

Beyond Yes or No: Covenant History & the Third Way

HAUNA ONDREY, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF CHURCH HISTORY,
NORTH PARK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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A significant decision is before the Covenant: will the boundary for congregational membership in our denomination remain faith in Christ, or will it be redefined? This decision both underlies and transcends the upcoming Annual Meeting vote regarding whether to involuntarily dismiss First Covenant Church in Minneapolis from the roster of member congregations. We in the Covenant should be well-informed as we make it. The day *after* a majority of UK citizens voted to leave the European Union, the second most Googled phrase in Britain was “what is the EU?” While there is nothing that requires the Covenant to maintain continuity with its past, if we are going to embark on a path of fundamental change, we should do so intentionally.

In this essay I describe the founding vision of the Covenant Church and trace how that founding vision was preserved through episodes of intense cultural conflict. In light of this history, I suggest that as a denomination we must decide whether this founding vision is still possible and desirable or whether it has finally met its match in same-sex marriage. If we decide to discard our unique identity as a non-confessional believers’ church, we should do so with accurate knowledge of why that identity was chosen at our founding in 1885 and why it was intentionally re-chosen at critical junctures throughout Covenant history. I seek here to offer a piece of that background; the decision is, of course, up to the Covenant as a whole.

THE FOUNDING VISION: A NON-CONFESSIONAL BELIEVERS’ CHURCH

When Martin Luther stood before the Holy Roman Emperor in 1521, he rejected the demand to retract his critiques of the Roman Catholic church with these words: “I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted, and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience.”

Within the decade, Luther’s principle of “Scripture alone” had raised a further question – whose interpretation of Scripture alone? In 1529 Luther broke decisively from the Swiss Reformers because his conscience was captive to a reading of Scripture that rejected transubstantiation (the Catholic theology of the Eucharist) but upheld the physical presence of Christ’s body in the Communion elements. The Swiss reformer Huldreich Zwingli, on the other hand, was convinced that Scripture presented the Eucharist as a symbolic memorial. In John Calvin’s reading, Scripture taught that Christ was present in the Communion elements truly but not physically.

These and other debates on Scripture’s meaning followed inevitably from Luther’s appeal to conscience. Ongoing differences of biblical interpretation led to ongoing denominational division. Confessional statements – summaries of these particular interpretations – were written and adopted. These confessions served to clarify the boundary between multiple traditions of interpretation. One was a Lutheran, for example, if he subscribed to the interpretation of Scripture that was specified by the Augsburg Confession. One was a Calvinist if she subscribed to the interpretation spelled out in the Westminster Confession. Because a primary purpose of these confessions was to determine who was inside or outside of a particular tradition, the points of doctrine that *distinguished* traditions took on special importance.

The Pietist movement emerged in Germany in the late 17th century in response to the rise of confessional Lutheranism. The Pietist movement sought to revive and complete Luther’s reform in areas it perceived the Lutheran church had backtracked through its hyperattention to doctrine. Philip Jacob Spener, the “father of Pietism,” critiqued the tendency of confessional Lutheranism to replace living faith with detailed knowledge about

faith. He charged the Lutheran church with focusing on doctrinal orthodoxy to such a degree that this eclipsed the experience of faith and its resulting transformations. In Sweden, 19th century revival leader C.O. Rosenius bemoaned the division ironically caused by the insistence on uniformity. He wrote, “It would not be probable to expect that all Christians, despite being enlightened by the same Spirit, should come to complete agreement on all spiritual matters here on earth, where we understand and prophesy in part.” Precisely for this reason, Rosenius urged, Christians should focus on their unity in Christ rather uniformity in all points of doctrine.

