

## **Head, Heart and Hands**

Today is February 20, 2015. Today we celebrate 130 years of the birth of our denomination, the Evangelical Covenant church. Today we want to remember our founders and our roots. Today is a day to remind ourselves that Swedish Christians immigrants from across the United States of America came to Chicago for a meeting. The speaker opened the meeting with a sermon and verse that would never be forgotten. Actually, it would be remembered by the next generation all the way to our current generation. The verse was from Psalm 119:63, "I am a companion of all them that fear thee." On Friday the 20th of February, the Covenant denomination was born.

Since the beginning of our denomination, we have been caring for the most marginalized people, focusing on heterogeneity and diversity which make their synthesis in every single immigrant who feels lonely and does not have any roots in a new, unknown, distant land far from their relatives.

Today is a day to pause, think and reflect on our founders' message which goes back to Pietism. Today is a day to talk about our past, however, we will also be invited to return to the present and continue writing a new chapter with our very lives, by making History for our next generations, our sons and daughters. As we keep our eyes open to understand God's Word, I invite you to read the text which we find in Luke 10:25-37: The Parable of the Good Samaritan.

It says:

**25** On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

**26** "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

**27** He answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

**28** "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

**29** But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

**30** In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. **31** A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. **32** So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. **33** But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. **34** He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. **35** The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

**36** “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

**37** The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

Pietism has two very strong convictions: 1) A life transformed and 2) Church as an assembly of believers who are intrinsically connected to human beings, people like you and me, created in God’s image and likeness. Missional Pietism is Covenant Identity. Our Covenant identity and DNA take us back to the founders of Pietism: Johann Arndt, Philip Jakob Spener, August Hermann Francke and Nicolaus Zinzendorf, a social reformer and bishop of the Moravian church who influenced John Wesley, the father of the Methodist movement.

One of the six proposals in “Pia Desideria” by Philipp Jakob Spener was an emphasis on the practice of Christianity, not merely its doctrine. Pietism and its founders criticized vehemently the cold intellectual approach of those days. Not too much after Luther and the Reformation, the Protestant Reformation movement got lost in empty theological discussions. The thirty years war between Catholic and Protestant countries painted an even worse background and scenery in Europe at the time.

In other words, God has never let Himself be an “object” for human studies. God is not part of a “mechanical religious system” where individuals learn how to push the right buttons in

order to receive a type of benefit at the end of the “process” through established rituals, good behavior or bargains to satisfy an enormous quantity of human whims by making Him our “Aladdin” or “Waiter God” serving and responding to all of “His” selfish children's wishes.

Pietism is an invitation to the religion of the heart. Pietism is an invitation to experience and live out the concept, “Head, Heart and Hands” by understanding the importance of reading the Scriptures, spiritual knowledge, theological approaches, but at the same time, going much deeper, letting the letters and paragraphs of the Scriptures reach out to our hearts by making real what we call a rebirth, conversion and new life in Jesus. *We affirm the necessity of the new birth!*

And more than that, Pietism is an invitation to repeat Jesus' actions and way of life in our own historical path in this world by not only raising our hands vertically to accept Jesus in our public gatherings, but also extending our hands horizontally to be Jesus' hands reaching out to our neighbors as we live life on the ground for God's glory and our neighbor's good!

At this point the German theologian and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, comes to my mind when he says “Without us knowing it, we have given Him something to eat, we have given Him something to drink, we have clothed Him and visited Him, but also, without knowing it, we have rejected and excluded Him.”

Pietism appeals for a real coherence between *orthodoxy* and *orthopraxis*. Pietism appeals for an indivisible life by making me, myself and I only one person as I walk towards the platforms of our churches, pass by diverse work environments, attend my Sunday school programs and go back home to sit around the living room coffee table with my wife and children. An individual without masks. An individual without performances. An individual who does not pursue the cult of the ego. An individual who does not put care for appearance above everything else in

life. An individual without a double or triple life. An individual who has an honest and transparent devotion. An individual who continuously seeks to fortify his character through an honest and true life. An individual who watches what she believes and lives it out. John Arndt would call this attitude and behavior: True Christianity!

Now let's turn to the historical background behind what we just read in Luke. Then, we'll return to some applications and lessons from the parable, and finish the message by highlighting the parallel between the passage in Luke and the influence Covenant roots have for us this Founder's Day.

As we know, after the death of King Solomon in 975BC, the Israelites were split into two groups and kingdoms: The Kingdom of the North and the Kingdom of the South. The southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin were together called Judah, and their capital city, Jerusalem, was invaded by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. Therefore, that whole generation stayed captivated in Babylon.

