

the center letter

Cultivating Missional Communities

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Communities of Reconciliation in a Culture of Fear and Revenge

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So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation: that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. (2 Cor. 5:17-19).

The church as “missional” is a sent community, a community called and sent by God into particular social-cultural-historical contexts. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, the purpose of the church is to discern, to embody, and to proclaim the life-giving, life-saving, and life-fulfilling gospel of Jesus Christ. This description of the church assumes that the church has something to offer the world that the world cannot know on its own. And more, it assumes that what the church has to offer is important, that it will make a difference to the life of the world. Much more than social service or social action, more than church growth or church planting, mission involves the identification, confrontation, and transformation of all that blocks the flourishing of life as intended by the one who came “that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10.) In other words, the missional church is thrust into active engagement with that which threatens the life of the world.

The intent of *The Center Letter* is to be a resource for those church leaders who are guiding their churches out of the grasp of Christendom and toward a new future as more faithful and effective missional communities. Not a quick read, *The Center Letter* is for the questioning and thinking church leader. It does not provide easy answers to complex issues but rather tries to reveal the complexity of the issues facing the church at this moment in history. It does not offer quick-fix solutions to operational problems but rather attempts to address systemic foundational and presuppositional issues which churches must confront if they are to become intentional missional communities in this new post-Christendom era. It does so by utilizing the rich biblical-theological heritage as well as thoughtful analysis and critique of the contemporary context.

This particular series of *The Center Letter* hopes to stimulate reflection and discussion about what is involved as missional churches seek to be ambassadors for Christ by embodying and proclaiming the messages of reconciliation in a culture increasingly shaped by fear and revenge. This will also be the theme for the Center’s 2008 Convocation in Chicago, IL on July 17-19 (see www.missionalchurch.org for more details). The intent of this issue is to provide an overview, while the following issues of 2008 will go more deeply by:

- (1) Exploring the principalities and powers that shape today’s culture of fear and revenge. What are the thought patterns and practices that shape a culture preoccupied with unlikely dangers that take on the status of imminent threats? How does fear determine our actions and interactions with the world? How does fear become anger which is expressed in a rhetoric of revenge?
- (2) Considering the biblical language and images of reconciliation. Reconciliation with God and with others is at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. How does the biblical theme of reconciliation engage, challenge, and transform the thought patterns and practices of fear and revenge? How does the biblical message of God’s peace incarnated in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit speak to a culture shaped by deep levels of anxiety and vulnerability?
- (3) Discovering how the church as a community of reconciliation is a sign, foretaste, and instrument of God’s reconciling intent for the world. How do Christian communities provide an alternative to the larger culture’s attitudes and behaviors of fear and revenge? How does the church witness to God’s promise to provide all that is needed for the flourishing of human life?
- (4) Reflecting on the practices that shape communities of reconciliation for their witness in a broken and alienated world. How can the biblical language and images of reconciliation be embodied with Christian congregations? What are the barriers to and what is the liberating effect of these practices? What is required for the cultivation of resolve and courage to move from concerns of safety and security to the practices of hospitality and generosity?

A Culture of Fear. Marc Siegel, begins his discussion of the current “epidemic of fear” with the following observation:

Fear invades our homes like never before, affecting more and more people. Newspaper headlines are apocalyptic warnings. Media obsessions fuel our cycles of worry, which burn out only to be replaced by more alarming cycles. The passions and routines of everyday life are our primary defenses against this contagious fear. These defenses, however, are being eroded, bom-

barded by the ongoing doom-and-gloom of the daily news. Twenty-four hours of cable news infiltrates our sleep and may be as dangerous to our health as cigarette smoke is to our defenses against cancer.¹

While fear can be a useful defense when faced with genuine threats to survival, exaggerated fear can be dangerous to human physical and psychological well-being. Also, fear is a strong motivator which can be manipulated and exploited by the media, politicians, and advertisers.

The Rhetoric of Revenge. The terrorist attacks on 9/11 created a new level of anxiety and vulnerability among the American people. Responding initially with astonishment and grief, fear quickly became anger, and eventually the nation became caught up in the rhetoric of revenge. Politicians and others began calling for retaliation: the terrorists had threatened the security and safety of the greatest country on earth and they must be caught and made to pay for this outrage. Thus the country mobilized for war, for an all out battle against international terrorism.

Fear and anger make people want to attack, to search out those responsible and punish them. But in the grip of excessive fear, proper perspective can be lost and people may lash out, turning fear into aggression and violence. Being afraid, people can become ruthless, seeking to inflict pain and suffering upon their enemies. In the face of fear, anxiety, and feelings of vulnerability, justice may be redefined as vengeance. When reason is overwhelmed by outrage, emotion takes over and the desire to “get even” begins to shape personal and collective behavior.

