

Covenant Freedom: Freedom for All or Free-for-all?

*Michelle A. Clifton-Soderstrom, professor of theology and ethics,
North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois*

In 1949 North Park Theological Seminary graduate William Doughty cherished the Covenant's theological and intellectual freedom. By 1958 pastor Doughty was suspicious of the framework within which freedom in the Covenant was conceived.¹ His doubts around the then-named Mission Covenant Church's approach to theology grew, leading finally to Doughty's censure and eventual resignation.

A few years prior, the *Covenant Quarterly* had run a series on why pastors joined, remained in, or left the Mission Covenant. Describing his own reasons for staying, Covenant pastor Henning Gustafson named the Mission Friends as instrumental for his spiritual development and observed that he did not find them to be "holier than thou" types. He appreciated Christian freedom as it was connected with biblical interpretation and respected the Covenant's principle of life before doctrine.²

1. In his 1949 farewell sermon at North Park Theological Seminary, Doughty said, "I treasure the intellectual freedom which a principle like this gives me. It enables a man to be a truth-seeker. It enables a man to retain his intellectual integrity." In his letter resigning his ordination credentials in 1958, he wrote, "I still believe that the Covenant as originally formulated and organized was admirable in its concept of theological freedom within a fundamental framework, in its strong fundamental position on doctrine, and in its concept of fellowship....If ever a group within the Covenant should deem it right and advantageous to form a new Covenant group along fundamental lines I should be most happy...." Quoted in Mark Swanson, "A Cause for Freedom: William C. Doughty and the Covenant Commission on Freedom and Theology," ii. Record Series 14/0, Box 22, Folder 13, Covenant Archives and Historical Library (CAHL), Chicago, Illinois.

2. Henning Gustafson, "Why I Have Remained in the Covenant," *Covenant Quarterly* 6:4 (1946): 233–34.

Why these contrasting experiences of freedom in the Mission Covenant Church such that it attracted some while pushing others from the denomination? What is at stake in Christian freedom, and how is it faithfully stewarded and maintained? The short answer is that faith communities always face crises of theological identity and expression, and the Mission Covenant in the 1950s and early 1960s is no exception. While not the only period in Covenant history marked by an urgent need to define freedom, it is arguably one of the more critical. Because of its commitment to common life before common doctrine, the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC) opens itself up to the ongoing task of doing theology “as a work that continues as long as God grants life and purpose to our fellowship.”³ There were great successes during this period, such as the work of the Covenant Committee on Freedom and Theology (1958–1963), but there were also losses, such as the fellowship of Doughty.

This article engages the theological heritage of Christian freedom in the Evangelical Covenant Church as it functions theologically and practically. The article begins by offering a historical and theological description of Christian freedom in the Covenant, paying particular attention to freedom’s relationship to two other Covenant Affirmations: the centrality of the word of God and the necessity of new birth. Next, I engage documents related to the work of the Committee on Freedom and Theology as well as historical cases to probe the limits of freedom. The article concludes with a robust description of faithful dissent—as a category used by historians of renewal movements and more recently in Covenant documents—and its crucial role in ongoing renewal in the church. My primary focus is the 1963 report *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*. Not only does this report represent the culmination of five years of collective work at a critical juncture in Covenant history, but it was also affirmed as “a frame of reference” and 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

3. *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* (Chicago: Evangelical Covenant Church, 1963), 3. Available at http://collections.carli.illinois.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/npu_swccc/id/36987/rec/4, accessed October 23, 2016. The full report is reprinted, with introduction and annotations, in *Covenant Quarterly* 75:3–4 (2017): 4–33.

and practice”⁴ by the unanimous decision of the Annual Meeting, the highest governing authority in the Covenant.⁵

I conclude that the cherished freedom so essential to Covenant identity requires that the interpretive community read Scripture with an eye toward formation, or conversion, as telos. I conclude further that faithful dissent preserves the possibility of ongoing renewal and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in communities committed to the Word and thus is a necessary aspect of Christian freedom.

Freedom in Christ

In 1958 the Annual Meeting established the Covenant Committee on Freedom and Theology and charged it with the task of preparing a study that delineated “the nature and scope of our freedom, which we look upon as a unique part of our tradition” and “our theological position related to our biblical heritage and to historical Christianity.”⁶ The formation corresponded with the rebuke of the aforementioned Covenant pastor William Doughty. Culminating in his publication titled, “A Cause for Concern in the Covenant,” the actions that led to Doughty’s departure from the Covenant centered on his critique of the denomination, particularly North Park Theological Seminary and the denomination’s Youth Department, for being proponents of theological liberalism and neo-orthodoxy and for violating Scripture. The Board of Ministerial Standing requested that Doughty handle his charges internally, directly, and with the appropriate parties. Instead, Doughty continued the widespread distribution of his publication to every church chairperson in the Covenant, which led to his censure and the temporary suspension of his ordination credentials.⁷

Though not the first public conflict in the Covenant, such a censuring of one of its ministers was a novel situation for the seventy-three-year-old denomination and caused much confusion in the body. The appointment

4. Ibid., 2.

5. Historian Karl A. Olsson writes of the committee’s work, “Since the committee’s study was produced at a considerable outlay in time, in creative energy, and in denominational funds in 1958–1963, it is appropriate to assess (a) its intrinsic merit as a study document, as well as (b) its theoretical and practical impact on the Covenant Church.” Olsson, *Into One Body...By the Cross*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1986), 359.

