

## COVENANT THEOLOGY, COVENANTAL CHURCH LIFE

By Rollin O. Russell

Few theological terms have been so variously and frequently misused as “covenant.” The word is utilized for restrictive rules for housing developments, for informal and even casual agreements between two or more individuals, and is even the name of a trucking company, presumably one that will do what it contracts to do. For churches and people in the Reformed tradition it means much more, and the purpose of this study is to state what that is and why it is important.

Louis Gunnemann, a distinguished, long tenured professor of theology at United Seminary of the Twin Cities, made a helpful and crucial distinction between *polity* and *order* when attempting to understand the Church and the churches. “*Polity* refers to the principles of organization and government utilized by a church as a visible body of persons formed for mission. Church polity relates the church as a particular gathering of persons in one or more places, to the church’s *order* as the universal (catholic) community of faith.”<sup>1</sup> Hence, church order is the pattern of church life which a body of Christians derives from its understanding of God’s revelation in Jesus of Nazareth, the core theology which underlies its assumptions and habits in its common life. Its polity, then, is derivative and consists of the organizational principles based on that theology of the church, the institutional expression of its faith and order. Churches that have a covenantal understanding of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth will develop a covenantal structure to their organizational life.

Robert S. Paul stated the issue very clearly:

Any doctrine of the church must come from a doctrine of Christ. We believe that

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<sup>1</sup> Gunnemann, *United and Uniting, The Meaning of an Ecclesial Journey* (New York,

God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, is revealed to us in Jesus Christ, and hence that Christ embodies the very truth and reality of God. Thus, the first question of ecclesiology is: as followers of Jesus Christ, how can we show ourselves, corporately, to be the people of such a God?<sup>2</sup>

From Constantine forward the church had seen itself as the representative on earth of the Holy, Sovereign God and Christ the Messiah, the Lord of heaven and earth. It was ordered hierarchically in accordance with this view of Christ and of the nature of God's presumed created order. Hence, the Church, like the Roman Empire and Roman dominated society in the Mediterranean world, was organized from the top down with ascending degrees of power, and one overall head, the Bishop of Rome. Every person and class of persons had their proper place in the order of things, owed allegiance and fealty to those in the class above them, and that structure was presumed to be ordained by God.

The Church was seen as the Body of Christ on earth, with the Pope as the Vicar of Christ. To be in communion with the Church was necessary to assure one of salvation and security in the hereafter. A sacramental system grew over time to provide forgiveness of sin, and confidence of life in the heavenly realm as long as one remained in the Holy Communion of the Mother Church. There were even short cuts to that blessed assurance, designed for those already deceased about whose eternal security their living relatives might have cause for doubt. Among them were the indulgences offered by the Vatican in the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century to which Martin Luther objected. It was a closed, hierarchical system based on social and religious assumptions that were taken for granted by all but a few. The Church's hierarchical *polity* was based on its

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United Church Press, 1987),158.

<sup>2</sup> Robert S. Paul, *Freedom With Order: The Doctrine of the Church in the United Church of Christ* (New York: United Church Press, 1987) 62-65

understanding of God, Christ and creation, i.e., its theological understanding of *order*, and that understanding shaped the conventional wisdom in church and society.

So, how did Reformed Protestants twelve centuries later come to see the proper order of the one universal church as covenantal, and why did it matter so much? That story begins in the pre-reformation era and can be traced through the English Puritan, Scottish Presbyterian and German Reformed traditions.

## I.

As the theological assumptions of the Middle Ages began to crack under the pressure of Enlightenment thinking, numerous thoughtful Christians saw and attacked the glaring flaws in the hierarchical and sacramental life of the Roman Church. They advocated a faith based on *sola scriptura*, scripture as the sole basis of authority for faith and life, and *sola gratia*, the grace of God as the only source of salvation. Many also became troubled by the classic assessment of human depravity which left no room for the human response and free will. Yet they were wary of the Arminian heresy which was seen as advocating salvation through the good works of the believer. They began seeking and writing about other perspectives which would acknowledge human responsibility and participation in the process of salvation yet clearly affirm the grace and sovereignty of God in this as in all else.

