

# ***Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom (1963): Full Report with Supporting Historical Documents***

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*Edited by Hauna Ondrey, assistant professor of church history,  
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Three historical documents are reprinted here, in whole or part, offering and contextualizing *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, a report commissioned in 1958 and endorsed in 1963 by the Covenant Annual Meeting.

In 1958, the Board of Ministerial Standing appointed a committee “to study problems that have been with us for a long time: first of all, the nature and scope of our freedom, which we look upon as a unique part of our tradition.”<sup>1</sup> This decision was precipitated most immediately by the widely publicized criticisms of William C. Doughty, pastor of Bethany Covenant Church in Mount Vernon, Washington. Soon after his ordination in 1952, Doughty began to challenge the orthodoxy of seminary guest speakers and materials published by the Covenant Youth Department. He voiced additional anxiety about denominational overreach, concerned that a revised Covenant constitution threatened congregational autonomy and that censorship in denominational publications (as he interpreted this) sought to silence dissenting voices. Doughty’s overarching concern was that the Covenant was abandoning its commitment to scriptural authority.<sup>2</sup>

1. *Covenant Yearbook 1958*, 242.

2. In his centennial history, Karl A. Olsson has described at length the events summarized here. See *Into One Body... By the Cross*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1986), see esp. 305–308, 332–51.

This was not the first time such concerns had been raised. The charge given to the committee references “problems that have been with us for a long time.” The Covenant had weathered intense internal conflict at the height of the Fundamentalist controversy in the 1920s.<sup>3</sup> At that time, some had insisted forcefully that the Covenant’s commitment to biblical authority required its allegiance to the “five fundamentals.” Against this, the Covenant insisted that a commitment to scriptural authority did not entail commitment to verbal inerrancy—and that to adopt the five fundamentals as the only valid interpretation of Scripture would be to abandon their Reformation and Pietist heritage, siding instead with the medieval and Protestant scholastics their forebears had protested.

The outcome of this prior conflict had been that, while nothing prevented individuals or congregations from joining the World Christian Fundamentals Association—and indeed, several prominent Covenanters were involved at the highest level—the Covenant as such would not further specify its broad confession of “the Holy Scriptures, the Old and New Testaments, as the Word of God and the only rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.”<sup>4</sup>

In the post-war years, the Covenant saw significant growth beyond its original immigrant community, enabled by the completed transition from Swedish to English.<sup>5</sup> Extensive wartime outreach to soldiers had given the Covenant increased visibility,<sup>6</sup> and focused church extension efforts following the war led to new congregations in expanding suburban and urban areas. Taking place within the context of the rise of

3. On the impact of the Fundamentalist/Modernist controversy on the Covenant, see Karl A. Olsson, *Into One Body...By the Cross*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1985), 211–72; Olsson, *By One Spirit* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1962), 526–49; Philip J. Anderson, “Education and Piety in an Immigrant Evangelical Tradition: North Park and the Challenge of Fundamentalism,” *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly* 47:4 (1998): 208–31 (available digitally through the Swedish-American Archives of Greater Chicago, [http://collections.carli.illinois.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/npu\\_sahq/id/4629/rec/29](http://collections.carli.illinois.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/npu_sahq/id/4629/rec/29)); Steven Elde, “The Hearth and the Chimney: Covenant Attitudes toward Education,” *Covenant Quarterly* 49:2 (1991): 3–43.

4. Constitution, Article II. See note 34 below.

5. Though the Covenant had begun taking Annual Meeting minutes in English in 1923 and the qualifier “Swedish” was dropped from the denomination’s name in 1936, by 1940 approximately half of Covenant congregations were still conducting services in Swedish, and only in 1955 were Covenant publications printed exclusively in English.

6. For the impact of World War II on the Covenant, see Olsson, *Into One Body*, vol. 2, 291–308, and John J. Laukaitis, “Service, Faith, and Race: North Park College During World War II,” in *Denominational Higher Education During World War II*, ed. John J. Laukaitis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 93–145.

neo-evangelicalism in the United States, the increased number of new Covenanters brought renewed conflict regarding scriptural authority. Many who learned about the Covenant during the war and joined a Covenant congregation or attended North Park on the G.I. Bill expected that, by its self-claimed evangelical identity, the Covenant intended *neo-evangelicalism*, and therefore was committed to penal substitutionary atonement and verbal inerrancy.

Doughty himself came to North Park Theological Seminary in 1948, following his studies at Moody, with the impression that the Covenant and its school were fundamentalist. While Doughty was not alone in this misunderstanding, the broad publicity Doughty gave his critiques, his relentless insistence that the Covenant must be aligned with Fundamentalism's core tenets, and his resistance to procedures of inquiry and discipline imposed by the Board of Ministerial Standing led ultimately to his censure<sup>7</sup> and the formation of the Covenant Committee on Freedom and Theology.<sup>8</sup> This committee worked for five years, bringing updates to each subsequent Annual Meeting until the final report was presented and adopted in 1963.<sup>9</sup>

The first set of texts below is excerpted from the minutes of the 1958 Ministerium Annual Meeting (Ia) and Annual Meeting of the Covenant (Ib). The minutes detail at length Doughty's actions and the procedures by which the Covenant responded, the text of resolution of censure, and the appointment of the Committee on Freedom and Theology. The substantial space devoted to these proceedings is highly atypical. The full text of the final report, *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, follows (II). Page numbers from the original printed version are included in brackets within the text in order to facilitate cross-reference and citation. Finally, excerpts from the 1963 Annual Meeting minutes document the

7. Doughty would go on to resign his credentials the following year. *Covenant Yearbook 1959*, 221–22.

8. The appointment of the committee is presented as “separate from, but related to” the matter of Doughty. See minutes below (Ib), 15.

9. *Covenant Yearbook 1959*, 177; *Covenant Yearbook 1960*, 252; *Covenant Yearbook 1961*, 246; *Covenant Yearbook 1962*, 231; *Covenant Yearbook 1963*, 209, 233. It is important to note that the adoption of the report did not settle the conflict once and for all, as perhaps was the desired outcome when commissioned. In fact, Olsson suggests that it may rather have added fuel to the fire that erupted again in 1965, eventuating in a petition against the seminary and the recommendation to hire a seminary Bible professor to represent a conservative view of Scripture (fulfilled briefly by Donald Madvig and subsequently by Klyne Snodgrass's long tenure). For a narrative of this subsequent history, see Olsson, *Into One Body*, vol. 2, 359–72.

adoption of the final report by the Covenant ministerium (IIIa) and the Annual Meeting delegates (IIIb).

Minor typographical conventions have been modified in conformity to *Quarterly* style; the use of the generic masculine has been conformed to the current convention of gender neutral language. Full texts of all original documents are available through the digital collections of the Covenant Archives and Historical Library: *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom* can be found within the Frisk Collection of Covenant Literature;<sup>10</sup> Annual Meeting minutes through 1999 are accessible through the Frisk Collection of Covenant Yearbooks.<sup>11</sup>

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## (I) Origin of the Committee

### (a) 1958 Annual Meeting of the Ministerium, *Covenant Yearbook 1958*, p. 191

In presenting the resolution of censure, the secretary read a lengthy history of the events involved. This history is attached to the minutes of this meeting,<sup>12</sup> along with the specific wording of the resolution of censure and recommendation. Following the resolution from the Board of Ministerial Standing,<sup>13</sup> the president granted Mr. Doughty an equal amount of time to present his answer to the charges listed. A period of discussion followed until the question was called for. The resolution of censure and recommendation of the Board of Ministerial Standing passed without a dissenting vote.