Among the Swedish pietists, the Mission Friends, the Atonement Controversy deepened misgivings about the value of confessions. In 1872, Swedish Lutheran pastor P.P. Waldenström rejected the Lutheran view that the atonement reconciled God to humanity. When he asked his now-famous question, “Where is it written?” it was a claim that God’s reconciliation through the cross was *not* written in Scripture. However, this *was* written in the Augsburg Confession, which taught that Christ “was crucified, dead, and buried, that he might reconcile the Father unto us.” The Atonement Controversy alerted the Mission Friends to the fact that, rather than clarifying Scripture, a confessional statement could potentially obscure Scripture’s message. Worse still, a confessional statement could *replace* Scripture’s authority. This controversy shaped Mission Friends in both Sweden and the United States, where immigrants joined one of several Swedish Lutheran synods – Augustana, Mission, or Ansgar – all three of which utilized the Augsburg Confession as a doctrinal standard for membership. Painful division resulted, as those sympathetic with Waldenström were barred from Lutheran pulpits and Communion tables.

This particular history shaped the organization of the Covenant in 1885 as a believers’ church that held Scripture itself as its only confession. The founding Constitution names members of the Covenant as “Those churches and organizations that are made up of believing members.” In adopting a principle of voluntary membership based on new life in Christ – a believers’ church model rather than a state church model – the Covenant joined the larger free church movement. What truly set the Covenant apart was its adding to this first commitment a modest confession: “This Covenant confesses God’s word, the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, as the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.” This positive choice was at the same time a very intentional *rejection* of conformity to any human-made confessions as a boundary determining and limiting membership. It was precisely to organize under these two commitments – as a believers’ church that was non-confessional – that the founders organized the Covenant rather than simply remaining within the existing synods.

The boundary for membership of congregations in the Covenant has always and only been faith in Christ. The Covenant’s confession of Scripture as “the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct” was a commitment to Scripture alone *rather than* a particular confessional interpretation of Scripture. This means that Covenant commitments to Scripture and freedom are both misunderstood if taken in isolation. Conclusions about faith, doctrine, and conduct cannot be made without regard to Scripture (freedom without Scripture); neither can particular interpretations of Scripture be required where multiple conclusions are possible (Scripture without freedom). The Covenant’s historical commitments to Scripture and freedom are only understood correctly if they are understood together. To place Covenant commitments to Scripture and freedom in an oppositional or hierarchical relationship to one another is to either fundamentally misunderstand or substantially redefine these commitments.

The founders were not naïve to the uniqueness of this freedom nor to its vulnerability. It was likened to a turtle without a shell, a sailor navigating by the stars rather than a compass. But *this freedom* – freedom from any human confession in order to enable freedom for submission to Scripture – was considered constitutive, the identity marker without which the Covenant would cease to be the Covenant. Speaking to non-Covenanters at the Parliament of the World’s Religions in 1893, Covenant secretary and North Park president David Nyvall insisted that the Covenant’s identity as a non-confessional believers’ church was its “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.” In 1910 C.V. Bowman, the third president of the Covenant, wrote, “But concerning church order, the Mission Friends have a principle that is still more unique and takes a very prominent place in their program. They 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, and which justifies their existence as a particular church.”

THE VISION REAFFIRMED: FUNDAMENTALISM & NEOEVANGELICALISM

A founding identity does not necessarily entail the persistence of that identity. Yet across the decades, the Covenant’s identity as a non-confessional believers’ church was intentionally upheld against specific challenges that denied its sufficiency. I offer here two case studies: the fundamentalist/modernist controversy of the 1920s and its redux in Neoevangelicalism in the 1950s and 1960s to highlight the role the Covenant’s founding commitments played in navigating episodes of intense cultural conflict.

Case Study 1: The Fundamentalist/Modernist Controversy. The Covenant was not immune to the controversies that racked and shaped denominations in the first quarter of the twentieth century. (But, crucially, it did manage to weather them undivided if not unscathed.) Those aligned with the World Christian Fundamental’s Association were convinced that the threat posed by modern science and methods of higher biblical criticism were sufficiently great as to jeopardize the integrity of Christianity itself. In their view, at stake were the very fundamentals of Christian faith, and individuals and denominations had to choose a side – either they would uphold fundamental Christianity as defined by the fundamentalists, or they would be opposing it. This binary was insisted upon forcefully outside the Covenant, and equally emphatically within.