An early treatise which used the concept of the covenant to address this issue was by Heinrich Bullinger, the successor to Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich. In 1534 he wrote *De Testamento sive Foedere Dei*, in which he described the covenant of grace as having begun with Adam and being open to the whole human race: “When God’s mind was to declare the favour and good will that he bare to mankind, . . . it pleased him to make a league or covenant with mankind.”

Similarly, John Calvin wrote that the covenant God made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob already had Christ as its implied basis, and that the distinction between the old and new covenants relates not to the substance but only to the mode of administration.<sup>3</sup> So, the understanding of the covenant as the process by which a gracious God relates to humankind had its early beginning in the Reformed understanding of salvation. The initiative was always God's, and the emphasis was on God's promises and fidelity, as well as human responsibility and accountability, exercised within that gracious covenant.

The continuing theological reflection on the meaning of the covenant in relation to the church's teaching on salvation took a critical turn in the next century in the burst of theological and ecclesiological thinking occasioned by the English reformation and revolution. Elizabeth I had staunchly supported the Church of England which her father, Henry VIII, had wrested from Rome and fashioned to his own liking. When she was succeeded by James VI of Scotland, who became James I of England, the Puritan faction in the Church of England had high hopes for its reformation since James had been reared in Presbyterian Scotland. A petition signed by a thousand clergy with Puritan convictions, called the "Millennial Petition," asked for a conference with the new king, and he obligingly convened the Hampton Court Conference in 1604. The only good news for the Puritans out of that gathering was the commissioning of a new translation of the Bible, the King James Version. In all else, especially in their hope to end the hierarchical structure of the Church of England, they were frustrated. James is said to have remarked in response to their proposals, and in an aside to one of his advisors, "No bishop, no king." Later events in New England and the American colonies would prove him right. Reformation of the Church of England was refused.

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<sup>3</sup> Donald K. McKim, ed., *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids,

Increasingly, from that moment, independent congregations began to be formed outside the authority of the established church. They were of two sorts. Some separated totally from the Church of England, a few of them during Elizabeth's reign, such as those who fled to Leyden, Holland and eventually to Plymouth in New England. Others sought to remain within the established church and purify it while following their own consciences regarding church life. The former group was referred to as Separatists and the latter as Puritans.

One outspoken Puritan leader, Henry Jacob, was imprisoned for his criticism of the established order, was released in 1606 and immediately immigrated to Holland. Upon his return in 1616 he helped establish an independent congregation in Southwark, near London. In his catechism titled, "Principles and Foundations of Christian Religion," he wrote:

Question:     How is the Visible Church constituted and gathered?

Answer: By the free mutuall consent of Believers joyning and covenanting to live as Members of a holy Society together in all religious and vertuous duties as Christ and his Apostles did institute and practice in the Gospell.<sup>4</sup>

Here “covenant,” which had formerly been used to elucidate a Reformed perspective on salvation, is used to describe the gathering of and basic pattern of relationships in a congregation.

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William Perkins was considered a sound and orthodox Calvinist in his theology. But in describing the covenant of grace he stretched that garment into what other Calvinists would view as a distortion. His intentions were evangelical. The strict Calvinist doctrine of double predestination left little space for human response or decision in the process of salvation and resulted in a feeling of hopelessness or resignation to an eternal destiny controlled by the will of a seemingly arbitrary God. Perkins taught that the smallest element of hope and longing for regeneration in the soul was to be understood as the work of God's spirit, and that it beckoned such a person toward the covenant of grace. Skillful preachers took full advantage of this assertion and attempted to kindle the spark of such a hope and to encourage those who responded in beginning the pilgrimage of regeneration. He expounded this insight in a treatise titled "A Graine of Mustard Seed," where he held that redemption starts with the merest desire to be saved.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the grace of God was not a cataclysmic experience, nor an apparently arbitrary gift bestowed by a capricious Sovereign God. It was available by God's grace, it was understandable, it inspired the individual to actively cultivate the seed, and it was nurtured and brought to fruition *in the covenant community*.

