

Questions for the Covenant Church

Where is the conversation on sexuality, faith, the Bible, and policy heading now, thirty years on from the establishment of the official Covenant position? What kinds of discussions, debates, or topics for deeper study and reflection are we being led into, both out of choice and out of necessity?

Many questions have been left unanswered or have left us with conflicting or confusing responses. The following comprises an incomplete list of questions that require further engagement. They are not intended to be merely a rhetorical exercise; we are all invited to ask these questions of ourselves and our churches and to ponder how they might impact the culture and ministry of the Covenant. As you read them, consider how you might be in a season of being called to wrestle with and speak into these and other related questions.

1. What do we mean when we talk about “faith”?

Is faith primarily about believing or assenting to the right set of ideas? Is it about the strength of will that we have in believing those ideas? Is our litmus test of faith the extent to which we ascribe plenary inspiration to literalistic or plain-text readings of the Bible? Or is faith more about *faithfulness* in patterning our lives in the Way of Jesus? Is it about filtering our reading of the Bible and relationship to the Christian tradition through the lens of Jesus’ love?

2. Does a steadfast appeal to tradition frustrate our ability to be transformed by Christ?

The Christian tradition is the historical witness that has developed both doctrine and practice through centuries of Christian thought. The Covenant tradition traces its roots through the Lutheran branch of the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church, the early Mediterranean churches, and down to the Judaistic faith of Jesus and the people of Israel. However, as a multicultural denomination, we have been influenced by all manner of Christian traditions. Our traditions connect us to our ancestors and forebears and to each other through common language and ritual. Some traditions have changed very little in the last two thousand years, but others have been

dramatically altered or outright abandoned. Weaving through both our appeals to tradition and the necessity of change is our commitment to following the Way:

A Way is something that is to be followed, and we cannot follow a Way without leaving where we are now. Walking a path or following a road using maps and compasses are not what we mean by following the Way of Jesus. Instead, we are using "Way" to describe something more like a "Way of life" or "Way of being"; the Way is a person after all.²⁶⁶

3. What does it mean for us to have a cross at the center of our faith?

Catholic priest John Cihak once wrote a profound statement on the relationship between God and Jesus:

In the ugliest place of human existence (crucifixion and death) God reveals himself as absolute, total self-giving love... Being disguised under the disfigurement of an ugly crucifixion and death, the Christform is paradoxically the clearest revelation of who God is.²⁶⁷

Jesus requires of us, "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."²⁶⁸ What does this look like for each of us? Taking up a cross means sacrificing. What are we willing to sacrifice in the spirit of self-giving love?

4. Is it time for the Covenant Church to reevaluate its understanding of the sacraments?

The Evangelical Covenant Church currently recognizes two sacraments: the Eucharist (communion) and baptism. Marriage is recognized as a blessing and ceremony performed by the church but is not considered a sacrament (other Christian traditions, such as the Catholic Church, do identify marriage as a sacrament). The Covenant has famously extended fellowship to Christians who have had diametrically opposed views of baptism: some wanting to baptize infants, and others believing baptism must follow

²⁶⁶ Billie Hoard and Paul Hoard, *Eucontamination: Disgust Theology and the Christian Life*, (Cascade Books, 2025), 51.

²⁶⁷ John R. Cihak, "Love Alone is Believable: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Apologetics," February 14, 2011.

<https://fatherdavidbirdosb.blogspot.com/2011/02/love-alone-is-believable-hans-urs-von.html>

²⁶⁸ Luke 9:23, NRSVue

a conscious affirmation of faith. Historically, this has not been a banal difference in opinion. Anabaptists in the 16th and 17th centuries were executed by the thousands, in part for practicing rebaptism. Should differing views about marriage, which has now become a literally schismatic issue in the Covenant Church, be accepted in the same way as disagreements about baptism? Should churches be put under disciplinary proceedings and church trials for exclusively practicing only one form of baptism? If gay couples are barred from participating in marriage, which is not a sacrament, should they be denied communion or baptism, which are sacraments? Why or why not? Should marriage be elevated to a holy sacrament?

