

April 2017

Dear Evangelical Covenant Church Leadership,

The leadership of the ECC requested that I reflect upon the Board of Ordered Ministry “Freedom and Responsibility: Dissent and Covenant Clergy” document in light of the sermon that I preached at First Covenant Church, Minneapolis on March 5, 2017 titled, “LGBTQ.” I am grateful to have such an opportunity and trust that my brief comments here will lead to healthy conversations framed by collegiality, mutuality and greater understanding amongst those charged to lead the ECC.

First, I believe a pastor has the responsibility and freedom to be theologically and biblically grounded at the same time s/he represents ECC affirmations, policies, practices, and guidelines. One of the primary callings of those ordained to word and sacrament is to act as “theologian for the local congregation as well as the larger church...And, s/he interprets the gospel with authenticity and leads the church to live out its apostolic mission.¹ It is clear to me that throughout the history of the Covenant the primary affirmation of Freedom in Christ and its paradoxical companion of clergy freedom and responsibility has been the relational landscape where theological inquiry and debate bubble up in every generation around the most contentious matters of their time. In 1963 nine esteemed clergy leaders, including First Covenant Church Minneapolis Pastor Paul P. Fryling, submitted a report to the Annual Meeting titled “Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom.”² This report framed the historic high level agreements that are central to our body and invited the clergy to consider freedom and responsibility as framed by “obedience to God’s will in and through the Scripture.” Reflecting on Covenant historic ethos they wrote:

“In the church of their day they saw evidence that the Christian liberty, recovered in the Reformation, was in danger of being stifled by the hardening of forms and dogmas. While they realized that dogmas, set forms or worship, and “Official” interpretations of Scripture served a purpose in the life of the church, they were fearful lest such forms become idols which stand in the way of a living encounter with Christ as disclosed in the Word...Christian freedom, as has been defined in the first part of this chapter, is a gift which comes through obedience to God’s will which is made known in and through the Scriptures.”

In a more contemporary reflection it was John Phelan Jr. writing in a published essay titled, “Setting Boundaries or Finding Life”³ who framed our historic understanding of the will of God in and through Scripture as not trying to best our rivals, but how to love our God through the following approach to Scripture:

“The Bible must be studied as a text and not simply a proof-text...The Bible is superior to creeds and confessions...The Bible is a lived text...The Bible is empowered by the Spirit to enliven faith...The Bible’s authority lies in leading individuals and community to salvation and a pious life, not in its history, chronology, or science...The Bible is a document of the people, not just scholars, pastors, and church leaders...”

¹ The Evangelical Covenant Church, Official Covenant Documents, 2004.

² Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom: The Final Report of the Covenant Committee on Freedom and Theology presented to the annual meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church of America. Chicago, Illinois, June 18, 1963. Donald C. Frisk, Paul P. Fryhling, Henry, A. Gustafson, Jr., Eric G. Hawkinson, Irving C. Lambert, Secretary, Karl M. Nelson, Robert H. Peterson, Leslie R. Ostberg, Chairman.

³ Covenant Companion, February 2011.

In sum, the Covenant ethos is that the Bible and theological considerations of the ECC community is as fundamental to the sermons preached as the policies and practices of the ECC.

Second, the dissent expressed by the sermon of March 5, 2017 is a reflection of community dissent, not merely personal dissent. It is with the above historic Covenant thinking and theology and communal discernment of First Covenant Church, Minneapolis that I reflect on the recently drafted resource for pastoral dissent with utmost seriousness. In particular these sentences stand out:

“This freedom is offered by the Church to those who are being formed for ministry; it is not a right one claims for oneself. Dissent is sacred, accountable space in the discipleship journey where one prayerfully and earnestly processes matters of faith and conscience, primarily with colleagues and mentors.”

It is with a tremendous personal sense of grief that I acknowledge the theological disparities that exist among the array of those I consider colleagues and mentors in the ECC on the matter of LGBTQ personas and their participation in the life of the church. Alongside those who would discourage a sermon such as “LGBTQ,” I have many faithful ordained clergy and faithful members of Covenant churches who continue to encourage me to frame an approach to sexual identity that is Scriptural, collegial, and in faithful dissenting dialogue with the ECC’s current stated positions such that more safe space is created for LGBTQ individuals and their families to participate in the life of the church as equals and not as “less than.”

If there were few or no voices seeking Freedom in Christ on this matter, it would be highly appropriate to answer the concluding questions of the dissent framework with an acquiescing response of seeking ordination in another fellowship. However, there remain many clergy and lay voices who continue to ask that we provide freedom for differences of opinion and ongoing dialogue and exploration as to what the broader Christian movement is learning about the lives of those who consider themselves LGBTQ. It also needs to be noted that I have heard from many credentialed clergy who believe that points #4 & #5 of the Dissent and Covenant Clergy document are not the Covenant at its best in that our history expects that all policies must be open for discussion and review. It is our opinion that points #4 and #5 undermine the very idea of faithful dissent in that they ascribe a sort of inerrancy to the ECC and that #5 undermines the 2004 ECC Annual Meeting decision to not urge pastors or churches to leave if they dissent.

In sum, it is not just a personal position or personal sense of integrity that leads to dissent with policy matters of the ECC. It is principled, open discussion within our community, leading to communal dissent that I expressed in the March 5, 2017 sermon.

Third, while the sermon does demonstrate dissent, it also demonstrates ethical, respectful dialogue that is well within the marks of living in ministry accord with the ECC. I believe the sermon is representative of faithful dissent in that it is focused on a Scriptural framework for the Gospel of Christ in relationship to the identity of LGBTQ people. It was not a strident sermon challenging the ECC’s ethical positions regarding such contentious but secondary matters as gay marriage. And, just as importantly, this sermon was written and preached with sincere pastoral discretion and, moreover, is grounded in a much broader, faithful body of work that includes teaching and classes that are generous and faithful within the Covenant frame.

Also, for those who might have lingering questions about my broader ethical commitments on this matter, I continue to hold that which I articulated in a formal letter submitted to ECC leadership in

November 2014. I commit to living within the boundaries of the ECC ministerial ethics simultaneous to clinging to the Covenant vision of being “a companion of all those who fear thee” (Ps. 119:63) which ultimately includes welcoming Christ-followers who believe they are whole in their God-given identity as LGBTQ. What does that look like specifically? I commit to:

- Following the 2004 “Guidelines for Covenant Ministers regarding Human Sexuality” (e.g. no presiding over same-sex weddings, etc.);
- Calling all those associated with First Covenant Church, Minneapolis to high moral standards in the expression of their sexuality;
- Accurately stating and giving legitimacy to the ECC position, but not defending it to the exclusion of all others;
- Seeking more clarity from the ECC as to what exactly is egregious about a congregation that is in conversation about LGBTQ questions, that allows members to hold varying positions on issues of secondary theological importance and that chooses to maintain an inclusive posture toward the LGBTQ community. And,
- Including LGBTQ Christians throughout the life of the church.

I love the Covenant. I love this Covenant congregation. I believe the Covenant to be a Mission Friend network of churches that affirms Freedom in Christ. I believe the ECC is a body that does not need to conflate this secondary matter of LGBTQ identity with Christian identity and discipleship, such that it shuts down dialogue and repudiates the necessity for continued learning, discovering and conversation on this important topic. I continue to pray for God’s leading, and I thank you for praying along with me as we seek to be a Covenant people in the 21st century.

May God’s grace and the presence of the Holy Spirit be with us all.

In Christ,



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