William Ames, a non-separating Puritan and a student and admirer of Perkins, spelled out the key link between the covenant of grace as an evangelical approach to the understanding of salvation and as the basis for a new ecclesiology. Ames stressed that though from the time of Abraham there has been one and the same covenant, "yet the manner of administering this new Covenant, hath not alwayes beene one and the same, but divers according to the ages in which the Church hath been gathered."<sup>6</sup> Ames held that while earlier covenants had been administered

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<sup>5</sup> Perry Miller, *Errand Into The Wilderness*, (Cambridge, Mass., Belknap, 1956) 58.

through conscience, through law, through prophets and ceremonies, now through Christ it was administered through the preaching of the Word and the sacraments in the life of the gathered congregation, good Calvinist doctrine. So, the local community of those gathered in earnest longing for the grace and redemption of God, where the Word was rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered, and where discipline was rightly exercised, was fully a church, a community of the covenant established by the grace of God.

So, covenant theology provided the insights for Puritan theologians to meet what they saw as the egregious errors of the Church of England with a developing understanding of the church as the covenant community. The church and churches so constituted were seen to have a divine role in God's holy purpose and a compelling sense of their own authenticity as local congregations in unity with the whole Church. If such gathered communities are authentic in themselves as expressions of the one church, then they have authority vested in themselves.

Puritan apologists of that era repeatedly cited Matthew 18 as a basis for that authority. In this passage Jesus instructs the disciples that when there is a disagreement among them, they should go directly to the offending party and work it out, thus restoring unity. If that fails, they should take one or two of the community as mediators. If that too fails, "take it to the church, . . . and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (18:17-18) Hence, they saw divine authority vested in the faithful decisions of believers bound in covenant with each other and with God. This passage, of course, concludes, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (18:20) Such an insight and emphasis accentuates the fact that it was not only the hierarchical structure of the Church of England to which the Puritans objected, it was also to the lack of a seriously disciplined life among its people. Covenant ecclesiology provided the answer to both these



issues.

This is the basis and shape of church *order* in the Puritan tradition. Christ is the only head of the church, is present in the church, and where believers bind themselves in covenant to be mutually accountable together in His way, they exercise divine authority. From this set of insights flows a *polity* which sees all believers as equal in the sight of God, where discipline is exercised mutually rather than hierarchically, where leaders are set in office by the will of the community, are subject to the same personal and relational disciplines as all, and can be removed by the community. Rather than a law unto itself, each congregation is understood by their covenant in Christ to be bound in association with other churches for mutual consultation, accountability and support, and as part of the church universal.

So, covenant ecclesiology and a covenant based church order thus sprang from covenant soteriology and the debate over salvation. Clarity regarding this heritage becomes very important when we look at the way the churches of New England dealt with the controversies of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and how German Reformed churches responded to those of the 19<sup>th</sup>.

## II.

The ordering of the church around the theology of covenant was so ingrained in those Puritans who immigrated to New England that they based their church life on covenants and, as we shall see later, their civic life as well. The Salem Covenant of 1628 proved a model for all subsequent covenants: “We covenant with the Lord and one with another and doe bynd our selves in the presence of God, to walke together in all his waies, according as he is pleased to reveale himself unto us in his blessed word of truth.” It is a simple statement of church order based on covenant principles which places the gathered congregation in the covenant of grace which God intends for our salvation through the preaching, teaching and study of the Word.

This understanding of the church had important implications for their understanding of ministry and of pastoral leadership. Perry Miller describes an incident that occurred in 1633 when a company of émigrés was crossing the Atlantic to join the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Thomas Hooker and John Cotton, both ordained ministers of the Church of England with strong Puritan convictions, were in the company, and Cotton's wife had a baby at sea. After some discussion it was decided not to baptize the baby boy, "1, because they had no settled congregation there; 2, because a minister hath no power to give seals but in his own congregation."<sup>7</sup>

That is not to say, however, that pastors had no authority. They held the ultimate authority over individuals in that they were the principal examiners of any who would become part of the church. Congregations considered themselves the gathered saints, and one had to give compelling testimony of his or her salvation to be admitted to the covenant community. Perkins' assurance that faith the size of a mustard seed was sufficient to indicate the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in one's life was either unknown or unheeded by most churches and pastors. In the decades when the Puritan faithful resisted the authority of the Church of England and thus placed themselves in harm's way, and during the time of the immigration to New England and all the harsh circumstances involved in founding their communities and wresting their livelihoods out of the forest, few questioned their own or their neighbors' commitment or their fitness for redemption. But the second and third generations had difficulty feeling, exhibiting or expressing such clear evidence of their faith, and many were barred from membership.