5. Is congregational polity still the operative model for the Covenant Church?

Per the 2015 Guidelines²⁶⁹ it is the local congregation that determines standards for membership, discipline, and leadership. Why then does the Covenant Church not respect the local congregation's determination of marriage celebration for its own members? The vast majority of the tens of thousands of Covenanters from other churches, states, and conferences cannot be party to all of the conversations, learning, and prayer that occurs within a small community of mission friends as they navigate issues of fidelity and inclusion. Why should there be any denomination-wide policy at all over matters of *congregational discernment*?

6. Should the Covenant bind clergy and congregations to other policy papers and resolutions?

Covenant policy on divorce and remarriage cites the “inflexible commands” that represent “God’s absolute intention” that “marriage is for life.”²⁷⁰ It acknowledges Jesus’ only exception to that rule as being in cases of adultery. On the topic of women in ministry, the Covenant Church, by way of resolution, calls on *all* members to welcome women (and men) to pastoral roles (including lead pastor), as equal candidates in pastoral search committees, to preach, to serve on church boards, as well

²⁶⁹ See note 131 on page 46.

²⁷⁰ The Evangelical Covenant Church, “Divorce and Remarriage: A Policy Statement,” 2010. <https://covchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Divorce-and-Remarriage.pdf>

as to roles of chairperson, deacon, and elder.²⁷¹ Should the Covenant Executive Board, Board of Ordered Ministry, conference superintendents, or the Annual Meeting seek out pastors and congregations who have been involved in marriage ceremonies of divorced persons with living ex-spouses, or who have flatly refused to consider or hire women for leadership positions, and subject them to discipline up to and including removal of ordination credentials and membership?

7. Will membership in Covenant churches require additional affirmations?

The typical and recommended barrier for membership in a Covenant Church is an affirmative response to two questions: “Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior and promise to follow him as Lord?” and, “Do you accept the Holy Scriptures, the Old and New Testaments, as the word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct?” These are buttressed by the six Covenant Affirmations, less a confessional statement, and more of an acknowledgment of theological focal points:

- We affirm the centrality of the word of God.
- We affirm the necessity of new birth.
- We affirm a commitment to the whole mission of the church.
- We affirm the church as a fellowship of believers.
- We affirm a conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit.
- We affirm the reality of freedom in Christ.²⁷²

The Annual Meetings of 2019 and 2023 voted *en masse* to vacate the memberships of hundreds of Covenanters. As was previously established, voting out a church isn't kicking out a *building*, it is the disfellowshipping of *people*. Not a single person had ever been accused, let alone convicted, of violating either the two points of our modest membership statement nor any of the six affirmations. Should the Covenant church adopt the membership question, “Do you publicly and privately profess the marriage of one man and one woman as the singular essential boundary for a sexual relationship?” Should we add a seventh Covenant Affirmation—We affirm the moral

²⁷¹ The Evangelical Covenant Church, “Resolution on Women in Ministry,” 2006.

<https://covchurch.org/resolutions/2006-women-in-ministry/>

²⁷² <https://covchurch.org/who-we-are/beliefs/>

essentiality of monogamous heterosexual marriage? Hauna Ondrey posed similar questions ahead of the 2019 Annual Meeting:

Beyond this particular vote, as a Covenant we must decide more fundamentally whether to (1) follow to its full, logical conclusion the path of dismissing congregations that are out of harmony with Covenant principles, policies, programs, and institutions; (2) embrace the prohibition of same-sex marriage as the new boundary for congregational membership in the denomination; or (3) hold discerned ethical positions without enforcing congregational compliance, as we have done since 1885.²⁷³

8. Does the Covenant Church recognize the marriages of gay Covenanters?

We have established that the Covenant Church does not authorize same-sex marriages, permit clergy to officiate them, allow church facilities to host them, or credential married gay persons. That being said... *married gay Covenanters exist!* They got married somewhere else, and then just... came back. Or perhaps they joined a Covenant church after they were already married. What is the Covenant policy on recognizing and affirming their marital status? Can they be a part of a marriage ministry? Can they take a picture as a family for the church directory? Can they host a baby shower at the church, or dedicate their children during Sunday worship? Can they attend church retreats at Covenant campgrounds and facilities? *Can they share the same room?* It's not enough to say, "We don't have a policy." That is not good enough. I see only a few possible options here. One option: The Covenant Church does not recognize the legitimacy of gay marriage *in any way* and bars same-sex couples from any of the ministries or benefits afforded to heterosexual couples. (In that case, are we trading one standard for another and also petitioning the couple to get a divorce?) Second option: The Covenant Church does not *officiate* same-sex marriages, but otherwise accepts married gay couples in the same way as any other married couple. (In that case, what is the point of not officiating?) Third option: the Covenant Church leaves the inclusion of married gay couples to the discernment of the local congregation. (In that case, why couldn't their marriage ceremony be left to the congregation's discernment?)