6. *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 2.

7. For the series of events leading up to Doughty’s censure, see *Covenant Yearbook 1958*, 236–43. [Editor’s note: the complete *Yearbook* text is reprinted in this issue, pp. 7–16.] Cf. Olsson, *Into One Body*, vol. 2, 332–51.

of the committee was a measured response to the confusion evoked by the Doughty incident, and its appointment was affirmed as part of the motion against Doughty. In establishing the committee at the Annual Meeting of 1958, Covenant pastor Wesley Nelson underscored its importance, describing such a study on denominational liberties as “long overdue.”⁸

After five years of collaborative theological and biblical study as well as regular and broad input, the committee produced a sixteen-page report that was adopted by vote at the 1963 Annual Meeting in Chicago. Covenant historian Karl Olsson calls the work of the committee a “peak achievement in Covenant history in biblically based theological and ethical thought, in nobility of motive, and in apt and eloquent expression.”⁹ Indeed, the report is arguably the best theological treatise the denomination has put forth to date. It offers a rich understanding of Christian freedom, and it articulates well the relationship between the Covenant’s understanding of freedom and the authority of Scripture.

The report begins by describing the Bible as “an altar where one meets the living God and receives personally the reality of redemption.”¹⁰ Scripture is more than a book of truths or set of doctrines. Faithful readers engage it because they want to meet God in Christ Jesus and desire the transformative power of redemption. The first Covenant Affirmation, which asserts the centrality of Scripture, underscores the importance of the word as having transformative power. Theologically, the term *word* has a threefold meaning. First and foremost, it refers to Christ Jesus who was God incarnate. Second, *word* refers to Scripture as the testimony of the living God. Third, *word* can refer to the preached word, highlighting the proclamatory emphasis evangelicals believe is essential to heralding the good news.

These three intersecting yet distinct aspects of the word ground the authority of the Bible in ways beyond a commitment to the text alone and protect interpretation from being insular. The report engages this intersection in its recognition of the purpose of Scripture as a renewing work even above a repository of doctrinal truths. It reads, “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

8. *Covenant Yearbook 1958*, 242.

9. Olsson, *Into One Body*, vol. 2, 359.

10. *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 5.

work of the Holy Spirit in our minds and hearts.”¹¹ It further claims that everything the church does—from faith to worship to life—is renewed by Scripture, the source of our growth in Christ.

Such a commitment to reading for growth and renewal is the authority within which the Covenant understands freedom. In describing freedom, the report references it as a gift and conceives of freedom as both a state of *being* free and the process of *becoming* free.¹² The former is a statement about justification in Christ alone; the latter refers to the sanctifying work of the believer through the power of the Holy Spirit. In other words, freedom is both a gift from God and a reality with accompanying spiritual practices, such as gracious listening and humility in one’s views, through which God changes our hearts and minds.

With an emphasis on conversion by the word, the report applies freedom to both “a diversity of opinions in many matters of doctrine and by a variety of standards in many areas of conduct.”¹³ The report also calls the Bible the “avenue to freedom” and proceeds to offer parameters for how this freedom is experienced and can be maintained within four specific arenas: relationships within the church, institutional life and service, intellectual pursuits, and outreach.

The developments in each section give a clear a picture of how freedom operates with regard to diversity in interpretation and application. The believer’s relationship with Christ matters greatly as does the community’s ongoing renewal.¹⁴ A diversity of viewpoints within the communion creates potential avenues for renewal. The report states, “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.”¹⁵ Going back to Scripture with the ultimate goal of *becoming Christlike* demonstrates a mature interpretive process to which the Covenant has been devoted. When ongoing theological and moral questions arise in the church, the commitment to diverse perspectives is a call to revisit and potentially reinterpret the word.

The spiritual habits around the practice of extending freedom show

11. *Ibid.*, 6.

12. *Ibid.*, 9.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, 11.

15. *Ibid.*

the deep sense of unity the Covenant desires, even with such a vulnerable commitment as is the commitment to freedom and diversity. The report names freedom as a gift extended in the spirit of God's creative and redemptive love. It notes the virtue of courage and the duty to listen and understand. It claims,

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....Through sharing discussion and 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.¹⁶

The report speaks against ignoring key concerns of the body and argues that engaging one another strengthens the unity of the church, whose unitive source lies not in one another but in Christ. The report acknowledges that human beings are finite, limited in knowledge, and varying in levels of maturity. Rather than being a source of despair, these anthropological truths move the church to discuss differences in "open and lively" ways and to depend on the diversity of readers to "make faith relevant to our day."¹⁷

Interestingly, the report alludes to theological, institutional, and personal integrity, noting that interpretations of Scripture should never be used for personal or institutional advancement. The report warns the church that Christians are brought into bondage when they place "chief emphasis on the success and growth of the institution" and when they evaluate persons based on their value to the organization.¹⁸ Further, the report employs the language of "slavery to institutional success" as a real temptation that the Covenant has faced and will continue to face.¹⁹ It recognizes the important role that the institution plays. Nevertheless, if the institutional church relies too heavily on human restrictions and policies as opposed to being sensitive to the direction of the Holy Spirit,

16. *Ibid.*, 12.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 14.