As also we know for some reason the southern tribes were able to keep their traditions and roots even though they were in a distant and foreign land. Nevertheless, the northern ten tribes of Israel which were together called Israel, and had their capital city as Samaria, were invaded by the Assyrians and let them have and possess their daughters, influence their culture and customs, and alter their life style. As a result of this process, the Samaritans were born as a hybrid race between Jewish and other peoples and cultures.

Later on, the Samaritans would be rejected and marginalized by the "pure" Jewish race. Later on, the Samaritans would be considered "foreigners" in their own land. Later on, the

Samaritans would be called impure and unworthy people. Later on, the Samaritans would be seen as an inferior class by the "religious cast".

Jesus calls the path from Jerusalem to Jericho "the way down road". "The way down road" was not too long. "The way down road" was around 24 km, however, it was a dangerous route visited and well known by many thieves and robbers. "The way down road" was taken by everyone in this parable. "The way down road" was taken by 4 different classes of people: "a certain man" about whom we do not have a lot of details, a priest, a Levite and lastly, a Samaritan.

This "certain man" might have come home after his routine and daily work hours. This "certain man" might have looked forward to seeing his daughter after a week of travel. This "certain man" might have come back to see his wife again after being out of town due to his business affairs. The fact is that we do not know, but one thing we do know, he was coming down the road. He was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and left, leaving him half dead.

Most likely the priest and Levite left the Temple in Jerusalem and came down from Jerusalem to Jericho. They probably were also coming back home, after their worship and sacrifice, after their religious readings and traditional hymns, after spending hours talking about God, love, neighbor, mercy and forgiveness in the Temple. They were seen as the "high spiritual class" in Jerusalem. They were seen as "the closest people to God" by everyone. They were seen as examples and references of piety. Piety? They were just individuals of the law. They were just sons of the intellectual. They were just sons of the tasks, duties and liturgy! They saw the man who was almost dead and then passed by on the other side.

In the April 2013 edition of the Covenant Companion, we read "*Perhaps the most well-known Covenant adage is Paul Peter Waldenström's question, 'Where is it written?'*" I wish the Samaritan parable ended with the words in verse 28, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live." But, instead, there is a "but". Verse 29 says "But, he wanted to justify himself." He knew what to do, "but" he didn't put it into action. He knew, theoretically in his head what he was supposed to do, but he didn't let this intellectual exercise come to his heart and end up in an action through his hands.

As it is written "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, Love your neighbor as yourself."

Do this and you will live!

It is as simple as that.

As it is written.

This is the first lesson we have here today as we celebrate our 130th anniversary. "The way down road" is taken by all of us in a certain metaphoric way. "The way down road" is life. "The way down road" is inevitable. "The way down road" is before our eyes every day. "The way down road" is the opportunity we all have to make what we say and believe become real. "The way down road" is the chance we all have to put what we consider to be our values, moral standards and rules into practice.

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher and father of existentialism says what matters in this life is *how* you live life because we all are coming down on the same road. We all step down on the same ground of existence. Kierkegaard says the thing that makes each one of us different from the other is *how* we choose to live life!

Simplicity and directness in preaching was one of Spener's proposals to correct conditions in the church in his day. We look and find tough words. We look and try to impress everyone around us. However, what has been required as an echo along the centuries is only one simple thing: an action of love because *"He saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him.*

Let me ask you a question: Have you seen him? Have you seen her? He is next to you on the road, almost dead! She is asking you for help every day as you turn on your Christian radio or try to memorize more verses to preach and say everything by heart as you show everyone your ability to speak in public and your homiletic skills.

I began this sermon with the Swedish Christian immigrants who came from across the USA to Chicago for a meeting. The Covenant has been a denomination that cares for immigrants, marginalized people, justice and love. The Covenant has worked locally and internationally through diverse ministries and departments in order to reach out to different groups of people, nations and cultures.

Covenant World Mission, Covenant Relief, Love Mercy and Do Justice, Invitation to Racial Righteousness and Sankofa are some of the initiatives, ministries and departments that bring us back to Pietism and our Covenant roots in order to challenge us right now, today, in this very room. They remind us how to live the same principles in our neighborhood, under our roofs with our dear family, next door with our colleagues at work, among the huge immigrant and homeless population all over the US and how to make our life our mission by making our very existence our act of worship to God. We can make our basic daily routine an unique opportunity

to demonstrate an act of service. Life is my stage. Life is my pulpit. Life is my parish. Life is my Mission. Mission is my Life.

