



# Missional Journal

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## Walls of Hostility

November 9, 1989 marks the fall of the Berlin Wall and symbolizes the end of the Cold War, the dissolution of the Soviet block, and the re-unification of Germany. I don't have the expertise to unpack all the implications of this event, but surely this is clear: the destruction of the Wall signalled to everyone that communism had failed and that there were other and greater powers in the world.

When Christianity entered the ancient world another wall symbolized even deeper, more intractable alienation among the world's peoples. This was the temple wall that separated the "court of the gentiles" from the inner courts accessible only to Jews. Gentiles who tried to pass the barrier were subject to a penalty of death not unlike Germans who tried to escape from East to West Berlin.

It is likely that Paul alludes to this wall when he states that Christ "is our peace, who has made the two [Jew and Gentile] one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility . . . to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace" (Eph. 2:14-16). This text is crucial for Paul's framing of the gospel. The reconciliation of Jew and Gentile is not some kind of happy "extra" that Jesus brings. Rather, it is integral to how Paul interprets the effect of Christ's death and resurrection.

In the cross God is reconciling the world to himself, but he is also reconciling humans with one another. **Reconciliation is vertical and horizontal.** The challenge of integrating Jews and Gentiles into one body was not only difficult--as we see in Acts and Romans--it was strategically important to the mission of God and the effectiveness of Paul's ministry. The plausibility of the message about Jesus was established in part

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by the visibility of Jews and Gentiles transcending centuries of hostility.

Bringing reconciliation among the peoples of the world must always be part of the missional agenda. The horrors of Rwanda in the bloody massacres of 1994 were perpetrated in a nation estimated to be 80-90% "Christian." It has been argued that the tribal animosities that drove much of the conflict were created in part by colonialist *and missionary literature*, and anthropological studies of the early 20th century.[1] In other words, Western missionaries in Rwanda were complicit in building hostility rather than bridging it.

But we should not flatter ourselves in thinking we have avoided these problems ourselves. Racial alienation is alive and well in the church in North America. We continue struggling with the challenge of "dividing walls." In a post-Christian society where our words have less impact, we must refocus on the powerful witness of "lived out" reconciliation among peoples of different color and culture.

I was reminded of this recently while visiting with a new friend, Dr. Paul Husband, who has been the pastor of Tunica Presbyterian Church for 20 years. We met to talk about the missional church movement. I think I learned more from our time together than Paul did.

Located 35 miles south of Memphis, Tunica County, Mississippi made headlines in 1988 as the poorest county in America. Few black families live above the poverty level and the county is well-known for its racial segregation. I was quite taken by Paul's account of what God has been doing in Tunica over the last two decades, so I asked him to share the story:

*When I came to Tunica in 1988 I thought I would get to know several black pastors so I could share what I had learned in seminary. But the pastors were so busy working secular jobs 40 to 50 hours a week, and then preaching on Sundays, that they did not have time to sit under my tutelage. It's a good thing they didn't!*

*In the spring of 1996 black pastor Rodney Hibbler invited me to attend the youth group he and his wife, Jenny, led on Tuesday nights. Rodney had only a high school education and no seminary training. I thought I would be able to help him with his youth group since I had been a youth*

minster for seven years and had an MDiv and PhD in church history. Was I ever wrong!

When I arrived that night about 120 teenagers were packed into a small church singing praise and worship songs with all their might. Rodney next opened the floor for one-sentence testimonies. One by one the teenagers stood and gave their praise to God: "I just thank God for the privilege of singing His praise tonight," "I praise God for the Bible," "I praise my Lord Jesus for changing my heart and forgiving me all my sins...." Everyone had something for which they gave thanks and praise to the Lord. Next the Bible study began and the teenagers participated by quoting verse after Bible verse with Rodney and Jenny. I had planned on helping them do youth ministry--even though I had a hard time getting 15 teenagers to attend my youth group, much less sing praises with gusto, give testimonies, and quote Scripture. God humbled me that night and showed me how much I could learn from my black brothers and sisters.

The Lord knit our hearts together, and I soon learned that Rodney knew his Bible backwards and forwards and could preach circles around me. I invited Rodney, his son, and his brother to attend a Promise Keepers rally in Memphis in the fall of 1996. As we continued to fellowship and pray together, we believed the Lord was calling us to bring the black and white pastors in Tunica County together to fulfill the Great Commission. The result was a newly formed Ministers Association of five black pastors and four white pastors who met weekly in my home for Henry Blackaby's Experiencing God Bible study. Out of that study we began planning an outreach effort together, agreeing to bring short term missions to Tunica.

Seth Barnes, executive director of Adventures in Missions (AIM), said in his yearly publication, Aim Opportunities: "Since the early nineties Tunica has been targeted as a gambling mecca by major casinos. Indeed, millions of dollars have flowed into the county, yet the poverty and attendant social pathologies are as bad as ever. In the midst of this, Christians here have seen God at work in powerful ways. Although the black churches are poor financially, they have wonderful men of God for their pastors, men with vision and passion to show the love of Christ to all the people of their county. Pastor Rodney Hibbler (who is black) and Pastor Paul Husband (who is white) have a passion to fulfill the Great Commission and to bring racial reconciliation to Tunica. Christ is at work in uniting the

*ministers as He breaks down the walls that have separated the races for so long."*

*Rodney and I invited AIM, Southern Baptists, Christian colleges, and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) to partner with us in short-term missions and help facilitate racial reconciliation in Tunica County. Over the past 12 years we have joined forces to host over 5,500 short-term missionaries who come to pray with and for those in need, and help us share the love of Christ in our community.*

*Mission activity has consisted of repairing and painting homes of the poor, re-roofing homes and churches, conducting acation Bible schools, basketball camps, health clinics, a nursing home ministry, sports evangelism, prayer ministries, door-to-door evangelism, and local jail evangelism. We have placed New Testaments with gospel tracts in over 2,500 homes and our gracious Lord has allowed us to see over 4,000 professions of faith in Christ as a result of the mission effort here in Tunica County since 1997. We now have plans to expand to other small Mississippi delta towns.*

So, just a few concluding thoughts from me:

1. To be missional is not just talk but action. My friend Paul was engaged in missional ministry before I even started talking about it.

2. As I have said in other articles, being missional is about moving back into the neighborhood and discerning what God is doing. **Too much of our understanding of ministry is focused internally--our denomination, our church, our building.**

3. The serious pursuit of racial reconciliation is a humbling process. Arrogance thrives behind the walls of racial insularity. When the gospel begins to tear down the walls, we often find that God's Spirit has already been at work in powerful ways on the other side. And we find that our own experience of the gospel is now enriched in the fellowship of those we previously feared or avoided.

4. What I have called **the horizontal dimension of the gospel is not an optional add-on once we accomplish the real task of getting people "saved."** Rather, salvation in Christ is a comprehensive restoration of our relationship to

God, to one another, and to the world. Churches committed to embracing reconciliation vertically *and* horizontally have incredible potential for transforming our culture. Just as the destruction of the Berlin Wall demonstrated the presence of greater powers than those of the Soviet empire, so the removal of "the dividing wall of hostility" by Christians practicing peace gives clear evidence of the power of the gospel.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dave", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

[1] <http://www.geocities.com/missionalia/rwanda1.htm>