19. *Ibid.*

the Covenant will suffer in its spiritual health. In a paper on church order and the authority of the Word, Donald Frisk writes,

While submission is a part of life within the church, such submission is not to individuals or offices because of authority they possess in themselves. It is the Word known in the power of the Spirit which is authoritative. Any emphasis on unquestioning submission to another, as in the discipling movement, seems unwarranted. Such an emphasis denies the freedom without which personal growth is impossible and values the contemporary word spoken through an individual above the Word interpreted in the life of the entire congregation.²⁰

The 2008 resource paper, “The Evangelical Covenant Church and Scripture,” also recognizes the abuses of power that are possible in biblical interpretation. The paper acknowledges that, “Whether deliberate or unintentional, the Bible has often been misused as a means to protect a way of life or maintain a hold on power and resources.”²¹ One antidote that paper names is reading within a diverse interpretive community:

As the Evangelical Covenant becomes more and more diverse (which we believe is a movement of the Holy Spirit), we must be attuned and sensitive to the various lenses through which we read the Bible. We must ask ourselves what our respective lenses might be and how a given lens might hinder or help our reading. We must be sensitive enough to listen well to others’ reading with lenses different than our own.²²

Similarly, the 1963 report recognizes that the majority opinion is not always the correct or most vital interpretation. Stifling minority interpretation, moreover, can stifle “emerging spiritual vitality.”²³ Reliance on

20. Note that Frisk acknowledges the aforementioned distinction between the Word (as Christ) and the word (as the scriptural text or proclaimed word) in his discussion regarding the essential content of the gospel. Donald Frisk, “The Bible in Theological Perspective,” December 1958. Record Series 1/2/6/2, Box 1, Folder 4, CAHL.

21. “A Covenant Resource Paper: The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible” (Evangelical Covenant Church, 2008), 3. Available at <http://covchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2010/05/Covenant-Resource-Paper.pdf>, accessed October 23, 2016.

22. *Ibid.*, 4–5.

23. *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 13.

majority views alone can also silence the voices of those who are part of marginalized groups, not only marginalized views.

The commitment to reading in diverse groups is not new in the Covenant. Beginning in seventeenth-century Germany with conventicles, or small groups who gathered to read Scripture, the Covenant's forebears included diverse interpreters. Specifically, women, young people, and those we were uneducated began to read God's word and talk together about its implications for their lives. These practices were a departure from the norm, and pastors who encouraged small groups were often criticized by the state and their clerical colleagues. Yet lay people in both Germany and Sweden continued to read and to participate in the renewal movements across northern Europe that eventually led to the Evangelical Covenant Church. Both the 1963 report and the 2008 resource paper—not to mention the Covenant Affirmation of the reality of freedom in Christ—continue this important thread in the Covenant's history and show that the commitment to freedom has not waned.

Exercising Freedom: "Christian Discipleship in the Midst of War"

The Evangelical Covenant Church has addressed difficult moral and theological questions in a variety of ways. At times the Covenant has made the conscious decision to err on the side of inclusivity, even at some perceived risk. Cases such as the response to the charismatic movement, the statement on women in ministry, or the resolution on criminal justice demonstrate examples of inclusivity that carried some risk. In other cases, the Covenant has responded to difficult moral questions by lamenting inadequate ethical action and even challenging its posture on such issues as racial justice, immigration, and creation care. In other words, the Covenant has confronted its historical postures and sought to correct erroneous theologies and moral practices in a number of areas. At times, two opposing views have been allowed to coexist in the name of unity or driven by the humble conviction that each may be valid, as in the cases of baptismal theology and the debate around just war and pacifism. The case of the Covenant's resolution on war and pacifism is a particularly interesting case in which antithetical views were allowed to coexist in one communion. This section examines Covenant response to war as a salient case study for the exercise of freedom.

In 2006 the Annual Meeting of the ECC adopted a resolution titled

“Christian Discipleship in the Midst of War.”²⁴ This resolution includes arguments for the scriptural faithfulness of both just war theory and pacifism.²⁵ The previous year’s Annual Meeting had adopted two resolutions, “Consistently Protecting and Promoting Life”²⁶ and “Christian Responsibility to Pursue Shalom in a Violent and War-torn World.”²⁷ The goods and values in the 2005 resolutions contextualize the development of the 2006 resolution. The 2005 resolutions affirm living hope, deliverance from death, serving the risen Lord, abundant life, reconciled communities, recognition of the wonders of God’s creation, resisting the culture of death, and initiatives that could be said to be just peacemaking practices. The stated values and goods of the resolutions on promoting life and shalom force the question: In the context of the goodness of peace and life and the evil of war, when is it ever permissible to employ violence, to spend billions of dollars on war, and to call some wars a just path of Christian discipleship? Given the moral commitments and the emphasis on discipleship and life, one could argue that such a context would never allow for violence—and certainly not as a path of discipleship.

