

Historical Background

Much has been written about the historical developments that led to the formation and perpetuation of the Evangelical Covenant Church and its distinct flavor of ecclesiology and biblicism. These writings have come from people far more capable and qualified than myself, and as much as I can, I will be quoting from them and directing you, the inquisitive reader, to engage with my sources in their entirety. I won't be attempting anything like a summary of Karl A. Olsson's 830-page tome of Covenant history, *By One Spirit*,¹⁶ but I would like to pull on what I consider to be some salient threads that necessarily inform the predicament in which the Covenant Church now finds itself. As former Covenant President T. W. Anderson put it, "We want to study the past in order that we may better understand the present and, by the grace of God, plan wisely for the future."¹⁷

The Evangelical Covenant Church has adopted a list of "distinctives" as part of its ecclesial identity, consisting of "We are..." statements:

- We are Evangelical, but not Exclusive
- We are Biblical, but not Doctrinaire
- We are Congregational, but not Independent
- We are Traditional, but not Rigid¹⁸

In trying to understand our collective identity as Covenanters, let us take a look at a few historic vignettes through the lens of these Covenant distinctives. These stories are well-known to scholars but may be less so to the average parishioner or casual observer. In any case, readers are invited to look through the source material for a fuller understanding of the context, consequences, and conversation surrounding each of the stories and characters from our shared heritage.

¹⁶ Karl A. Olsson, *By One Spirit*, (Covenant Press, 1962).

¹⁷ T. W. Anderson, "President's Report," *Covenant Yearbook*, 1935, 5.

¹⁸ Everett L. Wilson and Donald Lindman, *What Does It Mean to be a Covenant Church: A Look at Covenant Distinctives*, (Covenant Publications, 1988, 2007).

Evangelical, But Not Exclusive

The Evangelical Covenant Church is both the historical and spiritual successor to the churches of the Swedish Mission Covenant, members of which referred to themselves as “Mission Friends”, congregations of both domestic Swedish churches, and immigrant churches in America. These congregations were united around a common experience. As with all good Protestants, “The Evangelical Covenant Church was born of ‘dissent.’”¹⁹

Early Covenanters were responding to power structures in both the state-sponsored Swedish Lutheran Church and the influential Swedish-American Lutheran Synods that demanded alignment with the Augsburg Confession as a standard of doctrinal purity required for membership. They gathered as “free churches”, caught up in a revival of *pietism*, an earlier movement in German Lutheranism that “charged the Lutheran church with focusing on doctrinal orthodoxy to such a degree that this eclipsed the experience of faith and its resulting transformations.”²⁰ In 1842, Swedish lay preacher C. O. Rosenius wrote, “It would not be probable to expect that all Christians, despite being enlightened by the same Spirit, should come to completely the same way of thinking on all spiritual matters here on earth, where we understand and prophesy in part.”²¹

In 1872, Swedish Lutheran pastor P. P. Waldenström troubled the theological waters when he made public a sermon he had preached which directly contradicted the view of the atonement presented in the Augsburg Confession. It was in this sermon that Waldenström made his famous statement—a Covenant favorite, “Where is it written (*Var står det skrivet*)?”²² Waldenström took issue with the language of the Confession which stated that Christ’s atoning work on the cross reconciled *God* back to *humanity*. He could find no supporting statements to this claim anywhere in the New Testament and thus concluded that the confession of an imperfect document could never replace confession of Christ, himself. What came to be known as The Atonement Controversy “alerted the Mission Friends to the fact that, rather than clarifying Scripture, a confessional statement

¹⁹ Anderson, “Harmony.”

²⁰ Hauna Ondrey, “Beyond Yes or No: Covenant History and the Third Way,” *The Pietist Schoolman*, June 21, 2019, 2. <https://pietistschoolman.com/2019/06/21/covenant-history-third-way/>

²¹ C. O. Rosenius, “Pietism”, *Pietisten*, 1842.

