

Conclusion

This report has identified and detailed an undercurrent within the Evangelical Covenant Church which is a witness to suppression, to animosity, to loss of cultural identity and cohesion, and to spiritual harm. It is not claiming to reflect a totalizing narrative of the Covenant or of every person's experience in it, but it is affirming of and respectful towards a substantial existing minority. Refrains of protest are anticipated: "Why are you being so negative? Why aren't you talking about all the good that's happening in the Covenant? My experience in the Covenant has been wonderful... can we just change the subject and talk about something else?"

From the outset of this project I have been asking myself, "How can I speak with clarity and forthrightness in advocacy with a tone that invites people into reflection, conversation, and curiosity, rather than simply condemning?" I'm not sure that I have the ability to do that in a way that will make every reader feel comfortable and safe. I'm also not convinced that that should be my job. A couple of years ago I became more aware of the hurt and exhaustion that LGBTQ+ Christians experience, sometimes daily, in justifying both their inclusion in the church and even their very existence. I made a commitment that should I witness a queer person being misrepresented, attacked, abused, or whose dignity is being questioned, that, if it is in my purview to do so, I have a responsibility to speak up and not allow that behavior to go unchallenged. Presenting such a challenge may cause some offense or some hurt feelings. But as womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas taught me, as I sat in the audience during her lecture from the stage at Awaken Church, "An education that never discomforts never transforms."²⁸³

As I mentioned in the introduction, this report is not meant to present a fully articulated apologetic for LGBTQ+ inclusion or for same-sex marriage. The point is to explore ways of honoring multiple viewpoints. This requires intentional structures to ensure safety and authenticity. This discussion MUST be informed by the lived experience of queer people and it must also be informed by the voices of those who left

²⁸³ Kelly Brown Douglas, "What Price Freedom?" (lecture, Theology Beer Camp, Saint Paul, MN, October 17, 2025).

the Covenant because they found the denomination's policies on sexuality too restrictive. That is the point of the survey; it is meant to give an incomplete peek into their experiences in a way that has not been allowed by the institution. There is a danger in assuming that Annual Meeting votes to sanction and remove pastors and congregations provide us with any kind of clarity about how the broader congregation is considering, experiencing, or evolving on questions about sexuality and gender.

The Christian tradition is not monolithic. The Center for the Study of Global Christianity estimates that there are 45,000 Christian denominations in the world.²⁸⁴ All these different ecclesiological entities have an incredible diversity of theology and praxis and there is no reason to believe that diversity will not continue to grow. What the Covenant has historically done is to take various Christians with diverse perspectives and to hold to keeping that diversity in one church rather than splitting off and dividing.

The maneuver to disfellowship churches over what amounts to diversity of thought in one area of Christian ethics raises deeply existential questions. Is true fellowship a Covenant-defining value? How do we see the person who dissents? Do we see them as family or as pariah? Yet again, the *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom* report is instructive here:

Such freedom in our personal relationships will also lead to a consideration for the contribution of minorities. Christian vitality has not always been maintained by the majority. It has, in fact, often been found only in small minorities. Such minorities have no voice where conformity to "official" interpretations is required. Unless we wish to stifle all emergent spiritual vitality, we must be sure that people within our fellowship will be free to express themselves in ways which are different from the majority position without the fear of being labeled as disloyal.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁴ <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/center-for-global-christianity/research/quick-facts/>

²⁸⁵ *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 29.

Naming the Harm, Acknowledging the Pain

We must have the courage to be honest about the current state of the Covenant, even if it is hard to accept or if it contradicts our preconceptions...

The Evangelical Covenant Church has for the last thirty years been engaged in a campaign of systematic marginalization and disenfranchisement of LGBTQ+ people, their allies, and those who publicly challenge the denomination's position on human sexuality.