The rhetoric of revenge can shape not only a nation’s response to terrorism, but the response to all perceived threats to personal well-being. For example, getting tough on crime can all too often become linked with the desire for vengeance. Rather than a longing for justice, vindictiveness may begin to creep into laws as punishment becomes excessive and cruel. Thus the debate about whether the criminal justice system is intended to punish wrong doers or to rehabilitate them for useful and productive lives.

The Biblical Message of Reconciliation. Rather than the cultural story of vulnerability, anxiety, and dread, the church offers a different story. The church’s story is of a loving God who creates and sustains all that exists. And more, this all-powerful God took human form and in Jesus Christ manifested a way of life shaped not by fear and revenge, but by hope and compassion. In Second Corinthians, the Apostle Paul offers three powerful incentives for the church to live by faith and confidently trust in the reconciling gospel of Jesus Christ.

The first incentive is “**the fear of the Lord**” (2 Cor. 5:11). Rather than cowering before a coercive and threatening power, the gospel stimulates a sense of awe before the reconciling God who calms our fears and delivers us from evil. “Fear of the Lord’ is the deeply sane recognition that we are not God.”² A sobering awareness of God’s holiness and an awesome recognition of God’s justice provides a necessary perspective for the message of reconciliation. Because in Jesus Christ “the riches of God’s kindness and forbearance and patience” (Rom. 2:4) are revealed, those who fear God have nothing else to fear.

The second incentive is “**the constraining love of Christ**” (2 Cor. 5:14). It is Christ’s love demonstrated most forcefully upon the cross, that provides the energy and power for the message of reconciliation. “It is not just our love for Christ, it is the love of Christ, that shapes, molds, and intensifies our dedication to the task of restoring to spiritually dead people the life they have lost and their purpose for living.”³ The crucified and risen Christ provides the purpose and the passion for reconciliation.

The third incentive is “**the power of a new creation**” (2 Cor. 5:17). The God who created all that exists and who in the cross of Jesus Christ experienced the hatred and enmity of the creaturely world, has, through the Holy Spirit, brought about a total renewal of all of creation. Much more than accommodation or tolerance, the reconciliation to be found within God’s new way of life is one of radical relationship transformation. Reconciliation within a new creation is God’s plan for dealing with fear, alienation, conflict, and even the human cry for vengeance.

The Ministry of Reconciliation. To become active ambassadors for Christ, Christians must passively receive the new and enduring relationship with God which is offered through faith in Jesus Christ. There is nothing that we human beings can do on our own to merit reconciliation. The only response to what God has done on our behalf is: (1) to celebrate it through committed lives filled with thanksgiving and praise; (2) to live freely and gratefully within God’s new creation, enjoying restored relationships with God and with one another; (3) to share the good news with our neighbors, even our enemies, to the end of the earth. “The Church, therefore lives in that sphere of reality in which it is proper to acknowledge and testify to reconciliation because we have been reconciled; in which it is fitting to make peace because peace has already been made; in which it is truthful to speak to and welcome strangers because we ourselves have been spoken to and welcomed by God, and so have become no longer strangers but fellow-citizens.”⁴

Engaging in the ministry of reconciliation, the church is called to be both realistic and hopeful. With eyes wide open, the church is to engage the fear, anxiety, and injustice of the world. The church can confront such harsh realities because it lives from hopeful expectation, trusting in God’s promise of a time when God will dwell with God’s people and “wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more” (Rev. 21:3). The church “lives from reconciliation toward reconciliation, from the reconciliation that God has achieved in Christ to the consummation of God’s community with God’s reconciled creation.”⁵ As the church prays, “Thy kingdom come,” it expresses a confident anticipation of the transformation of all reality, a future which has been inaugurated in the history of Jesus Christ.

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¹ Marc Siegel, *False Alarm: The Truth About the Epidemic of Fear* (Wiley & Sons, 2005), p. 1.

² Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Cowley Press, 2001), p. 103.

³ Samuel George Hines and Curtiss Paul De Young, *Beyond Rhetoric: Reconciliation As A Way of Life* (Judson Press, 2000).

⁴ John Webster, “The Ethics of Reconciliation,” in *The Theology of Reconciliation*, Colin Gunton, ed. (T&T Clark, 2003), p. 120.

⁵ Christoph Schwobel, “Reconciliation: Some Biblical Observations for Dogmatic Reconstruction,” in *The Theology of Reconciliation*, p. 35.

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