Yet that was not the Covenant’s conclusion. The 2006 Annual Meeting affirmed both the just war tradition and the pacifist tradition as Christian and faithful. Though just war and pacifist positions share the common ideal of peace and fall very close to one another on the spectrum of war theories, the ethical behaviors these two views accept for achieving peace are antithetical to one another, specifically around the moral question of taking a life. Just war theory admits that sometimes it is permissible to

24. Commission on Christian Action, “Christian Discipleship in the Midst of War,” 2006, available at <http://www.covchurch.org/resolutions/2006-discipleship-in-war/>, accessed October 23, 2016.

25. Just war theory finds justification in the idea that at times force is necessary to restrain evil, to protect the innocent, and to preserve order in society. While not celebrating war, the just war tradition pursues a realistic response to a fallen, imperfect world. Pacifism, on the other hand, is the refusal to participate in killing and war because of the lordship of Christ, who embodies the ultimate sacrifice by dying himself. Refusing war and violence is a witness to the cross and the power of the resurrection, and it is the ultimate form of the call to love one’s enemies. Pacifism acknowledges that humans are not ultimately in control of history and employs both obedience to Christ and radical empathy for all human life as a basis for its position.

26. Commission on Christian Action, “Consistently Protecting and Promoting Life,” 2005, available at <http://www.covchurch.org/resolutions/2005-protecting-and-promoting-life/>, accessed October 23, 2016.

27. Young Pietists, “Christian Responsibility to Pursue Shalom in a Violent and War-torn World,” 2005, available at <http://www.covchurch.org/resolutions/2005-shalom-in-violence/>, accessed October 23, 2016.

take a life; pacifism holds that it is never permissible. Just war Christians and pacifist Christians remain at irreconcilable odds when it comes to the permissibility of killing, particularly if one is a pacifist.

How can two opposing views on the moral question of killing coexist within the same communion? Is it because taking a life is sometimes justifiable? Is it because the question of killing is a secondary matter of faith that is not really connected to the nature of God and matters of salvation? Such questions are germane to the root of the exercise of freedom in the midst of significant theological and moral differences. Further, they incite exploration of the limits and boundaries of Christian freedom within the ECC's communion.

Two conclusions may be drawn from this case. First, the Covenant has historical precedence for thinking and discerning in morally complex ways. If asked, most Christians would say that "thou shall not kill" is a moral absolute, or as close to it as one can get, and yet the majority of evangelical Christians, including Covenanters, identify with the just war tradition. In many ways the just war tradition has the ability to view even such moral absolutes as killing with the kind of complexity and discernment that allow for killing within a particular set of conditions.

Second, the Covenant has historical precedents for holding two opposing views on such morally complex topics as war and peace. While baptism is another example of two views, it lacks the oppositional power inherent to the moral question of killing. Additionally, the two modes of baptism can arguably be said to fit within a single theology of God's saving grace that includes God's action and the human response. The ECC has shown hospitality to both baptismal views. That it has also shown hospitality to just war adherents and pacifists, deeming both disciples of Jesus Christ in equal measure, demonstrates humility in the face of deep and complex moral questions.

The ECC's polity is based on friendship, mutual trust, and ongoing discernment. It also recognizes our imperfect knowledge and need to be open to the Holy Spirit. Because the Covenant is non-confessional, no question of interpretation is off the table. The Covenant began as a renewal movement, trusting the Spirit to work in new and different ways in the face of a variety of complex moral questions, and it has relied on relationships and faithfulness to Christ for unity in this same Spirit as opposed to confessional statements or stipulated moral positions. The case of just war and pacifism existing side by side is the story of the Covenant when it discerns from a place of maturity, complexity, and

humility. In other words, the resolution “Christian Discipleship in the Midst of War” offers an example of Christian freedom in all its vulnerabilities and challenges.

Faithful Dissent

In a letter to Leslie Ostberg, chair of the Committee on Freedom and Theology, committee member and pastor of First Covenant Minneapolis Paul Fryhling suggested this preface for the committee’s final report: “By affirming categorically our heritage of freedom in Christ...we are convinced that Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom will serve to defend Covenanters...*from undocumented ‘judgment by opinion’ and unwarranted coercion, while at the same time guarding the right of sincere dissent expressed in the Spirit of Christian grace.*”²⁸ Fryling’s concern was ensuring Christian freedom, and his solution was to protect the right of sincere dissent.