### (b) 1958 Annual Meeting of the Covenant Church, *Covenant Yearbook 1958*, pp. 236–43

#### *Censure of William C. Doughty*

The secretary of the Board of Ministerial Standing read the following statement, resolution of censure, and recommendation from his board:

The Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing, with the full concurrence of the Covenant Ministerium, recommends the following resolution of

10. Available at [http://collections.carli.illinois.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/npu\\_swecc/id/36987/rec/4](http://collections.carli.illinois.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/npu_swecc/id/36987/rec/4).

11. Available at [http://collections.carli.illinois.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/npu\\_covyb](http://collections.carli.illinois.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/npu_covyb).

12. Included below, pp. 7–16.

13. Forerunner to the Covenant's current Board of the Ordered Ministry.

censure regarding the Rev. William C. Doughty:

In view of the procedures and utterances directed to the entire Covenant by the Rev. William C. Doughty, the Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing wishes to review the history of this case and to recommend a certain course of action. The attitudes and actions which have brought the Rev. William C. Doughty as an object of concern before the Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing is best pointed up by the following statement:

During September and October of 1957, Pastor Doughty wrote in the *North Pacific Conference News* two articles in which he expressed his opinion that there was a drift away from the traditions of the Covenant toward liberalism, mentioning particularly the Covenant Press, the Covenant Youth Department, and North Park College and Theological Seminary.

On January 7, 1958, at the annual meeting of the Bethany Covenant Church of Mount Vernon, Washington, Pastor Doughty withheld recommendations of support for North Park College and Theological Seminary and the Covenant Youth Department for reasons already stated.

Because this information had come to the Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing and because this was of vital concern to the entire denomination, the Board at the Midwinter Conference in Denver, Colorado, invited Pastor Doughty to come at Covenant expense, and to confer informally in the hope that a mutual understanding would be reached, or at least that proper procedures might be established.

This invitation was twice presented by long distance telephone: First, through the secretary of the Board and, subsequently, at the request of the Board, by the chairman of the North Pacific Missionary Conference.<sup>14</sup> These invitations were declined by Pastor Doughty who insisted that he wished to proceed according to the regulations. Thereupon, the Board directed to Pastor Doughty a communication, delivered to him personally by the secretary of the Board, on March 3. From this communication the following is quoted: The Board

in all sincerity had twice asked you to confer with it to attempt an informal settlement of the matter.... We view your rejection of the request as a serious affront to the Board, and... such steps are now to be taken as will require you to appear

14. The North Pacific Conference was a regional conference, comprised in 1958 of thirty-eight congregations spanning the current Pacific Northwest Conference, as well as three churches in British Columbia. Cf. *Covenant Yearbook 1958*, 318–19.

before the Board in Miami. Your fellow ministers concerned in your statements have previously appeared before the Board for examination as to character and doctrine, have been appointed by the Covenant for their positions, and are in good ministerial standing. For these reasons and others, the Board expressed its deep concern over your refusal to grant its request to confer with it. The Board holds the matter to be of such a nature and of such urgency that you are hereby informed that you will be definitely expected to meet with the Board during its Annual Meeting sessions in Miami, which will begin on Thursday, June 12. In the meanwhile, as stated earlier, you are not to speak or write on the subject at all.

On the same date (March 3), five members of the North Pacific Conference, one of whom was also the secretary of the Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing, were present at a business session of the Mount Vernon church, where they hoped to come to an understanding with the church and its pastor. The counsel of this group was obviously rejected, inasmuch as subsequent to this meeting letters were sent by the church to the secretary of the Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing, and to the chairman of the regional conference, suggesting that the church viewed the procedures of the conference and the Covenant Board to be in the nature of "police-state methods."

In view of the developing difficulties, the Pastoral Relations Commission of the Covenant (consisting of President [of the Covenant] Theodore W. Anderson, Dean [of the Seminary] Eric G. Hawkinson, and Secretary [of the Covenant] Joseph C. Danielson) offered its services in a letter addressed to the church on March 12. The Mount Vernon church declined the proffered services of the commission and made a counterproposal that President Theodore W. Anderson, Dean Eric G. Hawkinson, and the executive secretary of youth work, the Rev. Aaron Markuson, appear before it to clarify some issues. The Pastoral Relations Commission declined this proposal because the arrangements suggested would be irregular and unworkable. The commission suggested that the matter could be further pursued by correspondence.

On April 17, the board of the North Pacific Ministerial Association, together with the superintendent and chairman of the regional conference and the secretary of the Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing, held a meeting before which Pastor Doughty appeared and read the paper which

now has been circulated under the title, "A Cause for Concern."<sup>15</sup> That board then advised him to leave the matter in its hands and asked him to refrain from any further public presentation of this document until the matter could be brought before the annual meeting of the regional ministerial association.

Before that annual meeting could be held, in complete disregard of this request (a request which now had been made both by the Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing and by the regional ministerial board), Pastor Doughty mailed mimeographed copies to all the ministers of the North Pacific Conference.

The North Pacific Ministerial Association's meeting, May 1–3, carefully considered and discussed the whole problem of Pastor Doughty's procedure. During the course of these deliberations, the chairman of the association, speaking on behalf of the assembly, and referring to Pastor Doughty's previous violations of specific instructions, instructed him not to further publicly discuss the matter, but to let it be brought to the session of the Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing at the meeting in Miami Beach. Upon the conclusion of the deliberations, one of the members of the association was appointed and instructed to publicly deliver in the session a frank and serious rebuke to Pastor Doughty. This action was carried out according to decision.

Less than two weeks after this rebuke and these instructions, Pastor Doughty distributed printed copies to every church in the Covenant through its chairman, the same article now entitled, "A Cause for Concern in the Covenant." In a covering letter he requested the chairman to give the pamphlets to the pastor of the church and to its delegates to the Covenant Annual Meeting in Miami Beach.

In response to this mailing, now that the matter had become Covenant-wide, the president and the secretary of the Covenant sent a letter on June 4 to all church chairmen and pastors, explaining the situation and pointing out the nature of the requests which had been made of Pastor Doughty, that no public discussion should be conducted by him awaiting the consideration of the whole issue by the Board of Ministerial Standing in Miami Beach.

Pastor Doughty's response to this letter was to send another commu-

15. This was a pamphlet printed by Doughty in 1958, in which he compiled seminary class lectures, drawn verbatim from student notes taken in shorthand. Doughty distributed the pamphlet widely after this initial presentation of the material to the conference board. See Olsson, *Into One Body*, vol. 2, 312, 336, 349–50.

nication to the church chairmen under the date of June 10, by which action he indicated his disregard of all counsel and advice given to him.

This then sketches the course of events up to the meeting of the Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing here in Miami Beach, a meeting to which representatives of the North Pacific Conference were invited as advisory members.

