

Harmony and Congregational Liberty
in the Tradition of the Evangelical Covenant Church

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Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Romans 12: 16ff. (NRSV)

For we invariably find that where the laws rule, especially over the conscience, there is no end into a hundred thousand. “Therefore,” Christ says, “I do not impose anything else on you. I ask and demand no more than this one thing, that you faithfully preach about Me, watch over my Word and Sacrament, show affection and harmony among one another for my sake, and patiently bear the adversities that this entails for you.” . . . And if aversion and discord have arisen anywhere, we must restore and improve the love and friendship.

Martin Luther, Sermon on John 14:16 (1537)

Early Covenanters in Sweden and North America—those who formed, shaped, and gave language to denominational ideals—thought deeply about **communal harmony**, in the spirit of the above quotations, derived from their experience of newfound freedom in Christ and personal, biblical faith. They knew that while the letter often kills, the Spirit gives life. They knew—like the English nonconforming dissenter, John Bunyan—that “examples speak more powerfully than precepts” when it comes to the experience of faith and a caution against judging others. The present time is a serious, critical juncture in Covenant history, one that tests, for the first time, a stated constitutional process of charging an established congregation with being “out of harmony” with potential “involuntary dismissal” from the denomination. This procedural language goes back only to the 1957 Constitution and Bylaws revision process; to date, in sixty-two years, it has never been tested by application or execution. When this language was added, there was a specific context regarding the question, “Why?” A subject for historical reflection elsewhere and at another time, the important insight to hold is this: When the Covenant incorporated in the Constitution and Bylaws “out of harmony” language for the first time, it had a clear and firm understanding from the past and within its core values what it meant to be “in harmony.” Harmony always referred to living faith as the sole criterion of belonging, mission, mutual support of the denomination’s ministries, but never doctrine beyond the ancient creeds of the Church (especially the Apostles’ Creed) or positions where Christians may have serious differences.

What does such language mean, especially in relation to what Covenant sources have so richly to say about harmony and congregational liberty? What may be the unintended consequences of establishing such precedent, when over a span of 134 years since the denomination's founding in 1885 a North-American Covenant congregation has never been excommunicated—that is, formally cut off from belonging and denominational withdrawal of the “right hand of fellowship,” visually symbolized in the 1885 Covenant Seal with a grasped shake of hands and the words *Conjuncti in Christo*? This is equally true for the 141 years of history in the Swedish Mission Covenant, established in 1878. Of course, some congregations have been encouraged in the past to leave voluntarily, but none have been forcibly expelled by the action of an annual meeting. It is wise, therefore, to pause and listen to more distant voices of persuasion, patiently and respectfully to one another.

The Evangelical Covenant Church was born of “dissent.” Its primary location in the broad field of church history is within the heritage of “nonconformity,” the “free churches,” and the embrace of “tender consciences.” This was forged in the context of established structures of power and authority, particularly in nineteenth-century Sweden (the Church of Sweden) and the United States (the Augustana Lutheran Synod). Of course, only the former was a “state church” established by law, though Augustana emulated it in principle toward the Swedish-American free churches, even though it could not in reality. Sweden was a compulsory society with legal means of coercion until 1858; the Covenant story, therefore, is one of ecclesial liberation that could empower cohesive diversity because it was rooted solely in the personal experience of new life in Christ. Local congregations were free to determine criteria of believing, belonging, and governance. By their ecclesial DNA, therefore, Covenanters should have the capacity and resources to understand nonconformity and dissent first-hand, and yet maintain the unity of the body. The perpetual painful lesson of church history? There can be unity without demanding uniformity. Generations of Covenanters have known and honored this.

Harmony in Relationships and Mission, Liberty in Congregational Belonging and Life

When early Covenant leaders wrote about the need and blessing of harmony among believers and the gathered churches, all was predicated on a shared understanding of personal conversion (“the one thing needful”) and the local congregation as the primary locus of “the communion of saints.” Its freedom was inviolate and its intentional common devotion and mission in relationship with others the source of harmony at home and beyond. These proved to be hard-won principles of identity, both in Sweden and North America. The most important voices were those of Carl Olof Rosenius (1812-1868) and Paul Peter Waldenström (1838-1917), both leaders of the Pietistic renewal movement in Sweden. Rosenius, a Lutheran layman, led from within the state church, and Waldenström, a Church of Sweden pastor and theologian, became the principle leader of the emerging Swedish Mission Covenant beginning in the 1870s. American Covenant leaders referred consistently to their respective foundational voices. A few examples make this clear.

