



David Nystrom is a contracted preacher/teacher in the Pacific Southwest Conference and Vice President of Academic Affairs at William Jessup University. Following are the first 4 installments of *Exploring the Affirmations*, a 6-part series that give insights on the six Covenant Affirmations. *Exploring the Affirmations* is currently featured in Quick Connect, the PSWC e-news piece.

David can be scheduled for preaching and/or teaching in your church by contacting Nelly Bothi at nelly.bothi@pswc.org or 925.677.2140.

A DVD and a study guide on the Covenant Affirmations are available at <http://www.covchurch.org/resource/exploring-covenant-affirmations-dvd-and-study-guide>. To speak with someone further about using the curriculum contact the Covenant Resource Center at 1-800-338-IDEA(4332) or resource.center@covchurch.org.

The Centrality of the Word of God.

"When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel..."(Galatians 2:14)

Typically we think of "gospel" as either the story of Jesus or as one of the four Gospels in the Bible. There is another sense, however, one that Paul pressed into service when he found himself in opposition to Peter while in Antioch. He claimed that Peter was not acting "in line with the truth of the gospel." The gospel is a contagion for good, restless and robust in its ability to transform as God's plan of reconciliation unfolds. The gospel has implications for every new development within the compass of human endeavor. It is never exhausted.

So is it with the Bible. We believe that the Bible is the word of God, the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine and conduct, the clearest pointer to and revelation of Jesus Christ. These are matters of doctrine. But the first Covenanters understood these as matters of conviction when in home Bible studies they came to living faith in Jesus Christ. It was this vibrant, restless quality that captured them. In our ministry to children and youth, our preaching, home groups and private devotion the Bible is to be central because when we read and study the Bible we affirm that we are broken and that only God in Christ can rescue us. Our preaching and teaching should aim to let the Bible speak with clarity and focus, rather than to seek in scripture justification for our own desires. We must never try to tame the Bible. Scripture through the activity of the Spirit of God must examine us. We read the Bible to discern what God desires to form in us. The Bible is central for us because we have covenanted to seek to hear God's voice and to follow God's direction, rather than to hear from God only what we desire.

New Birth.

In recent years wealth has made us greedy, and self-indulgence has led us, through every form of sensual excess, to be, as it were, chasing after our own deaths...we know we are killing ourselves, but we lack the ability to stop. — Livy, c. 10 AD

The whole world is a slave to sin. — Galatians 3:22

I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. — John 3:3

As Covenanters we believe in the necessity of new birth. We believe it because the Bible teaches it. We believe that, as the Roman historian Livy observed, there is a malady that afflicts every human being, and we are unable to save ourselves.

We believe, contrary to voices ancient and modern, that we need help from outside. Jesus called this a new birth. You must be born again, he said. We believe that in Christ God has provided a remedy for the deadly affliction from which we all suffer. Because of what God accomplished in Christ, through his death and resurrection, the Spirit of the living God can dwell within us, and the heart of stone can be exchanged for a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26-27). We believe that there is only one remedy, that Jesus Christ is the only way, the only truth, and the life (John 14:6). We believe that through him is the possibility of new life, the abundant life, a life lived in growing harmony with God and his purposes. Only in this way can we enlist in the service of the God of the universe and thereby find freedom from the power of sin that enslaves us.

The Whole Mission of the Church.

When we say that the Covenant is committed to the whole mission of the church we call to mind three broad truths, each composed of separate but related constellations of idea.

The first broad truth is that from the beginning the Covenant was a "covenant," a *forbund*, a voluntary association of churches that decided to pool their collective resources for the furtherance of the Gospel. This means that we understand that our possessions are not actually ours, but that we are stewards of what God has given to us. It means that we are committed to the evangelistic task. It means that the ambit of our concern lies not only within our local community, but extends across the continent and indeed the entire world. We are committed to mission, local and global, because Christ called us to it, and this commitment is more vibrant than issues that might separate us. We are, as our forebears in the Covenant said, Mission Friends.

The second broad truth is that the mission of the church involves not only the salvation of souls, but also ministries of compassion and justice. In the parable of the unmerciful servant Jesus makes it clear that our forgiveness, our compassion for others, is both measure and regulator of the degree to which the life of the kingdom resides in us. We long to be moved with compassion in the face of suffering just as was Jesus, precisely because Jesus was so moved. We long that the love of Christ showered on us might flow through us.

Finally, we believe that this mission belongs to the whole church, laity and clergy, women and men, children and adults, rich and poor.

The Church as a Fellowship of Believers.

When we say that we believe the church is a fellowship of believers we intend to convey four principal ideas. First, we affirm the New Testament idea that the church is the body of Christ, a fellowship of believers alive in Christ and linked together in Christ, as Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 12. Second, we mean that we are committed to the New Testament idea of community that is quite apart from the way the world around us works. The leaders of the Gentiles lord it over them, Jesus says, but it is not to be that way among you (Matthew 20:25). The Christian community should be characterized not by self-interest, but by the exercise of power in the interests of service. Paul says that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female (Galatians 3:28). This is a multi-ethnic, multi-class, gender equal vision. Third, we mean that the church is a voluntary organization. It is not a servant of the state or practice we engage in out of mere habit. To follow Christ with sisters and brothers is a passion. Finally, we mean that we are committed to a mission to the world. Unlike some historical expressions of Christian community, our aim is not to withdraw from the world into a pure community, but rather together to engage the world with the love of Christ.

A Conscious Dependence on the Holy Spirit.

Covenanters have never been a particularly charismatic lot. This does not mean, however, that the Holy Spirit has not been active in our midst. Covenant Affirmations reads, "The Covenant Church, rooted in historic Christianity, affirms one God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit continues the creative work of the Father and the redeeming work of the Son within the life of the church." This means that we, along with Christians from the earliest apostles, believe in a triune God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. With Jesus we affirm that the Spirit lives within believers (John 14:17). With Paul we believe that the Christian life is "walking by the Spirit" (Galatians 5:16). With Augustine we believe that the spiritual life is, in part, learning to make more room for the presence of God in our lives ("Narrow is the dwelling place of my soul, O God; do thou expand it!"). With the Reformers of the sixteenth century we believe that the Spirit and the Word speak in concert with one another. The early Covenanters believed that the Spirit was guiding them in mission. It is this gentle but insistent leading of the Spirit that has marked Covenant history. Let us endeavor to open our hearts more fully to God, and commit to the disciplines that allow us to listen to the voice of the Spirit.