When in its present session the Board reached the point in its agenda where it was to deal with Pastor Doughty, it was immediately presented with a request from the Mount Vernon Church board and its pastor that the whole interview be recorded verbatim. The Board declined this request because adequate records are always kept of its proceedings, and because no such request is provided for in either the Rules and Regulations of the Board or in Robert's Rules of Order. Furthermore, it seemed to indicate a basic distrust of the Covenant and its constituted authority. Such distrust was indicated by the wording of the following telegram from the church:

Sorry request for recording ministerial minutes pertaining Pastor Doughty hearing not granted. Manner in which this meeting is planned is highly disturbing to us causing doubt as to sincerity and truth. We reaffirm our stand tape or court reporter for complete minutes is a must. Our pastor possesses our complete confidence and support. He is being likewise advised of this wire and instructed not to appear at hearing if not given proper and true consideration we remain in prayer and God's word, Philippians 1:9, 10.

When Pastor Doughty appeared before the Board, he was presented with a statement expressing the desire that the interview might be conducted on an informal and familial level. The statement pointed up the fact that as Christians and as ministers the group should in the utmost frankness, honesty, and love consider the whole problem, seeking a settlement which would enhance the unity of the fellowship. It was pointed out that the Board did not desire to conduct a trial but rather that we should confer together in confidence and understanding under the guidance of the Holy Spirit so that fears could be allayed and confidence restored.

Pastor Doughty was then given an opportunity to make a statement in which he declared that if the Board would not permit a verbatim recording of all the conversation during the interview he would refuse to enter into conversation with the Board.



In the absence of Pastor Doughty, who had been asked to leave the session while the Board considered a policy matter, the Board reconsidered the demand for such verbatim recording and by polled vote unanimously (one member of the Board not as yet having arrived) reaffirmed its previous decision. Pastor Doughty was then called back into the session and was informed of the Board's decision. He then reaffirmed his own decision, upon which the Board then asked him if he would be willing to discuss the whole problem in a preliminary unofficial, off-the-record session. He was asked to consider this alternative during the lunch hour.

In the afternoon session, the Board was informed by Pastor Doughty that he would not accept this alternate proposal. Upon receiving this statement, the Board expressed its deep regret and sorrow that its hopes and aims were not realized, whereupon Pastor Doughty withdrew from the session.

In view of all this, we present this resolution of censure and recommendation.

INASMUCH as Pastor Doughty has unethically and publicly called into question the complete trustworthiness of some Covenant leaders and ministers, whom he has mentioned by name, men in whom we have confidence and who have given ample evidence that they are trustworthy leaders and teachers and that they possess intellectual integrity and spiritual maturity; and

INASMUCH as he has proceeded by word and deed by such irresponsible publicity as to cause much disturbance and concern within our churches and among our ministers; and

INASMUCH as he has persisted in pursuing his course in disregard of the prescribed procedures, as indicated in the letter of the Covenant's president and its secretary, which reads in part, "We believe that criticism of Covenant policies and leaders is always permissible. It should, however, be made to the individuals and boards directly responsible. Furthermore, it should follow the procedures established by Covenant Annual Meetings"; and

INASMUCH as he has rejected both counsel and suggestions of friends, fellow ministers, and responsible boards within both his regional conference and the denomination, advice and counsel intended to bring about understanding and settlement of the differences; and

INASMUCH as his actions have indicated a deep distrust of conference and Covenant leadership, and of the Covenant itself as represented by its Board of Ministerial Standing, thus casting aspersion and reflection upon the integrity and fairness of duly constituted authority; and

INASMUCH as he has failed to recognize and understand the principle of freedom of theological interpretation within the recognized authority of the Scriptures, which has traditionally prevailed within the Covenant, and has violated it in his attempt to impose upon his ministerial brothers,<sup>16</sup> and upon the Covenant church, his doctrinal positions; and, finally,

INASMUCH as all of this—conduct unworthy of a minister, un-Christian relationships to his fellow ministers, disloyalty to the Covenant—constitutes a serious offense against his brethren and the Covenant church, which has by ordination given him his official standing; therefore be it

*Resolved*, That we recommend to this Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church of America:

1. That Pastor William C. Doughty be censured for his un-Christian spirit and his willful method of procedure; and

2. That we withdraw his ordination credentials for a period of one year, but grant him ministerial license, thereby placing him on probation under the discipline and direction of the North Pacific Ministerial Association through its board, and of the Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing, in order that there may be opportunity for repentance and reconciliation; and

3. That this ministerial license, granted for one year, be held on condition of acceptable ministerial behavior.

The Board of Ministerial Standing regrets the necessity of this resolution and recommendation. It has no intention of thereby inhibiting legitimate criticism properly channeled. When such is made, proper actions will be taken.

This resolution and recommendation does not reflect an evaluation of Pastor Doughty's contention that there is a drift toward liberalism.

16. The first women were ordained in the Covenant in 1978, two years after the Annual Meeting had formally approved the ordination of women. *Covenant Yearbook 1976*, 149; *Covenant Yearbook 1978*, 172.

Our action is based on his spirit and procedure. The Board has complete confidence in the integrity of our Covenant leaders and teachers. However, in view of the confusion which exists, the Board is appointing a committee to plan and prepare a study of the real nature of our highly cherished freedom in the Covenant and of our theological position within evangelical Christianity.

The moderator called upon Elmer Fondell,<sup>17</sup> an invited visitor to the Annual Meeting, to make a statement regarding proper procedure for the meeting at this time.

Mr. Fondell responded by pointing out that ecclesiastical assemblies can take one of two courses of action on matters such as that which was before this meeting: (1) it can conduct an open trial as in a general legislative assembly, or (2) it can appoint a small group to handle the matter. The latter has been our way of procedure. This does not permit an open trial by or in assembly. It does permit a statement by the regular board concerned, and a statement by the person involved and a rebuttal by the board. The assembly can then proceed to decide as to how it wishes to handle the resolution or recommendation presented.

The Board of Ministerial Standing having made its presentation, Mr. Doughty was recognized for a statement.

Mr. Doughty stated that he had not had adequate time to prepare and cited the Rules and Regulations of the Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing on the matter. He, thereupon, read the paper he had prepared for and read to the Covenant Ministerium.

Mr. Wickman<sup>18</sup> made only a general rebuttal to Mr. Doughty's statements.

Mr. Doughty was again allowed to speak in his own defense.

Leslie R. Ostberg,<sup>19</sup> a member of the Board of Ministerial Standing, pointed out that the problem before the assembly was related to larger

17. Professor of missions at North Park Theological Seminary (NPTS) until his retirement in 1963.

18. Virgil D. Wickman, pastor of First Covenant Church in Tacoma, Washington, and secretary of the Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing.

19. Ostberg was chair of Board of Ministerial Standing. The pastor of Edgewater Evangelical Covenant Church in Chicago, Ostberg came to the 1958 Annual Meeting as one of two presidential nominations along with A. Eldon Palmquist. It was Clarence A. Nelson, however, who would be voted as fifth president of the Covenant—the only Covenant president to be nominated from the floor of an Annual Meeting. Cf. *Covenant Yearbook 1958*, 211, 218–19.

problems within the North Pacific Conference and that the resolution of censure allows continued ministerial standing for Mr. Doughty.