This is neither an exaggeration nor is it a deluded assessment. It is unambiguously confirmed by the historical record and by personal testimony as demonstrated in this report. A number of individuals in positions of leadership have, acting in bad faith, conspired, organized, and executed plans to delegitimize, demonize, and expel persons who threatened their cultural cache in the American Evangelical arena. A great many more members, believing in the vision and mission of the institution, bought their propaganda wholesale, or else insulated themselves from properly apprehending the magnitude of the harm that was being done. I, myself, confess to having played my own part in this role for some time. Queer people are easy targets; they are already an oft-maligned minority, and with a half-dozen decontextualized verses running cover for any ethical concerns, it's an easy move to believe that the Bible provides a clear and uncontroversial answer to the sexuality question, or that it's even capable of doing so. It is also easy to have so much love for a community, and such a desire to maintain its strength, so as to develop blind spots to areas of genuine injustice.

Critics might presume that I am accusing the ECC of blatant homophobia and that the denomination's *Embrace* resources refute this claim. That is not precisely what I'm doing. I'm accusing the ECC, as an institution, of *heterosexism*.

An analogy might be helpful here. Theologian Reggie Williams writes about how, in discussions of racism, we must distinguish between words like *xenophobia*, *prejudice*, and *White supremacy*. Xenophobia is essentially "an attitude of unwelcome for strangers, foreigners, or anything unknown," while prejudice is "bias or contempt that results from unsubstantiated information about others." But White supremacy is something different. Williams says that White supremacy "...is not about your feelings, which is to say, it is not

a matter of liking or disliking people of different races... Hatred and harm are secondary. The primary thing is longing for an *idealized community*.”²⁸⁶

If *homophobia* is more akin to *xenophobia* or *prejudice*, then *heterosexism*, at least in the way I’m using the term here, is more like *White supremacy*. While I have little doubt that some amount of homophobia permeates the ECC, my criticism is aimed more precisely at the denomination’s ingrained culture of heterosexism. The actions of the Covenant Church point towards a longing for an idealized community in which traditional models of sexuality, and of a clear gender binary paradigm, are prioritized over the messy complexity of diverse embodied people of faith. Heterosexism teaches us that to be cisgender and straight is to be “normal.” (That was literally one of the write-in responses to question #10 in section 1 of the survey. “What is your sexual orientation?” “Normal.”) Heterosexism teaches us that to be cisgender and straight is to be by default the protagonist in the story. To paraphrase Dr. Williams, “To resist [heterosexism] is to encounter centuries of embedded ideology masquerading as reality.”

Institutionalized religious heterosexism presupposes a divine order to nature, rationalized by heteronormative readings of Genesis 2 and 3 and Romans 1, and then forces individuals to fit into that paradigm, unaware or unconcerned about the harm that might be caused, while ignoring calls for self-reflection or criticism. This results in the demonization of queer people and allies who go on to leave the church. David Gushee diagnoses the damage done to communities of faith:

Christians have alienated gays and lesbians and their families, friends, and sympathetic allies, driving many away from the love of Jesus Christ and contributing to the secularization of American culture. They have done a great deal to create hostility to the church and closed ears to the Gospel. The saddest cases are the church’s own rejected gay and lesbian adolescents and twentysomethings. They are legion.²⁸⁷

The Covenant Church has instantiated a kind of tyranny of the majority. This is evidenced by non-democratic tactics such as out of order proceedings in the ministerium,

²⁸⁶ Reggie Williams, “White supremacy is a script we’re given at birth,” *The Cristian Century*, September 23, 2020. Emphasis mine. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/white-supremacy-script-we-re-given-birth>

²⁸⁷ David Gushee, “Christians v. Gays: The Damage Done,” *Religion Dispatches*, June 27, 2013. <https://religiondispatches.org/2013/06/27/christians-v-gays-damage-done>

aberrant commissioning and writing of position papers and expository essays to arrive at a predetermined conclusion, systematic nullification of open discussion or even the possibility of presenting a counterpoint. The consequences have been the redefinition of faithful dissent, church trials and defrocking, entire congregations disfellowshipped, de facto confessional boundaries for pastors, and ultimately the treatment of self-actualized gay people as cannon fodder for an ecclesiological debate turned line in the sand. The Covenant Church has allowed conservative neo-fundamentalist elements in its ranks to violate its very ethos and to redefine Covenant identity and its testimony to the broader Christian Church.