²⁷³ Ondrey, "Beyond Yes or No," 5. See note 20 on page 14.

9. How are transgender, intersex, and non-binary members expected to experience marriage?

Please don't miss this incredibly important point. The existence of intersex and transgender people *dismantles the one-man-one-woman marriage paradigm*. I'll explain. Let's start with two related cases of intersex people: Swyer syndrome and CAIS. Individuals with Swyer syndrome have a genetic mutation which causes complete gonadal dysgenesis, meaning their testes do not fully develop and they typically have a vulva. Individuals with CAIS, which stands for complete androgen insensitivity syndrome, produce testosterone and other androgens, but their bodies do not respond to them. In both cases, these persons have a 46,XY *karyotype*, meaning their 23rd pair of chromosomes includes an X and a Y chromosome, typical for a human male. However, they have a traditionally female *phenotype*, meaning their physical sexual dimorphism (genitals, breasts, etc.) is more closely aligned with a typical human female. If a person with Swyer syndrome or CAIS wanted to be married in a Covenant church, what does the policy on human sexuality say about that? One could make the argument that the person is *genetically* male but *physically* female (not a *good* argument, mind you, as gender is less binary and more fluid than perhaps we previously thought). So, are they allowed to marry a man? A woman? Now extend the argument to transgender and nonbinary people. A transgender woman, through hormone replacement and surgery, can achieve something strikingly similar to a woman with CAIS: an XY karyotype with a traditionally female physiology and, more importantly, identity. Can they marry a man? Are they only allowed to marry a woman because they were assigned male at birth? Do we throw up our hands and say, "I guess they just can't get married!" (But if a transgender or intersex woman *can* marry a man... then why can't a gay man?) *Not having an answer or hoping that it just doesn't come up is not an option.*

10. Should there be Covenant spaces for LGBTQ+ people in relationships, or will our message be "break up or find another church"?

The promotion of LGBTQ+ relationships is something that threatens a pastor's ordination and employment. It is *the only thing* that has led to the involuntary removal

of an entire congregation. *It's kind of a big deal.* The Covenant's position is based on a particular biblical interpretation that frames gay romance and sexuality as essentially sinful, or at the very least in violation of God's created order. If that is the case, then if Covenant churches allow gay couples as participants or even members, are they not tacitly affirming them in their persistent and unrepentant state of sin? Would we offer membership to a person actively involved in an affair, or who was habitually abusing their children? Are those sins somehow different than the sin of being gay and in love? *If they are, then how so?*

It seems as though the Covenant's boundary-delineating policies concerning the romantic interpersonal relationships of LGBTQ+ people are primarily, if not exclusively, concerned with young, inexperienced, naïve, unmarried individuals. I am unaware of any significant content in any Covenant resolution, guideline, position paper, or *Embrace* resource, which addresses mature, self-actualized, confident, committed, gay partnerships or marriages. What does the ECC's "standard" of "marriage between one man and one woman" require of the already-married gay couples that darken our doors? Do we resign ourselves to the charitable support, encouragement, and inclusion of their families, or do we gently lead them on a journey towards alignment with "the standard", which would necessarily include *advocating for a divorce*? Or perhaps we direct them to an affirming church which would be more accepting of their relationship, which strikes me as hopelessly cynical.