Lester Munson, a member of the Covenant Executive Board, reminded the assembly that (1) its responsibility was to pass on the recommendation of the Board of Ministerial Standing, that (2) the Covenant has asked its pastors to rule themselves, and that (3) the recommendation imposes a lenient sentence considering the gravity of the offense. He therewith moved the previous question.

Wesley Nelson<sup>20</sup> appealed to the moderator for one more opportunity for Mr. Doughty to speak. Mr. Munson agreed to this procedure.

Mr. Doughty repeated that he had not had adequate time and opportunity to prepare for his defense. When put to a vote the previous question prevailed.

By vote of the assembly, a closed ballot was cast on the resolution and recommendation of censure presented by the Board of Ministerial Standing. The motion to adopt prevailed.

Arthur Johnson<sup>21</sup> (Lakeview, Chicago) asked the Board of Ministerial Standing why it had decided that further study of this situation must be deferred to next year.

Wesley Nelson pointed out that a great deal of time had been spent already on this issue, that further time was not now available, and that a study committee to be appointed later by this meeting would have opportunity to make a long overdue study of our denominational liberties.

The secretary of the Board, Mr. Wickman, replied that this was also made necessary by the fact that it could not confer further with Mr. Doughty as long as he demanded taping or verbal reporting of the proceedings, when the Board had no precedent for this method of recording nor any desire to engage in it. He further stated that the Board wishes to deliberately disassociate the matter of freedom within the Covenant and the matter of procedure in Mr. Doughty's specific case.

#### *Appointment of and Charge to Study Committee*

Mr. Wickman presented the following actions of the Board:

Separate from, but related to this entire statement just presented, and in specific reference to the committee referred to in the closing sentence

20. Pastor of Mission Covenant Church in Oakland, California, and member of the Board of Ministerial Standing. In 1960 he would be called to NPTS as associate professor of practical theology. See note 31.

21. Chair of and delegate for Lakeview Mission Covenant Church, Chicago, Illinois.

of the statement, the Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing wishes to announce the appointment of that committee; namely, Arvid F. Carlson, Donald C. Frisk, Paul P. Fryhling, Henry A. Gustafson Jr., Eric G. Hawkinson, Wesley W. Nelson, and Leslie R. Ostberg, the last-named serving as chairman.<sup>22</sup>

This committee is requested to study problems that have been with us for a long time: first of all, the nature and scope of our freedom, which we look upon as a unique part of our tradition; and, second, our theological position related to our biblical heritage and to historical Christianity.

We would expect the committee to give structure and character to this study in our denominational context and to make use of all available resources. A preliminary report will be expected of the committee at the 1959 Annual Meeting.

We request the approval of this action by this Annual Meeting.

A motion to grant the requested approval prevailed.

Clarence A. Nelson, president of North Park College and president-elect of the Covenant,<sup>23</sup> reminded the assembly that the above actions on the recommendation of censure and related matters still left members of the North Park Seminary faculty under a cloud of suspicion. He urged the assembly to remember that while the now authorized study was in progress it would continue to be the purpose of the school to serve in the high freedom given persons in Christ and promised that this freedom shall not be entangled. Prolonged applause followed Mr. Nelson's statement.

A motion to record the actual count of the votes on the resolution and recommendation of censure was lost.

Mr. Doughty was recognized by the moderator and assured the assembly that the censure voted him would not be taken lightly.<sup>24</sup>

22. See notes 25–33 below regarding committee members.

23. See note 19.

24. Doughty resigned his Covenant ministerial credentials the following year. *Covenant Yearbook 1959*, 221–22.

## (II) The Full Report

### **Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom: The Final Report of the Covenant Committee on Freedom and Theology, Presented to the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church of America, Chicago, Illinois, June 18, 1963**

#### *Preface*

[p. 3] With this report the Covenant Committee on Freedom and Theology concludes its work on the assignment given to it by the Annual Meeting at Miami, Florida, in 1958. This committee was originally appointed by the Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing “to plan and prepare a study of the real nature of our highly cherished freedom in the Covenant and of our theological position within evangelical Christianity” (*Covenant Yearbook 1958*, p. 240). In approving the appointment of the committee, the Annual Meeting gave it the following assignment: “to study problems that have been with us for a long time: first of all, the nature and scope of our freedom which we look upon as a unique part of our tradition; and, second, our theological position related to our biblical heritage and to historical Christianity” (*Covenant Yearbook 1958*, p. 242).

The first part of this assignment has been completed. The committee presents herewith its findings concerning the nature and scope of Christian freedom within the framework of biblical authority. This is not to be construed as a creedal statement but as an historically oriented description of today’s Covenant Church. The subject matter is confined to authority and freedom—the authority of the Bible and our freedom in Christ.

The second part of the committee’s assignment, namely a description or definition of the Covenant Church’s theological position, was begun with a study document on the “Nature of the Church and the Sacraments,” which was submitted to the 1962 Annual Meeting in Seattle, Washington. This should be considered as the first step in the fulfillment of the second part of the committee’s assignment. The task of defining the theological position of the Covenant Church is conceived as a work that will continue as long as God grants life and purpose to our fellowship. It remains for the denomination itself to appoint such committees or commissions as it considers necessary to continue this work.

The report which follows, entitled *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, when endorsed by this Annual Meeting, will, until such time as it may be revised by further denominational action, serve the Covenant Church in the following ways:

(1) A Means of Identification. Without claiming uniqueness for the Covenant denomination within the family of God, it is herein identified by its concern for biblical authority and Christian freedom. [p. 4]

(2) A Frame of Reference. As a non-creedal church, the Covenant is subject to periodic pressures from its own membership to define the basis for its unity and the boundaries of its diversity. *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom* is a statement to which reference may be made to determine whether or not particular courses of action or types of thought are consistent with Covenant principles and practice.

(3) A Basis for Mutual Understanding. As the Covenant Church grows older in years and larger in numbers, it becomes increasingly important for its survival as a vital fellowship that its members understand and accept each other in a spirit of mutual trust and confidence. The basis for such mutuality is described in this document.

(4) A Definition of Freedom. By examining the implications of our freedom in four significant areas of our common life as embodied in *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, the committee has sought to provide adequate guidelines for both the limitation and protection of this freedom.

### The Covenant Committee on Freedom and Theology

Donald C. Frisk, North Park College<sup>25</sup>

Paul P. Fryhling, Minneapolis, Minnesota<sup>26</sup>

Henry A. Gustafson, Jr., North Park College<sup>27</sup>

Eric G. Hawkinson, Fort Lauderdale, Florida<sup>28</sup>

Irving C. Lambert, Secretary, Glen Ellyn, Illinois<sup>29</sup>

25. Dean of the seminary, having succeeded Eric Hawkinson in 1961, and professor of theology at NPTS.

26. Pastor of First Covenant Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and vice-chair of the Northwest Conference. Fryhling joined the Board of Ministerial Standing in 1962 but resigned the following year.