David Nyvall called our non-confessional identity our “password and ransom. Losing it would cause the Covenant to forfeit its right to exist any longer as a Christian denomination, merely sinking to the degrading position of a sect.” C. V. Bowman said that our forebears “hold that the local church shall consist of only believing members but at the same time have room for all true believers, no matter what their viewpoints are on controversial doctrines. It is this principle which really distinguishes Mission Friends from other Christian denominations.”²⁸⁸ Truthfully, I ask, at the denominational level, *what now distinguishes being Covenant?*

Whether you think I have the explanation of the current state of the church nailed down or you think that I’m way off base, it is undeniable that the ECC has been on a trajectory of excommunication of faithfully dissenting members. Each one of us needs to decide if we want to continue down that path or earnestly seek an off ramp.

The Evangelical Covenant Church is being called to abandon its culture of heterosexism, of supremacy, and of contempt. Doing so will require lowering defenses, intentional listening, responsive reconciliation, and willingness to be disquieted. We must stop hunting for heretics. We must get out of our echo chambers and talk to one another. Covenant leaders must proactively create spaces for healing. This cannot be done by the Annual Meeting in which people place votes about things that don't affect them and then go on with their lives. We require a more integrative approach.

²⁸⁸ Both quotes are found in Ondrey, “Beyond Yes or No,” 2-3.

The Covenant, The Bible, and “Discernment”

The Evangelical Covenant Church has a problem: the contrast between what the Bible *is* and what we might *wish that it was*. The denomination’s “discerned position on human sexuality” is based almost exclusively on a particular reading and interpretation of a handful of biblical texts. Texts that were not written for and are not fully capable of answering the questions we are asking of them: “Does God bless gay romance? Are ‘male’ and ‘female’ normative or exclusive in God’s created order? For whom is the benediction of marriage offered?” The Bible presents diverse and sometimes contradictory statements about many topics and it does not present a single unified doctrine or ethic about either sexuality or marriage. This doesn’t mean that we can’t draw throughlines from it, but appealing to the text to arrive at scientific conclusions about complex topics that weave together culture, psychology, biology, ethics, morality, and theology *requires* that we prioritize certain texts and certain translations and interpretations of those texts, and subordinate others. *Every* reader does this, be they conservative or progressive, traditionalist or revisionist, fundamentalist or radical. Affirming readings of the Bible are just as “biblical” and just as “reasoned” and “reasonable” as non-affirming readings.

What all Christians are professing is that the Bible has the power to transform lives. That is at once a liberating and dreadful proposition, because the transformative power of the Bible means that *it might lead us out of our own view*.

I would argue that the Covenant Church, in fact, *does not have a discerned position on human sexuality*. Discernment is a process that requires honestly admitting our limitations and seeking the wisdom of others. Discernment requires that we acknowledge our own preconceptions and biases. It means setting aside our own wants and ideas and listening to outside voices. It means entertaining new insights and different perspectives. It means having the freedom to change your mind and the safety of sharing that with the community.

When has the process of discernment about human sexuality and marriage in our fellowship ever looked anything like that? When has Covenant leadership acknowledged even the possibility of the legitimacy of alternative viewpoints? When have we commissioned task forces to gather data, to study, to present findings, and make

recommendations (even a minority opinion)? When have we intentionally platformed speakers to share scholarship and stories that point to surprising new perspectives? When has the Covenant Church, as an institution, ever done anything but to suppress ministers and lay leaders who offered to do this on their own, when safety and goodwill were revoked? I've spoken with writers of the 1996 Resolution on Human Sexuality, and I regard them highly. I believe that they were honestly writing what they thought was the most accurate reflection of traditional Christian sexual ethics at the time and that they approached their commission to crafting the resolution with fidelity. I also believe that clinging tightly to that one, brief, constrained document for the next thirty years without any serious attempt to reevaluate it—when 35% of the Annual Meeting wanted to pursue thoughtful study—and then calling it a “discerned position” is a gross overstatement.