The Half Way Covenant of 1662 was the compromise which allowed the children of members to be baptized, but not to participate in the Lord's Supper, unless and until they could

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<sup>7</sup> Miller, p. 20.

give the required testimony. They were nonetheless subject in every way to the disciplines of membership in order to guard the purity of the church and its covenant. In retrospect it seems a sad compromise. It was certainly a test of the covenant understanding of the church as the “visible saints,” based as it was on the prevailing notion of salvation as an individual event of which evidence could be produced.

One leader who saw clearly the inadequacy of this solution was Thomas Hooker. He recognized that many extraordinary professions of the experience of God’s grace proved later to have been made by scoundrels and that this posed the likelihood that even the best methods of examination were inadequate. Thus, “if there were those being admitted who turned out to be hypocrites, there were probably others who were actually elected but were unable to give satisfactory evidence.”<sup>8</sup> The Half Way Covenant simply heightened the frustration of many sincere descendants of the founding generation, and it was in response to their need that the first wave of evangelical fervor swept New England.

Solomon Stoddard, a pastor in Northampton, in 1679 invited any who had been baptized to renew their covenant with God and the congregation and come to the Lord’s Table. There was a great outpouring of enthusiasm, and four subsequent “harvests” were held over the next several decades.<sup>9</sup> The Boston clergy were outraged to no avail, and the stage was set for Stoddard’s grandson, Jonathan Edwards and the ensuing outbreak of the “Great Awakening.” Edwards’ compelling and sometimes fearsome rhetoric focused on the need for the church to be a distinct, disciplined community, living according to God’s Word. This further working out of the understanding of salvation and the invitation to all to become part of the covenant of grace in the

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community of disciplined accountability thus had a clear effect on Puritan ecclesiology. The church began to be understood as the company of those who owned the covenant and lived together within its discipline, in close supportive association with other churches and in communion with the one catholic church. The role of ministerial leadership carried substantial authority within the scope of the congregation's covenant and authority, and in association with other churches and ministers.

Yet another dimension of the theology of covenant came to light early in the Puritan experience in New England. It was clear from the earliest reflections on covenant and governance that the principles which pertained to the life and health of the church were pertinent as well to civil government. In New England there was the opportunity to put those insights into practice. John Cotton wrote: "The same Spirit quickneth us unto holy duties; so that . . . the Spirit sanctifying draweth us unto holy Confederacy to serve God in family, Church, and Common-wealth."<sup>10</sup> The just and righteous society thus became an integral concern as part of the mission of the church, and hence part of its life and order. There was no separation of church and state in Puritan New England, and the idea never would have been imagined. There were deep convictions about the nature of civil government, of course, and they would remain a characteristic feature of the tradition.

Thus, the theology of covenant produced a church order which focuses on God, who enters into covenant with humankind for its salvation, and who calls persons into the church where Christ is the only head. In the life of the congregation Christians are nurtured toward new life through the Word, the sacraments, and mutual discipline, and they are part of the universal church where they fulfill the larger mission of forming and participating in just, civil societies.

### III.

A roughly parallel set of developments took place to a limited extent in Pennsylvania and the middle Atlantic region a century later. The German Reformed churches which had been established there in the 18<sup>th</sup> century did not apply covenant theology to their understanding of the church. There is also nothing in their writings which approaches the frequency with which the Puritans cited covenant themes. But when faced with the issues of individual salvation in the revivalism of the “Second Great Awakening,” they drew on the concept of covenant in their response. The Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 stated the core understanding of baptism in the Reformed churches, a perspective which is consistent with that of the earliest reformers.