27. Professor of New Testament at NPTS.

28. Dean of the seminary when the commission began its work, Hawkinson retired in 1961 and in 1963 was serving as pastor of Evangelical Covenant Church in Pompano Beach, Florida, a church plant that joined the Covenant at the 1963 Annual Meeting (*Covenant Yearbook 1963*, 134). A surgery prevented him from attending that gathering.

29. Executive at Ryerson Steel and long-time member of Douglas Park Covenant Church in Chicago. He was the father of Jean Lambert, the ninth woman ordained in the Covenant (cf. Kelly Johnston, "Jean C. Lambert: Covenant Pastor, Theologian, Pioneer," *Covenant Quarterly* 75:1 [2017]: 31–49). The Irving C. Lambert award, honoring commitment to urban ministry, continues to be given in his name.

Karl M. Nelson, Princeton, Illinois<sup>30</sup>

Wesley W. Nelson, North Park College<sup>31</sup>

Robert H. Peterson, San Francisco, California<sup>32</sup>

Leslie R. Ostberg, Chairman, Quincy, Massachusetts<sup>33</sup>

Walter Thorell and Arvid Carlson found it necessary to resign from the Freedom Committee for personal reasons. [p. 5]

### ***Chapter 1: The Authority of the Bible***

The Covenant Church was born in the pietist movement and in the Scandinavian revivals of the nineteenth century. It found its source of vital spiritual life in a renewed appreciation of the Scriptures. The established church of the day honored the Bible and accepted its authority, but its concern was more often with the letter than with the spirit. Although it was rigidly orthodox, it often did little to meet the needs of the heart and made difficult a warm-hearted and vital relation to the message of Scripture.

The spiritual power of the pietist movement lay in its recovery of a vital and dynamic use of the Bible. This early pietist approach to the Scriptures was not new. Rather, it was the rediscovery of the living view of the Bible which characterized the early Reformation.

It has been and remains the conviction of the Covenant that the Bible is “the Word of God, the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.”<sup>34</sup> Our forebears considered the Bible to be a book which, while referring to many things, is primarily about one thing—our salvation and

30. Member of Mission Covenant Church in Princeton, Illinois. Medical doctor, former Covenant missionary to China, and father of F. Burton Nelson, NPTS professor of ethics and theology 1960–2004.

31. Associate professor of practical theology at NPTS. See note 20.

32. Attorney, member of First Covenant Church in San Francisco and the Board of Directors of North Park College and Theological Seminary.

33. See note 19. By 1963, Ostberg was serving Covenant Congregational Church in Quincy, Massachusetts.

34. In 1963, the Covenant’s Confession (Constitution, Article II) read: “The Covenant Church believes in the Holy Scriptures, the Old and the New Testament, as the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct” (*Covenant Yearbook 1963*, p. 428). Compare with the Covenant’s founding confession (1885): “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,” and current confession: “The Evangelical Covenant Church 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” (Constitution, Article II).



the power to walk therein. Its essential content is the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. To read it properly, therefore, is to find it an altar where one meets the living God and receives personally the reality of redemption.

In its primary sense, God's revelation of himself is made in the person of his son, our Lord Jesus Christ. In his birth, life, teaching, ministry, death, and resurrection, the redemptive action of God in history is seen at its decisive focal point. On the cross, atonement for our sins is accomplished; in the resurrection, our victory over sin and death is assured; in the promise of his second coming, the consummation of his purpose for history is made sure.

The early church proclaimed this revelation of God in Christ as the central theme of its message of redemption. This message was understood in the light of the Old Testament and preserved in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). The Scriptures, written by godly men inspired by the Holy Spirit, arose in the life of the believing community. Used in the writing were of necessity human words, figures, and concepts which were in relation to the culture of their time. In and through this temporal language, God speaks his eternal word wherein is our salvation.

The Scriptures are both the witness to God's redemptive action in history and the interpretation of that action. Both the redemptive action in history in which God discloses himself and the interpretation or meaning which the Scriptures give of [p. 6] that action together constitute revelation. The church sees in such revelation the glory and mystery of God who condescends to speak his word through human words and finds in it a mystery which can be compared to the Incarnation of the eternal son in the man Jesus. It looks upon the revelation, writing, gathering, and preserving of the Scriptures as a great work of God.

While the Scriptures address themselves both to the mind and heart, the proof of their authority is not determined ultimately by the tests of human reason but by God himself as he bears witness to the Word through the inward work of the Holy Spirit in our minds and hearts.

Because there is no other channel through which redeeming knowledge of God is now disclosed to humanity, the church is bound to the Scriptures. Only in and through them does the church find the source of its life. Therefore, its faith, its worship, its conduct, its fellowship, and its freedom must all arise out of, be judged by, and be renewed by the Scriptures.

Because the Scriptures have arisen within history and are transmitted to us through historical processes, the church in its educational task is

obliged to use the best available methods of scholarly research to answer questions pertaining to text, authorship, circumstances of origin, content, and meaning.

Because the Bible is the word of God, the church is obliged to treasure its message, guarding against every temptation to obscure its plain teaching or evade its truth and humbly submitting itself to responsive obedience in the Holy Spirit.

The Evangelical Covenant Church is a community of people which “believes in the Holy Scriptures, the Old and New Testaments, as the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.”<sup>35</sup>

What does this statement mean for the understanding of ourselves as a Christian community?

(1) It means that we are a people of a book. We believe that the Bible is the place where God is to be met, where his forgiveness is proclaimed, and where his will is made known. This is not to say that he is unable to speak through other means; but it is to affirm that he has chosen to speak to humanity through the Bible. The Bible is the means by which God has chosen to reveal himself to us.

Accordingly, we believe that when God speaks through a sermon, it is because the sermon is the message of the Bible. When he speaks to us in prayer, it is because our prayer is prayer according to the Bible. When we hear him speak in the events of history, or in the world of nature, it is because we have learned through the Bible to understand what it is that he is saying in these areas. The Bible is for us a meeting place with God.

(2) Our statement of faith also means that we believe the Bible stands in judgment upon our sinfulness. Its message is the story of God’s love for the world, of his calling us from our sin, and of his demand that we share in his redemptive ministry; as such it stands in judgment upon the Christian church and condemns all thought and action which does not conform to the will herein revealed. The carelessness that would distort the gospel out of concern for success or growth; the excessive concern for the comforts of life in a world of misery and need; the [p. 7] failure to live as persons accountable to God for all expenditures of money, talent, and time; the factionalism and exclusivism by which the members of Christ’s body are separated from one another; the sinful pride and prejudice which prevents loving of persons of other races, religions, and classes; the failure to understand appreciatively those in the Christian fellowship

35. See note 34.

with whom we disagree; the unwillingness to extend to individualists and non-conformists the freedom required for creative spiritual growth; and the joylessness sometimes attendant upon the Christian community in its excessive concern for self and its neglect of the grace and power available in Christ—all these the Bible condemns and in judgment calls the Christian to repentance and renewal.

This message of judgment, then, is only the context for the more positive function of the Bible. It is not only a book that judges. It is also a means of grace, and as such the Christian community has experienced it. Through its message, God confronts people with the grace of forgiveness and the gift of new life, and through the reverent reading of it God's Spirit nourishes the faith, deepens the love, guides the conduct, and encourages the hope of the Christian person.