Russell Cervin, pastor of Salem Square Covenant Church in Worcester, Massachusetts, echoed Fryling’s sentiments regarding the theological importance of dissent. In a paper solicited by the committee in response to the question, “How can we insure minority opinion and guarantee the right to critical dissent through proper channels?” Cervin wrote,

Differences of theological slant are not only inevitable but they are necessary if we are to keep from settling down into ecclesiastical soliloquy. The static position may be one of orthodoxy *according to the accepted group*, but it might also be the position of death. As we think and speak and feel God working within us we challenge one another in the spirit of devotion and humble seeking until our theological faith is corrected and deepened and with greater effectiveness applied to the world context in which we now live.²⁹

Cervin’s paper also offers very helpful guidelines for practicing faithful dissent—all of which were incorporated into the final report in some way. He argues that if the Covenant leaves no room for disagreement on important theological and ethical matters, renewal will not be possible. Such a denial of dissent “is a far cry from the open, dynamic life into

28. Paul Fryling to the Covenant Committee on Freedom and Theology, December, 1958. Record Series 19/1, Box 1, Folder 6, CAHL. My emphasis.

29. Russell Cervin to the Covenant Committee on Freedom and Theology, 1960. Record Series 19/1, Box 1, Folder 3, CAHL. My emphasis.

which the Holy Spirit pours his gifts. It is the closed, introverted life of self-perpetuation—the static, self-righteous, and ego-centric way of life.”³⁰ Cervin calls the church to remember that the Holy Spirit moves. Further, “We have to be willing to lose our lives and even be broken on the anvil of the word....The distinctive characteristic of the church is the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon it, and therefore it is never static but dynamic.”³¹

Additional letters and feedback received by the committee repeatedly express the importance of faithful dissent and offer parameters by which dissent may be called faithful. What constitutes dissent that is faithful? Is complementarianism faithful dissent? Is refusing to perform an infant baptism an act of faithful dissent? Is insisting on rebaptism faithful dissent? What is the difference between dissent and faithful dissent? In reading through the letters, reports, and debates regarding dissent as it pertains to freedom, five criteria appear consistently and serve as a nuanced barometer for gauging the faithfulness of dissent. These criteria are published in another scholarly article, and I offer additional elaboration on each below.³²

1. Are those with the dissenting view following policy? The criterion of following policy in relationship to dissent pertains largely to clergy. While one could imagine ways a congregation could dissent (e.g., by rejecting women in ministry), congregations determine themselves how they will do life together. Congregations have their own constitutions, for example, and individual churches call pastors, decide on membership, and appoint leaders on a church-by-church basis.

Within this congregational polity, individual congregations work interdependently with their conference and the denomination based on mutual trust. Power is shared between the three entities, and, rather than being top down in authority structure, the ECC is “a from-the-bottom-up... union of independent churches.”³³ Pastor Nathaniel Franklin writes of the Covenant’s congregational polity, “This means that at its base there is home rule in the governing of the local church, restricted only in its

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Michelle A. Clifton-Soderstrom, “Common Sense, Plain Sense, and Faithful Dissent: Evangelical Ethics and Marriage Equality,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 37:1 (2017): 101–17.

33. Nathaniel Franklin, “Remembering Our Heritage, Let Us Go On!” *Covenant Quarterly* 5:3 (1945): 170.

between-church relations by rules adopted voluntarily by the representatives of the churches for the good of all churches.”³⁴ Further, Franklin calls top denominational and conference leaders “Covenant servants,” called by the churches themselves to represent and serve the churches in all of their diversity.

Policies as they pertain to clergy, however, present a different context for dissent. Pastors ordained or licensed by the ECC have a set of guidelines and policies they have agreed to respect and adhere to. Those who are ordained have vowed to uphold the teachings of the Evangelical Covenant Church as best they can and to faithfully discern their fit in the event that they cannot uphold Covenant positions on a variety of theological issues.³⁵

Is dissent even possible, then, if clergy cannot deviate from policy? Theology and policy are distinct issues. Policy must take into account institutional survival and operate in ways that theology does not. The task of theology, however, is central to the work of the pastorate, and new theological interpretation is the ground on which dissent may be considered faithful *even while a pastor respects ECC policies*. A member of the clergy, especially one ordained to word and sacrament, acts as a “theologian for the local congregation as well as the larger church... [and] interprets the gospel with authenticity and leads the church to live out its apostolic mission.”³⁶

Policy must answer ultimately to biblical interpretation, and it is precisely within this spirit that the possibility of faithful dissent exists. Work that critiques policy theologically is critical for pastors and reinforces the commitment to renewal that is at the heart of the Covenant’s heritage as readers. There may come a breaking point when a pastor decides she or he cannot in Christian conscience continue to follow policy, but this should only follow a lengthy period of biblical and theological study accompanied by moral discernment that includes the criteria below.

2. Is the person or group sincere in their commitment to Christ

34. *Ibid.*, 171.

35. “Guidelines for Covenant Pastors and Congregations Regarding Human Sexuality,” line 25, available at <https://covchurch.org/resources/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2015/10/Guidelines-for-Covenant-Pastors-and-Congregations-Regarding-Human-Sexuality.pdf>, accessed July 27, 2018; “Freedom and Responsibility: Dissent and Covenant Clergy, A Resource for Pastoral Reflection,” 1, available at <https://covchurch.org/resources/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2010/05/Freedom-and-Responsibility.pdf>, accessed July 27, 2018.