Question 74. Are infants also to be baptized?

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Yes, because they, as well as their parents, are included in the covenant and belong to the people of God. Since both redemption from sin through the blood of Christ and the gift of faith from the Holy Spirit are promised to these children no less than to their parents, infants are also by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, to be incorporated in the Christian church . . . .<sup>11</sup>

Revivalists in that time preached and pleaded for repentance and conversion and baptized all who thereby confessed faith in Christ. This practice denied that any who had not received such an experience were among the redeemed. In a “Pastoral Letter to the Ministry and Membership of the German Reformed Church” in 1846 the officers of the German Reformed Synod addressed that issue in covenant terms. They counseled the churches, ministers and members not to be misled by such teaching and preaching, but to recall that God’s covenant with humankind is unbroken from the time of Abraham and is made with the Church, the body of Christ. That emphasis, of course, is consistent with the teachings of Bullinger, Calvin, Ames, and others of the earliest Reformed leaders. They then compared baptism with circumcision:

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<sup>11</sup> *Heidelberg Catechism*, (New York, United Church Press), 71-72.

Those who were in covenant were members before they were circumcised; members even at birth, by virtue of the stipulations of the covenant . . . they received circumcision, not so much as an initiatory rite, but rather as a solemn token or declaration of membership which already existed.<sup>12</sup>

So, baptism is not a rite of initiation into the realm of God's grace based on a sudden emotional experience of the grace of God. Members of the covenant community already stand in God's grace, need no further assurance or authentication of it, much less a wrenching emotional and spiritual experience, and certainly should undergo no additional baptism.

Leaders in this tradition went further to challenge the methods of revivalism by contrasting the new measures of the "anxious bench" and its emotional pleadings with the "system of the catechism." John Williamson Nevin taught that it was the continuity of baptism, confirmation, regular participation in the sacraments and hearing the preaching of the Word in Christian community that places the believer in the context of grace. This perspective is consistent with that of William Ames' covenant understanding of the church, and it likewise places the church in continuity with the universal catholic church. Yet, it broadens the concept by placing the catechism at the center, and thus including all the matters of authentic faith, moral living, personal piety, growth in understanding and sacramental worship, the practices which provide the subject matter and content of the catechism. This places the emphasis on the objective dimensions of covenant life: creed, catechism, sacraments and worship, rather than a subjective focus on the experience of regeneration.

Further, "Nevin insisted that the mission of the church is not achieved suddenly, as with

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<sup>12</sup> "Pastoral Letter to the Ministry and Membership of the German Reformed Church" in Charles Hambrick-Stowe, ed., *Living Theological Heritage*, Vol. 3, (Cleveland, Pilgrim), 377.

the conversion of an individual soul, but is ‘a process, both for personal sanctification and for progress in the moral organization of society’<sup>13</sup> Though Nevin and the German Reformed tradition in the 19<sup>th</sup> century would never have used the term covenant to describe the order of the church, it *was* used to clarify their understanding of salvation in distinction from that proclaimed by the revivalists. In it they imply what the earlier Puritans stated explicitly when they described the church as a community of those in covenant to walk in God’s ways and support each other in that holy pilgrimage, though for the German Reformed people that pilgrimage was much more a communally ordered journey. Further, Nevin adds a corporate dimension to Perkins’ “mustard seed” imagery. As Charles Hambrick-Stowe comments,

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 392.



The church contains within it the germ of the dominion of God and is called to a mission that will redeem the whole of life on earth. Salvation is not just for individual souls; salvation transforms every aspect of human life: social, artistic, scientific, philosophical, economic, political.<sup>14</sup>

The church was seen as that body of Christians who were in covenant with God and with each other not just for the sake of their own salvation and for the perpetuation of a truly catholic church in which all are mutually accountable and supportive. They were in covenant as well for the sake of the whole world and for its renewal.