Rosenius inquired in 1854 about the “distinguishing mark” of the church. His reply was simply “those whom the Lord himself knows as his own,” though by extension he affirmed, as well, the four ancient marks of the universal church: “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.” “This is the only distinguishing mark!—‘Christ, Christ,’ the eternally new song of the heart, the heart’s only all in all.” Five years later, in an essay on “The Diversity of God’s Children,” Rosenius noted that differences “come from God and are not at all something bad, but instead quite the

opposite, something rich and beautiful.” “They should be observed,” he wrote, “with reverence for God, who is the source of a diversity of grace.” Rosenius realized that because “we have a tendency to lean either to one side or another, then it is quite healthy for us to keep company with brothers [and sisters] who have the opposite opinion from us. . . . Besides it is the duty and wisdom of every Christian, as far as it is possible, to seek to unify and keep together this band of siblings, which is so often tempted to break apart. . . . Surely these people are our siblings in grace.” Importantly, “our *opinion* and *assessment* of one another could be incorrect.”

In 1899, two decades after the formation of the Swedish Covenant, Waldenström reaffirmed this definition that “the Christian congregation in a given place *shall be an expression of the communion of saints*, that is to say, an association of Christians *solely on the grounds that they are Christians*,” citing Galatians 3:28. Based on this, “The Mission Covenant has no churchly authority over the individual congregations, their preachers, prayer houses, congregational governance, or any of their internal affairs.” He argued that it is no longer a New Testament congregation when doctrines and rules “exclude people, whom they acknowledge as belonging to Christ, yet who have another perspective on doctrine.” It asks only, “Are you a Christian?” and “has room for all who believe in Christ.” Moreover, “there is no congregation that does not contain *a number of different opinions in sway*. But these different opinions need not prevent them from staying together.” Five years later, when Waldenström became president of the Swedish Mission Covenant in 1904, he reminded the church: “For wherever on earth believers meet together, they feel themselves drawn together as brothers and sisters. This is God’s love in Christ Jesus, which makes them soft and melts away that which previously held them at a distance from one another.”

In the North American context, David Nyvall (1863-1946), first president of North Park and the most articulate writer concerning the church’s identity, noted in his 1930 history *The Swedish Covenanters*: “Waldenström suddenly loomed very high in the opinion and in the imagination of thousands as a symbol of everybody’s right to read and think.” Covenanters echoed him repeatedly in his image of the door to church membership, one that is so narrow that it excludes all who cannot profess personal experience of saving faith, and yet one so wide that it includes all who do. Historically, any discussion of exclusion and inclusion must begin here.

The Northwestern Missionary Association (now the Northwest Conference) was organized in Pennock, Minnesota, in October 1884, four months prior to that of the denomination. Its chief organizing spirit was the pastor/evangelist Erik August Skogsbergh, who had recently accepted the call to the mission congregation in Minneapolis, organized a decade earlier, now First Covenant Church. In his published report, Skogsbergh listed four purposes of the association, the final one stating that it would:

Not encroach on the rights of the churches nor to control them in a way that would hinder their free development according to the Word of God, but on the contrary, to be their servant or the channel through which the gifts and strengths might be brought together to carry out the common task that individually they cannot do.

The organizational meeting in Chicago of the Covenant Church on 20 February 1885 was the result of a resolve to bring closure to two decades of struggle and strife over the nature of the church and formalize a union of congregations. The assembled delegates concluded to acknowledge and respect their differences and center their unity around common faith and

mission. The breakthrough came not in agreement about non-essential doctrinal matters but in seeing the life of Christ in each other the means to extend the invitation to others. Skogsbergh described what happened immediately after the vote:

One stood there as if amazed at what had happened. But soon there were brotherly embraces and discussion within small groups. Brethren confessed that they had been like so many goats which had tried to budge each other but had now lost their horns and could now love their brothers, with whom they had differed before. It was inspiring to listen to these confessions, and especially from those to whom one never dreamed that it could happen. But the Lord can do many things.

Warm hearts had tempered the all too pervasive hot heads, and following the spontaneous singing of Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress," the delegates set out to write and adopt the first constitution. It mirrored the constitution of the Swedish Covenant in eight brief articles. Article III read: "The purpose of this Covenant is, in full harmony with the teaching and example of Christ and the apostles, to work for the spread of Christ's gospel, for true Christian congregational life, and for unity of service among the individual churches."

The language of harmony is consistent with life and mission. Axel Mellander, dean of the Covenant seminary, in 1900 referred to the Constitution as encouraging "harmonious cooperation between local churches," adding a decade later, "Local congregations ought to stand in a relationship to each other of Christian harmony and cooperation for the common goal of the conversion of the world and the upbuilding of congregations." Carl Victor Bowman, president of the Covenant from 1927 to 1933, wrote in 1910 that the denomination embodied the intended blessing of "God's goodness in Christ Jesus, thereby letting home and world mission be united in the most beautiful harmony."

With Waldenström, these descriptions of harmony were wedded to the independency of the local church on the question of who may formally belong and welcomed into full participation, and who decides. In a paper on Covenant identity written for the World's Parliament of Religion at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, David Nyvall was explicit in his assertion that "the local congregation is free and independent in the matter of doctrine [and] church practices." "Just as there is great freedom in the matter of interpreting doctrine," Nyvall added, "so there is great freedom in church practices, order of worship, and related matters."

So, on the question of constitution and government, the church is on the one hand without any authority above her, and on the other hand, firmly united with the others through missionary interests. Assuredly, the Covenant is a union of churches. But no church has in its union surrendered its independence, its self-determination in all questions concerning the congregation's own work and its property.