It would be wrong to think that the Covenant Church, as a diverse collection of individuals, has come to anything resembling a settled position on sexuality. Settling on a single position is not really something the Church typically does. The historic Christian tradition reveals numerous examples of correcting either harmful, ill-reasoned, or inconvenient theologies and ethical practices. Slavery, segregation, prohibition of interracial marriage: those were all Christian positions, at least in certain communities, until they weren't. So was antisemitism. Collecting interest on loans was as anti-Christian as you could be until John Calvin said it was all good. Does your church play drums during worship? Do you sing *in English*? How long have those positions been settled? Tell me, what is the discerned Christian position on glossolalia?

The Covenant Church does not have a discerned position on many topics: the virgin birth, atonement, Trinity, Heaven and Hell. These represent core Christian doctrines—they have also been contested and debated over the centuries—and yet they are not found anywhere in our affirmations or resolutions. Sexuality is. Not a discerned position, but a boundary. One voted into binding policy by the Annual Meeting, to be sure, but only after a singular viewpoint was elevated to the delegitimization of all others. This process of making sexuality the boundary highlights our profound disunity, as zealous members, including many who were entrusted to positions of leadership, felt the need to solidify a position for which there was serious faithful dissent.

Calling it a discerned position is not only inaccurate, but also presumptuous. The Covenant Church does not deny access for gay people to get married. *It outsources it.* A gay couple in a Covenant church can go get married somewhere else and then be back in worship the next Sunday. The “discerned position” would not affect them, except to cause unnecessary friction with their pastor when they’re told, “You can get married, but I just can’t have anything to do with it.” The “discerned position” merely functions as a reminder to sexual and gender minorities that their inclusion in our faith communities will always be questioned and conditional. Failure to recognize this reality betrays either ignorance or cynicism

The narrative of the “discerned position” sends a message of finality. In two words it tells a familiar story of group identity and coherence. “This is the way.” “So say we all.” “The tribe has spoken.” A phrase to end the conversation, not to open it up to curiosity.

But humans are naturally curious creatures. Certain members of the tribe may have seen the Bible as their hidden advantage and that appeals to plain-text biblicism would be sufficient to quell any dissent. They may not have anticipated the volume and depth of scholarship that has been released in the last thirty years that actually leverages the Bible and the Gospel for affirming viewpoints. They may also not have anticipated that a growing number of Christians would be exposed to and convinced of those viewpoints, including other scholars, pastors, and leaders.

People across the Covenant Church are changing their minds. Some are now loud and proud allies. Some are convinced of an expansive view of sexuality, but aren’t sure what to do with it, or what it might cost them to admit that publicly. Others are right now having their hearts and minds pushed towards ideas that they don’t have permission to have, and they are scared. This process is constantly unfolding because people are curious and keep learning and keep encountering the “other”. Many of the pastors who have been forced out, or who are currently under the gun, changed their minds *after* their ordination.

The Covenant is long overdue for a true period of discernment. This conversation, in which individuals are afforded true safety and are open to the possibility of being changed through the process, should have already happened. It will be painful and costly to do it now. It will be *more* painful and *more* costly to wait and do it in the future. Either

way, a reckoning for the denomination's tardiness on this matter will be necessary. What the Church needs now is integration and healing. Sibling authors Billie and Paul Hoard put it well:

So the simple message of "get over it" or to "just accept" what's happened misses the entire point and is dismissive at best and abusive at worst. Working through is a process, not a moment or choice. It takes time, repetition, commitment, and continued faith in an audacious hope.²⁸⁹

We are a "people of the Book" because God speaks to his people through our sacred texts. Being honest about the Bible does not preclude this, but it does require that we engage in a continuous and recurrent pattern of gathering, reading, prayer, and discernment. God has a history of speaking to his people in surprising, even scandalizing ways. We have created language to try to capture this scandal: *revelation, apocalypse, the prophetic spirit*. How can we acknowledge even the possibility of a prophetic movement when our own pastors are institutionally prohibited from participating in it? The Covenant has warned about this potential pitfall for decades:

