

A COVENANT RESOURCE PAPER:

## The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible

**W**e are people of the book. That book is the Bible. Central to the life of the Evangelical Covenant Church, the Bible reveals God and God's intent for us and our world. By it we discover our identity and mission as individuals and as a church. By it we are brought to new life in Jesus Christ, life in God's kingdom. The Covenant Church was begun by people who were known as "readers" because of their deep love for the Bible. By reading the Bible both individually and in corporate worship, they sought to understand it and to allow it to bear fruit in their lives.

Our passion for Scripture rises out of our conviction that the Bible's message comes from God and enables life at peace with God and with our neighbors. Here we see God offering this new kind of life, first through Israel and then ultimately through Jesus Christ. At the very heart of our commitment to Scripture is the conviction that Jesus was and is eternally the living Word of God (John 1:1-18), the supreme revelation of God. The living Word, Jesus Christ, and the written word of Scripture belong together. We believe the Bible is God's word because it communicates to us the living Word, Jesus Christ. In Christ we understand who God is and in Christ we discover our own true identity. Scripture reveals God at work to create a people for himself, to forgive them, free them from evil, and to establish his kingdom among them (1 Peter 2:9-10).

We are convinced that the Holy Spirit of God by whom the living Word became incarnate also inspired the Bible and still illumines and transforms readers of the Old and New Testaments. "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). The Spirit works through these Scriptures to bring about new life in Christ, which is a central Covenant conviction and the basis of our unity.

The Preamble to the Covenant Constitution affirms the centrality of the Bible for faith and practice by saying, "the Holy Scripture, the Old and New Testament, is the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct." This conviction is repeated four times in Covenant Affirmations. Both Testaments, the sixty-six books of the Protestant canon, are together embraced and understood to provide an overarching account of God's revealing and redemptive work begun in creation, continued in Israel, and culminating in Jesus Christ. With such a commitment to Scripture, early Covenant people constantly asked the question, "Where is it written?" when dealing

with questions of doctrine or practice. This was not mere proof-texting; it was a determination to understand the intent of the whole of Scripture and the way it should be appropriated for life and thought. That question still guides us. In all we believe, do, and say, we place ourselves under the authority of God's written word and seek its direction. Scripture itself is our compass, not formulations about Scripture or about its inspiration. Our great passion is constantly to renew our commitment to the authority of God as revealed in the Scriptures. Our desire is to keep alive, strong, and always growing the flame that first burned in our forebears for the authority and power of God's word. For these reasons, developing a shared understanding of how we read Scripture is critical for our life together.

## How the Covenant Church Reads Scripture

In order to be faithful to Christ and the Scriptures, Covenant people have specific convictions about how we read the Bible, even while recognizing that not all Covenanters read Scripture with the same result. We are well aware of both the diversity of readings and the value of that diversity. It is like playing a musical piece—no two performances are exactly the same. Differences arise from the skill and experience of the players, the instruments they use, the key in which they choose to play, the rhythm and style they prefer, and the setting in which the music is played. There is freedom in interpreting a piece of music. Yet the music remains determinative and pulls together the individual differences of the players, instruments, and settings into its own unity and reality.

Yet, within the diversity of performance, there are still rules for playing music well, and some players will be better than others. The analogy does not suggest, "Anything goes." Musical interpretation is determined primarily by the musical score itself and to a certain degree by the traditions of the musical community and by the audience who hears it. Thus not all interpretations of a piece of music—or of Scripture—are equally faithful to the score or the text.

One important aspect of this analogy is that music must be played. Performance is not merely explanation; it is text translated into life. If a musician does not perform the music, the music is merely notes on a page. So it is with Scripture. If the text is not acted out in our lives, even though it is the word of God, it is left as merely words on a page (James 1:22-25).

What follows describes five Covenant ways of living out Scripture and offers three commitments for doing that well and faithfully.

At our best we as Covenant people read the Bible faithfully, communally, rigorously, charitably, and holistically, with commitments to grace, transformation, and mission.

First, Covenant people read the Bible faithfully in keeping with its character and its concerns. Since it is the word of God, a faithful reading is a prayerful reading. We come to the text asking that God's Spirit will instruct us and transform us. Central to the formation of the Covenant Church is the pietistic concern for encounter with God. As stated in the final report of the Covenant Committee on Freedom and Theology in 1963, "To read it [the Bible] properly... is to find it an altar where one meets the living God..."