36. *Ibid.*

and to the body? In the archival sources documenting the work of the Committee on Freedom and Theology, the modifier “sincere” appears as frequently as the term “faithful.” Determining the sincerity of a dissenting person or group is difficult work, and generally the dissenter claiming sincerity enjoys the benefit of the doubt. In most cases, public denominational action toward dissenting persons has assumed the dissenter’s sincerity.

Yet one can be sincere and also mean-spirited. Doughty was not censured for his theological differences with the ECC. Rather, the 1958 censure was a response to Doughty’s “unethical” behavior that publicly and broadly named denominational colleagues untrustworthy.³⁷ Doughty was charged with mean-spiritedness, aggressive behavior, and “an un-Christian spirit.”³⁸ Such charges were also made in the cases of A.B. Ost—a fundamentalist in the 1920s who attacked North Park Theological Seminary and was eventually defrocked for his crude attacks and writings—Otto Högfeldt, Joel Johnson, Algoth Ohlson, and Joel Fridfelt.³⁹ In fact, Karl Olsson makes a claim that holds true today:

The curious fact to be drawn from the history of the Covenant is thus that no one has ever been defrocked for heresy, and, what is even more strange, only those have been brought under serious censure who have questioned the orthodoxy of someone else. They have usually been told either that the denomination has freedom in doctrinal matters or that they didn’t go about their criticism in the right way.⁴⁰

In addition to loyalty and the spirit of the dissenting group, *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom* offers best practices for those sincerely committed to Christ and to one another. It concludes that when it comes to personal relationship and the contribution each makes to Christian fellowship,

37. *Covenant Yearbook 1958*, 239. For a detailed account of the Annual Meeting’s proceedings around the response to Doughty, see *Covenant Yearbook 1958*, 238–40.

38. Olsson, *Into One Body*, vol. 2, 351. In the official move to censure Doughty, it is significant that the motion was gracious and open to critique, and the motion quoted a letter written by the president who wrote, “We believe that that criticism of Covenant policies and leaders is always permissible. It should, however, be made to the individuals and boards directly responsible.” *Covenant Yearbook 1958*, 239–40.

39. Karl Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 544. While Olsson wrote in 1962, to date I am not aware of an incident disproving his claim.

40. *Ibid.*, 545–46.

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.⁴¹

Other processes reflecting commitment to Christ include speaking directly to those with whom one disagrees, refraining from public shaming of individuals and groups, showing love and respect in all words and actions, and respecting the fellowship of the body.⁴² When scholarly pursuits are criticized or questioned, they should be done so with “complete sincerity and earnestness” as well as humility even though there may be fear and alarm at conclusions that seem “contrary to sound Christian doctrine.”⁴³

A final marker of this criterion is the question of whether the dissenting person is acting alone or in a group. Covenant wisdom claims “the root of all heresy is to act alone.” A dissenting group of persons or churches offers stronger reasons for taking differing views seriously.

3. Does the dissenting position relate to the dominant position by being more or less inclusive? The ECC has historically erred on the side of inclusion, especially as it pertains to marginalized groups. In the 1950s, the Covenant declared solidarity with the civil rights movement and named racial oppression and injustices as intolerable for the church. The Annual Meeting resolved to send the US Senate a resolution that fully affirmed the movement.⁴⁴ Ten years later, the 1960 Annual Meeting resolved to send a letter of support to African Americans in Montgomery and named Martin Luther King Jr. an apt leader. The resolution, which overwhelmingly passed, states, “we commend the Rev. Martin Luther King, the leader of the movement, for wisdom in insisting that only love can overcome hate, and that we assure him of our prayerful support to

41. *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 13.

42. Cf. Russell Cervin to the Covenant Committee on Freedom and Theology; letter from Irving Lambert to the Covenant Committee on Freedom and Theology, July 11, 1960. Record Series 19/1, Box 1, Folder 7, CAHL.

43. Olsson, *Into One Body*, vol. 2, 358; *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 15.

44. *Covenant Yearbook 1950*, 232.

the end that he and his followers may find under the American flag the justice they deserve.”⁴⁵ Other examples of erring on the side of inclusivity are affirming women in ministry and a variety of views on eschatology and the inspiration of Scripture. In other words, a key question is that of *who* is dissenting and what group of persons they represent. If the group is one that has been marginalized within the church, such as women, people of color, or the LGBTQ community, the question of God’s justice comes into question as the church seeks full participation of all of its members—especially those who have been marginalized.

