



WHAT DOES IT
MEAN TO BE
A COVENANT
CHURCH?



A LOOK AT COVENANT DISTINCTIVES



Just what is the Covenant Church anyway?” There are a number of ways to answer that question. The Covenant Church could be described in terms of statistics or organizational structure or doctrinal beliefs.

But perhaps it is most meaningful to say that the Evangelical Covenant Church is the custodian of four values, which when taken together seem to be unique. Other denominations have one or more of these values, but no other group appears to hold all four with the degree of commitment that characterizes the Covenant. These values are:

- 1) We are evangelical but not exclusive.
- 2) We are biblical but not doctrinaire.
- 3) We are congregational but not independent.
- 4) We are traditional but not rigid.

Evangelical but not exclusive

Evangelicalism is the direct heir of the Reformation. If there is one word that defines it, it is *grace*. Evangelicalism proclaims a gospel of grace as the only way to salvation; it treats the Christian life as an experience of grace; and it defines the church as a community of grace.

Evangelicalism was rediscovered by the great Reformation denominations—Lutheran, Anglican, and Reformed—but it is not

contained by them. It has overflowed into other movements, including the Covenant.

Unfortunately, evangelicalism also contains within it the seeds of exclusivism. Ever since the Reformation there have been attempts by the church to make our arguments foolproof and our congregations pure.

Some evangelicals have detailed the Christian life in manuals of discipline. Others have prescribed the experience of grace to make it conform to some sort of normative standard. Still others have drawn the boundaries tight around the community of grace, so that only those who conformed to a particular pattern of behavior, or who testified to a particular expression of the experience of grace, could be included.

But in addition to these exclusive evangelicals there are also *catholic* evangelicals (note the lowercase “c”). By conscious choice the Covenant places itself in this second group. There have always been exclusive evangelicals among us (we would hardly be catholic evangelicals if we didn’t include them!), but our exclusive evangelicals cannot buttress their position with an appeal to church authority.

“Catholic evangelical” may be a new idea to you. It simply means a universal acceptance of all who are in Christ. An early Covenant leader wrote in 1910: “[The Covenant] maintains that the local church shall consist of only believing members, but at the same time have room for all believers without regard to their particular interpretation or controversial doctrinal teaching. This is to say that the local church shall in a great measure be a faithful portrait of God’s Church at large.” That is being a catholic evangelical!

The Covenant Church welcomes any baptized Christian into full membership on the basis of life and faith. There are many denominations where this isn’t so:

- some exclude people because they haven’t been immersed;
- some because they impose standards of conduct to which the individual Christian’s free conscience will not submit;
- some because a person hasn’t spoken in tongues;
- some because a prospective member holds different views on the end-time.

Those who have equated evangelicalism with exclusivism may have difficulty understanding the Covenant Church, so our catholic evangelicalism needs explaining to those who are not used to

it. But it has been with us from the beginning, and it is integral to an understanding of who we are.

Biblical but not doctrinaire

From its founding, the Covenant has been a biblical fellowship without entrenching particular interpretations of doctrine in its constitution.

Just as there are those who equate *evangelical* with *exclusive*, so there are those who equate *biblical* with *doctrinaire*.

We are biblical, which means:

- There is a limitation on matters of doctrine. Nothing has validity in the areas of faith, doctrine, and conduct unless it accords with Scripture. We reject the notion that all “sincere religion” is on a par with what God has revealed in the Bible.
- We give particular attention and prominence to what is clearly taught in the Bible, to what has been commonly taught in the Church since Pentecost, and both of these as reaffirmed in the Reformation.
- We have the freedom to hear many interpretations of Scripture and to enter into discussion when there is disagreement. We don’t have to defend an “official” position.
- Both clergy and laity are “Bible people.” If we do not keep informed on the content and message of Scripture itself in each generation, we will have nowhere to stand.

Doctrinaire, on the other hand, means that the Bible is to be interpreted from a *fixed* doctrinal position. Though doctrinaire persons may have a firm belief in the Bible as the word of God, they cannot in all cases allow the Bible to speak freely and clearly—for they have already made up their minds in these cases. Rather than allowing the Bible to test and correct their doctrine, their doctrine determines in advance what they are willing to hear from Scripture.

Ironically, believers often become doctrinaire at the least defensible points of their doctrinal systems. The clearer a biblical doctrine is, the less need there is to be doctrinaire about it, for there is common agreement as to its meaning. But as clarity and importance decrease, argument and dogmatism increase. Denominations and movements become founded on doctrinaire interpretations of a few passages of Scripture.