Eventually, the Church of England shut their door to John Wesley. The young man who was the founder of the Methodist movement, influenced by the Moravians with its roots in Pietism said, "I look upon the world as my parish!" You might look at me and ask: "Fábio, what does this have to do with me in the US? This means you and I have 7 billion opportunities to express God's love, God's transformation, God's compassion, God's Word and God's action every single day because we currently have 7 billion people on this planet!

This means you and I have over 300 million opportunities to keep our *orthodoxy* and *orthopraxis* coherent because we currently have over 300 million people in the United States. Also, according to Wikipedia, "nearly 14 million immigrants entered the United States from 2000 to 2010, and over one million persons were naturalized as U.S. citizens only in 2008." Look upon the world as your parish! Look upon your neighborhood as your parish. Look upon your office as your parish. Look upon the hospital you work as your parish. Look upon the university you attend as your parish! Look upon your own home environment as your parish.

The Samaritans were "immigrants" living in their own land. At least they faced the same reality as all immigrants face in a foreign country. The Swedish immigrants came to the US and understood what the Samaritans faced. By the way, I am getting ready to move to Japan as a Covenant missionary with my family. It is going to be the 5th country I will have lived in. It is going to be my 4th immigration process after Canada, Spain and the US. New language. New culture. New signs of communication. New habits. New atmosphere. New challenges!



I know personally what it means to be an immigrant: speaking with an accent, facing a totally new life, being far away from family and roots. Today I invite you to look around you. How many times have you looked past your neighbor? How many times have you chosen not to stop to help a homeless on the street because you were late to go to choir rehearsal at your church? How many times have you chosen not to help somebody else just because that individual did not belong to the same "social class" as yours, the same nationality or skin color? How many times have you decided not to show any interest in him because he was not part of your group of "Levites" and "priests"?

Let's remember Jesus' teachings and our roots. Let's remember our founding parents and the Pietism principles in order to understand this message is for me. This message is for you! This message is for us, Covenanters! History is an enormous repetition according to Kierkegaard. In fact, we are facing the same characteristics, historical facts and scenery that the founders of the Pietism movement faced at the end of the seventeen and beginning of the eighteen centuries.

Rancorous and insatiable theological disputes, cold church formalism, pseudo spirituality, control and arrogance in our leadership, a disconnect between what has been affirmed and what has been done, egocentric and selfish life style, insensitivity for those who are next to us in an unfavorable and marginalized condition...

How much of what you know that is a fruit and by-product of your theological routine is being put into action? How many times have you put God on the table and tried to dissect Him by discussing theological arguments, free will or predestination, types of baptism, who is sup-

posed to participate in Communion, who is supposed to serve Communion, who is allowed to preach in our gatherings?

How much of your heart does your theology have? How often do you consider that your theology is in your heart and then also put it into action through an act of service by rescuing or helping or forgiving your neighbor on the road? How many times have you forgotten he was created like you - in God's image - *Imago Dei* !

Dietrich Bonhoeffer comes to mind once again. He said "The human being lives life without being a human being". We have become selfish narcissists. We have become our own masters. We have become human beings without hearts even though we might profess our faith. This is dangerous ground!

I ask you. I ask myself. What kind of faith do I have? Our faith may be in ourselves. Our faith may be in our career and personal accomplishments. Our faith may be the result of any type of neurolinguistic speech and positive determinism. (For example, people wake up and say, "This is going to be a blessed day. I prophesy that this will happen." We might know it as "name it and claim it". But this is not faith. This type of positive thought may produce external accomplishments, but it does not provoke internal change.) Our faith may be a pseudo-faith. What we call faith is not faith! Our faith may not be a real, genuine and authentic faith in Jesus according to Jesus and according to the Gospels.

I would call what we call "faith" just a group of beliefs. A group of beliefs that we learn from a certain religious environment where an individual grew up memorizing religious hymns and readings. A group of beliefs that does not have any effect in one's life because they are just part of an intellectual storing tank and belong to a "rich" knowledge for arguments and foolish

theological disputes that go nowhere! A group of beliefs that are part of a religious and mechanical flow. A group of beliefs that are more like a bunch of amulets that have to do more with a pagan ritual than a deep commitment to God's Word and our neighbor. When an individual faces a bad day, when she suddenly receives notice from her doctor that she has an irreversible health condition, when he finds out someone close to him got in a car accident, this individual loses his "faith"! Perhaps he never had it.

I am not surprised when I hear people put their Bibles under their pillows before they go to bed in order to find out a solution for their insomnia. I am not surprised when I hear people trying to give their tithes to churches with the sole purpose of expecting God to give them back tenfold, fiftyfold or even one hundred fold. They bring their whole tithes to the storehouse and treat it like a bank or as if they're putting their money in the stock market and they expect God to guarantee them an unlimited bull market.