This fundamental agreement on the basics of church order by the German Reformed tradition in Pennsylvania and the middle Atlantic area and the Congregational Churches of New England developed from the same Reformed roots. Both traditions shaped their understanding of faithful ecclesial life in distinction from the individualistic understandings of salvation which were so evident in the religious enthusiasms of their particular times. Though there were differences in their perspectives, covenantal theology was cited by both in delineating both soteriology and ecclesiology, both the understanding of salvation and of church order. It is little wonder that a covenant understanding of the church and its order are deeply ingrained in the thinking of the United Church of Christ, Presbyterian and Reformed Church Bodies today, and that their polities have developed accordingly.

#### IV

One current expression of this covenantal tradition is very apparent in the polity and life of the United Church of Christ, the denominational body of my own ministry. The Preamble to its Constitution indicates that the United Church of Christ is formed of the union of the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches in order to embody their unity and carry on their common mission (Paragraph 1). It implies that it similarly perpetuates the core values of both, values we have seen above. It “acknowledges as its sole Head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior,” in keeping with the uniform testimony of the Reformed tradition. It identifies as its bases of authority: “the Word of God in the Scriptures, and the presence and power of the Holy Spirit,” as well as “the faith of the historic Church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers”(Paragraph 2). This constitutes its claim to continuity with the whole catholic church.

The Preamble then describes “the free and voluntary relationships which the Local Churches, Associations, Conferences and ministers sustain with the General Synod and with each other”(Paragraph 3). In enumerating the unity of organizational life in this way-- congregations, associations, conferences, General Synod -- the Preamble indicates a “lateral relationship (that is) basic to our ecclesiology because each component is an expression of the church itself and not (as an instrumentality) a *part* of the church, a special interest in one part of the church’s work.”<sup>15</sup> The lateral relationship is an expression of mutual ministry where all elements work as equals under the headship of Christ. This makes all the expressions of the church equally and fully responsible for embodying the historic covenantal order of the church. Further, this lateral relationship is the proper context for the mutual interaction which is characteristic of covenant life, and which assures that the church will be in a continuing process of reflection and reformation. Again, the Preamble captures this dimension of our covenant order: “It affirms the responsibility of the church in each generation to make this faith its own in

reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God”  
(Paragraph 2).

In each of its four settings -- local church, association, conference, and General Synod -- the United Church of Christ functions covenantally, and each agency, judicatory and institution relates covenantally to the others. Each freely binds itself to the others and to God for the purpose of together seeking to discover and to be obedient to God’s will revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. Hence the Constitution states that its provisions:

. . . define and regulate the General Synod and those Covenanted Ministries, Affiliated Ministries, and Associated Ministries . . . which are related to the General Synod and describe the free and voluntary relationships which the Local Churches, Associations, Conferences and ministers sustain with the General Synod and with each other. (Paragraph 3)

The U.C.C. Constitution and Bylaws *define and regulate* the units of organization which are part of the General Synod, but they *describe* the free and voluntary relationships of the units of organization in other settings. Each is bound by its own constitutions, charters and policies, but each enters freely into the covenant relation with the others.

Thus, paragraphs one and two of the Preamble define the *order* or the United Church of Christ as an organic whole with Christ as its head, and with various embodiments in different settings, each bound to the others and each responsible for showing forth the fundamental faith and covenant shared by all. Local churches freely bind themselves together and with God into associations and conferences and into the United Church of Christ to serve God in the whole world and to participate in the manifold blessings of the faith and experience of the whole

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Church. Within each of the four settings, the constituent members bind themselves to each other and to God to grow together in faith through the hearing and study of the Word, the celebration of the sacraments, and the exercise of mutual discipline.

Because this covenantal order allows no authority of one setting over another, authority in the U.C.C., between the different settings of the church as well as within each church or setting, is exercised through mutual accountability. It is practiced by “speaking the truth in love, (so that we may) grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Ephesians 4:15). This shared discipline is not just a pragmatic way of reaching acceptable decisions in a democratic organization. It is how we grow to spiritual maturity, the principal discipline of our mutual pilgrimage toward the life God intends.