Sometimes people wonder if we aren’t in danger of making pri-

vate interpretation too important. We agree that personal opinion on the meaning of Scripture must be tested against other opinions in communal Bible study. The understandings of others who have gone before us and those who are our contemporaries must be given serious attention.

We also stand open to the accusation that we don't know where we stand. But in reply we must ask, isn't the Bible itself clear and dependable? Can it not be taken on its own terms as the word of God? We stand where the Bible stands, wherever it stands. We don't tell the Bible what it should mean, or give confessional authority to interpretations upon which there is significant disagreement among Christians.

It is not common in church history to be biblical without being doctrinaire. That is why we dare to assert it as a distinctive.

Congregational but not independent

Congregationalism is a representative democracy in which the final authority in the church's affairs lies with all the people, not with ministers and other officials. It can embrace a wide range of individual styles, from entire local church independence to a high degree of centralization.

Centrism in congregationalism does not imply a direct control over local churches. It involves a central control over the missions and ministries that the churches have in common. The denomination may have control of its missionary work, but it has no control over the mission work done by the local congregation.

The Covenant tends to be centrist in its congregationalism, because that is the reason it came into being. The people who have made the Covenant—past and present—have more than enough in common to carry on an effective mission together. Our purpose is to do things cooperatively that cannot be achieved by independent congregations. So the structure from the beginning, as today, is not around a person, or a system of government, or a doctrinal position. It is around mission.

The Covenant exists to make the mission and institutions we have in common as effective as possible. It doesn't interfere with the freedom of local churches to run their own local programs and property.

At each level in our structure the *congregation* of the people is the final authority on how the mission and institutions will operate at that level. The local church is a congregation; the regional confer-

ence is a congregation; and the denominational Annual Meeting is still another congregation. Each level is part of a whole, and each level needs the others, but the entire structure runs on mutual promises and trust, not on one level reaching up or down to exercise legal control over another.

Independence stresses individual experience and local identity, often at the expense of a commitment to a larger body of believers. It values the present moment so highly that it devalues the history of the movement that brought it into being. The local church is severed from its ancestors.

Because of this it has no automatic commitment to a particular mission. Often it contributes to missions over which it has no influence at all.

Our distinctiveness does not lie in the form of our government. Other denominations are organized along similar, if not identical, lines. Rather, it lies in the degree to which we have established a strong central identity and mission without sacrificing the freedom of the local churches.

Traditional but not rigid

Tradition is that which is handed down to us from the past. This process is neither good nor bad. It simply happens. If we were not traditional we would spend our time reinventing what has already been invented and rediscovering what has already been learned. We are all content to be traditional when it comes to indoor plumbing and air conditioning.

The Covenant Church is consciously traditional in its faith and practice. We do not change for the sake of change. On the other hand, we have usually rejected a form of tradition that can be called rigidity. Tradition says, "The old ways are good; we won't change until we can improve." Rigidity says, "The old ways are best; we will not change. In fact, the old ways are right; we must not change." Rigidity gives emotional and even constitutional authority to tradition.

Some parts of our Covenant heritage have faded because they do not fit our changing circumstances. But others remain because we have found them to be good or instructive or efficient or beautiful. Among them are:

- 1) our distinctive hymns;
- 2) our high view of the sacraments;
- 3) our freedom in the practice of baptism;

- 4) our strong confirmation program;
- 5) our love for celebrative traditions; and
- 6) our recognition of the value of the church year.

It is easy to fear tradition. But we must remember that even formlessness is itself a tradition. Our unity does not lie in all Christians having identical traditions, for that would mean changing history. It lies in our having the same Lord, the same faith, the same baptism, the same God and Father of us all (Ephesians 4:5-6). The traditions listed above don't *prescribe* what *must be* in the Covenant; they *describe* what *is* that has come to us from previous generations.

This is not all there is of the Covenant. Much of what is in the Covenant today is new in our generation. But there are other parts that we cherish from our past as well.

Conclusion

We have been dealing with Covenant distinctives. The really important things of the Christian faith—salvation by faith and the incarnation, for example—are not *Covenant* distinctives. They are *Christian* distinctives. We hold these, and much more, in common with the whole Church of Jesus Christ.

Covenant distinctives are not nearly as important as Christian distinctives, but they are important in describing the way we do things. They are values that have shaped our past—values that motivate and inspire us today.

They are one way of answering the question: “Just what is the Covenant Church anyway?”

CP
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