church's ongoing renewal.

Clifton-Soderstrom's work warrants careful reading and serious, critical engagement. We hope the inclusion of *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom* will facilitate such thoughtful interaction, and we welcome formal responses for publication in a subsequent issue of this journal. Please contact the editor or submit directly to our website by October 15, 2018, noting guidelines for authors.

In 1910 C.V. Bowman (Covenant president 1927–1933) described the Covenant in this way:

But concerning church order, the Mission Friends have a principle that is still more unique and takes a very prominent place in their program. They hold that the local church shall consist of only believing members but at the same time have room for all true believers, no matter what their viewpoints are on controversial doctrines. It is this principle which really distinguishes Mission Friends from other Christian denominations, and which justifies their existence as a particular church.

This question confronts us today: What distinguishes the Covenant from other Christian denominations and justifies its existence as a particular church? As we grapple with this question in the present we would do well to consider how Covenanters have answered it in the past.