

A Covenant Toolkit for Disciples

Draft Materials for Review Only

Session Two: A Covenantal Life

Session Two Learning Goals:

1. **To introduce** the theological concept of covenantal relationships;
2. **To affirm** the importance of a loving relationship between a living God and people;
3. **To recognize** the difference between covenantal relationships and contractual relationships.

Read:

The Preamble to the Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

<https://disciples.org/our-identity/the-design/>

Watch:

Session Two video – Rev. Dr. Casey Sigmon

<https://youtu.be/R02-RKFv76s>

(Transcript below)

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Consider:

In your group or on your own, consider the following questions. Broader questions, like “What stood out to you in her presentation? Did anything in her story resonate with you? Was there anything you disagreed with?” could also be helpful discussion starters.

1. Intro question: Dr. Sigmon highlights her journey to intentionally choose to be a part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). How did you start attending your current congregation? What drew you to your current congregation? If you were raised Disciples, what has kept you in relationship with this particular

tradition? If you were raised in another tradition like Dr. Sigmon, what are some differences you have noticed between the Disciples tradition and the tradition in which you were raised?

2. In what ways is your congregation already living out this concept of covenant--a relationship with God and other living things?
3. How has a conflict resolved through covenant relationships changed or re-shaped your congregation/community? What was that process like?
4. When has your congregation felt tempted (or fallen into the trap) of living out contract because of fear? What was the context and how was it resolved?
5. In her presentation, Dr. Sigmon highlights the connection between covenant and assembly and challenged us to think about novel ways of assembling. How has your community already lived into this challenge in light of a year that has essentially required physical distancing? What ways have you already adapted and re-imagined new ways of assembly/community/relationships? What is gained from this adaptation and re-imagination? What is missed from this current reality?
6. Do you think living out covenant is different in a digital world? If so, how?
7. We have practiced physical distance for awhile now. Many congregations pivoted in a variety of ways to continue worshiping and serving together. Some congregations remain physically distant, while others have returned to physical ministries with safety protocols. Individuals and congregations alike have experienced fearfulness, feeling frozen, and fragmentation. How can the concept of covenantal relationships overcome these three very present FR-words (fear, frozen, fragmentation)?
8. Dr. Sigmon suggests that covenant is a tool that can combat initial reactions to live out of fear and fragmentation. How might covenantal relationship be used in your congregation and wider community to foster “a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world?”

Close:

As the time and conversation comes to a close, end with a brief prayer of thanksgiving for God's covenant and our covenantal relationships.

Video Transcript

Lovingly and Livingly Bound- A Process Theology Reflection on the Covenantal Language of the Preamble of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

Rev. Dr. Casey T. Sigmon

I am a Disciple of Christ today because of the covenantal poetry and practice of this denomination that seeks wholeness for a fragmented world and pursues polity and policy in relationship with a living and loving God.

In order to highlight our unique covenantal theology, allow me to contrast it with the contractual theology I once lived in.

I lived in the land of contractual religion. The only time a word remotely equivalent to 'contract' (tsaw-fad') appears in the Hebrew Bible is in Lamentations 4:8 –

... they are not recognized in the streets. Their skin has shriveled (tsaw-fad') on their bones; it has become as dry as wood.

That is what contract does. It shrivels up and dries out a living God and a living witness in the body of Christ to God and with creation. It shrivels up imagination. Contract shrivels up attention and intention, making a church that strives to transcend that which is organic, rendering the church out of touch with creation as it changes and lives.

For example, I reached a point in my contractual Christian tradition where I could no longer disagree or at least discuss areas of disagreement with my fellow church people. For some people, my very presence as a woman called to preach was a disagreement, a breach of God's contract. And it wasn't as if my arguments didn't come from engagement with a Bible I understood to be a living word by the power of the Holy Spirit! When the word of God is written, and rendered plain in meaning, then one must believe in the Bible to prove faithful witness.

But I believe in God.

And I believe God still speaks through the prayerful and thoughtful practice of engaging scripture. And I believe in people's capacity to assemble and feast together even in disagreement and discernment. Both of these core affirmations felt right at home in the covenant people who call themselves Disciples of Christ.

Here is some more word play for you (I can't help it, I'm a homiletician). Etymologically speaking, "covenant" comes to us from the Latin *convenire*, meaning to convene, assemble, come together. Disciples embody covenant when they assemble- as a congregation, a region, a general church. Covenant is not just ideologically it is physiological. The body must commit to assembling.

Contract? It doesn't have as much to say about organic bodies. It is written or spoken agreement, It is past tense, only with physical repercussion when its arrangement must be enforced by law. The etymology defines contract as parties drawn together, think in a legally binding way. But we have also taken up this word of contract to speak to disease...we don't say covenant a disease, we say contract a disease. It also means to 'decrease in size and number.'

Covenant people are lovingly bound to one another while contract people are legally bound.

Covenant is a living and loving promise or commitment between living and loving parties. It also relates to context the same living loving care.

Contract people are bound by adherence to an agreement. Context is not written into the agreement. When one breaks the rule of the contract it is rendered null and void.

Covenant is a verb, theologically, not a noun. It is an agile way of following God in context, in relationship with other living things. I see this agility in the ideal of our tradition that there is no creed but Christ, thus able to think and act quickly, participating in God's work for wholeness (shalom) in a fragmented world.

Covenant people are also agile, in that when conflict comes about, when partners disagree about hard things, ideally we work through conflict to reach a new level of understanding and a new way of being. Conflict can be the beginning of a new chapter rather than the ending of the agreement and relationship.