²² P. P. Waldenström, “Sermon on the Atonement,” *Pietisten*, 1872.

could potentially obscure Scripture's message. Worse still, a confessional statement could *replace* Scripture's authority."²³

It's worth noting that not everyone in the Christian faith shared Waldenström's willingness to jettison traditional and authoritative doctrinal statements that did not align with his understanding of God revealed in Christ. In 1922, R. A. Torrey, then Dean of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (now Biola University), wrote to North Park Seminary professor and Covenant pastor Axel Mellander concerning Waldenström and his spiritual successors:

I am familiar with Dr. Waldenström's theory of [the atonement], as I have his books, and am confident that in this matter, though he was an excellent Christian man in some respects, he was aiding the work of the Antichrist, and in that matter was a follower of the Antichrist, and that the doctrine of the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ is so fundamental that there can be no union between those who believe in it as it is taught in the Word of God and those who deny it. Dr. Waldenström's doctrine of the atonement as quoted in this letter [Mellander's] will not stand the test of careful Scriptural examination ... I have many excellent friends ... in the so-called "Mission Friends," but in so far as they accept this view of the atonement, they certainly are doing the work that the Antichrist desires to be done, and aiding and abetting him to that extent in his work.²⁴

The Evangelical Covenant Church is "evangelical, but not exclusive." We find our shared identity in our commitment to the Gospel of Christ, not in drawing up elaborate doctrinal positions that exclude certain people who are otherwise fellow travelers in the journey that is following Jesus. Though it may cause friction with members whose convictions about specific theological and ecclesiological questions might appeal to sectarianism, the Covenant Church chooses to forgo purity for the sake of inclusion. As Waldenström put it, "When a congregation *has room for all who believe in Christ*, such that it does not exclude any members of the body of Christ, but merely the unbelievers, then it would in fact be in its essence entirely a Christian congregation."²⁵

²³ Ondrey, "Beyond Yes or No," 2.

²⁴ R. A. Torrey, Letter to Axel Mellander, February 14, 1922, Covenant Archives.

²⁵ P. P. Waldenström, "Room for All Who Believe," 107.

Biblical, But Not Doctrinaire

Early 20th century American Protestantism was marked by a concerted and energized push towards biblical and theological conservatism, and the Covenant Church found itself enmeshed in the controversy thus inspired. Responding to challenges posed by historical and textual criticism in biblical studies, as well as the proliferation of Darwinian evolution in the natural sciences, *fundamentalism* emerged as a pathway back to doctrinal and ethical security rooted in biblical authority. As Covenant historian Karl A. Olsson wrote, “The Fundamentals movement, both in its formal and informal phases, played a crucial role in the history of the Covenant in the period 1915-33.”²⁶

In 1910, the Testimony Publishing Company of Chicago published a series of pamphlets (90 essays in total) titled *The Fundamentals*, edited in part by the aforementioned R. A. Torrey. One consequence of getting down to the fundamentals was the summarizing of the teachings of Christianity into essential doctrines. The most popular summary was “The Five Point Deliverance” of the Northern Presbyterian Church, which affirmed: 1) the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, 2) the virgin birth of Christ, 3) the substitutionary atonement of Christ, 4) the bodily resurrection of Christ, and 5) the historicity of the biblical miracles.²⁷

Olsson notes that much of the language of *The Fundamentals* is “assertive rather than argumentative”. He quotes Dyson Hague’s essay on higher criticism:

The qualification for the perception of Biblical truth is neither philosophic nor philological knowledge, but spiritual insight. The primary qualification of the musician is that he be musical; of the artist, that he have the spirit of art. So the merely technical and mechanical and scientific mind is disqualified for the recognition of the spiritual and infinite. Any thoughtful man must honestly admit that the Bible is to be treated as unique in literature, and, therefore, that the ordinary rules of critical interpretation must fail to interpret it aright.²⁸

²⁶ Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 531. Most of the information I learned about the Covenant’s foray in the fundamentalist/modernist controversy comes from Part III: *Baptized Into One Body*, Chapter VIII: *Groping for an Image*. It is worth reading, if not simply for more detail, then also for Olsson’s obvious affection for the history.

²⁷ Douglas A. Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story: A History of the Movement* (Baker Academic, 2005), 165. Olsson’s own list differs in the fifth fundamental, choosing instead “The Second Coming of Christ.”

²⁸ Dyson Hague, “History of the Higher Criticism” in *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to Truth* (1910) I, 90.

