

**Look to the Rock
What Makes Covenant Covenant
Part One: Bedrock Beliefs**

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Isaiah 51.1 says

Look to the rock from which you were cut
and to the quarry from which you were hewn.

About four years ago we replaced our kitchen counters. It took us awhile to find the right one, but eventually we settled on a stone slab that we found up in Merrillville.



It's a beautiful piece of grey-white granite that they call White Spring. It has small rippling currents of dark grey and spots of burgundy mineral deposits. Here's a piece of it, which was cut out for the sink.

You know me and my love for rocks. I got curious about the kind of stone it was. So I googled White Spring granite and up popped stores in Raleigh, Phoenix, Richmond, Austin, all selling White Spring granite countertops. I thought it was interesting that so many stores a kind of counter using that name. I thought it must be a common kind of rock.

But the more I looked, the more I was struck by how similar the descriptions were.

Here's one description from Arizona: "Featuring a backdrop of crystal-white bedrock, White Spring is noteworthy for its alluringly rambling, high-variation veining in white, gray and crimson hues." Here's another one from Connecticut: "Having a white background with burgundy and gray movement, this granite has beautiful, subtle character."

Clearly they were all talking about the exact same kind of rock. That means all those stone slabs must have come from the same region.

But where? I did a little more digging and discovered that all of the White Spring granite in the world comes from a single quarry, this one, the Bianco Spring stone quarry in the Aimorés Mountains in the state of Espírito Santo in southern Brazil, 5151 miles from here.



And every single stone cut from that quarry – the ones sold in San Francisco and Seattle and Tulsa and Tampa Bay and everywhere in between – they all have the same distinctive look and feel, the same quality and texture, because they were all cut from the same rock formation in the same mountain.



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The members of the Covenant Church family are all beautifully unique. At the same time, because of what we have in common, we all share a distinctive quality that reveals we all came from the same rock.

In this sermon series we're wrestling to identify what that certain something is. What makes Covenant Covenant?

The men and women and young people of Covenant Church are made distinctive by our beliefs, our calling, our values, and our posture. Over the next four Sundays we'll be talking about each of those in turn.

We'll begin by looking this morning at our bedrock beliefs.

Before we talk about what they are, let's talk for a moment about how we carry our beliefs around here.

As you probably have discovered in your own reading of the Bible, the Bible comes to us in lots of different literary forms: some sections are straightforward history, but others are collections of songs, or proverbs, or prophetic messages filled with exaggerated imagery, or parables that are made-up stories designed to teach truth. And then there are lots of letters written to specific churches about specific questions they were asking and challenges they were facing.

It's not arranged like an encyclopedia, where you can flip to the section on God's nature, or the section on church structure, or the section on the Holy Spirit. All those things need to be gleaned from throughout the sixty-six books and letters that make up the Bible.

What that means is that some parts of biblical truth, the most important parts, are really clearly spelled out, but other parts, the less important or more peripheral parts, are not always as clearly spelled out.

And what that means is that in those less important or nonessential matters of faith – things like how communion or baptism should be administered, or how church government should be structured, or how exactly the end times will unfold, or how to engage the various structures of our culture, or what the implications of Christian faith are for things like politics and economics, or what should be the appropriate Christian response to a global pandemic – in those and other nonessential areas there is not consensus. In fact, there's pretty considerable disagreement.

We're part of a denomination that has a wonderful motto that goes all the way back to the time of the Reformation that captures beautifully the spirit of how we hold our beliefs here at Covenant.

Evangelical Presbyterian Church Motto

In essentials, unity.

In non-essentials, liberty (or freedom).

In all things, charity (the old fashioned word for love).

In those handful of areas that we identify as essentials, we want to be characterized by unity and a strength of conviction. But we want to demonstrate that strength of conviction without stridency, to have a commitment to truth without being hard-edged or dogmatic or self-righteous.