If we were to restrict our freedom by clearly defined creedal statements and detailed regulations on church order to guide us, this would be a comparatively simple matter. However, if we are to continue to refuse to be bound by such human-made restrictions on Christian freedom, we must be sensitive to the direction of the Spirit as he seeks to lead us to act according to the will of God as it is revealed in the Bible.²⁹⁰

No one ever spoke a prophetic word without personal cost. Risking that cost is necessary if it means getting out of God's way and allowing the Spirit to work in people's lives. Peter was told in a dream, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."²⁹¹ He was later reminded that this view contradicted scripture. It was unbiblical. His response: "Who was I that I could hinder God?"²⁹²

²⁸⁹ Hoard and Hoard, *Eucontamination*, 48.

²⁹⁰ *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 30.

²⁹¹ Acts 10:15, NRSVue

²⁹² Acts 11:17, NRSVue

Recommendations for the Evangelical Covenant Church

Our beloved church is mired in self-contradiction, suspicion, and distortion and we require proactive measures to move forward in a healthy way. Our conflicting narratives about biblical authority and freedom in Christ require clarification. Earlier attempts to solidify this ethos should either be affirmed, *in action as well as speech*, or should be decisively modified. It is not fair to our membership to speak about freedom in one way and, in practice, to behave antithetically to that conviction. Because we are a diverse body, these kinds of decisions will require discussion that goes well beyond a thirty-minute window allocated at the Annual Meeting. Covenanters need to be given the space and guaranteed the safety to ask questions and to hear genuine responses, opinions, and criticisms. The following is a modest list of recommendations for how the denomination might *begin* to do that work. They are informed by close listening to voices from throughout the Covenant who long for similar things.

Recommendation #1: Lean into theological diversity.

I want to begin with a change in posture that every person reading this report can begin to do right now. Acknowledge the fact that not a single one of us knows everything that can be known about God and the intersection of our finite human lives with the divine. We all have limited access to knowledge, we make mistakes, and we are all in a process of transformation. Our mutual confession as Christians is to devote ourselves to the worship of God as divine love most clearly revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. We are not called to worship the Bible, or certainty, or cultural supremacy. Theologian Walter Wink gives us some wisdom on this matter:

We need to take a few steps back and be honest with ourselves. I am deeply convinced of the rightness of what I have said... But I must acknowledge that it is not an airtight case... Rather than tearing at each other's throats, therefore, we should humbly admit our limitations. How do I know I am correctly interpreting God's word for us today? How do you? Wouldn't it be wiser for Christians to lower the volume by 95% and quietly present our beliefs, knowing full well that we might be wrong?²⁹³

²⁹³ Walter Wink, "Homosexuality and the Bible," in Wink et al., *Homosexuality and the Christian Faith*, 48. See note 250 on page 152.

This can begin by encouraging a broader discussion of Christian ethics that goes beyond “what the Bible says.” The belief that the Bible is an obvious and unambiguous source of certain kinds of knowledge is what Dale Martin refers to as “the sin of Christian textual foundationalism.” He writes,

I have insisted that the texts don't speak—except in the most tenuous of metaphorical senses of that term—and that we as humans have to do lots of hard work to interpret the texts before they have any meaning for us at all...

My point is that when we do so, we have to recognize that it is not the text itself that is simply "giving" us that meaning. The "finding" of meaning in Scripture necessitates interpretation and cannot be done outside interpretation. Human beings are necessary for meaning to take place, and we can experience no interpretation without human agency...