A faithful reading is self aware. We each come to the Bible with a lens—a set of assumptions or presuppositions—through which we see and understand. This lens is formed by cultural context, gender, geography, language, our understanding of life, and the personal and historical baggage we all carry. As the Evangelical Covenant Church becomes more and more diverse (which we believe is a movement of the Holy Spirit), we must be attuned and sensitive to the various lenses through which we read the Bible. We must ask ourselves what our respective lenses might be and how a given

lens might hinder or help our reading. We must be sensitive enough to listen well to others' reading with lenses different from our own.

A faithful reading must also be in line with God's intent. A glance at church history underscores the ease with which we can miss God's message. The church has too often strayed into sin far outside the boundaries of faithful interpretation (for example, attempts to justify colonization, slavery, and racism, an assumption of the inferiority of women, and indifference to the poor). Whether deliberate or unintentional, the Bible has often been misused as a means to protect a way of life or maintain a hold on power and resources.

Regardless of the reason, the record of misreadings in Christian history is cause for humility in our own reading of the Bible. It should cause us to pause before we make authoritative statements about a particular interpretation of a passage—especially if it is an interpretation on which Christians authentically disagree. Simply put: we sometimes get it wrong. When reading faithfully, we will often find the Bible challenging the way we live rather than affirming it. The Bible pierces to the depths of our souls and “judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

Second, by the very nature of Covenant life, we read the Bible communally. Interpretation of Scripture is not a task we do in isolation (2 Peter 1:20-21). None of us has the breadth of experience, intellectual skill, social sensitivity, or spiritual depth to interpret the Scriptures alone. Our reading is informed by our identity and experiences, including our gender, economic status, and culture. None of us has experience sufficiently broad so that we may grasp all about which Scripture speaks. The Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that inspired the text, helps us in our reading and discussion, and the community of faith—both past and present—provides assistance in hearing the text. The Holy Spirit and the community of faith work in concert with each other to guide the task of reading and listening well.

The Covenant Church defines “community of faith” not only as our own denomination (with its churches, history and affirmations), but as the opening to Covenant Affirmations defines it, the whole apostolic, catholic, Reformation, and evangelical tradition that has been passed down to us. We seek to read faithfully in the context of the creeds of the larger, historic community of faith. Whenever we say that we are a non-creedal church, we mean that we have chosen to allow the text to be primary in our faith, doctrine, and conduct. We have worked hard not to allow particular interpretations of texts to take precedence over the text itself to guide our life together. We acknowledge and learn from Christian traditions and thinkers different from our own. What is faithful or right is not always immediately clear. To read with both the Holy Spirit and the community of faith requires discernment. We discern together—not in isolation—the Holy Spirit's work in this world, in our hearts, and in the community of faith over time. It is central to the character of the Covenant Church that we have consistently made decisions to trust in the sufficiency of the Holy Spirit speaking through the community to guide us in our discernment.

Our commitment to reading communally encourages Covenanters to read together frequently both in worship and in study and to share our readings with one another in a forthright and direct manner. It creates a culture of mutual openness and generosity among us and among our diverse cultural contexts. This in turn creates the kind of spiritual maturity that helps us live with the ambiguity often present in our life together. Such a communal reading allows the Bible, in concert with the Holy Spirit, to do its powerful work. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God's people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Third, we read Scripture rigorously. We recognize these writings for what they are in their original historical and cultural contexts. We realize that there is a distance between us and the first readers of Scripture. It was not originally written to us, but the Bible's words are for us and about us. God speaks to us through these words. We see ourselves mirrored in its pages. The biblical books were written to people long ago. They are nonetheless relevant and authoritative, even though our world is quite different from the world of the Bible (1 Corinthians 10:11). Belief in the Bible's power and authority to transform us does not mean that understanding happens automatically. All our intellectual capacities are brought to the task of interpretation, and we make use of available information and scholarly tools to bridge the gap between the ancient text and our own lives. Critical to this task is the willingness to hear the text and obey. Since the Bible was written to people in ancient contexts, reading it calls for interpretive skill and for insight into how language and texts work. We seek to understand what texts meant in their original contexts and then to discern how that meaning is appropriated for the church today. Some of the hard work has been done in translations, and a whole community of scholars serves and works with the church to assist the process of understanding. Yet every Christian has the privilege and responsibility to take part in the communal reading of the text.