Regarding church membership, Nyvall's words were even more poignant: "Our first principle is that every true believer has a right to church membership with us in all respects and it would be a mortal sin and treason to exclude someone that the Lord himself has received."

Early Covenant leaders expressed these common convictions in various ways. Bowman believed that "they guard our very life" and represent "a beautiful Christian

virtue.” In 1917, Otto Högfelt (editor of the popular independent newspaper *Missions-Vännern* and a frequent critic of Covenant leaders and institutions), cited Nyvall’s 1893 published paper and warned “that if we forsook this principle [of church membership and congregational freedom] we no longer had the right to exist. Have we, in practice, been faithful to this confession?” Covenant president Erik Gustaf Hjerpe (1910-1927), referenced familiar words in 1924, a time of escalating denomination-wide controversy: “The Covenant’s principle in this matter we say is very narrow and at the same time very broad. It is so narrow that there is room only for believers in Jesus Christ, and so broad that there is room for all such believers, and that they on that ground are entitled to membership and all the privileges of the Christian Church.” In 1929, Nyvall called these “convictions too strong to be silenced,” the basis of “friendly relations,” the *modus vivendi* of mission, and the way of walking forward together in harmony. “New Testament faith,” he said, “is not legislative.”

By way of summation, Covenant president Theodore W. Anderson (1933-1959) wrote at the fiftieth anniversary in 1935 reiterating the autonomy of the local church as a key characteristic of the Covenant: “In other words, we are congregational in organization. There is no centralized authority exercised over the churches.” The Covenant is a “spiritual home for all Christians,” and its fellowship and unity reside there. While urging a fully informed and engaged body of delegates at annual meetings in the work of deliberation and decision, he also issued a word of warning: “The perils involved in an ecclesiastical bureaucracy are greater than any practical advantages inherent in it.” In hindsight, there is an element of irony in that over the course of Anderson’s long presidency the denomination became increasingly centralized—a matter of practical necessity and yet of concern to many—and forms the transition to 1957 and the unprecedented constitutional language of being “out of harmony,” a procedure that has remained dormant for seven decades—even through the most contentious period of Covenant history, the 1950s and 60s.

Uncharted Waters—From Inclusion to Exclusion in Covenant History?

Until now, the Evangelical Covenant Church has had no experience in its long history of the involuntary dismissal of a single congregation. It is important not to mince words: “dismissal” from the rolls *is* “excommunication” from the ecclesial body—what seventeenth-century Puritans prosaically called “delivering up to Satan.” Though recognizing many forms and definitions throughout the Christian Church regarding processes of discipline, it is a formal death-knell. It is the ultimate marginalization in the Covenant Church, a group that has claimed to be *amicus dei*, friends of God and of one another in faith. Voluntary leaving and removal from the rolls, which congregations have chosen several times in the past, is not dismissal or excommunication. Involuntary removal is. With the founders’ clear understanding of a congregation being by definition “the communion of saints,” it is not so much that an individual congregation has been excommunicated but more importantly that individual Covenanters therein have been purged by fellow Covenanters—persons admitted to membership solely on the basis of a personal testimony to the reality of living faith in Jesus Christ.

If I might be permitted a personal word. First Covenant Church in Minneapolis, gathered in 1874 is where my family has been since 1882 (three years before the

establishment of the ECC), and also where in retirement I have returned my Covenant membership because of its vital ministries in downtown Minneapolis. Yes, it is inclusive in its welcome of believing and belonging, which is its historic right, but it is arguably as Covenant in its love of Jesus, each other, and the world as it has ever been in its history, one I know well as a longtime historian of the Covenant Church.

Those who support expulsion may wish to picture their own congregations and what takes place week after week. At its core, First Covenant is no different. There on a Sunday are lifelong Covenanters like me; those who have served the congregation and the denomination for many years; young families and professionals engaged by vibrant life in an urban context; new believers, and therefore new to the Covenant; a marvelous diversity of ages, ethnicities, and socio-economic status; and, surely not least, the bright young faces of children running around, learning, secure in their faith community, trusting of caring adults who look to their best interests and budding faith. I see in them myself in the 1950s and 60s, with my many friends in what was then the largest Covenant congregation in the denomination. My life as a Covenant pastor and scholar would never have unfolded without this secure yet challenging nurture at its beginning. I am there and discharging an indebtedness because I recognize in continuity the same Spirit today. And soon there will be hundreds of individuals and families living on this historic property in a 42M affordable housing project, coming into the orbit of this caring congregation, along with homeless folks receiving hospitality and secure shelter every day of the year, and I picture new Covenanters helping to build the future and extend the love of Christ to East Town in Minneapolis and beyond. Now, that would get the missional juices flowing of Erik August Skogsbergh! First Covenant Church still stands with the right hand of fellowship extended, as it has for the past 145 years. Will a supermajority of delegates in Omaha choose to relinquish the grasp and simply walk away?