One regularly comes across a certain tone in debates about Christian ethics, a tone by which one or both parties in the debate seem to say, "Don't blame me! I'm not opposed to gay people... The Bible is. The Bible tells us...." Such people never admit that the Bible doesn't actually talk. They do not acknowledge their own interpretive practices by which they have arrived at what they think the Bible "says." People throughout history, therefore, have committed grave ethical offenses—supporting slavery, oppressing women, fighting unjust wars, killing, torturing, and harming their fellow human beings under cover of "the Bible says."²⁹⁴

North Park Director of Contextual and Lifelong Learning Bret Widman has recently shared a powerful tool for sharing across division in his essay on interpretive communities. Recognizing that faith communities may sometimes lack “a paradigm of listening and discerning what the Spirit of God is saying to a specific congregation,” he employs a *Stop, Look, and Listen* model of discernment:

Cultivating an interpretive community requires the slow process of stopping whenever a decision is needing to be made, looking to the past, and listening to how the community perceives their past and present... If one does not stop, look, and listen, the consequences may be dire with even the best of intentions... The paradigm of an interpretive community

²⁹⁴ Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 1-2. See note 112 on page 41.

is one where there is a desire, longing, and intentionality of seeing and hearing what Jesus is presently saying and presently doing.²⁹⁵

The model that Widman presents emphasizes looking to our histories and beginning an interpretive process to discern where God might be leading us in our particular context. This may be precisely the type of community building that we need to animate a revived period of discernment within and across our fellowships.

Recommendation #2: The Covenant actively commissions a study group and publishes a work of biblical and theological inquiry that contrasts with the position of the 1996 resolution and is informed by contemporary scholarship and the experience of LGBTQ+ Christians.

It is well past time to acknowledge the diversity in our denomination and to not merely cease actively punishing and suppressing these voices, but to elevate them and learn from them. A study does not require approval from the Annual Meeting; this could be done *today* by the Covenant Executive Board and Covenant Offices Leadership Team. Even though the delegitimization machine has driven many qualified and capable leaders, scholars, and queer siblings in Christ out of our fellowship, there remains a determined remnant who would be willing and excited to participate in this project. Inviting them in good faith will require a penitent posture and assurances of safety and, more than likely, third-party mediation. I personally would gladly avail myself of my time and service to assist in the organization of such a committee.

Scott Erickson, a school administrator and North Park Seminary alum, had an acute recognition of the critical need for this work *twenty years ago*:

Can the church think together about important theological issues from different viewpoints?... In early Covenant history, there was a general understanding of conversion as the “one thing needful” without constructing doctrinal litmus tests as the way one would belong to the Covenant Church...

[The] lack of diverse material seems quite troubling, not because of the content of [the denomination’s] texts but rather because none have produced a thoughtful analysis of

²⁹⁵ Bret M. Widman, “Cultivating an Interpretive Community for the Present and the Future” *Covenant Quarterly*, 83, no. 2 (2025): 53-54, <https://covquarterly.com/index.php/CQ/article/view/263/225>

differing viewpoints, a thoroughgoing dialogue on important theological matters related to sexuality, or a public listening process that includes the voices of homosexual persons...

Christians and Covenanters, working biblically and theologically, are developing broader definitions of sexuality. Indeed, many Christians who read the Bible carefully and take it seriously have found a theologically more expansive view of Christian teaching on sexuality than previously considered, just as the Covenant Church applied this kind of approach to expanding its own theologically and biblically based understandings about baptism and the ordination of women, for example. As with these issues, some would now dispute any teaching that would consider heterosexuality as the only normative sexuality for Christians. Is it not of concern that some might come to view the 1996 resolution, and its reaffirmation in the 2004 referral, as the only theologically viable position for a person in the Covenant Church? Is it not time for the Covenant Church to consider how a theologically and biblically sound dialogue on homosexuality might be initiated and sustained so that the diversity of voices might be heard?...

I wonder how the denomination has helped its churches and families with the task of pastoral care when it has offered so few and such non-diverse resources on the topic of human sexuality... From a pastoral perspective, the Covenant Church's resolution-oriented solution to the issue of human sexuality seems unhelpful because it moves too quickly to unequivocal language and, thereby, neglects important principles in the Covenant's history of biblical theology...