Fourth, we read Scripture charitably with regard to differing interpretations on matters not central to our core beliefs. "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:2). The Covenant's emphasis on "life together" in Christ as the unifying bond has profoundly shaped our understanding of both faith and Scripture. This commitment has historically kept Covenanters united in times when it would have been easier to divide over such issues as baptism, atonement, or the nature of the inspiration of Scripture. While a variety of views about Scripture has always been present in the Covenant, two things are clear: we do not waver on the authority of Scripture, nor do we accept explanations that do not do justice to the character of Scripture.

Our charity with regard to differing interpretations is not without limits. Not all readings are equally convincing or determinative for the church. We have central, clear convictions about Christian doctrine and Christian life, which are reflected in our Covenant Affirmations. We have biblical convictions about difficult issues, which are reflected in our polity. We are willing to challenge biblical interpretations that stray too far from the central convictions of the Covenant Church. So our charity is not based in uncertainty of thought, but in humility, mutual submission, and concern for the unity of the church (Ephesians 4:3, 4:15, 5:21). We are committed to the core of the Christian faith, but differences on matters where Christians have historically disagreed are no grounds for division. Rather they are an opportunity for reaching out to each other, for growth and for mutual instruction.

Fifth, we read the Bible holistically, allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture. When early Covenanters asked each other "Where is it written?" they were certainly looking for specific scriptural texts, but they also wanted to know what the entirety of Scripture said on a topic or specific issue. No single Scripture passage is by itself the word of God; each passage is the word of God only as part of the whole scriptural story of God's election of Israel and the fulfilling of God's promises in Jesus Christ. Covenanters affirm that all the parts of Scripture are inspired by God, but it is the whole of the Bible, not just some parts, that helps us to interpret faithfully how to live and what to believe. This allows the more clear passages of the Bible to help interpret the confusing or troubling (or even painful) ones. This interpretive rule also assumes that any individual passage of Scripture is read in

terms of the whole Bible, and it is read in terms of the narrative movement and direction of the Bible as a whole.

To these five ways of reading Scripture we add three essential commitments. The first is a commitment to grace. Grace is central to the character of God and the gospel. By grace God reconciles humanity through Jesus Christ and gives us new life in Christ (Romans 3:21-26; Ephesians 2:6-8). Jesus taught the authority of this key movement of grace. In response to those who elevated Scriptural teaching about ritual purity above Scriptural teaching about regard for fellow human beings, he quoted the prophet Hosea saying, “But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’ ” (Matthew 9:13). In the same way Jesus gave priority to scriptural commands to love both God and neighbor (Matthew 22:36-40 and parallels). The Apostle Paul continued this primary emphasis on God’s grace in Jesus Christ. Particularly in Romans and Galatians, but indeed in all of his letters, Paul argued passionately for the primacy of God’s grace. It is no accident that Paul began and ended every letter with reference to grace, as if to remind his readers that all of life is lived within the parameters of grace. Grace is not merely a gift God gives us; grace is God giving us himself and drawing us into relationship through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have experienced the loving Father receiving us as wayward children. We, like Peter, know what it is to deny our Lord, yet be restored to his service. Like Cornelius and Lydia, although we did not belong, we have been made members of God’s family. Consequently, we want to be a people who extend that same grace to each other and throughout the broken world.

Grace entails living with God and it becomes the motivating and empowering force toward living for God. This understanding of grace does not give license to wrong-doing. Instead, we are invited, encouraged, and expected to live out the grace we have received. This priority on grace—drawn from the character of God, the actions of Jesus, the teaching of Scripture, and affirmed especially in the Reformation—is perhaps the strongest feature of Covenant identity. It is the responsibility of every Covenant Church to live out this grace in the context of its own ministry. It is grace lived out that enables—even requires—reading charitably and communally.

The second commitment is to transformation. It is crucial that in our reading we consciously come to Scripture with a profound desire and expectation to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, (Romans 12:2). We do not just read the Bible. The Bible reads us. The Bible is “living and active,” and we should expect to be changed. We should expect the Bible to do something and to make a difference both in readers and in their communities. As we read the living word, the living God confronts us and calls us to new life in the kingdom of God.