I think this would be a good place for an aside about a comment I've made several times over the past year and a half, that I believe God wants us to become a church known more for our love than for anything else. By that I never intended to say that we were softening our commitment to truth at Covenant. Never. Only that in our dealings

with the world, we want to have a soft touch as we speak the truth, to speak the truth in love.

So in essentials, unity. And in those areas that we identify as nonessentials we want to hold our convictions with what one biblical scholar describes as “theological modesty”, a humility of the heart that recognizes there are others who love Jesus more than we do, and have studied scripture more thoroughly than we have, who come out in a different place than we have, and they may well be right.

That doesn’t mean we shrug our shoulders and say “Who knows?” We’ll still be faithful to do our homework and arrive at our convictions in these areas, but we’ll give one another the freedom to come out in different places on those same issues.

In essentials, unity.
 In non-essentials, freedom.
 In all things, love.

One implication to point out here. You’re probably already making this connection. There is always a temptation to elevate a nonessential to the level of an essential, and then to insist on unity, to insist that everyone else in the church see that issue the same way we do, and then to condemn those who don’t as being less spiritually mature or biblically faithful than we are.

But that’s not how we do it at Covenant.

In essentials, unity. Yes.
 But in non-essentials, freedom, and in all things, love.

We believe that our shared commitment to Jesus as King, and to Scripture as final authority, and to church as community of affection and mission agency, is sufficient to keep us united even in the face of considerable differences of opinion in nonessential areas.

With that as our backdrop, let’s come back to the question of our bedrock beliefs.

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If you were asked to make a list of essential Christian beliefs, a list of things every Christian should agree on, the things that we want to live for and stand for together, what would be on that list?

About fifteen years ago we were led to identify what we consider to be our essential beliefs, the core faith convictions that we hold as nonnegotiable, beliefs that we believe are so important, so crucial, so central, that we think they should define us. Here’s what we came up with.

Our essential beliefs center in three areas, and are summed up in three statements . . .

Covenant Church Essential Beliefs

We believe Jesus Christ alone is King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

We believe the Bible is fully trustworthy and authoritative.

We believe the Church exists to proclaim and live out the love of God.

Before we go on and explore each of these, think with me for a moment about the significance of that word “belief.”

Christianity is often lumped together with Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other belief systems under the category of World Religions.

But among Christians it is our practice to speak of Christianity not as a *religion* but as a *faith*. It’s an important distinction.

The word religion means “scrupulous observance.” Religion is an impersonal word that has to do with satisfying rules and fulfilling stipulations. A religious life is a life lived according to a code.

But the word “faith” focuses on the relationship between two people, not between a person and a set of rules.

Yes, it’s true that part of Christian belief is confidence that certain things are true.

God exists eternally in three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit.

God created everything from nothing.

All human beings will stand before God to answer for our lives.

Jesus will return and usher in a new heaven and a new earth.

And so on.

But belief is not just a list of truths we are confident in affirming. Belief is a deeply relational word. It implies belief in a *person*, putting our confidence or trust in a person. And at the heart of the Christian faith is the invitation for us to put our trust in Jesus as the one who rescues us from our sin and purchases our lives for God.

And our belief in Jesus, our trusting him, is always meant to include one further step: not just confidence but allegiance, not just trusting him but *entrusting* our lives to him as Lord, as the King of all created existence.

Do you trust Him? Have you entrusted your life to Him?

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Which leads us straight into our first and most important faith essential:

We believe Jesus Christ alone is King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

We believe that Jesus is the long awaited and long promised king, and that in Jesus, all the purposes and promises of God are fulfilled.

We believe that before he became a human being Jesus was the eternal Son of God, the second person in the Trinity. And in obedience to the Father, He left His Father's side and came to earth on a rescue mission to reconcile humanity to God.

He took on human flesh and lived among us, revealing God to us.
He took on human sin and died for us, reconciling us to God.
Then, having defeated sin and death, He rose from death to life and ascended to heaven, where he now rules over us as King.