It would seem imperative not to isolate the Bible from the principles of theological process. But when the Bible does become isolated, people might articulate their views on sexuality based on traditional cultural assumptions and then find Bible verses to support those views... The language of resolution does not allow for an acknowledgement of ambiguity and a disagreement among biblical scholars on the issue of homosexuality... The denomination has thus neglected the task of helping people develop the biblical and theological tools to think carefully about this complex issue.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁶ Erickson, "Let Us Take Our Bible Seriously," 109-112. See note 45 on page 22.

Recommendation #3: The ECC invites churches who have gone through their own process of discernment in developing inclusivity statements to share their stories.

Instead of pushing congregations with inclusion statements to leave the denomination, as has been the wont of conference and denominational leadership for years, the ECC could instead conduct interviews in which leaders and congregants from those churches explain the process and reasoning by which those statements of inclusion came about. These interviews could then be published to social media, to the Covenant website, and in the Covenant Companion, to bring these discussions out of closed-door meetings and private email threads, and into the light of day. This will no doubt inspire its fair share of criticism and no small amount of pearl clutching, but this small simple act would be a powerful statement of communal fellowship, discernment, and solidarity. It would also make good on a commission given to us by our Covenant forebears:

If, however, we concentrate in our outreach on one segment of society because of either of these fears or simply because of our attraction to those who are like us, [p. 16] we deny the principle of freedom in Christ because we do not permit persons in our fellowship the freedom to be different from us. The effect of such concentration is to make it even more difficult to communicate with the world around us. We need the voice of a wide variety of peoples on the floor of our conferences and in our policy making bodies. We need the corrective discipline of their differing backgrounds to keep our message and our work relevant to our generation.²⁹⁷

Recommendation #4: Covenant leadership reaffirms the denomination's commitment to its foundational ethos and reforms its punitive model OR admits an ecclesiological shift and takes steps to craft an orienting confessional statement.

This, of course, would require Annual Meeting action. The ECC finds itself under the pressure of substantial internal and external criticism for saying one thing and doing another. We purport a non-confessional approach to ecclesiology in which diversity, both in culture and in thought, is celebrated, and in which freedom is explicitly affirmed. Recent actions tell a different story. The moment we voted out a congregation over a narrow interpretive heuristic, the church crossed a line into confessionalism. Elements of

²⁹⁷ *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 32.

diversity in our community are not only not celebrated, but framed exclusively as moral failing, a problem to be solved, a weakness to be overcome. Our freedom in Christ is conditional, and those who hold the most power set the conditions.

Adopting a confessional statement or additional affirmations as a barrier for membership will feel to many like a historic betrayal of what makes the Covenant special, but it may be more in line with where the denomination has moved following Evangelical church growth. Bringing the denomination's public-facing ideology and its policies and procedures into closer alignment provides clarity for all churches, pastors, and congregants on both sides of the aisle. If they haven't already, Covenanters should start deciding if they would like to make overtures in favor of one position over the other.

Recommendation #5: Give serious attention to a congregational approach to marriage.

Should we as a denomination unify around our identity as a pietistic, non-confessional, doctrinally and theologically diverse fellowship, then efforts to reorient around that shared ecclesiology demand a clear-eyed return to congregational autonomy. A congregational approach to marriage allows for the freedom to have important conversations about marriage, ethics, and ministry with LGBTQ persons, with decisions being determined less out of fear and more out of community discernment. A move to this model would require Annual Meeting confirmation, and so any attempt to make that shift would necessitate creating space for Covenanters to communicate their congregation's needs, to present their cases, and to debate the relative merits and challenges. This would have to happen *before* any motion put before the Annual Meeting, perhaps over the course of multiple years. Some churches may want to leave a denomination in which other congregations permit same-gender weddings, even if they are not required to adopt that policy. In fact, some congregations have already inscribed into their constitutions and bylaws that any step towards even the possibility of a more open, congregational approach would automatically trigger a voluntary removal process. It's unfortunate that there are members who are so staunch in their opposition to same-sex romantic relationships that they are not willing even to consider the conversation or test its outcomes, but in choosing to leave, they would be leaving a denomination that is more aligned to the historic ethos of the Covenant Church.