Olsson goes on to write:

This, in itself, is acceptable. If the Bible speaks only to initiates, the scientific efforts of non-Christian critics are immaterial and irrelevant. But if the critical scalpel has been struck from the hand of the unbeliever, it cannot be reclaimed for Christian defense. You can't have it both ways. Either the Bible is in some sense a field of rational inquiry for believers and unbelievers alike or it is not. If it is not, the Scriptures cannot and should not be either attacked or defended by rational means.²⁹

This conflict between modernist and fundamentalist understandings of the Bible was no doubt deeply felt by Covenant pastors, scholars, and seminarians. Being located in Chicago, the center of the fundamentalists' publishing efforts, North Park College and Theological Seminary found itself squarely in the middle of the controversy. Neighboring institutions were drawing lines. To the south was the conservative and fundamentalist Moody Bible Institute, and to the...well...further south³⁰ was the liberal and modernist Chicago Theological Seminary. It's not hard to imagine that North Park, being the focal point of Covenant higher learning, and thus exposed to the scholarship of higher criticism, would also generate attraction toward a movement whose purpose was to elevate the authority of the Bible, even as its espousal of the five fundamentals brought it into precarious proximity with confessionalism.

In 1919 the first World's Christian Fundamentals Convention was held in Philadelphia and attracted over 6,000 attendees. This enthusiasm led to the formation of the World's Christian Fundamentals Association (WCFA) which attracted the likes of William Jennings Bryan when evolutionary theory was identified as a potent threat to biblical historicity. His celebrity caught the attention of the Covenant Annual Meeting, who in 1922 sent to him a resolution which reads:

The Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant, assembled in its 38th annual conference in Chicago, June 20-25, hereby expresses to you heartfelt thanks and grateful appreciation for your courageous stand in upholding the doctrines of the Bible, and your effective work

²⁹ Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 528-9.

³⁰ Though not *technically* in the geographic center, one can't help but entertain the image of North Park being pulled in opposing directions.

against the enemies of the Holy Scriptures. Our earnest prayer is that God may grant you a long and useful life.³¹

Bryan's role, of course, culminated in the famous Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee in 1925, for which Bryan argued for the prosecution. Before passing away in the week following the trial, Bryan spoke at a WCFA meeting in Memphis at which he preached against the "anti-biblical" subject being taught in schools.

One interesting Covenant personality who emerged in this time was Paul W. Rood. Rood graduated from North Park in 1911 and was ordained in 1915³² before being called to First Covenant Church of Seattle the following year. By 1925, Rood was pastor at Beulah Tabernacle in Turlock, CA (the predecessor to Hope Covenant Church) as well as an evangelist and revivalist to California's Central Valley.³³ Following the death of Bryan, he established the Bryan Bible League for the purpose of spreading fundamentalism. Riffing off of Isaiah 6, he said, "In the year that Bryan died, I saw the Lord."³⁴ This clearly got the attention of the WCFA, because by 1929, Rood had become the president of that organization. In 1933, Rood returned to Chicago to pastor Lakeview Covenant Church (now Resurrection Covenant) while also maintaining his role as president and organized a month-long evangelistic campaign during the Chicago World's Fair. Two years later, he accepted the position as president of Biola College where he stayed for four years and essentially saved the college from financial ruin.

At the risk of redundancy, I can't help but to emphasize that the impact of fundamentalism on the Covenant Church was so significant that a Covenant pastor, a member of a denomination, mind you, with no official doctrinal confession, was the de facto head of the American fundamentalism movement in its heyday for almost *six years!*

Perhaps even *more* significant to the Covenant's intersection with fundamentalism were the actions of Axel B. Ost and Gustaf F. Johnson. Ost was a North Park Seminary graduate and travelling evangelist, and Johnson, beginning in 1914, was the pastor of The

³¹ *Covenant Yearbook*, 1922, 157.

³² Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 533.

³³ "Obituary for Paul W. Rood," Find a Grave, accessed January 22, 2026, https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/56145169/paul_w-rood

³⁴ Steward G. Cole, *History of Fundamentalism*, (New York, 1931), 262-3.