In either case, by tacitly accepting the marital relationships of *some* gay people, or by pressuring them to subordinate their partnerships to the authority of the church, what message are we sending to the queer youth in our congregations? Micah Witham addressed the same question in his opening statement to the ministerium:²⁷⁴

The question I would invite you to ask yourselves is when your kids, or your friends' kids come out to you—and they will—and they say they love Jesus and want to follow Jesus but don't want to live alone. What do we say to them? They either leave our

²⁷⁴ See note 212 on page 74.

fellowship (and they are leaving our fellowship, by the way) and they find other spiritual communities to be a part of, or they leave spiritual community altogether.²⁷⁵

11. What *precisely* is the boundary for married gay Covenanters?

There is no explicit prohibition on gay persons in the Covenant being husbands or wives, they just can't be married *in* a Covenant church. Got it. Married gay Covenanters cannot be *ordained pastors*; this we have established. But where exactly is the line in which out-and-proud, side-A, dating or married gay Christians can be involved in an official capacity in a Covenant church? You pick the cut off (but be prepared to justify your answer and cite your evidence): Weekly attender... set up/tear down crew... audio-visual team member... greeter... giving a personal testimony in church... public prayer... public reading of scripture... taking the offering or distributing communion... giving the announcements... volunteer in the nursery... volunteer in children's ministry... volunteer in youth ministry... on the worship team... leading a bible study... deacon... paid (non-ordained) staff... worship *leader*... church board member... adult Sunday school teacher... church board *chair*... occasional (non-ordained) preacher... youth retreat speaker... whole church retreat speaker... conference staff... regional conference speaker... North Park staff... North Park *faculty*... denominational staff... North Park *seminary faculty*... national conference speaker... published author for Covenant Press (oops, already happened)... President of the Evangelical Covenant Church (maybe one has to be ordained for this position, I don't know).

12. Does not the Covenant's emphasis on social justice and reconciliation demand that we include LGBTQ+ people in the conversation?

Methodist minister Ken Carder had a paradigm changing conversation during his time on the Council of Bishops for the UMC. He wrote,

I felt that the persistent discussion of homosexuality within the Council and other denominational circles was distracting us from fully addressing economic injustice. I shared my concern with a friend, a theological consultant to the Initiative. His response

²⁷⁵ Witham, "Opening Statement."

lodged in my conscience: “But, Ken, you can’t portion God’s justice for one group and ignore it for another.”²⁷⁶

Ken Sehested of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America put it similarly, “Matters of justice cannot be segregated.”²⁷⁷ Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of current and now former Covenanters are testifying to some level of *trauma* suffered at the hands of the denomination. This present report proves it. Whether or not you feel that the decisions and actions leading to that trauma were in some way justified, the question remains: *what are we going to do about it?* This is a naked and open-ended question, I don’t have an answer for you. Or is it the case that as a denomination we feel we can insist on racial reconciliation and justice without doing the same for queer people?

13. Are we so committed to living into God’s unconditional love even if it means going against the institution of the church?

Following the Way of Jesus and conforming to the ideologies and idiosyncrasies of a church as political organization are not the same thing. This is why the issue of *dissent* has been so important to the Covenant since its inception, and also why the denomination has sought to manage and confine it. At what point are we willing to jeopardize our positions of comfort and privilege to enter into public dissent as a means of expressing the radical love of Jesus? Former Nazarene pastor James Travis Young wrote, “I believe that tending the *real* flame—to live in the power of God’s love—is to accept and give love without condition, without guilt—and if necessary, *without the church*.”²⁷⁸

²⁷⁶ Kenneth L. Carder, “Why I Changed My Mind about Homosexuality and the Church,” *United Methodist Insights*, September 26, 2018. <https://um-insight.net/perspectives/why-i-changed-my-mind-about-homosexuality-and-the-church/>

²⁷⁷ Ken Sehested, “Biblical Fidelity and Sexual Orientation: Why the First Matters, Why the Second Doesn’t,” in Wink et al., *Homosexuality and the Christian Faith*, 51. See note 250 on page 152.

²⁷⁸ James Travis Young, “We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together,” *Patheos*, December 17, 2024. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/sacredoutcasts/2024/12/we-are-never-ever-getting-back-together/>

14. “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?”²⁷⁹

So the question was posed in 1963. I’m not sure we’ve reached a satisfying resolution. Our documentation points to “Yes,” while our behavior points quite explicitly to “No.” Whichever answer we give, we need to be consistent.

15. To what extent should Covenant pastors have the freedom to make decisions about the needs and best interests of their parishioners?