It was its commitment to non-confessionalism that led the Covenant to reject as a false alternative the fundamentalist/modernist binary set forth by the fundamentalists. The Covenant’s reason for not adopting the “five fundamentals”¹ as a denomination was not an assessment of their doctrinal content. Many Covenanters believed in Scripture’s inerrancy, and certainly the vast majority, if not all, believed in Christ’s virginal birth and bodily resurrection. The content was not the primary concern. The concern was the elevation of these tenets to a confessional status, insisting that Christian orthodoxy stood or fell by assent to them. It was this that raised red flags for Covenant leaders, drawing on their particular history within confessional Lutheranism on both sides of the Atlantic.

At the 1928 Covenant Annual Meeting in Omaha, North Park Seminary professor Nils Lund defended himself against the charge of modernism brought by Gustaf F. Johnson, pastor of First Covenant Church of Minneapolis (then called the Tabernacle). In speaking to the delegates, Lund grouped the fundamentalists’ insistence on scripture’s verbal inerrancy with the medieval scholastics Luther had protested and the Lutheran confessionalism Pietism had sought to renew. Just as the Protestant scholastics had traded an infallible pope for “infallibility in the form of a book,” Lund saw twentieth century Fundamentalism as a regression to confessionalism rather than the “only representation of orthodoxy in our day,” as they claimed to be.

The Covenant maintained the conviction that a confessional statement – be it the Augsburg Confession or the five fundamentals – was not necessary to protect Scripture’s truth or authority. In addition to being unnecessary, they perceived that such statements bring their own dangers. One of these dangers was the threat to unity, drawing from the denomination’s experience of division and exclusion in the Swedish state church and the Augustana Synod. As Lund warned so passionately in 1928, “Confessions are legislation, polemics. They bristle with challenges made to magnify and punish errors. They are war methods. They are the front lines of battle.”

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.

Lund believed that Scripture was threatened equally by higher biblical criticism (taken in isolation) and the five-point confession of Fundamentalism in that both movements fell short of Scripture's ultimate purpose – the dynamic encounter with the living Word through the Holy Spirit.

Thus, amid internal pressure to subscribe to the five fundamentals as the only contemporary instantiation of Christian orthodoxy, the Covenant navigated a third way, drawing on resources from its particular history. Rejecting as a false alternative the fundamentalist/modernist binary, the Covenant maintained the spare and spacious confession of its founding: “This Covenant confesses God’s word, the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, as the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.”

Case Study 2: Neoevangelicalism and the Committee on Covenant Freedom and Theology. Similar conflicts and outcomes reemerged in the post-World War II context amid the rise of Neoevangelicalism and its more irenic but no less emphatic commitment to Scripture’s inerrancy. The main lines of this conflict, as it played out and came to a head in the Covenant, have been sketched elsewhere. Of particular relevance to my argument is the logic of the Covenant’s formal response. The report adopted in 1963, *Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom*, defines Covenant freedom as its confession of Scripture alone and grounds this freedom in the Covenant’s experience with the negative corollaries of formal confessional statements. Familiar themes are traced: the commitment to non-confessionalism, rooted in the Reformers’ dynamic view of Scripture, revived in Pietism; the need for humility arising from human finitude; the commitment to unity. The following paragraph ties together many of the themes of the document and offers a useful shorthand:

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.

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

The essential identificational role of non-confessionalism emerges in the sense of importance the committee attached to its work, in both process and outcome. The Covenant Committee on Freedom and Theology was convinced that the future integrity of the denomination depended on the retention of its historical freedom. They saw their work as safeguarding this freedom and unanimously believed it critical that their final document hold a juridical status within the denomination, providing “a unifying framework and perhaps even as a guardian of the integrity of our fellowship.”² The committee unanimously desired that the document function as “a useful instrument if in the future serious accusations were made against individual ministers, teachers, leaders, and even the Church itself, providing a definitive statement of our theological position as it pertains to the authority of the Scriptures and a means by which our freedom could be both defined and preserved.”³