Tabernacle in Minneapolis (later known as First Covenant Church of Minneapolis). Johnson was “neither by origin nor inclination a Covenanter.”³⁵ He was quite outspoken in his championing of fundamentalist views of biblicism in the fight against liberalism and worldliness. In the first seven years of his ministry the church lost half of its membership. Johnson referred to them, including long-time Covenanters as “dead wood”. “The effect of Johnson’s personality and ministry was to push the Covenant toward theological definition.”³⁶ This was reflected in a resolution from the 1924 Annual Meeting:

WHEREAS, the fundamental principles of Christianity are continually being assailed, causing confusion and bewilderment in the minds of some and sorrow to the hearts of earnest Christians:

Be it resolved, that the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant of America... reaffirm our loyalty to the historic principles of Christianity and our whole-hearted allegiance to the Bible as the infallible word of God and our absolute authority for life and doctrine.³⁷

Johnson, Ost, and a number of others aligned with the WCFA began to call out Covenanters who were perceived to be too liberal, if not outright heretical. Individuals such as Covenant president C. V. Bowman, North Park president-emeritus David Nyvall, and dean of the seminary Nils Lund. At the 1927 Annual Meeting, a committee from the Northwest Mission Association, which included Ost and Johnson, “presented a resolution calling attention to the crying need for the revival of a church sunk in indifference and self-righteousness.”

The causes for this situation the committee found in a shaken faith in the infallible authority of the Bible, in the lust for pleasure, in avarice, and in fraternization with the world. The cure would be a revival among leaders and people alike. If no cure was effected, warned the committee, some Covenanters would sink into dead formalism and decadence and others, looking for spiritual life, would be drawn into the sects of the fanatics and hyper-spirituals. It was a solemn resolution to which no one could take exception.³⁸

³⁵ Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 531

³⁶ Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 532.

³⁷ *Covenant Yearbook*, 1924, 175.

³⁸ Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 536.

Later that year, Otto Högfelt, editor of *Missions-Wänneren*, a conservative publication born out of the Swedish Lutheran Mission Synod, printed criticism of a Nyvall lecture on the nature of fundamentalism and modernism, and then, over the next two weeks, printed Gustaf Johnson's own lectures on modernism. This was followed by an article written by A. B. Ost attacking the use of a book titled *The Making of a Minister* by Charles R. Brown in North Park Seminary classes. Ost had apparently come to the campus to interview students about the faculty. He concluded that the instruction coming out of the seminary was heretical. A series of letters and meetings ensued. Bowman formally requested that Ost and Johnson present charges to the board in writing. They refused. Johnson contended that he had overheard Nils Lund in conversation at a Chicago restaurant which suggested that Lund did not believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ.

Such was the setup for the tense and pivotal Annual Meeting of 1928, located, of all places, in Omaha, Nebraska. The Covenant executive board, in collaboration with the board of North Park, was prepared to offer a resolution in defense of the school's faculty and administration. North Park board chairman, Hugo Anderson, outlined the events leading to the creation of the resolution and ended his remarks with this prophetic comment, "Truth is not the essential thing in a religious controversy, but personal reputations and personal conquests."³⁹

Gustaf Johnson and A. B. Ost were both given chances to speak and clarify their recollection of events and concerns. Ost declared that the lecture titled "How do you read?" that Nils Lund had given to the ministerium at the start of the meeting was in fact heretical "in that it claimed that the Bible contains but is not the Word of God and in its doctrine of progressive revelation."⁴⁰

The Annual Meeting passed the resolution with a large majority, exonerating the North Park faculty, but leaving Ost and Johnson with a feeling of having been wounded. More shots were fired in the following years, including an open letter from the secretary of the Covenant, Joel S. Johnson, who once again questioned the orthodoxy of North

³⁹ *Covenant Yearbook*, 1928, 162.

⁴⁰ Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 540.

Park's curriculum. In 1932, Nils Lund was able to present a statement in defense of his personal faith and professional pedagogy. The Annual Meeting report states:

Lund gave a clear and concise statement of his beliefs and principles and confessed his unqualified faith in the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. His method of teaching in which he acquainted his students with different views of Christian doctrine exposed him to misunderstanding and misrepresentation by antagonists. He called attention to views which had become prevalent [in] later years among us, which were not in accordance with the Evangelical Lutheran faith held by the founders of the Covenant, and which he could not accept.⁴¹

The following year, Lund, Johnson, and Johnson jointly signed a statement that communicated forgiveness for any unkindness or false accusations that may have occurred and a willingness for cooperation in the mission of the church.