(3) Clearly implied in our statement of faith is the conviction that a spiritually healthy Christian community must be sustained by a right use of the Bible. For the Bible, through which we hear God's judgment upon our sinfulness, is also the means by which there comes God's saving and healing word of life. To receive these words of judgment and renewal we must restore the book to the place which our Covenant forebears gave it. It must be the center of our life and worship. It must be the daily bread of every Christian; it must be the constant diet of every church.

Our times of Bible study are to be regarded as times of prayer. After using all our resources to determine the original meaning of a passage, our task is to turn its message into a prayer, marking its relevance for our lives as members of a Christian community in a world that needs salt and light.

If, as individual Christians and as a Christian community, we learn to listen to God's voice breaking through to us day after day and week by week from the pages of his chosen book, we will discover a deepening of our love for him who saves us, a widening of our love for this sinful world, a strengthening of the bonds of fellowship and mutual trust within the Christian community, and a growing Christlikeness in the lives of his saints. [p. 8 blank] [p. 9]

### ***Chapter 2: Freedom within Authority***

The Covenant Church, accepting the authority of the Scriptures, must inquire into the nature of Christian freedom, the way in which it has experienced that freedom, and the ways in which that freedom may be maintained.

### *A. What Is the Nature of Christian Freedom?*

The human situation, as described in the Bible, is a situation in servitude. Humanity is enslaved to numerous powers: to sin, law, death, and spiritual forces. These debilitating servitudes keep individuals from realizing their own meaning and potential. Enslaved by these powers they cannot discover what God meant them to be. They are not free.

The good news assures us that these many servitudes may be exchanged for one new commanding control—a voluntary bondage to God. Paradoxically, this voluntary bondage to God is freedom itself. For the yielding of one's life in obedient love to the will of God is the avenue to human fulfillment. In this yielding of self to God, the person discovers their own true destiny. Hereby one becomes what they were meant to be: the servant, the child, the friend of God. To become what one is meant to be, to realize the very purpose for which one is created, that is freedom.

Freedom, then, is the gift which comes through obedience to God's will. This will is made known to humanity in and through the Scriptures, and particularly through Jesus Christ. In Christ God has spoken, revealing both his judgment and his salvation. Through Christ God has acted, calling humanity to repentance, to the forgiveness of sins, and to a new life of fellowship with himself.

Freedom is a gift which one must rightly use if one would retain it. On the one hand, the Christian has been set free to live in fellowship with God and others in obedient conformity to God's will. On the other hand, the Christian is threatened with the continuing possibility of some new or old servitude and stands in continual need of the resources of grace. Thus, freedom is conceived as a state of being free and a process of becoming free. "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1).

What relevance has this definition of the Christian's freedom and this description of the human situation to us who are confronted by a diversity of opinions in many matters of doctrine and by a variety of standards in many areas of conduct? If we believe that our freedom is found in our conforming to the will of God, then it becomes imperative that we know what that will is. According to the Christian faith, [p. 10] God has revealed his will to humanity in the Bible and supremely in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Hence, the Bible is the avenue to freedom. Its message is God's word, to which human beings, if they would be free, must respond in obedient faith.

On the central issues of our faith, doctrine, and conduct, the biblical

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

However, the meaning of the Bible or the nature of its relevance is not so clear as to remove all diversities of interpretation. Christians do hold divergent views on the theological definition of such doctrines as biblical inspiration, the sacraments, the incarnation, the atonement, the application of the Christian ethic, and the consummation of the age. Thus, while there is unity on the level of faith in Christ and the gospel, there is diversity on the level of theological expression.

The diversity is not in itself contrary to the will of God. The Bible affirms that God created us as finite human beings. Our diversity is a reflection of our finiteness as well as our immaturity. Hence, his will is that we should recognize this finiteness and be dependent upon and responsive to the revelation he has already given to us. While attempting to state the content of the revelation in terms that are meaningful to us, we must keep in mind that our apprehension of the revelation is subject to the limitations of our humanity and that we are subject to error and often in need of correction.

For the Christian to accept God's will involves acknowledging their finiteness and their dependence on God. On the one hand, this implies the importance of constructing a theology which will clarify faith. On the other hand, it gives the Christian freedom from bondage to any human-made theological system by whatever name it may be called. It gives freedom to be open to the correction of one's fellows and to the rich possibilities of spiritual growth which accompany this acceptance of one's finitude. It gives freedom to discover one's utter dependence on God's revealing work of grace as the only avenue to personal fulfillment. Thus, it gives freedom to be what God meant for each person to be—the dependent, obedient, and victorious child of God.

### *B. How Has This Freedom Been Experienced in the Covenant?*

This understanding of freedom as submission to the will of God was exemplified in the work and teaching of the founders of our denomina-

tion. In the church of their day they saw evidence that the Christian liberty recovered in the Reformation was in danger of being stifled by the hardening of forms and dogmas. While they realized that dogmas, set forms of worship, and “official” interpretations of Scripture served a purpose in the life of the church, they were fearful lest such forms become idols which stand in the way of a living encounter with Christ as disclosed in the word. Similarly, while they were appreciative of the wisdom reflected in the creeds of the church, they saw the creeds to be partial and imperfect summaries of what is said more powerfully in Scripture itself. Therefore, they refused to make any of the written creeds binding in an absolute sense, lest slavish adherence to a creedal statement make it difficult to hear and respond to the full implications of the word for their [p. 11] day. They believed that true freedom came by faith in and surrender to Christ and the word alone.

Further illustration of our founders’ conviction that freedom is implied in the believer’s relationship to Christ is seen in their view of the church. For them the church was the fellowship of believers and was brought into being through the redemptive work of Christ and the “renewal of the Holy Spirit.” Accordingly, the one basic requirement for membership in the church was the experience of the new birth and a consistent confession of Christ as Savior and Lord. To have added the requirement of uniformity in all doctrinal matters would have been to forget that “our knowledge is imperfect” [cf. 1 Corinthians 13:9] and would have presumed that a final and authoritative theological position was in their sole possession. Its effect would have been to limit their fellowship to the dimensions of a sect rather than permit it to be the household of God in which the living faith expresses itself in varied ways. Thus, our forebears found it spiritually meaningful to live in Christian fellowship with persons holding different doctrinal viewpoints in some important areas as long as their life and spirit witnessed to their submission to Christ and devotion to the word of God.

Such a position did not mean indifference to doctrine or a lack of theological concern. This is evidenced in the lively discussion of doctrinal topics which arose in response to the questions, “Where is it written?” and “What is written?” Early Covenanters knew that even the simple confession “We acknowledge Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord” implied in itself a number of theological affirmations. They understood that a part of the task of the church was to spell out in systematic and orderly manner the theological structure implied in its confession. They were

aware of the danger of heresy and, therefore, insisted that all theological statements must be continually under the judgment of the revelation given in Scripture.