An important case revealing the Covenant’s ability to risk inclusion is the discernment of whether to accept the charismatic movement in the 1970s. Consisting of both dispensationalists and Pentecostals, the movement evoked much fear and hostility in the ecclesial world and especially among Southern Baptist groups, mainline churches, and Lutheran—especially Missouri Synod—churches.⁴⁶ Churches and denominations took sides. In the midst of controversy, Covenant superintendent Raymond Dahlberg discerned a middle way, writing, “Covenant freedom will not allow us to tolerate this kind of militant rigidity in either direction. There must be a middle ground on which we can stand together.”⁴⁷ In making the decision to accept the best of what the charismatic movement had to offer, the Covenant affirmed the birth of prayer groups, vital ministering, renewed use of spiritual gifts, and “individual Christians deeply renewed in faith and service.”⁴⁸ While splits came in other denominations as a result of spiritual competition, the Covenant committed to a “radical openness to God’s will” and a “deeper understanding of his all-encompassing love.”⁴⁹

Inclusivity is not only a theological commitment; it is also a commitment to persons and congregations. The 1959 Annual Meeting affirmed reports by the Committee on Freedom and Theology that argued,

45. *Covenant Yearbook 1960*, 264.

46. Peter Hocken, “The Charismatic Movement in the United States,” *Pneuma* 16:2 (1994): 191–214; Kenneth S. Kantzer, “The Charismatics Among Us,” *Christianity Today* 24 (February 1980): 245–49; Edward Watson, “A History of Influence: The Charismatic Movement and the SBC,” *Criswell Theological Review* 4:1 (2006): 15–30.

47. Raymond Dahlberg, “The Practical Results of Glossalalia in the Covenant and How It Relates to Them,” Record Series 1/2/6/2, Box 15, Folder 6, CAHL. For additional context on the charismatic movement in the ECC, see *Narthex* 2:2 (1982).

48. Thomas King, “Charismatic Renewal and the Church,” Record Series 1/2/6/2, Box 14, Folder 1, CAHL.

49. *Ibid.*

The Bible calls us to repent of our exclusiveness. When, because of human divisiveness we cut ourselves off from fellowship with others who also belong to Christ's Church the Bible reminds us that there are many members in Christ's Body, and that all must work together under the guidance of the Head for the health of the whole Body. And when because of sinful pride and prejudice we refuse to love those of other races, religions, and classes, the Bible reminds us that these are persons whom God created and for whom Christ died.⁵⁰

The second report the committee submitted to the Annual Meetings between 1958 and 1963 identified principles the Covenant needed to observe if they wished to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." It concluded,

Christian faith has never been limited to majority opinion. It has, in fact, often been maintained by small minorities. Recognition of this fact requires us to give fair consideration to the contributions of minority opinion. Unless we wish to stifle all emergent spiritual vitality, we must make sure that people need not fear they will be labeled as disloyal if they express themselves in ways which are contrary to the majority position.⁵¹

A prior report had argued that, "failure to understand appreciatively those in the Christian fellowship with whom we disagree, and the failure gladly to extend to individualists and non-conformists the freedom which they require for creative spiritual growth, these failures are sin.... These afford a variety of opinions in things not central to the gospel, which are vital as stimulants and correctives for the spiritual growth of the body."⁵²

The ECC's inclusivity is perhaps most especially demonstrated in its theology of baptism. The theology is an inclusive one that believes God's saving work is larger than either infant or believer baptism alone. Infant baptism emphasizes human vulnerability and utter dependence on God's

50. Covenant Committee on Freedom and Theology, 1959 Report, Part III, "The Relevance of the Bible to Our Life as a Christian Community," Record Series 19/1, Box 1, Folder 2, CAHL. Cf. *Covenant Yearbook 1959*, 181, 239-40.

51. Covenant Committee on Freedom and Theology, 1961 Report, p. 11. Record Series 19/1, Box 1, Folder 2, CAHL.

52. Covenant Committee on Freedom and Theology, 1959 Report, Part III.

grace as initiating human salvation. It also connects with the Old Testament history of marking bodies—including bodies of children as part of families—covenantally. Believer's baptism emphasizes the believer's response to God and commitment to follow Christ fully. Both modes reflect God's vast work of salvation, and in affirming both modes the Covenant has opted for an inclusive theology of baptism.

4. Does the person or group agree that Scripture is authoritative for the argument? A high view of Scripture means that one is willing to openly read and engage Scripture and its truths. As such, a high view of Scripture is applied to the relationship one has with the word in belief and in practice. Two faithful readers may differ in their interpretations and still both hold a high view of the authority and place of Scripture in their lives.

For this reason, the claims of this criterion pertain not to a particular interpretation of Scripture but simply that Scripture is, and ought to be, read and to inform the conversation. In other words, it is possible to agree on the centrality of Scripture while holding divergent interpretations. Navigating this criterion is perhaps the trickiest of all because faithful Christians disagree on how and toward what end to read Scripture. Further, the question of biblical authority is one that a variety of adherents apply differently.

If the purpose of reading Scripture is to make truth claims or develop a systematic theology or set of doctrines about God, the methods and tools employed emphasize exegesis, original languages, and authorial intent. Truth is evaluated on the accuracy of interpretation. On the other hand, if the emphasis is on spiritual sustenance and conversion, truth is evaluated on the ways the good news of Scripture has taken hold of and molded the life of the believer. Furthermore, the Protestant tradition has ascribed to the converted reader access to Scripture's truths, even if she or he does not have formal biblical or seminary training. In other words, a biblical scholar and a lay Christian may each have a high view of Scripture.