In reflecting on the fundamentalist-modernist controversy and the determination ultimately made by the Covenant to rely on the Bible as its *sole confession*, Karl Olsson writes:

It is this principle which historically has plunged the Covenant into difficulties in trying to determine heresy. If you really do not know what orthodoxy is, and you cannot know this merely from the uninterpreted Bible, how do you judge heresy? At least the kind of practical heresy which plagues the church? *The answer is that you can't.* You are limited in your discipline to the censuring of those who from the vantage point of their own orthodoxy castigate heretics. 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.⁴²

In 1925, David Nyvall had begun publishing a series of articles in the Swedish-language newspaper *Minneapolis Veckoblad*. Titled "Let Us Keep Our Bible," Nyvall was critiquing the fundamentalist tendency toward uncritical literalism, while also upholding the continuity of Covenant traditions of biblical interpretation. He wrote:

⁴¹ *Covenant Yearbook*, 1932, 139.

⁴² Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 545. Emphasis mine.

There is no materialism more dangerous and disastrous than the interpretation of Scriptures that does not serve the new covenant, which is Spirit and life, but serves the letter, which kills... When one takes the imagery of the Bible in a literal manner—meaning to imagine these things as literally spoken and literally interpreted—then unnecessary troubles begin and many stumbling stones block the way to one’s faith in the Bible.⁴³

He went on to write, the following year:

Because we, as a denomination, are founded on the Bible as the only adequate basis for faith, the question of what inspiration really means is a vital biblical issue. Inspiration does not mean that we have an error-free and self-descriptive Bible. Rather, we have a life-giving proclamation of the truth: life-giving because its content is Christ himself.... One does not read the Bible in heaven, where God is the light. Therefore, the Bible cannot now replace Christ, who is the light, as well as the way, the truth, and the life. Just as it was important for me to insist on this unadulterated source for our faith in the Bible, it was also urgent to insist upon a method for using the Bible that was consistent with this source: in other words, the work of revival... [as] the word’s great task in this world.⁴⁴

The Evangelical Covenant Church is biblical, but not doctrinaire. “[The] history of biblical theology in the Covenant Church clearly demonstrates that, while ‘let us take our Bible seriously’ accurately reflects agreement on biblical *authority*, well-meaning Covenanters would approach its *interpretation* in different ways.”⁴⁵ This is *why* diversity is so important: it requires that we recognize the image of God *in the other*, and reminds us to hold at arm’s length the favored beliefs that conform to our own biases.

As we seek to obey God’s will as it is revealed to us in Scripture, we remain humble because we recognize that we could be wrong—that truth may lie outside us. For this reason, we read with open ears and eyes, we read and re-read, humbly open to God’s revelation, as it comes through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in ourselves and in our brothers and sisters.⁴⁶

⁴³ David Nyvall, “Låt oss behålla vår bibel,” Part I, *Minneapolis Veckoblad* (July 28, 1925), 4-5.

⁴⁴ David Nyvall, “Låt oss behålla vår bibel,” Part X, *Minneapolis Veckoblad* (January 5, 1926), 4-5.

⁴⁵ Scott E. Erickson, “‘Let Us Take Our Bible Seriously’: The Ecclesial Nature of Biblical Interpretation,” in *In Spirit and in Truth: Essays on Theology, Spirituality, and Embodiment in Honor of C. John Weberg*, ed. Philip J. Anderson and Michelle A. Clifton-Soderstrom (Covenant Publications, 2006) 108.

⁴⁶ M. Safstrom & H. Ondrey, “Covenanters Reading Scripture Through History,” *Augustana Digital Commons* (2016)

Traditional, But Not Rigid

The 1920s and early 30s would not be the last time that the Covenant's unique approach to ecclesiology would be challenged by appeals to doctrinal purity. During the post-WWII era, a new approach to American Protestant conservatism emerged in *neo-evangelicalism*. The so-called "new evangelicals", including such figures as Harold Ockenga, Carl Henry, and Billy Graham, favored an earnest engagement with the culture, as opposed to the more separatist views of the earlier fundamentalists, while still retaining strict adherence to the teachings of the fundamentals, most notably that of the inerrancy of scripture. The influence of neo-evangelicalism within the Covenant played out in the perceived tension between two of our defining affirmations: the centrality of the Word of God, and the reality of freedom in Christ.