These two historical examples show how the Covenant’s founding identity as a non-confessional believers’ church was intentionally preserved against movements that called for its modification or abandonment. Those who organized the Covenant in 1885 had accepted the vast majority of the Augsburg Confession yet rejected the confession’s status as a boundary marker for membership in the denomination. Likewise the Covenant’s response to Fundamentalism in the 1920s and Neoevangelicalism in the 1950s and 1960s had less to do with the *content*

of the movements than their common claim that a particular interpretation of Scripture must be believed in order to remain within the bounds of Christianity. The implication of such claims was that the Covenant's confession of Scripture alone was inadequate; more detail was needed in order to be sure one held the correct interpretation. For those familiar with the Covenant's particular history, this was an old trick in new guise to which the original reasons for rejecting Augsburg *as a membership boundary* applied with undiminished force. As Lund said in 1928, arguments to the contrary "can impress only those who lack historical orientation."

2019 ANNUAL MEETING VOTE: INVOLUNTARY DISMISSAL OF FCCM

The Covenant Executive Board stated how it limited its task in determining whether First Covenant Church Minneapolis is out of harmony with the Covenant: "The Ex. Bd. also did not engage in hypothetical future cases where congregations may be alleged to be out of harmony on any other discerned positions of the Annual meeting."⁴ Yet as a Covenant, we *must* take a broader perspective. The question at hand is not whether the Covenant's position on same-sex marriage is correct; it is whether that position will function as a boundary-marker for the membership of congregations. 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.

The constitutional provision invoked in the recommendation of involuntary dismissal specifies that "Member congregations that through decision or practice are out of harmony with the principles, policies, programs, or institutions of the ECC may be dismissed from the ECC according to the procedures stated in the Bylaws" (Article IV, Section 4.4). Herb Hedstrom, chair of the writing team for the 2001 constitutional revision, has underscored that this language "is covenant language not legal language." Never has a congregation been involuntarily dismissed from the denomination, even as many have fallen short of these covenant pledges. "There are and always have been member congregations that are relatively weak in their financial support, that seldom or never send students to North Park University, that refuse to call women as a senior pastor, or do not practice both infant and believer baptism. We have never involuntarily dismissed such congregations."⁵

An affirmative Annual Meeting vote to involuntarily dismiss FCCM for violating a denominational policy is a decision to begin interpreting this article more restrictively. If we decide to move in this direction, this restrictive interpretation will be applied consistently or inconsistently. Given the Constitution's explicit statement that harmony "includes regular financial support of the denomination,"⁶ a consistent application would need to consider the 300+ congregations who are listed as giving no financial support to the denomination in 2017.⁷ Beginning with financial support would have the benefit of offering an objective metric for harmony as well as having explicit constitutional support. But clearly compliance with Covenant principles, policies, programs, and institutions would encompass a great deal more. Given the church's commitment to women at all levels of pastoral leadership, how would we handle out of harmony allegations against congregations that do not permit women to serve Communion or preach from the pulpit? Formal policies on baptism (for [pastors](#) and [congregations](#)) and [divorce and remarriage](#) may only be the start, since "If the Annual Meeting has taken a collectively discerned position on any issue, such issue can form the basis for an out of harmony action."⁸ If this path is taken to its logical conclusion, it is difficult to see how denominational resources and energy will be freed up for pursuing other ministry priorities.

If, on the other hand, congregations are not consistently dismissed for being out of harmony with all of the Covenant's principles, policies, programs, and institutions but only the Covenant's 2015 "Guidelines for Covenant Pastors and Congregations Regarding Human Sexuality," we must acknowledge that *heterosexual sex within*

marriage has become the functional boundary for congregations' membership in the Covenant. This would be a significant change. It cannot be equated with simply reaffirming or defending the authority of Scripture, with our sexual ethic as a test case. To frame it this way is to take a confessional perspective – where the boundary of the Covenant is not Scripture alone but a specified interpretation of Scripture. It is precisely this that the Covenant rejected at its founding and resisted again and again throughout its history.