Final Thoughts

Movement on these recommendations will require active campaigning from those who hold power and influence in the Covenant. They won't just *happen*. If the current leadership team is uninterested in pursuing them, then a groundswell of motivated and courageous stakeholders could organize to impress the importance of the issue or to begin to advance the goals of the recommendations outside of the normal structures. In any case, those with a minority position cannot "force" a debate. Those in power will have to consciously concede power and in some way uplift the minority. Covenanters from the past have spoken directly to this:

Such freedom in our personal relationships will also lead to a consideration for the contribution of minorities. Christian vitality has not always been maintained by the majority. It has, in fact, often been found only in small minorities. Such minorities have no voice where conformity to "official" interpretations is required. Unless we wish to stifle all emergent spiritual vitality, we must be sure that people within our fellowship will be free to express themselves in ways which are different from the majority position without the fear of being labeled as disloyal.²⁹⁸

This has always been the paradox. Prophetic movements *always* come from the margins, and marginal voices always threaten both the power and influence of the institution. But a movement cannot be discerned to be prophetic if the powerful do not concede their power to the marginalized; or until the institution itself comes to a calamitous end.

In all honesty, my experience tells me that the latter is more likely to occur than the former. The power/prophesy dichotomy is a positive feedback loop. Those who hold power believe that their privilege is evidence of their rightness. The prophetic critique challenges this paradigm. It must be wrong, so it is suppressed. This increases the need for the prophetic voice. And on it goes until something cracks; maybe the need for the security of certainty, maybe the community itself. I continue to have hope that I'm wrong, and as evidence I submit to you this report, which took considerable time, research, and

²⁹⁸ *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 29.

emotional energy to complete. I would not have done all of this if I didn't think that we are still capable of true discernment and reconciliation.

The prophetic word that came to our fellowship in 1963 still speaks to us today:

The carelessness that would distort the gospel out of concern for success or growth; the excessive concern for the comforts of life in a world of misery and need; the failure to live as persons accountable to God for all expenditures of money, talent, and time; the factionalism and exclusivism by which the members of Christ's body are separated from one another; the sinful pride and prejudice which prevents loving of persons of other races, religions, and classes; the failure to understand appreciatively those in the Christian fellowship with whom we disagree; the unwillingness to extend to individualists and non-conformists the freedom required for creative spiritual growth; and the joylessness sometimes attendant upon the Christian community in its excessive concern for self and its neglect of the grace and power available in Christ—all these the Bible condemns and in judgment calls the Christian to repentance and renewal.²⁹⁹

If you do not know how this applies to the queer people in our orbits, then I'm afraid you have not been listening to them. There is still time. We can still lean in close. *It will not be easy.* It requires vulnerability. It requires a recognition of past mistakes and the strength of will to both admit and correct them. Nils Lund saw clearly the consequences of not mustering up this strength:

If we move on in this way, we will land where the so-called orthodoxism within Lutheranism landed, namely, in a sterile, bone-hard, and spiritless orthodoxy. The emphasis on doctrine above the spiritual life will be one of the earliest results. The hunt for heretics will begin again. The Bible will be used as ammunition in theological conflicts but not as food for the spiritual life.³⁰⁰

Many voices in our fellowship are telling us that we are already there. *Do not sneer at their testimony. Do not shrug and ignore what they are saying.* That is not discernment, it's a defense mechanism.

²⁹⁹ *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 21-22.

³⁰⁰ Nils W. Lund, "The Authority of Holy Scriptures," *Covenant Quarterly*, 30, no. 4 (1972), 22.

The LGBTQ+ people in our fellowship are not mistakes. They are not artifacts of a fallen world. They are not case studies to be leveraged in arguing either the depravity of the modern culture or Christian supremacy over it. They are beloved children of God, made uniquely in God's image, and bear a critical witness to the rest of us of His/Her/Their divine diversity and expansive mercy.

To become what one is meant to be, to realize the very purpose for which one is created, that is freedom.³⁰¹

May we all have the determination and courage to discover that purpose and let it be guided by our divine capacity to love and be loved.

In Fellowship...

³⁰¹ *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, 23.