Thus, Article III of the Constitution, adopted in 1997, in light of this unique heritage, spells out the nature of the covenantal relationships which the various settings of the church share and does so in expression of the fundamental faith and order of the church as it was hammered out over the centuries.

Within the United Church of Christ, the various expressions of the church relate to each other in a covenantal manner. Each expression of the church has responsibilities and rights in relation to the others, to the end that the whole church will seek God’s will and be faithful to God’s mission. Decisions are made in consultation and collaboration among the various parts of the structure. As members of the Body of Christ, each expression of the church is called to honor and respect the work and ministry of each other part. Each expression of the church listens, hears, and carefully considers the advice, counsel, and requests of the others. In this covenant, the various expressions of the United Church of

Christ seek to walk together in all God's ways.<sup>16</sup>

The provisions of the U.C.C. Constitution and Bylaws which follow the Preamble and Article III describe how this covenantal understanding of the church's order is fleshed out in the organizational relationships of its polity. It is clear from all the above that the faithful adherence to the mutually agreed dynamics of these relationships is not a small matter. Faithfulness to the terms of our "covenant within the covenant" is expected from all parties, and any breach or casualness is taken very seriously. While those who are unaware of the continuity of theology, church order and polity, may see such matters as incidental, others see them as violations of the very fabric of our life together. Such issues are deeply felt and passionately argued.

This is increasingly the case in our current social culture which encourages individualism in persons and independence in institutions. We tend to focus on our own work, our own organizations, our own churches, with only afterthoughts to the implications of our actions on the fabric of the whole. We easily slip into a *quid pro quo* approach to organizational relationships and ask of each other: What have you done for me lately? Too often the result is mutual acknowledgment and enlightened self-interest where there is something to be gained, but general disinterest, if not competition, in our usual behavior.

Tensions often arise, especially in the conflict between the freedom of each expression of the church and the mutual accountability that is a core commitment within our covenant life. On the one hand, we affirm that "The autonomy of the Local Church is inherent and modifiable only by its own action. Nothing in this Constitution . . . shall destroy or limit the right of each Local Church to continue to operate in the way customary to it . . . ." (*Constitution*, Paragraph 18). On

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<sup>16</sup> *The Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ, 2001 Edition*, (Cleveland, Executive Council, 2001), 2-3.

the other hand, we affirm that each Local Church has a God-given responsibility for the United Church of Christ and its welfare (Paragraph 17), and that any actions from any other covenant partners will be held in highest regard (Paragraph 19). We share and enjoy freedom within our covenant, and we are obliged by it to be mutually supportive and accountable. This is no small challenge when there are disagreements over issues of faith, mission or public witness.<sup>17</sup>

Such issues frequently occur between and within local churches, conferences and their respective leaders. The conferences, in their freedom, may make decisions which are not received with joy in some local churches. Such decisions become the policy of those conferences and the conference ministers implement and interpret such actions within the provisions of the constitutions of their conferences and of the responsibilities of their own positions. Then, if necessary, the conference ministers interpret the ways in which local churches might receive and consider those actions, as well as the established methods to dissent from and attempt to change them. They become mediators and interpreters of the dynamics of the covenantal relationships which are foundational in the U.C.C. and critical to its well-being.

The same kinds of tensions arise, of course, when the General Synod takes a controversial position on a volatile public issue. This often happens precisely because the church applies its covenant understanding of God and of Jesus' vision of God's Realm to the realities of our civil society and to global relationships, just as did our forbears in their commitment to form and maintain just, civil societies. The Synod is responsible for grounding any such actions in our theology and in the ways in which our understanding of the church's mission and purpose are grounded in that faith. In all such cases we rely on the disciplines of covenant life to keep us in

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<sup>17</sup> See the chapter in this volume on *A Local Church and Wider Church: Autonomy in a Covenantal Polity* by Donald Freeman for a full discussion of this matter.

unity as we take seriously the perspectives of each while earnestly seeking together and in dialogue for “more light and truth from God’s Holy Word.”