It is important to recognize that not establishing the Covenant's ethic of sexuality and marriage as a membership boundary does not signify a lack of commitment to that ethic. Over the decades Annual Meetings have come to consensus positions on ethical matters ranging from conscientious objection and race relations to militarism, ecology and immigration, and the use of television, alcohol, and obscene literature. In 1961 and 1976 delegates approved policies on divorce and remarriage that affirmed the permanence of marriage as the New Testament ideal. Even as it affirmed this standard, it left application of this ethic to the discernment of local pastors and congregations, for example whether to officiate the remarriage of one or two divorced persons. Is the ethic that “the indissolubility of marriage belongs to the very order of creation” held with less conviction because not actively enforced among congregations by denominational administrators or administrative boards?

This is distinct from clergy ethics. Credentialed clergy agree to a set of [ethical guidelines](#) and to the oversight of the Board of Ordered Ministry in upholding those ethics. There is nothing comparable for congregations, following from our congregational polity. Therefore the Annual Meeting can allow FCCM to remain in fellowship *and also* hold its established ethic. A decision to maintain FCCM in Covenant membership is also not an endorsement of the congregation's actions or manner of dissent (e.g., local credentialing of a suspended pastor). The 2019 Annual Meeting Officers have [formally distinguished](#) retention and “innocence.” It *is* possible to affirm an ethical standard without establishing it as a boundary for membership of congregations. This is what the Covenant has done since 1885.

CONCLUSION

A fundamental decision is before the entire Covenant: will the boundary for congregational membership in our denomination remain faith in Christ, or will it be fundamentally redefined? If FCCM is involuntarily dismissed from Covenant membership, we will need to decide whether (1) to apply the Constitution to out of harmony congregations consistently or (2) to elevate heterosexual sex within marriage as the boundary for denominational membership. Both of these directions will mark a profound discontinuity with the Covenant's founding identity as a faith community open to all believers and only believers. The history of the Covenant has shown us that a third way is possible.

The Covenant was founded as a believers' church whose only confession was Scripture. For over one hundred years a persistent, active recommitment to freedom has forged for the Covenant a unique place within the American denominational landscape. Even as the Covenant has continually sought to discern how to apply Scripture to all facets of Christian life, none of these conclusions has been used as a centrally-determined and enforced boundary for congregational membership, displacing its identity as a non-confessional believers' church. To determine now that the Covenant's discerned position on sexuality will function uniquely as the boundary of congregational membership is a profound decision. To go that direction is to conclude that Covenant freedom has finally met its match in same sex marriage – that, finally, the integrity of the Christian faith stands or falls on the church's preservation of heterosexual sex. If we are going to make this decision, it is imperative that we do so advisedly.

NOTES

¹ Discussed at greater length within a series of pamphlets published over several years (*The Fundamentals*), the “five fundamentals” essential to Christian orthodoxy were distilled to (1) the inerrancy of Scripture, (2) Christ’s virgin birth, (3) substitutionary atonement, (4) Christ’s physical resurrection, and (5) the historicity of gospel miracles.

² Irving C. Lambert to Zenos Hawkinson, December 1, 1962. Record Series 19/1, Box 1, Folder 6. Covenant Archives and Historical Library (CAHL), Chicago, Illinois.

³ Article draft by Leslie Ostberg for Companion. Sent to Irving Lambert March 1, 1963. Record Series 19/1, Box 2, Folder 16, CAHL.

⁴ [“Decision of the Executive Board of the Evangelical Covenant Church regarding allegations that First Covenant Church, Minneapolis is out of harmony,”](#) no date.

⁵ Herbert J. Hedstrom, January 4, 2019, letter to the Executive Board. [“Agenda-Item-10b,”](#) 119.

⁶ “Member congregations pledge mutually to support the principles, policies, programs, and institutions of the ECC. This includes regular financial support of the denomination, its regional conferences, and affiliated institutions” ([Covenant Constitution and Bylaws](#), Article IV, Section 4.3).

⁷ [Local Church Statistics](#), *Covenant Yearbook 2018*. 363 congregations are listed as giving 0% of their budgets to the denomination. This includes congregations not yet removed from the roster as well as pre-fellowship groups yet still represents a significant number of established Covenant congregations.

⁸ “Decision of the Executive Board.”

⁹ The Evangelical Covenant Church, [“Divorce and Remarriage: A Policy Statement.”](#)