The Bible is a guide and means to discipleship, and if discipleship is not the result of our reading, we have failed. When we come to Scripture in an attitude of openness, expecting to encounter the life-changing, powerful word, we discover that we are participants in God’s story of love and rescue. Though not originally written to us, this marvelous word is for us. Our own fingerprints on the narrative begin to emerge with every turn of the page. We, too, have bitten into forbidden fruit and paid the price for it. We, too, have wandered through the wilderness, wondering where we will land. We, too, have been overwhelmed by a task, only to discover that God is able and faithful. We, too, have been lost and then found. And in conversion we are placed in the story of Jesus to follow him and live out his purposes. Obedience to the word of God, which is possible only through the affirming, comforting, and challenging presence of the Holy Spirit, leads to transformation in the life of the disciple and in the life of the church. Conversion is necessary, confession and repentance are required, and change is inevitable. Our reading is transformational, and transformation in all its

forms is a primary goal of the church. Jesus' charge to "make disciples...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded" (Matthew 28:19-20) speaks to the comprehensive task of forming those who follow Jesus so that they look, think, and act like Jesus. We are continual works in progress, ever pilgrims on the way, and we are always "being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory" (2 Corinthians 3:18). As we are transformed, we join our Lord in seeking the transformation of others. It is through transformed people that God transforms the world, and active, passionate use of Scripture is at the heart of all transformation.

Our third commitment is to mission. This lies at the foundation of the Covenant's origin and existence. Early Covenanters were called Mission Friends, and mission is and always has been at the heart of the Covenant Church's identity. The distinction between evangelism and social ministry or justice was not allowed. Our pietist heritage emphasizes that what we did was for both God's glory and neighbor's good. We continue to be friends of God's mission today. We make the leap off the page in order to be changed and to live out the words we read. In this we follow the example of Jesus himself, who began his own mission as a fulfillment of the words of the prophet Isaiah in Holy Scripture (Luke 4:16-21). Jesus' mission is ours. Scripture calls us to join him in the work he is now doing in our world: finding the lost and helping the hurting, restoring the wounded, working for the advance of the good news, and extending God's kingdom in our world. Such action in turn continually reshapes the lenses through which we read. This leap off the page becomes an interpretive rule for Covenanters: valid reading of Scripture leads to obedience and service. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Everyone who hears these words and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on a rock" (Matthew 7:24). When we together enact the mission and life to which the Bible calls us, we become more faithful readers of its words and we give witness to and demonstrate God's grace in our broken world.

Covenant people, then, read and listen to the Bible: 1) faithfully, with a deep understanding of the power of God's word and our differing interpretive lenses, which requires humility; 2) communally, with the understanding that interpretation calls for the help of both the Holy Spirit and the entire community of faith, including the historic church represented in the common Christian creeds; 3) rigorously, with the knowledge that the Bible comes to us across a distance of time and culture that calls for study and careful thought; 4) charitably, with regard to differing interpretations of Scripture; 5) holistically, with the belief that it is the movement of the whole Bible that guides us. Covenant people also read with essential commitments to grace, because grace expresses the very character of God; to transformation, with a profound desire to be changed by our encounter with Scripture; and to mission, because valid reading leads us to join Jesus in the work that he is now doing in our world. These convictions are instruments we use to allow the full score of the music of Scripture to enliven and direct our lives and mission. These ways of reading Scripture overlap and are interrelated. They complement each other and enrich our experience of God's word.

Covenanters perform the music of the Bible for the sheer love of and devotion to the text itself and for the powerful way it shapes our identity and lives as people of faith. We also cherish the relationships created in this process. Where we disagree in reading Scripture, our central commitments carry us and take precedence over disagreements that are not at the heart of the Christian faith. The commitments that carry us include our commitment to Christ, our commitment to each other in the unity of the Spirit, our commitment to humility before God as we act on the words of the Bible, and our commitment to continue working together, seeking as early Covenanters did, to be "a companion of all who fear thee" (Psalm 119:63).

By these Covenant convictions regarding Scripture we are called to renew our commitment to a deeper engagement with God's word. May we find "our hearts burning within us" as we grow in our desire to allow the Scriptures to be "opened to us" (Luke 24:32, 44-45). It is our prayer that being a people of the book will never be relegated to warm memories of our history but will be the great passion that drives the movement called the Evangelical Covenant Church. May we truly be like the Bereans who "received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day" (Acts 17:11). We pray that our sheer love for God's word will be matched by profound discipline to be a people who are saved by grace, formed in Christ, guided by the Spirit, propelled into mission, and blessed through the work of God found in God's most holy word.