I Corinthians 8.6

There is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live, and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

Jesus is the Lord over the church, and He is the only way to know God the Father.

John 14:6

Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Given who he has revealed himself to be, the only right and reasonable response to his invitation is for us to trust Jesus as Savior and entrust our lives to him as Lord.

Romans 10.9

If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

If those things are true, then what are the implications for each of us individually? For us together?

Here are a few that come to mind. I'd love to hear the ones that come to your mind.

What are the implications for me?

- The single most important decision in my life will relate to who Jesus is and what that means for me. More important than what I study or where I work or who I marry. My deepest spiritual need – which is my alienation from God – can only be met in him, he alone can rescue me into a reconciled relationship with God. I am called to respond with faith, belief, trust, to receive the gift of his presence and work in my life.
- As a Christian I am called to understand myself as a subject of Jesus the King, which means surrendering my rights and freedoms and letting him rule my life. What he says

goes. So once I make the decision to trust Jesus, God's invitation is for me to turn around and make sure that every part of my life is open to him and reflects his place as king in my life – money, time, morals, and so on.

What are the implications for us?

- Our whole life as a church is centered on Jesus. He stands at the absolute center of everything we believe and do as a church.
- Jesus is the one thing we have in common at Covenant. He has called together a diverse group of men and women and young people from this city and this country and from around the globe, and gathered us around himself. He and he alone is our unity and our peace.

As Paul says in Ephesians 4:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (4.4-6)

- Because Jesus stands at the absolute center of the Christian faith, Jesus is the one thing we want you to keep bumping into here. You will never stop hearing about him because he is the defining center of every aspect of our life as a church.

The Christian life = following Jesus

The goal of Christian maturity = becoming like Jesus

The end of our hope = going to be with Jesus

The essence of Christian leadership = leading as we are led by Jesus

Our final source of authority = Jesus, what he says goes. Jesus has the last word

We believe Jesus Christ alone is King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

What other implications come to your mind?

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Our second faith essential spills straight out of that last implication. If Jesus is Lord, then what Jesus says goes. Jesus has the last word.

During his earthly ministry Jesus repeatedly affirmed the authority of Scripture, referring to it as the authoritative word of God:

For example, in **Matthew 22.29** he said to some of those who opposed his teaching

You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.

When Jesus quoted Scripture, which he did often, he used the expressions "it says" and "God says" interchangeably. Scripture is God's word.

That leads to the second faith essential for us here at Covenant

We believe the Bible is fully trustworthy and authoritative.

God's word, in its particulars as well as in its principles, is the uniquely authoritative witness to the Lord Jesus Christ and the life he has for us, and is trustworthy in its entirety. The Scriptures expose the darkness of our sin, reveal the hope of redemption through Jesus, and present God's intended way for us to live fully.

In **II Timothy 3.16-17** Paul writes

All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that each person who belongs to God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

In other words, the Bible makes clear what we should believe and it corrects the mistakes in our beliefs, and the Bible also spells out the way we should live, and brings all the parts of our lives into line with God's design.

When it comes to what is true about God, and what is true about us, and what is true about the life God intends for us, we don't need to guess. The Bible makes those things clear.

We believe the Bible is fully trustworthy and authoritative.

It is our final authority in all spiritual matters, God's revelation to his people, and we can turn to it with confidence.

What are the implications for me?

- God has made known to us through his word spiritual truths what we can never learn simply by observing this world. So I am called as a follower of Jesus to immerse myself in God's word, not dabble in it but immerse myself in it, to learn it, know it, make it mine, plant it in my heart so that, in the hands of God's Spirit, it can grow me into Christlikeness.
- In a world which offers many alternative versions of truth and truthiness, I can turn to the Bible with confidence that in its pages I have not man's best guesses but God's revealed truth.

God has not told us everything there is to know about himself. But God has told us all we need to know to know and love and serve him.