Here is a remarkable comment on the responsibility of Covenant ministers from the 1997 Annual Meeting:

We acknowledge that by virtue of our licensing, ordination, and call to ministry, we take on a responsibility to be trustworthy stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Corinthians 4:1-2). This means that we view those to whom we minister as a part of a sacred trust from God. It is our responsibility to seek their well-being, safeguard their interests, and protect them as we are able from danger and harm, even to the point of sacrificing our own interests. Hence, we act in the best interests of our parishioners, *even when this action does not serve our needs or interests.*²⁸⁰

What if the best interests of a parishioner run counter to a position statement or policy. Perhaps it’s easy for some to say, “Well then the pastor should forfeit his or her credentials.” But does not the fact that the pastor(s) is testifying to “danger and harm” require us to earnestly reevaluate the policy?

16. Is it even possible for delegates at the Annual Meeting to make these kinds of monumental decisions in good conscience and good faith?

I partially quoted this section from Leland Anderson’s letter to John Wenrich preceding the 2019 Annual Meeting, but it bears repeating:

²⁷⁹ *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 28. See note 57 on page 25.

²⁸⁰ *Covenant Yearbook*, 1997, 364. Emphasis mine.

I question whether six-hundred delegates over the course of an hour and a half can be sufficiently apprised of the facts and circumstances of a hotly contested factual and theological debate so as to render a just and fair decision relating to termination of the lifetime employment of another human being. Such a consequence will permanently dislocate not only the individual but also his family and congregation. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that no one will have time to explore the biases, motives, background, interests, and prejudices of these adjudicators. The suggestion will be made that they will “try their best,” but “try their best” to do what? If the purpose is to encourage them to maximize punishment rather than to render a fair, impartial and reasoned sentence, they will render a judgment contrary to all notions of fairness and also contrary to the character and nature of the Holy Spirit. I sincerely doubt that the will of God can be discerned in a time limited, scope limited two-hour discussion among six hundred people.²⁸¹

17. “Do you really believe that a church’s decision on welcoming gay people is a matter on which the faith stands or falls?”²⁸²

I pose this question to the non-affirming side with two different possible meanings. One take is this: does an open and affirming view of marriage otherwise negate a church’s witness to the Gospel and its viewpoint or discussion surrounding core topics of the Christian faith including God, Jesus, atonement, salvation, and sanctification? Does it bear any significant weight or is it more of a tangential issue? The second take is this: should the Church be so committed to a narrow and exclusive policy of marriage that it creates enough strife such that a significant percentage of gay and affirming Christians leave the congregation and possibly even the faith altogether? *This is happening right now.*

18. Do you think it is possible for the Covenant Church to reach true unanimity in its current position on human sexuality?

Even if the Covenant Church remains as hardline in its position on same-sex marriage or goes even further in its treatment of gay members, there is still going to be a

²⁸¹ L. Anderson, “Letter to John Wenrich.” See note 188 on page 63.

²⁸² Hays and Hays, *The Widening of God’s Mercy*, 6. See note 12 on page 10.

growing contingent of affirming Covenanters bubbling under the surface. Pressuring and even voting for congregations and pastors to leave is not going to consolidate the denomination's quest for full agreement because people keep changing their minds and kids and young adults (and some grown adults) keep coming out. Kicking out all the wrong types of people is not going to change this. Furthermore, why should we expect that in a denomination that professes theological and ecclesiological diversity, and in a world where historic Christian denominations have chosen to love and accept gay people, that the ECC would not attract an affirming contingent?

19. What do you say after someone you love says, "I'm gay"?

If you are a parent or imagine that you may one day be a parent, take a moment and consider what it would be like for your child to come out to you and ask for your acceptance. If you are a pastor: would you officiate their wedding? If you are not: would you give them your blessing? What would you be willing to sacrifice by saying yes or no?

20. Covenant Pastors: If you said "yes" ("I would officiate my gay child's wedding"), even if you still may not be able to go further and commit to being fully affirming and inclusive, then do you believe that insisting that Covenant pastors quit their calling and give up their credentials before doing so is truly a fruitful solution?

To what end? What do other non-affirming pastors or members gain by insisting that you, their colleague, either subordinate your own children to the institution or blow up the entire conglomerate that is your career/ministry/friendships?