Contracts don't verb. They noun, define, limit. They don't live. They are fragile. Conflict tends to be avoided because it inevitably means someone is wrong, someone is right, someone stays in, someone moves out. Contracts are fragile because trust and love are not required.

People draw together by a fragile contract are vulnerable to three other FR words:

- Fear
- Frozen
- Fragment

Fear: When religious people live out faith in contract they make decisions out of fear. It might be the fear of change and a sense of threat anytime anyone or anything comes around to challenge the agreement of how we live out our promises to God. Doubt and curiosity are cast as enemies in the fragile state of fear. Innovations in science and art invoke anxiety instead of awe. Deep down, one calls to mind Walter Brueggemann is his work on the myth of scarcity. Contractual living can't expand, remember, it draws together and decreases in size, like our vision in an anxiety attack, our lungs in an asthma attack. The fear narrows the field of possibility.

And so, we come to our next FR word: **Frozen**. Yes, I am the mother of two young girls, but I am talking about something else here. When religious people live out faith in contract, fearful of breaking the rules of God and church, the body can become frozen in its ways of seeing, ordering, and doing. The church changes state, even if it is of the same substances. Meaning, it goes from being the living body of Christ, H₂O in the state of liquid, agile and un-shatterable, life giving, and soul quenching, to being ice-a liability to anyone who crosses its path, shattering when met with force.

Which leads me to the final FR word and description for religious people who shift from covenant to contract discipleship: **fragment**. When religious people live out faith in contract, disagreements lead to fragmentation. We Disciples of Christ were born out of the lamentation of fragmentation. Seeking unity, we organized ourselves to be a movement that could handle difference and disagreement, so long as we could agree to confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, Savior of the world (right belief) AND come together to the Table, welcoming all as God welcomed us (right practice).

History tells the story of the challenge to live out covenant commitment, even with the best intentions. That's because covenant is the story of trusting God to leave the oppression of pharaoh through the ambiguity of wilderness. Covenant is posture and attitude even when sands are shifting.

But contracts are attractive! They promise clarity. Boundaries are clear. Rules set in stone. Contracts are attractive and comfortable until you encounter anything that threatens that which is set in stone. That's when they narrow, when the fragility seeps out and fear sets in.

Why did I join the Disciples? I was asked this question a lot when I left the evangelical world, went to a PCUSA seminary, and felt loving called into this movement. I'll tell you why: it's because it's one of the few bodies seeking to follow a living God in word and deed. It's also because these affirmations in our preamble create the possibility for people to pursue fellowship through conflict rather than choose teams every time conflict silences disagreement.

Why did I join the Disciples? Because our preamble and design are organizing propositions rather than laws writ in stone. Remember the words of the prophet Jeremiah concerning the covenant of YHWH, “I will put my instructions deep within them, on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.” (Jer. 31:33) Again, God chooses living pages to tell the story of covenant, not stone. At our best, Disciples of Christ embody commitment to discipleship of a God whose word was and is made flesh by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, as a process theologian, I also feel at home in our promises to adventure with God and one another as Disciples. In the preamble, we speak of a God who is **living**, DOC theologian and minister Bruce Epperly beautifully sums up the process understanding of God and ourselves in this way:

“In human life, growth is essential to well-being and maturity. Persons, institutions, or corporations that never change are labeled dysfunctional or irrelevant, and will likely, at least in the case of institutions and corporations, eventually cease to exist. Higher organisms, as [Alfred North] Whitehead [the founder of process philosophy] notes, “originate novelty to match the novelty of the environment.” In a world in which all things flow, ongoing creative transformation is not only healthy, but necessary for survival. Even Jesus underwent change and growth.”¹

Disciples, if we really are a movement and a covenant people, then we really are still growing and maturing so that we can bring good news into changing situations in our neighborhoods and in our world. We can meet the shifts with agility and so not fall apart when novelty comes our way. After all, covenant people dwell with God in tents, not fortresses.

We also speak in the preamble of a God whose covenant is **loving**. We are lovingly, not legally bound. This is a relational understanding of power, honoring creativity and open to the reality of otherness. Again, contrast covenant to contract. Contract relations are typically unilateral and coercive in power, seeking to minimize or eliminate others’ impact on that power of the written word. I hear whispers of process theology again in this loving covenant, relational covenant, modeled by God to us and expected to be reflected in our relationship with our fellow creatures.

If I were to push back on our preamble in any way from a process perspective, which I trust I can do with you all in our covenant relation, it would be that in this time it’s not enough to be bound to one another’s who are of the human variety. God’s covenant love is for all creation. And so, we must acknowledge our responsibility to include a fragmented creation and ecosystem in our understanding of ‘world.’ But now I am out of time.

In summary, the theology of covenant offers a hermeneutic for contextual decision making. We agree to assemble, as to not assemble is to not verb our covenant. In the flow of changing techno-culture and environmental cost of travel, we may need to decide on novel means of assembling in this digital age.

We also seek God’s presence as the loving bonding force equipping us to assemble in and through ambiguity, to sit at Table without coercing the difference and distinction of one another for the sake of comfort.

We also use our creativity and collaboration with God’s Spirit to engage tradition, text, and science and art as resources for propositions for faithful living out of covenantal relationship.

Thank you for the honor of sharing these affirmations of and propositions for a covenantal way of being the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) with you all today. May you lovingly and livingly lead our

¹ *Process Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: T&T Clark International, A Continuum Imprint, 2011).33.

movement into God's dream come down for all flesh and life to feel, even through conflict and ambiguity and into the unknown (oops, told you, mother slippage).

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