



COVENANT  
AFFIRMATIONS

**The church as a fellowship of believers.** Martin Luther, in the midst of the Reformation era, made a daring suggestion for the organization of the church:

[Christians] should sign their names and meet alone in a house somewhere to pray, to read, to baptize, to receive the sacrament, and do other Christian works. According to this order, those who do not lead Christian lives could be known, reproved, corrected, cast out, or excommunicated, according to the rule of Christ (Matthew 18:15-17). Here one could also solicit benevolent gifts to be willingly given and distributed to the poor, according to St. Paul's example (2 Corinthians 9). Here would be no need of much and elaborate singing. Here one could set out a brief and neat order for baptism and the sacrament and center everything on the Word, prayer, and love.<sup>6</sup>

Luther saw the ideal church as a gathering of those who confess faith in Jesus Christ, commit themselves to each other, and submit to no authority other than Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church. The Covenant Church seeks to realize the value of this ideal.

The roots of this view of the church are found in two basic New Testament emphases:

<sup>6</sup>Ulrich S. Leopold, ed., *Liturgy and Hymns* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965) p. 53.

- The church is a communion or fellowship of believers, characterized by mutual participation in and sharing of the new life in Christ. Paul calls the Christian community the body of Christ, a community composed of many members, each different and mutually interdependent (1 Corinthians 12:12-30). It is when we are in community with one another, when all of God's people are interacting with one another in worship and service, that God's will is most clearly revealed and discerned.
- The New Testament also teaches that within Christian community there is to be neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, but all are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28). These three areas—race, class, and gender—are to be of no advantage or disadvantage within the body of Christ. This is a multiethnic, classless, gender-equal vision. We recognize our need for ethnic diversity, for fellowship and mutual ministry across artificially constructed socio-economic boundaries, and for the gifts and leadership of women and men. It is the desire of the Covenant Church to pursue this biblical vision.

The church is a gathered community set apart for involvement in Christ's mission to the world. "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). The "priesthood of all believers" means that every believer is called to be part of a fellowship of believers and to participate in evangelism, formation, worship, and service.

The believers' church is not simply a human institution or organization, but a people whom God has called. Emphasis does not fall on buildings or hierarchical structures, but upon a grace-filled fellowship and active participation, through the Holy Spirit, in the life and mission of Christ.

Membership in the Covenant Church is by confession of personal faith in Jesus Christ. It is open to all believers. We do not expect that all believers will agree on every detail of Christian belief. What is required is that one be born anew "into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3). But if membership is open to all believers, it is also open

only to believers. “The doors of the church are wide enough to admit all who believe and narrow enough to exclude those who do not,” said our forebears.

This is not to claim that members of the believers’ church are perfect. The church knows itself to be always a company of sinners, but sinners who have experienced forgiveness and are seeking wholeness in a new relationship to God. At the same time we affirm that all people at all stages of belief and unbelief are welcome to participate in the life of the church.

The Covenant Church believes the Holy Scriptures to be the source of the church’s life, its preaching and teaching, and the means for its renewal. Jesus said, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31b-32). Included in the ministry of the word is the observance of baptism and Holy Communion as sacraments of the church expressly commanded by our Lord. They are visible signs of the invisible grace of Jesus Christ. The Covenant Church is open to all believers and recognizes infant and believer baptism as biblical forms of that sacrament and includes the practice of both in its ministry.

The local congregation is of crucial importance in God’s redemptive work in the world. While God is at work elsewhere, it is particularly in the close personal relationships of the fellowship that people are opened to the healing, convicting, and life-giving ministry of the Holy Spirit. Here, biblical nurture and discipline occur in the context of love and concern.

The Covenant Church is a communion of interdependent member congregations. Each local congregation seeks the guidance of the Holy Spirit in matters of common life and mission. In accordance with congregational polity, every congregation is free to govern its own affairs. At the same time, every Covenant congregation has committed itself to participate responsibly in the fellowship, decisions, and shared ministries of the regional conferences and denomination.

The Covenant Church holds that there is only one indispensable ministry—that of Jesus Christ. All members of the body are called to this ministry. It is a ministry of proclamation and evangelism, Christian formation and nurture, stewardship and servanthood. Both concern for personal salvation and for social justice are involved in the ministry. At the same time, we recognize that God calls certain men and women to be set apart as servants of the word, sacraments, and service. This does not give credentialed ministers superior

status. It does recognize their call from God and gives them a special function in the church, enabling the church to fulfill its mission.