

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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The "Mission Friends" Movement

by Dan Trygg

"I am a friend to all who fear You, to those who keep Your precepts."

Psalms 119:63

"Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be amazed that I told you that you must be born again."

John 3:6,7

"Let a person regard us in this way: as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. ² Moreover, it is required of stewards that each be found faithful... ⁶ I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up against another."

1 Corinthians 4:1-2,6

"And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another."

Romans 15:14

After the Edict of Thessalonica in 380 A.D., the Christian faith was deemed to be the official religion of the Roman Empire. No other gods or religious practices were legal. One of the practical consequences of this status was that pagans were attending churches, and professing faith, whether they understood what it was all about, or not. **It also became routine to baptize newly born infants, in the belief that this would remove the original sin nature, remove any uncleanness due to inborn sin, and would cause them to be spiritually regenerated ("born again").** Soon, virtually everyone was a "baptized Christian" by virtue of being born in the Roman Empire. The Roman Church taught that Christ's grace was mediated by the Church, through seven sacraments officiated by priests. **Unfortunately, if anyone would step back to look, ...it obviously was not effective at producing a transformed life!** Most people, while at least minimally religiously observant, were not significantly pious or living to serve God. Throughout its history, the Roman Church was very concerned that people remain faithful to its "right beliefs", even though there seemed to be little concern or expectation of most people living a dedicated life. **After a relatively brief glimmer of revival fire in the early 1400's, followed by reformation and new hope in the 1500's, the religious wars in Europe and the settling in of a religious system within Lutheranism that was very similar to the dynamics of Roman Catholicism caused the rise of a new "dead orthodoxy".** People were all thought to be Christians, because they were born into so-called Christian families, and baptized into the church, which was thought to cause spiritual rebirth. **Many dutifully attended church meetings, but they were dull, impersonal and formalistic. There was little "life" to be found there.**

Through the influence of Pietistic thought, by means of the personal devotional books by Johann Arndt, and the impact of Philip Jacob Spener's book, *Pia Desideria*, (Pious Wishes - 1675), which was a manual on church reform, **some people began to realize that there was more, and began to meet together to pursue a deeper walk of faith.** In addition, the practical outworking of faith to meet social and practical needs, through the establishment of orphanages, schools, work training education, and helping the poor and disenfranchised captured the holy imagination of believers, and **they sought to serve God by serving people in similar "unorthodox" ways, ...that is in ways that were outside of church.** The missionary accounts of Moravian missionaries, and the example of their community life together and their "religion of the heart" was also captivating to hungry seekers. The printing press was publishing not only Bibles, and devotional books, but also books and accounts of missionary endeavors, and songbooks that shared the music of Moravian hymns and other simple songs of worship that people could learn and sing at home. **People longed for a warm, personal, practical experience of God that was described and shared through these publications.**

Furthermore, **small gatherings of true, born-again believers began to meet informally for Bible study, prayer, fellowship and to worship.** Some also began to work together to meet needs in their communities, or even to form missionary societies to support and send missionaries to other parts of the world. **These meetings were seen as radical and dangerous by the official state churches in Europe.** In Sweden, for example, the influence of the Moravian heart for devotion and worship, and the disciplines of personal and small group Bible study that grew out of Pietism, caused enough alarm to the established state Lutheran church that **a Swedish Edict Against Conventicles was passed into law in 1726. This outlawed meeting in small groups outside the parish church building, and without the supervision of the pastor.** In spite of this attempt to control and quash such meetings, the movement kept gathering steam, until a great revival broke out in the 1830's (Note: That was after over 100 years of religious suppression!). This Edict was finally repealed in 1858, and religious toleration was permitted in Sweden. Nevertheless, **the Swedish Lutheran Church continued to view these small home gatherings as radicals.** In the 1870's they defined them as being outside of historical Lutheranism, because they emphasized (1.) the believer's church (i.e., that the true church consisted only of those who had been born again, not the all-encompassing "folk church") was a more accurate

approximation of what is described in the NT; and (2.) the Bible is the only authority for faith and practice (i.e., doctrinal formulations, such as creeds or the Augsburg Confession are valued, but are not embraced as normative or binding).

As a result, in 1878 the Swedish Mission Friends (Svenska Missionsförbundet) was first formed in Sweden, and the American expression of that movement was the formation of the *Evangelical Covenant Church* in 1885. Mission Friends had been in America, among immigrant Swedes since the mid-1860's. They continued to be influenced by revival and renewal movements in Sweden. While the state churches in Europe had emphasized "right belief", asking, "Are you *sound*?", the Pietist response had been, "Are you *saved*?" And, while the formalistic churches were asking, "Are you *going to church*?" the Mission Friends and Covenanters would ask the question, "Are you *living in Jesus*?" These questions get at the heart of a personal relationship with Christ, a fundamental distinctive of this movement.

The revival among the Swedes at home, and here in the US, was characterized by the three "C's": (1.) conversion, ...this was *the message*, "You need to be converted."; (2.) the colporteur was *the messenger* ("colporteur" usually meant a distributor of tracts and literature); and (3.) the conventicle, or *meeting together*, which was *the method*. A conventicle was a small group that meant for Bible study, worship, fellowship and prayer. Another key question that characterized the Mission Friends who gathered for these meetings was, "How goes your walk?" This was a lead-in to personal sharing, study, discussion and prayer. It offered accountability, but emphasized the reality that our spiritual walk is a life-long pilgrim journey. We need the accountability and support of others along the way. From the beginning, the emphasis of the Mission Friends and Covenanters was on living out your faith in daily life.

Another interesting distinction of the Mission Friends or Covenant movement is that they have *really chosen to make the Bible their only rule for faith and practice*. Early on, while there was discussion and debate about what kind of doctrinal statement they should have, one of the leaders suggested that they choose *not* to live by a creed, but to live with the freedom and tension of staying focused on the Word of God for what they believe. So, instead of a creed or doctrinal statement, they have chosen to live by a watchword, "Where is it written?" This forces them to go back to the scripture as their authority for their beliefs. It allows for freedom of difference and discussion in areas that are *not clear* and definitive, but brings us all together in agreement with what *is clearly taught* in the Word of God. Consequently, the Covenant movement has chosen to rest their identity on *six affirmations*:

- 1.) the Bible as the *only authority in matters of faith, doctrine and life*;
- 2.) the necessity of the *new birth in Christ*;
- 3.) the church as a fellowship of *believers*;
- 4.) the commitment to the *whole mission of the church*;
- 5.) a conscious *dependence on the Holy Spirit*; and
- 6.) the reality of *freedom in Christ*.

Another key principle is reflected by Psalm 119:63, "I am a friend to all who fear You." This text was preached at the first meeting of the newly formed group. While so many other groups were focused on what their *distinctives* were, ...what made them *different*..., the Covenant was founded on the idea that we want to befriend and work together with others who reverence and obey God. What do we share *in common with* other believers? **The Evangelical Covenant Church seeks to gather like-minded believers who can embrace our common beliefs, and are willing to work together to serve Jesus Christ by each doing our part to deepen our own walk with Him, to help each other grow in faith and effective service in Christ, and to combine resources to expand the work of His kingdom worldwide.**

The ECC is now one of the fastest growing denominations in North America. It is comprised of 875 congregations in the United States and Canada. It is also one of the most diverse groups, as well. More than 20% of its churches are ethnic or multi-ethnic. There are over 40 African-American churches, over 50 Hispanic churches, and over 30 Asian American churches within the Covenant. **Mission efforts at home** have taken a wide variety of expressions, including efforts to bring the love of Christ and to offer help to the hurting, the marginalized, the powerless and the oppressed. **World missions** initially reached into native communities in Alaska and into China. Over the years this has expanded to other areas in Africa, South America, Asia and Europe. There are now 14 national Covenant churches on five continents that have ties to the ECC. The Covenant Church in Congo, which originated in 1936, now has more members than the ECC churches in North America! **Covenant World Relief** is another arm of the Covenant ministry which is offering disaster relief and community development to address human suffering, especially through the transformation of individuals and families in the name of Christ.

The ECC is a church of churches. Each church is a family of believers who choose to fellowship and work together for Christ within their own body, and in their local community. Each church is an independent community of believers, which owns its own property and handles its own affairs, but which chooses to work with other churches in the ECC to accomplish larger things together than what they could do on their own.