Enter one William C. Doughty, pastor of Bethany Covenant Church in Mount Vernon, Washington. Doughty, after a time at Moody Bible Institute, came to North Park in 1948 to complete his seminary studies, believing the Covenant college to be more in line with his fundamentalist background.⁴⁷ By 1952, Doughty was ordained, and in a move reminiscent of A. B. Ost began questioning the orthodoxy of the instruction at North Park. In two articles written for the *North Pacific Conference News* in 1957, he argued that the Covenant was moving away from its traditions and toward liberalism, citing his concerns about the seminary, as well as Covenant Press and the Covenant Youth Department.⁴⁸ A number of attempts were made by both the Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing⁴⁹ and the leadership of the North Pacific Missionary Conference⁵⁰ to meet with Doughty, and by April of 1958, he met with his conference's board as well as its superintendent and the secretary of the Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing to discuss a paper that Doughty had written and begun sharing, called "A Cause for Concern in the Covenant."

⁴⁷ Hauna Ondrey, "Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom (1963): Full Report with Supporting Historical Documents," *Covenant Quarterly*, 75, no. 3-4 (2018): 4-33, <https://covquarterly.com/index.php/CQ/article/view/79/77> Most of my information on the Doughty affair and subsequent work of the Committee on Freedom and Theology comes from this report, including Dr. Ondrey's introduction and the supporting documentation from Annual Meeting minutes.

⁴⁸ *Covenant Yearbook*, 1958, 236-43.

⁴⁹ Now known as the Board of Ordered Ministry.

⁵⁰ A past regional conference that corresponds, roughly, with the current Pacific Northwest Conference.

In this pamphlet, “He accused the seminary of being neo-orthodox, and quoted verbatim, although out of context, passages from lectures and discussions purporting to substantiate his thesis.”⁵¹ Disregarding a request made by both boards, Doughty began widely circulating the pamphlet, first among the pastors in his conference, and later to the chairman of every church in the Covenant, requesting that copies be delivered to pastors as well as delegates chosen for the Annual Meeting.

Ahead of the 1958 Annual Meeting, held in Miami Beach, Florida, Doughty had been called to appear before the Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing. Doughty requested that the meeting be recorded verbatim, a request which was subsequently denied, and as a result refused to participate. Feeling there was no other choice, the board voted to present a resolution to the Annual Meeting, recommending 1) “That Pastor William C. Doughty be censured for his un-Christian spirit and his willful method of procedure,” 2) that he withdraw his ordination credentials for a year, and 3) that his ministerial license be held on condition of “acceptable ministerial behavior.”⁵² The resolution passed and Doughty was censured. He would end up forfeiting his credentials the following year.

The significance of the Doughty affair ended up being far more than just a fleeting period of friction caused by one disgruntled pastor. Following the vote on the resolution, The Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing announced the appointment of a committee to study issues that had seen a renewed focus since Doughty’s pamphlet campaign. Namely, “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.”⁵³

This committee, called the Covenant Committee of Freedom and Theology, spent the next five years studying, conversing, and soliciting feedback on Covenant understandings of “freedom in Christ.” They would ultimately produce a sixteen-page report that was formally adopted at the 1963 Annual Meeting in Chicago.

⁵¹ Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 619.

⁵² *Covenant Yearbook*, 1958.

⁵³ *Covenant Yearbook*, 1958, 242.

The report, titled *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, has been referred to by Karl Olsson as a “peak achievement in Covenant history in biblically based theological and ethical thought, in nobility of motive, and in apt and eloquent expression.”⁵⁴ Former North Park professor of theology and ethics, Michelle Clifton, wrote, “Indeed, the report is arguably the best theological treatise the denomination has put forth to date.”⁵⁵ I enthusiastically agree with these sentiments, as well as with North Park professor of church history Hauna Ondrey’s remarks:

The whole document is an eloquent expression of the Covenant’s historical commitments and should be read at least once by every Covenanter.⁵⁶

The committee starts by recognizing that “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.”⁵⁷ Indeed, as we have seen, a common refrain from a church community whose conscious acceptance of doctrinal uncertainty and flexibility has repeatedly led to the discomfort and bewilderment of a segment of our membership whose ecclesial background might predispose them to a more bounded set of beliefs.

The report is then divided into two major sections, the first of which addresses a Covenant understanding of the authority of the Bible. In describing the nineteenth-century developments that led the pietist forebears of the Covenant to break from the Swedish Lutheran Church, the committee writes:

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 not meet the needs of the heart... The spiritual power of the pietist movement lay in its recovery of a vital and dynamic use of the Bible... the rediscovery of the living view of the Bible which characterized the early Reformation.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Karl A. Olsson, *Into One Body...By the Cross*, vol. 2 (Covenant Press, 1986), 359.