We are not agnostics, having no knowledge of what is true about God
But neither are we gnostics, having secret knowledge of what is true about God

In the Bible God has spoken plainly to humanity. As Christians we are confident that God by his Spirit has spoken through his word and that he faithfully preserved his word, and we have in Scripture sufficient knowledge to know God and serve him.

- Our claim that we have God's truth – which the world sees as spiritual arrogance and pride — is actually reason for profound humility and gratitude in us, as God has been gracious to give us His word.

What are the implications for us?

- We take the bible really seriously as a church. It ultimately forms the basis of every one of our conversations as the people of God. Preaching, scripture study, teaching, biblical integration are all central to our life as a church.
- It is not our work to stand over Scripture and decide which portions remain valid, it is our work to understand it and stand under it. We won't wrestle with which parts of scripture still speak with authority, we'll wrestle with what it means to take the whole of scripture seriously.

We believe the Bible is fully trustworthy and authoritative.

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I pointed out that our second faith essential is a direct result of the first one. We look to the Bible as our final spiritual authority because Jesus our Lord has the last word in our lives, and he teaches us to.

Our third essential is likewise a direct result of the first one. If Jesus is Lord, and I am his subject, then I am part of a new community made up of others who follow him. My fellow followers of Jesus are my brothers and sisters in a community of affection that we call the Church.

We believe the Church exists to proclaim and live out the love of God.

Jesus is King. He reigns over His creation: the universe and everything in it. The kingdom of God exists wherever the reign of Jesus is acknowledged, and it spreads through this world one heart at a time, as individual men, women, young people, and children give their hearts and lives to him.

Philippians 3.20

We are a colony of heaven, and we wait for the Savior who comes from heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Church is a colony of the kingdom in this world. The Church exists to proclaim and echo the love of God in Jesus Christ. It never stops being his, or doing his work. It comes together as a community of affection, united in its shared love for Jesus, and it goes out as a mission outpost, united in its shared call to demonstrate the love of Jesus.

Revelation 1.4-7 says that Jesus

Jesus . . . loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to whom be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

The local church is a foretaste of the new humanity as envisioned in Revelation 7.9.

The worldwide gathering of Christians meets in local congregations, in which God is worshiped, the word of God is taught, the gifts of God are expressed, and the people of God are strengthened, equipping them to go out with grace and power into the world as kingdom agents and instruments, putting the love and presence of God on display.

I Peter 2.9

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness and into his wonderful light.

The church is God's community of affection and mission agency in this world

What are the implications for me?

- There's a lot of murmuring about the institutional church and its shortcomings, which can lead us to think that a version of the Christian life in which I shop churches for what I want, or just live the Christian life independent of the church, is sufficient. It isn't. The solo version of the Christian life is not a biblically recognizable one. I am part of something larger. So are you.

What are the implications for us?

- God wants us to see that spending time together building relationship, doing life together, using our gifts to serve each other, is not optional. Making room, taking time, for the shared part of the Christian life, is as important as our daily quiet times. Fellowship is as indispensable to the Christian life as worship, discipleship, and mission.
- God also wants us to see that the ways we are stretched by being with others who are not identical to us in age and stage, but who may be difficult for us, or different from us (in age, or gender or ethnicity or background or life experience), or under those who God has placed over us in positions of spiritual authority, are part of his sanctifying gift to us, helping to form us into the likeness of Jesus.
- God wants us to understand that the church exists for its scattered life of mission just as much as for its gathered life of worship, fellowship, and discipleship. Mission is vital because we believe the world around us is in great spiritual jeopardy. Those who have not trusted Jesus and entrusted their lives to him are alienated from God now and, when death comes, will be permanently alienated from him. Our witness to the presence and power of Jesus in our lives is a crucial part of what will catch the eye of a jaded world and awaken its heart to hope.

We believe the Church exists to proclaim and live out the love of God.

Jesus is the cornerstone of the church. The church stands on, and orients itself to, and is defined by him. He is the quarry from which we are all cut. Everything that makes us who we are can be traced back to that rock.