# Resource Papers of the Evangelical Covenant Church

## **Description**

Over the years a number of “occasional papers” have been written and published within the context of the ECC. While these papers have been a gift to the church and have significantly helped Covenant people consider difficult and challenging issues, there has been no uniform process by which these papers were commissioned, written, adopted and disseminated.

The following is a process approved by delegates to the 2007 Annual Meeting, for developing new Covenant documents that follow the important tradition of the “occasional paper.” It is a uniform process designed to aid Covenant people in exercising communal discernment on the most critical issues in the life of the church. This new document is called a Covenant Resource Paper.

A Covenant Resource Paper is a teaching document approved by the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church to provide context and clarity for Covenant churches on critical issues of concern in matters of faith, doctrine and conduct. A Covenant Resource Paper seeks to apply biblical teaching to critical issues in the context of the historical character and ongoing missional identity of the Evangelical Covenant Church. A Covenant Resource Paper exists to inform discipleship and practice in the life of Covenant people without rising to the level of creed, confession, or binding doctrine.

Similar to a Resolution of the Annual Meeting, a Covenant Resource Paper is non-binding in keeping with Covenant understanding that the Word of God is the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine and conduct, and in keeping with the Covenant’s long-standing emphasis on freedom in Christ. Unlike a resolution which is meant to offer a summary and crystallization of biblical thought, a Covenant Resource Paper is a longer, more dialogical and nuanced discussion of critical concerns. Unlike a resolution, which is focused primarily on ethical and political concerns, a Covenant Resource Paper informs ongoing discipleship and practice in all matters worthy of specific concern—matters of faith, doctrine and conduct. A Covenant Resource Paper will remain in effect to inform ongoing discipleship and practice in the life of Covenant people until such time as it is replaced or removed by the Annual Meeting.

A Covenant Resource Paper exists to educate and inform and call Covenant people to the full nature of the biblical message and life in Christ. Covenant Resource papers are not approved for the

purpose of discipline. The only basis for discipline is the Word of God. In order to help Covenant people understand the Covenant Resource Paper as a process of communal discernment (to inform ongoing discipleship and practice in the life of Covenant people rather than attempt to move the Covenant toward becoming a creedal church), delegates to the Annual Meeting commissioned the first Covenant Resource Paper be written on the topic, “How the Evangelical Covenant Church Engages in Biblical/Theological Reflection.”

## **Bylaws Article II, Section 2.1**

### **Covenant Resource Papers**

- a. The ECC may adopt Covenant Resource Papers to provide context and clarity on critical issues of concern in matters of faith, doctrine, and conduct for the ECC, ECC congregations, and corporations established by the ECC.
- b. The purpose of a Covenant Resource Paper is to inform ongoing discipleship and practice in the lives of members of ECC congregations in matters of faith, doctrine, and conduct. Since the ECC confesses that scripture is the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct, a Covenant Resource Paper is not binding and is not to be used as a basis for the discipline of ordained and licensed ministers of the ECC, commissioned staff ministers of the ECC, or consecrated missionaries of the ECC; the dismissal of an ECC congregation from membership in the ECC; or the discipline of members of ECC congregations.
- c. The ECC may adopt a Covenant Resource Paper only upon a two-thirds vote of the delegates present and voting at an Annual Meeting of the ECC. Amendments to a proposed Covenant Resource Paper shall not be in order; however, a proposed Covenant Resource Paper may be referred back to the Executive Board of the ECC for the purpose of addressing specific questions concerning its substance or wording.
- d. All proposed Covenant Resource Papers must initially be commissioned by a two-thirds vote of either (i) the delegates present and voting at an Annual Meeting of the ECC or (ii) the Executive Board of the ECC. Once commissioned, a proposed Covenant Resource Paper must be adopted or rejected by an Annual Meeting before another proposed Covenant Resource Paper on any topic may be commissioned. The commissioning of a Covenant Resource Paper may be requested by a member congregation, regional conference, board, commission, corporation, institution, or department of the ECC.
- e. All proposed Covenant Resource Papers shall be drafted according to a procedure approved by the Executive Board of the ECC.
- f. A proposed Covenant Resource Paper may be brought to the Annual Meeting of the ECC only upon the joint recommendation of the Executive Board of the ECC, the Board of the Ordered Ministry, the Council of Superintendents, and the Council of Administrators.
- g. After adoption by an Annual Meeting, a Covenant Resource Paper shall remain in effect until its replacement or removal by a subsequent Annual Meeting. A Covenant Resource Paper shall have the nature of a resolution under the current edition of Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised.