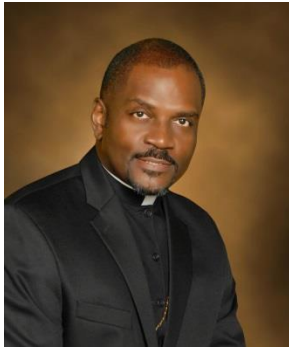


Part 10: We are a justice-seeking conference.

Lance L. Davis serves as the senior pastor of New Zion Covenant Church in Dolton, IL and is married to Dr. Kara E. Davis and they have four wonderful children: Grace, Andrew, Lance and Natalie.



He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does The Lord require of you. (Micah 6:8)

I, therefore, the prisoner of The Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace but to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God? (Ephesians 4:1-3)

In November of 1884, C. A. Björk wrote a letter that could be classified as the inaugural letter of the Covenant Church. Björk sought to settle the dispute between the Mission and Ansgar Synods which centered on the subject of denominationalism. On the one hand, the Mission Friends wanted to establish a denominational Covenant and on the other hand, the Ansgar Mission repudiated the idea of establishing a denomination. In his argument for establishing a denomination, Björk insisted, "Taking such a step [the organization of a Covenant] will without doubt be pleasing to God and conduce to His glory, further His kingdom, and confound the enemies who now rejoice in the division which exists in the work." (Karl Olsson, *By One Spirit*, pg. 288)

Björk's argument for a denomination was not simply for the glory of God, but it was also to bring unity among the pastors who clung vehemently to opposing ideals. Perhaps, it can be said that at the very beginning of the establishment of the ECC that Ephesians 4:3 resonated with Björk and the other Mission Friends in that they endeavored to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." They desired to establish a unified community (or Covenant) that would weather the storms of opposing views because such a course would ultimately glorify God.

As we fast forward to the present, there are still many disputes that seek to divide the Christian Church. Today, however, the Church appears to be split over their varying opinions concerning social, political or economic issues. Chasms within the postmodern Church are now caused by issues of justice and not necessarily Church discipline or doctrine. Civil rights, women's rights, voting rights and rights of personal choice are not only being argued within courtrooms and boardrooms, but also in many denominational conferences and ecumenical circles. All too often, the mere discussion of the issues has been a cause for fall-out among Believers. Many churches and denominations have been chided and criticized for taking one position over another. The potential fallout from simply discussing issues of rights and justice has caused many churches and denominations to clamp-down and refuse to discuss certain issues of justice at all. However, avoiding the issues all too often create division within the church as well.

Unlike many Christian denominations, the Evangelical Covenant Church has taken a different approach towards addressing issues of justice by making it one of its Mission Priorities; Love Mercy, Do Justice. While our approach is different, it's not new. As Björk and the Mission Friends sought unity within diversity in the early days of the Covenant, so do we today. The ECC seeks to expose and explore the issues of justice as a means to do justice. Doing justice means that we must expose injustices such as mass incarceration, human trafficking, and immigration. Exposing the injustices that plague our society informs the Christian practices of Covenant congregations and the communities that we serve. Once our communities are adequately informed of the challenges we face, then collectively we can explore ways to eradicate or at least minimize the effects of the injustices.

Not only are we a Covenant that resolves to do justice, but as an intentionally multi-ethnic Covenant, we seek to do justice together. As Björk desired, we too desire to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" by working together to make life better for the communities we serve with everyone at the table. We in the Central Conference aim to do our part in this collective justice-seeking work by maintaining a functional and relevant multiethnic Compassion, Mercy and Justice Commission. As a commission, the Central Conference CMJ exposes and explores societal injustices and seeks God's will in redressing the challenges of our world. As individuals, when we try to discuss the injustices within our ministry contexts, we help the world to see the problem; but when we seek and do justice together, we show the world the power of our God. In the ECC we've learned that "If you want to go fast, go alone; but if you want to go far, go together." The Central Conference: Doing Justice Together.

Bible Study

Ephesians 4:1-3; Psalm 82:3

The harmony and syncopation of a well-trained orchestra improves only as the group learns to work together. Unity within the orchestral community produces magnificent music flawlessly and repeatedly. The same holds true with any group whose success depends upon the relentless cooperation of the whole. Athletic teams, organizations and corporations all benefit proportionately to the group's desire to operate as one. As a denomination, one of the Mission Priorities of the ECC is to "Love Mercy, Do Justice." Another major objective of the Covenant is to reflect the mosaic of humanity that gathers around the throne of God by being intentionally multiethnic. Therefore, as we seek to carry out the mission aim of loving mercy and doing justice, we also seek to do so in complete harmony (or unity) with our brothers and sisters in Christ. It is our desire as Covenanters to avoid disunity within the Body in the matters of doctrine as long as we refrain from biblical heresy.

In 1884, A.L. Skoog and A.A. Svensen jointly wrote a statement in reference to the division that arose between the Mission Friends and the Ansgar Mission over the issue of establishing a denomination. The former opted for a denomination [The Covenant] and the latter vehemently opposed becoming a denomination. Skoog and Svensen wrote, "[The suggestion to form a Covenant] was first proposed by some of the brethren in the board of the Tabernacle Church in Chicago who observed with sorrow the division which prevailed among Christians and who

believed that there ought to be a meeting whereat the question of the best means of uniting Christians might be explored." (Karl Olsson, *By One Spirit*, pg. 285) It can be said then that the ECC was birthed out of the idea that we as Believers should do all that we can, as the Apostle Paul would put it, to endeavor "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Eph. 4:3)

When Paul penned those words, he was under house arrest in Rome. As he encouraged the Church of Ephesus to "walk worthy of the calling with which [they] were called" (4:1), he also insisted that they stay unified while walking the walk of their calling. Paul's admonishment to the Ephesians to "preserve the unity" tells of his concern for the potential for division among the Believers. Ephesus was a major trading artery of the Roman Empire. As such, there were many cultures and ethnicities that either lived or traded there. Additionally, Ephesus was the home to one of the seven ancient wonders of the world; the Temple of Diana. This pagan fertility goddess which was worshipped by many, if not most, of the Ephesians, also attracted many worshippers and admirers from surrounding territories.

Paul established the Church of Ephesus towards the end of his second missionary journey and left Priscilla and Aquila to continue the gospel ministry after his departure (Acts 18:18-21). On Paul's third missionary journey, he stayed in Ephesus for three years. During this time, many miracles were performed by Paul under the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:18-20). The Spirit of God moved so mightily that many Ephesians dropped their pagan worship, believed the gospel message and accepted Jesus as their Lord. Many craftsmen who made and sold Diana trinkets and objects of worship became enraged and began rioting in the streets after they began to lose revenue.

Many who came to Christ in Ephesus during those days were both, Jew and gentile, men and women, young and old; a mosaic of humanity and a wide range of cultures. Paul, reminds the believers from his place of confinement to walk "with all lowliness and gentleness [with] long-suffering." (4:2) Such virtues would be needed as the family of faith sought to do the will of God. He knew that they would need to walk in supernatural harmony if the Lord were to get the glory from His people. Paul follows up by insisting that the Church should "endeavor" or make haste to protect and preserve the unity of the Body which is made possible by the Holy Spirit. With all of its cultural, social and economic diversity, the Church of Ephesus needed to make sure that it glorified God through their unity. In His prayer to the Father for His followers, Jesus says, "And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one..."

(John 17:22) Our greatest gift to give back to God is our capacity to unify as Believers and servants of The Lord.

At the same time, our unity is made perfect in our service. Our service to the Lord, to one another and to the lost, lonely and marginalized evidences our obedience to Christ and our willingness to follow Him. When we serve together, the world sees our collective service or our collective lights shining and then glorifies the Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:16) Again, Jesus says in John 17:21, "that they all may be one... that the world may believe that you sent Me." Our role as disciples of Christ is to become one as we work the works of God. While these works draw the world's attention to us, it is our unity that turns their attention to God. But what are the works of the Church? What works should the Church of Jesus be involved in

today? Psalm 82:3 provides a clear answer to the question. Righteousness working within the hearts of the Believers should compel us to "Defend the poor and fatherless [and] Do justice to the afflicted and needy." James 1:27 says, "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world." Again, as Believers we are to "do something" in light of what we see in the world; we are not to shy away.

As we worship, pray, eat and fellowship together, we should additionally find ourselves serving and advocating for the less fortunate and the socially challenged as a unified body; as the family of heaven. Collectively, the Christian community should be engaged in "Doing Justice" and not merely talking about justice issues. Doreen Olson, executive minister of Christian formation, once stated that "Doing justice is not peripheral to being a Christian. It is one of the central aspects of our faith." When we see the world engaging in activities that takes advantage of the outcast, the fatherless, the poor and the oppressed, we have a divine obligation to "get involved." However, getting involved should not always be about the Lone Ranger Christian coming up against the "wiles of the enemy" alone. On the contrary, the world should see Christians banding together to redress the social, political and economic injustices that ravage the land and destroys the hope of humanity. Serving Christ means more than looking only to the things of "me and mine." Moreover, it is a walk that requires us to look at the struggles and challenges of others and to collectively do what we can to bring relief to the hurt and hope to the poor.

Justice is defined in a general sense as the maintenance or administration of what is just especially by the impartial adjustment of conflicting claims. More briefly, justice means conformity to truth, fact, or reason. In John 14:5, Jesus exclaims, "I am the way, the truth and the life." Therefore, it is Christ that sets the standard for justice as well as judgment, especially among Believers who are called to "walk" according to Christ. To live as Christ would require that we not only seek justice, but do justice. And in our doing justice we've been called by God to do it together.

Questions:

1. What are some of the obvious social injustices that impact your community or the community in which your church is located?
2. List some of the barriers to serving the needy, the poor and the marginalized.
3. Discuss the social climate and overall culture of Ephesus. Explain how your community is similar and how it differs from Ephesus. Take note of population diversity and cultural norms.
4. After reading our lesson, do you believe that Christians should or should not engage in social injustice issues?
5. Explain how the church today can become more relevant within the broader society.
6. Do you believe the church of today has let the poor and needy down or that the church has done an adequate job of defending the poor and attending to their needs?
7. What can you do within your own context to foster an environment of spiritual cooperation in addressing injustices?
8. Discuss some of the triumphs and challenges of unifying church members.