Our forebears, in keeping with this principle of freedom, were able to move out into the currents and crosscurrents of spiritual and theological influence which swirled about their lives. This is evidenced not by their interest in the work of the theological schools (for there was little of that) but in their participation in the pietistic movement itself, and in the discussions concerning the sacraments, church order, atonement, and other topics of vital concern in the life of the church. Their interest in doctrine was practical and devotional rather than intellectualistic. Very few of them were professional theologians. In relation to their own spiritual needs they examined in the light of the Scriptures the movements of which they were aware, accepting what illumined the biblical message and rejecting what they thought contrary to it. Through such discussion they found their own understanding of the faith corrected, deepened, and made relevant to the problems of their day.

If we are to be true to this aspect of our heritage, we should sincerely and faithfully use this principle of freedom as a basic element in our existence as a Christian people in today's world. To do so we must enter into the stream of present theological discussion and exercise our freedom creatively and helpfully with respect to the issues which now confront the Christian church. The theological concerns of the present moment differ in many respects from those of the past. Although many of the questions now being debated in the church were well known to our predecessors, others have arisen since their day and could not have been known to them. Thus, to say that we may differ only at those points where they permitted differences would be to deny to the present generation the freedom in Christ which prior generations enjoyed. In the basic and central affirmations of the Christian faith there must be unity, but in their expression and interpretation there is room for wholesome divergence. [p. 12]

It is, therefore, our duty to approach the areas of theological tension with courage, fraternal understanding, and unflinching devotion to Christ and the Scriptures. A passive neutrality simply paralyzes our influence and work. Fear of being misunderstood or misinterpreted may well reduce our spiritual impact to the point of diminishing returns, both in the pulpit and in the pew. If we do not speak the meaning of the word as we see it, we will incur the displeasure of God and lose his power. However, this

freedom to express ourselves must be coupled with a sense of responsibility to both God and neighbor, in the church and outside of the church. This sense of responsibility must be kept alive, enabling us to recognize the various stages of maturity and diversity of historical backgrounds of those to whom we bear witness and to acknowledge our own finiteness in the understanding of God's word. Through sharing in discussion the insights which each of us may possess and in faithfully seeking to understand the revelation given to us in Christ, we make the faith relevant to our day. In such discussion we shall doubtless find areas of difference, but we shall also find a deepened sense of our basic unity in Christ.

### *C. Maintaining Christian Freedom in the Covenant Church*

The conditions under which our denomination exists today are far different from those of its earlier years. Our members now live within the framework of the changing culture of our day. Evangelism and church extension are bringing many people of widely differing practices and doctrinal concepts into our fellowship.<sup>36</sup> A higher standard of education is making our members conversant with a wide variety of ideas. Our missionary activities are placing us in direct contact with the changing thought patterns of the revolutionary world of today,<sup>37</sup> and modern means of communication are bringing this world much closer to us than it has ever been before. Changing conditions such as these make it necessary to consider whether we may continue to experience Christian freedom in the way in which it has been so meaningful to us in the past.

This question of maintaining our Christian freedom is particularly relevant to the Covenant Church in four significant areas:

(1) Christian Freedom in Our Personal Relationships. The wider contacts and greater diversity among people who associate with one another today make it difficult to understand one another. Even words have different meanings for different persons, and communication by the spoken or written word presents problems. Strong emotional overtones often become attached to certain words. For instance, words such as "fundamentalism," "neo-orthodoxy," "liberal," and so forth tend to create strong emotional feelings, particularly when they identify persons

36. See introduction regarding post World War II church growth.

37. National independence movements led to sweeping decolonization across Asia and Africa following World War II, beginning in 1947 with India and exploding in Africa in 1960.



with movements in a manner which appears to be derogatory either to the persons or the movements or to both.

Is it possible, under these conditions, to maintain the principle of freedom within the authority of the Bible in our personal relationships? 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 [p. 13] to help us understand one another? In a word, how does the principle of Christian freedom relate to the problems of personal relationships among us today?

Christian freedom, as has been defined in the first part of this chapter, is a gift which comes through obedience to God's will, which is made known in and through the Scriptures. As has also been indicated, such freedom is both a state of being free and a process of becoming free. We all continue to be finite creatures, and no one has yet attained to the place of complete maturity.

The New Testament makes it clear that this recognition of our immaturity is highly significant to our personal relationships within the Christian fellowship. For instance, it is among those who "see in a mirror darkly" that Christian love prevails (1 Corinthians 13); it is those who deal with the "log" in their own eye who can see clearly to remove the "speck" from another's eye (Matthew 7:3-5); and it is among those who recognize and confess their sins that fellowship exists (1 John 1). Paul admonishes us to "be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21), and he himself longs to "be encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine" (Romans 1:11-12). As the New Testament indicates, it is when we recognize our own immaturity that we also recognize that our brother or sister can contribute something to us.

When Christian freedom as thus defined is applied to our personal relationships, superficial barriers become unimportant, and each person has the right to be themselves as an individual in Christ, and each person makes their contribution to the freedom of the entire Christian fellowship. This means, for instance, that we show our brother and sister the courtesy of hearing and of seeking to understand both their words and their meaning and that we do not judge them without allowing them the opportunity of stating their case. It also means that we exercise care

in our use of words with possible emotional overtones and that we never use any disagreement with our brother or sister as an opportunity for personal advancement at their expense. On the one hand, it means that we recognize that others have the freedom to differ with us according to their understanding of the will of God, and, on the other hand, it means that we have the freedom to change our own position as we understand the will of God more clearly. Thus we are free in our personal relationships, and we are becoming free as we help one another to conform more closely to the will of God as it is revealed in the Bible.

Such freedom in our personal relationships will also lead to a consideration for the contribution of minorities. Christian vitality has not always been maintained by the majority. It has, in fact, often been found only in small minorities. Such minorities have no voice where conformity to “official” interpretations is required. Unless we wish to stifle all emergent spiritual vitality, we must be sure that people within our fellowship will be free to express themselves in ways which are different from the majority position without the fear of being labeled as disloyal.

With the greater complexity of modern life it becomes increasingly important to keep the lines of communication as simple as possible. It is helpful for differing parties to come face to face in order to consider their differences. Where personal grievances exist, they may be most effectively dealt with in personal contacts as directed in Matthew 18:15–17 and in Galatians 6:1–5.

By such applications of Christian freedom we maintain the basic principle of freedom within the authority of the Bible even in our more complex personal relationships of today.

(2) Christian Freedom in Our Institutional Life and Service. The New Testament makes it clear that the church is the temple of God (see Ephesians 2:14–22). In this world it functions in the form of institutional organizations [p. 14] which express the spiritual realities much as the human body serves the human spirit. In its institutional form the church owns property, conducts business, pays salaries, and engages in many other activities which are similar to the activities of secular organizations. These activities are meaningful only as they serve the purposes of the Spirit of God who dwells in the church.

Christians may be brought into bondage by placing the chief emphasis on the success and growth of the institution. If we surrender to this temptation, we become subject to pressures for worldly success, and even our spiritual activities are evaluated in terms of this motive. The result

is that we tend to evaluate people superficially so that their devotion to Christ is measured only by their value to the church organization.

Such emphasis presents the threat that individual Christians will lose their freedom by becoming slaves to institutional success. It also presents the threat that constant emphasis on programs and institutional activities will leave insufficient time for the strengthening of our spiritual forces. Christian freedom is a spiritual matter, and it cannot exist unless there is sufficient emphasis on the spiritual aspects of the Christian life.