I am not surprised when I observe people applauding two different leaders in the same pulpit without observing that what "preacher B" is saying is the opposite of what "preacher A" just said a few minutes ago, because the listeners were moved by the preachers' tones of voice, powerful eloquence and communication techniques. They did not realize that what they said had nothing to do with Jesus even though their words and vocabulary carried the label "Jesus".

We have lost the discernment and knowledge of the pure and simple content of Jesus' teachings according to the Gospels in the Scriptures. We have lost the genuine message of the cross as it was lost in the days when our founders spoke God's Word against the corruption and anesthesia which took place in most churches and leadership.

The first proposal in Spener's "Pia Desideria" is an intensive study of the whole Bible with an emphasis on practical piety and theological education. For centuries the Scriptures were not able to be read and we did not have access to them due to what we call "church" as a religious institution. They had power. They had control. They retained God's Word by calling themselves "representatives of God on earth". They guided generations after generations on behalf of a "pseudo God". They taught about a certain faith that was just fruit of a group of beliefs and a by-product of their personal interests and human construction.

Today, there are thousands and thousands of Bibles. It is the number one best seller around the world, but ironically it is not read as much as it is sold. It is available in all electronic devices and framed in beautiful colors and figures against our walls in our offices and living rooms. However, we have become ignorant by choice. This laziness is a by-product of religion. It is the same disease that was present before the Reformation, and unfortunately, it has affected most of our Protestant churches after some decades of the same Reformation.

This is what religion means: a human construction with political, economical and social hidden interests trying to reach out to God. This term is "religare" in Latin. We can see how the word "religion" comes from this Latin verb. However, God's love does not require human effort - it is a unilateral and unconditional love.

God calls us. God calls you and me. God calls everyone! God calls us without any intermediaries. The only intermediary between me and God is Jesus Christ! *We affirm the centrality of the word of God!*

Phillip Jakob Spener also focused on a renewed commitment to the spiritual priesthood of all believers in his "Pia Desideria". It is what Luther claimed when he nailed his ninety-five the-

ses to the door of All Saint's Church in Wittenberg, Germany on October 31, 1517. It is what John Wycliffe, as one of the predecessors to the Reformation, claimed in his life through his teachings and preachings.

Our beginning, our roots and our first foundation point to small groups of people getting together in what was called Conventicles. Lay Ministry has been taking place in our denomination gradually over centuries and has been seen as one of the crucial characteristics in the Pietism movement since the beginning. We observe the purpose of the powerful affirmation "*We are a priesthood of all believers*" to set us free in order to serve and live for God's glory and our neighbor's good! *We affirm the church as a fellowship of believers!*

Samaritans have a place in this spiritual priesthood! Whoever has a sincere and pure heart. Whoever confesses Jesus as Lord has a place in this spiritual priesthood. Whoever wants to serve has a place in this spiritual priesthood. It is not about special credentials. It is not about special certificates. It is not about a well known degree in any of our expensive and recognized theological seminaries. It is not about being a priest or Levite. It is about our freedom in Christ and our consciousness that He has called us chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession in order to declare the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light. *We affirm the reality of freedom in Christ!*

You might ask me: Fábio, what does this message have to do with me? I know I am talking to you this morning. Maybe you have grown up in a religious Christian environment. Maybe you have learned religious hymns and memorized verses from the Scriptures. Maybe you have prayed around the table with your parents and grandparents. Maybe you have been a Covenanter for years. Maybe your father or grandfather was a Covenant pastor. However, you have been

passing by homeless people pretending not to see them and their needs. You might be living a double life telling your wife you have to work late when that is not the truth. Maybe you have added a group of beliefs to your mind, but never experienced faith in your heart as a result of serenity for your soul and peace for your mind through a real and authentic faith in Jesus by grace.

There is one more lesson I would like to leave with you before we pray. As it is written “Go and do likewise!” Let me repeat this once again please. “Go and do likewise.” From my heart my invitation is to ask you as you already know, as you already answered *“The one who had mercy on him”* is to go and do likewise for God’s glory and your neighbor’s good!

Dear Father, we thank You for our history and denomination. We thank You for our roots and inspiring personalities such as Johann Arndt, Philip Jakob Spener, August Hermann Francke, Nicolaus Zinzendorf and others. Help us live out what we profess and confess. Help us have your law in our heads and hearts, helping us to put them in action daily. Help us make our *orthodoxy* and *orthopraxis* to be one integrated movement. Help us to “go and do likewise”. Thank You for this powerful and meaningful celebration. Thank you for every single Covenant church, Covenant pastor, Covenant ministry and Covenant department. In Jesus' almighty name I pray.

Amen, amen and amen!

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