⁵⁵ Michelle A. Clifton-Soderstrom, “Covenant Freedom: Freedom For All or Free-for-All?” *Covenant Quarterly*, 75, no. 3-4 (2018): 34-54, <https://covquarterly.com/index.php/CQ/article/view/80/78>

⁵⁶ Ondrey, “Beyond Yes or No,” 4. See below for a link to the original report and see note 47 on page 23 for its reissue.

⁵⁷ *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, 1963* (Evangelical Covenant Church, 1963), 4. https://collections.carli.illinois.edu/digital/collection/npu_swecc/id/36973

⁵⁸ *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 5. Emphasis mine.

In her commentary about the report, Michelle Clifton identifies “three intersecting yet distinct aspects” of our usage of “the word”:

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.⁵⁹

The report reads, “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.”⁶⁰ Two important reminders are found in this statement. Firstly, that the focus of our attention throughout our encounter with the Bible must always be on Christ, the “word made flesh”.⁶¹ Secondly, that the Bible is a *human* document, and as such demands our honest acknowledgment of its contextually constrained origins as we seek and discern divine guidance from its pages.

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.⁶²

The second part of the report tackles “freedom within authority” and is subdivided under three questions: what is the nature of Christian freedom, how has this freedom been experienced in the Covenant, and how can we maintain Christian freedom in the Covenant? There is much that could be discussed here, and again, I would refer the reader to peruse the text of the report in its entirety; perhaps after you finish this present report. Our concern is primarily with the argument that the Covenant way of reading the Bible, what we might call our *tradition*, demands that we maintain the *flexibility* of honoring the diversity found in the mosaic of our congregational body. “The meaning of the Bible or the nature of its relevance is not so clear as to remove all diversities of interpretation... [Accepting] their dependence on God... gives the Christian freedom from bondage to any

⁵⁹ Clifton-Soderstrom, “Covenant Freedom”, 37.

⁶⁰ *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 6.

⁶¹ John 1:14

⁶² *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 6.

human-made theological system by whatever name it may be called.”⁶³ The committee goes on to reiterate the threats to division that motivated the Covenant forebears:

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... Therefore, they refused to make any of the written creeds binding in an absolute sense, lest slavish adherence to a credal statement make it difficult to hear and respond to the full implications of the word for their day.⁶⁴

A warning we would do well to acknowledge. They go on to write:

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.⁶⁵

The Evangelical Covenant Church is traditional, but not rigid. We acknowledge our place in the broader narrative of the biblical and theological tradition of the Christian faith, while also recognizing our limitations and that “we see through a glass, darkly.”⁶⁶ The recognition of our freedom in Christ reminds us that multiple interpretations are available to us, and that we must always be filtering our reading of scripture within our social and temporal location through Christ’s command to love God and love others.⁶⁷ This freedom also grants us a justification for faithful dissent.

⁶³ *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 10.

⁶⁴ *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 10-11.

⁶⁵ *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 11.

⁶⁶ 1 Corinthians 3:12, KJV

⁶⁷ Matthew 22:37-39

Russell Cervin, pastor from Salem Square Covenant Church in Worcester, Massachusetts, wrote in an essay submitted to the Committee on Freedom and Responsibility:

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.⁶⁸

Furthermore, from the committee's report:

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... 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.⁶⁹

We find ourselves left with a question that has become ever more prescient in the last thirty years. A question for which, in spite of vigorous attempts to solidify consensus, we continue to uncover a variety of answers and uncertainties. A question which was directly addressed in the report on *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*:

Can we maintain the kind of personal relationships required in a Christian fellowship without any limitations other than that we submit to the authority of the Bible as the revelation of God's will, or must we return to uniform dogmas and carefully defined interpretations of Scripture to help us understand one another? In a word, how does the principle of Christian freedom relate to the problems of personal relationships among us today?⁷⁰

Hold onto this as we explore the Covenant's conversation on human sexuality.

⁶⁸ Russell Cervin, Letter to the Covenant Committee on Freedom and Theology (Covenant Archives), 1960.

⁶⁹ *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 11, 13.

⁷⁰ *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 12-13.