On the other hand, too little recognition of the part which the institution plays in the life of the church presents a threat to the very framework of authority within which Christian freedom exists. The New Testament recognizes that the Christian body has the right and responsibility of discipline (see, for instance, 1 Corinthians 5:3–8). As has already been indicated, Christian freedom has been understood by the Covenant Church to be within the authority of the Bible. Therefore, whether the body be one of our local congregations or the denomination itself or any other organization within the denomination, it must have some way of determining that its freedom remains within the bounds of biblical authority. If we were to restrict our freedom by clearly defined creedal statements and detailed regulations on church order to guide us, this would be a comparatively simple matter. However, if we are to continue to refuse to be bound by such human-made restrictions on Christian freedom, we must be sensitive to the direction of the Spirit as he seeks to lead us to act according to the will of God as it is revealed in the Bible. Therefore, if we are to maintain the principle of freedom within the authority of the Bible as it relates to our institutional life and service, we must not only be thoroughly familiar with the Bible itself, but we must also emphasize a vital spiritual motivation for the institutional aspects of our fellowship.

(3) Christian Freedom in Our Intellectual Pursuits. True scholarship is an essential activity which should be encouraged among us. We are admonished to love the Lord with our whole person, including our minds (Matthew 22:37). The most significant battles of our time are those which are being fought in the world of ideas. The people of today's world are being challenged to live by new concepts, many of which are completely lacking in Christian perspective. We must be able to challenge our youth with the adequacy of our Christian heritage in the areas both of profound thought and of simple trust. Scholarly pursuits, therefore, should be considered worthy of the dedication of our finest minds and most devoted hearts.

There is a difference between true scholarship, which is open to all truth, and intellectual sophistication, which often looks on the gospel as foolishness. A Christian who gives him or herself to scholarly pursuits may be expected to be humble and devoted to their faith. Even such a person, however, faces problems which are peculiar [p. 15] to the nature of their work. The attitude of objectivity, of openness to new ideas, and of freedom from restrictions on thought often leads them to conclusions which are contrary to popular opinion. Some within the Christian fellowship may become alarmed at these conclusions for fear that they may be contrary to sound Christian doctrine, and they may with complete sincerity and earnestness raise questions about them.

Neither stifling freedom of thought nor granting the scholar immunity from criticism can produce harmony. On the one hand, we must recognize that we can remain active and vital in our interpretation of truth only as we permit the scholar to be honest about their conclusions. Human pride or fear may tempt us to reject ideas merely because they seem new. We must recognize and resist this temptation wherever it exists. On the other hand, we must recognize that the scholar is also human, subject to the temptation of pride of learning and to the common frailties of the flesh, and that an undisciplined and irresponsible scholarship has no place within the Christian fellowship.

The solution to our problem is to accept the scholar, as we accept others, on the basis of their Christian testimony, which they should be able to give in language clear and simple enough to be understood by all. The scholar's actions as well as their words should bear witness to their respect for the Bible as the word of God, devotion to their Lord, faithfulness to the gospel, and participation in the life of the church.

Having earned the respect of their fellow Christians, the scholar should be rewarded with the freedom which intellectual pursuits requires, but this freedom must be under the authority of the truth as revealed in the Bible. In order that harmful tensions shall not arise between the scholar and those who may question whether this principle of freedom within authority is prevailing, there must be a continuing communication within the church in order that the truth may be further clarified. Thus, the principle of freedom within authority also becomes the basis for our intellectual pursuits.

(4) Christian Freedom in Our Outreach. As the traditional walls which have isolated us in the past are breaking down, the way is opening for

us to look on all people who do not know Christ as objects of our evangelistic concern.

At this very point, however, we are faced with the temptation to concentrate in our evangelistic outreach on those who are most like us socially and economically. When this happens, our entire program tends to become geared to the interests and values of this group. We become specialists to our own class, and increasingly it seems right to leave to others the responsibility of reaching other classes. Eventually we conclude that we cannot afford to minister in certain areas because we do not understand or know how to work with the people who live there. Thus we lose the freedom to proclaim the grace of God to all people without distinction, as the New Testament presents it.

The very desire to maintain our concept of Christian freedom may tempt us to limit our outreach. We may hesitate to assimilate people from such a wide variety of backgrounds because of the fear that they will eventually lead us to an interpretation of freedom which will not be consistent with biblical authority. On the other hand, we may hesitate to assimilate people from backgrounds in which the Christian faith means submission to detailed doctrinal statements because of the fear that they may lead us to an interpretation of biblical authority which eliminates freedom.

If, however, we concentrate in our outreach on one segment of society because of either of these fears or simply because of our attraction to those who are like us, [p. 16] we deny the principle of freedom in Christ because we do not permit persons in our fellowship the freedom to be different from us. The effect of such concentration is to make it even more difficult to communicate with the world around us. We need the voice of a wide variety of peoples on the floor of our conferences and in our policy making bodies. We need the corrective discipline of their differing backgrounds to keep our message and our work relevant to our generation. Were we to seek to protect the principle of freedom within the authority of the Bible by limiting our outreach to those who can appreciate our heritage, we would destroy the very principle of freedom which we were seeking to protect.

It will help us to remember that the principle of freedom within the authority of the Bible, which is so much a part of our heritage, came into existence among us in a time of revival. It must be looked upon as a spiritual discipline which is closely related to the life and vitality of our denomination. To seek to maintain it by limiting our outreach to those

who we think will most easily embrace it is merely to admit that we do not believe that the gospel has the power to do for people today what it did for us in a previous generation.

We maintain this principle of Christian freedom only as we maintain our spiritual vitality, which we have by the grace of God. The problem of maintaining it, therefore, must be approached in a contrite and penitent spirit in which we seek the mercy of God in permitting us to return to him. Out of such an attitude, we pray, will come a renewed experience of the vital life in which we become free children of God under the lordship of Christ as the truth is revealed to us in the Bible.

### **(III) Adoption of the Report**

#### **(a) 1963 Annual Meeting of the Ministerium, *Covenant Yearbook 1963, p. 209***

The President recognized Leslie R. Ostberg, chairman of the Committee on Freedom and Theology, and commended the work of the committee since it was constituted in 1958. Mr. Ostberg then presented the completed report entitled, *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, reading a part of the "Purposes of the Report" and making other comments. The motion to endorse the printed statement carried unanimously with a rising vote.

#### **(b) 1963 Annual Meeting of the Covenant Church, *Covenant Yearbook 1963, p. 233***

##### *Report of Committee on Freedom and Theology*

The moderator recognized Leslie R. Ostberg, chairman of the Committee on Freedom and Theology, for the committee's final report. Mr. Ostberg stated that printed booklets of the report had already been sent to pastors and delegates by mail. The booklet, entitled *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, has the endorsement of the Covenant Executive Board, the Board of Ministerial Standing, and the Covenant Ministerium. Mr. Ostberg read the preface and moved the adoption of the final report for such uses as are suggested in the preface.

The motion carried.

Mr. Ostberg concluded by expressing appreciation to those who had served on the committee and all those who had helped in the study. A motion was carried to give a rising vote of thanks to the committee.