Ordained ministry in the United Church of Christ, because of the church’s covenantal theology and order, and because ministry is exercised within the authority of each particular setting, and not along side it, is subject to the same discipline. A minister may be ordained, commissioned, licensed and called to a variety of particular ministries, but each ministry is exercised within the life and accountability of a local church of which the person is a member and in relation to the association which grants authorization. An ordained minister who is called to serve a local church is charged with the responsibility of assuring, through the work of pastor, teacher and leader that this crucial discipline is functioning within the body to, for and within which she or he is responsible and accountable. Thus, the pastor works within the constitution and bylaws of the church and within the responsibilities of the pastoral office. The services of ordination and installation are covenant ceremonies which authorize the pastor to interpret and mediate the dynamics of covenant life within the congregation, as well as to preach, teach and provide pastoral care.

Church and Ministry Committees in the conferences and associations of the church are charged with the responsibility to interpret and administer the covenantal relationships which exist with local churches, with pastors who are “in standing” or are seeking standing, and between pastors and the churches they serve. Many of the issues which come before them are charges of violation of the standards of covenantal relationships, whether they are of ethics or policy. The covenants to which we have mutually agreed and bound ourselves, our constitutions, bylaws and policies, are always at the heart of such considerations. In each case it is the judicious exercise of covenantal discipline which enables the parties to “speak the truth in love”

(Eph. 4:15) and to “maintain the spirit of unity in the bond of peace.” (Eph. 4:3)

## V

In all these areas of church life, because our church order and polity has no hierarchy of authority, we rely on our covenants and on our mutual faithfulness to them to guide us and enable us to fulfill our commitments to God and to Jesus’ vision of God’s Realm. Hence, the keeping of our promises, made to each other in the presence of God in the covenant ceremonies of the church, and our willingness to receive correction and admonition from our covenant partners, is the cement that binds us together and binds us to the God we know in Jesus Christ. Locally they are the personal and familial covenants of marriage, baptism and confirmation, and the ecclesial covenants of ordination, commissioning, licensing and installation which bind us to one another in unity and common purpose. In all the liturgies which formalize and celebrate these covenants the parties make promises before God and the congregation of witnesses, offer prayers for the faithful fulfillment of the vows taken and the responsibilities accepted, and give symbols of the covenant bond just established. The local church and its members expect these solemn vows to be kept, they trust the covenanting God to empower such faithfulness, and they hold all accountable for the loving support of such covenants and of this holy process.

In the life of the wider church and all its covenanted ministries, its conferences, associations and its institutions of service, we have interlocking constitutions, charters and policies. Each covenant partner names the others in its founding documents and identifies ways in which the voice and will of each will be represented in the other for the good of all and for the service of our common mission. It is a system of interconnected covenants which formalizes and facilitates our covenant order, our covenant polity and our covenant life together in Christ. The United Church of Christ, in every setting, expects that these covenants and charters, on which the



unity and faithfulness of our common life depends, will be honored scrupulously. It looks to the covenanting God to inspire and strengthen that faithfulness, and it looks to each partner to hold all in prayerful concern and loving support.

In the United Church of Christ we believe that the God who was revealed in the life and servant ministry of Jesus of Nazareth has chosen to relate to humankind covenantally. It is a covenanting and faithful God whom we worship and seek to serve. Robert Paul's question is always at the heart of the matter: "How do we show ourselves to be the people of this kind of God?" We do so by being a covenant people. Since our knowledge of God is through the covenant which was reinterpreted and renewed by Christ, our theology is covenantal, our church order is covenantal, our polity is covenantal, and our life together in the church, in every setting, is life in faithful covenant. There is much diversity in the way we live that out, and there is much freedom within each setting and in the dynamics between them. But we are ultimately responsible to God and to each other for our faithfulness within these sacred bonds.

The one place in our original, official documents where the theology of covenant appears loud and clear is the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ of 1959 and repeated in all subsequent versions. In it we confess our faith that God, the Eternal Spirit, who calls the worlds into being and creates us in the divine image, has come to us in Jesus Christ and: "bestows upon us the Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages tongues and races." We are in covenant with God through Christ and in covenant with one another in the universal Church, a holy bond that is the source and substance of the new and blessed life God intends to be embodied in the church for the sake of the world.