Ideally, these two approaches and goals are not working in opposition but, as in the case of Covenant baptismal theology, together offer a more inclusive approach to Scripture. In short, the questions around correct interpretation need to be placed under the broader question of whether the dissenting person or group submits holistically to the general authority of the word. If a faithful Christian or group of Christians interprets Scripture from a minority perspective, the question "How has the Bible read me/us?" is as important as "What does the Bible say?" As

the resource paper on Scripture claims, “We do not just read the Bible. The Bible reads us. The Bible is ‘living and active,’ and we should expect to be changed.”⁵³ Not only is this statement a high view of Scripture, but presumably the changed reader will also have a new set of perspectives that he or she brings to the task of interpreting Scripture.

5. Is the dissenting position a central issue of faith, or it is a secondary issue? The question of primary and secondary matters of faith is an old one that confessional churches have an easier time discerning. The Augsburg and Westminster Confessions, for example, outline doctrines that are central to the Christian faith and the parameters within which theological orthodoxy is determined. The Roman Catholic Church has a Congregation on the Doctrine of Faith that defends and promulgates orthodox Christian doctrine.

As a non-confessional church, the Covenant has neither a statement of faith to which all must adhere nor a theological governing body that determines orthodoxy. Not even the seminary faculty who are trained in biblical and historical Christianity claim such a place in the ECC. While the parameters around primary and secondary issues of faith are a bit blurred, the Covenant has three solid resources for discernment. The first, and most important, is the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Lutheran heritage of the Covenant influences the high Christology the Covenant holds, especially as it pertains to a personal relationship with Christ. The emphasis on relationship enjoys not only Scripture as mediator but the living Christ who enlivens the text through the power of the Holy Spirit. The life of Christ in the Gospels is one that shapes not only how Christians live but how they interpret the rest of Scripture. This is not to make one part of Scripture more authoritative than another. It is to say that Christ, the person in the Gospel accounts, is the one whose relationship to believers matters when it comes to determining what is most important to the Christian faith.

Second, the Evangelical Covenant Church affirms the centrality of Scripture even while it holds to the historic confessions of the church, specifically the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds.⁵⁴ The creeds do not stand over Scripture; rather, they exist in relationship to Scripture. The Nicene

53. “The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible,” 5.

54. The Evangelical Covenant Church Constitution and Bylaws, Preamble. This commitment is also in the Covenant Affirmations, and both creeds are written out in full in the section “Common Christian Affirmations.” *Covenant Affirmations* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2005), 1, 4.

Creed, for example, was used as a reference point for the canonizing of Scripture and was affirmed by the whole church even before the boundaries of Scripture were finalized. The conciliar creeds offer a point of continuity with the historical Christian church as well as a summary of faith that outlines what is most essential to the Christian faith. When discerning the weight of a particular theological question, the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds offer an historically sound starting point.

Finally, the committee's report, *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, directly addresses the question of what is central and what is secondary. In fact, it is the only direct delineation of such to be affirmed by an Annual Meeting. The report, which reads almost creedally, claims,

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.⁵⁵

In terms of secondary matters of faith, the final report states, "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."⁵⁶ While one could argue that the ECC would benefit from ongoing conversation regarding the delineation of primary and secondary matters, history provides solid resources as a context for discernment.

Conclusion

Church historians call the Covenant a dissenting body that emerged with a commitment to genuine faith and renewal in the church. Maria Nilsson, grandmother of David Nyvall, was herself a dissenter who acted against the 1726 Edict Against Conventicles by gathering believ-

55. *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 10.

56. *Ibid.*

ers in her home to read Scripture. Her intent was not to cause disunity in the church but to pursue Christ in genuine faithfulness. Clearly the ECC does not label her a dissenter today, and her story underscores the importance of what might be a sixth criterion of faithful dissent: it is never an end in itself and should always lead to discernment and dialogue. This is the heart of freedom, the commitment that distinguishes the Covenant Church in significant and life-giving ways.

The Preamble to the Covenant Constitution celebrates freedom as essential: “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.”⁵⁷ Growth is painful, and the renewing work of the Spirit is vulnerable. Yet these commitments lie behind the Covenant’s historical commitment to freedom in Christ.

As a life-long Covenanter, I do not accept the option of dissent—only faithful dissent. Without faithful dissent, freedom is at stake. Dissent is more than a theological commitment. Faithful dissent is a habit that helps the church grow in new ways, return to the word, and listen to marginalized voices. This is especially important when the dissent is coming from persons or groups whom the church has historically harmed. The commitments that can help the church maintain Christian freedom—a commitment to the gospel, renewal, communion, a relationship with Christ, and faithful dissent—are present throughout Covenant history. They are stored in our archives and written on our hearts.

57. The Evangelical Covenant Church Constitution and Bylaws, Preamble.