




Missional Journal

BIBLICAL
SEMINARY

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May 2010, Vol. 4 No. 4

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Sign Me Up!

A friend of mine recently said, "Dave, I've been reading your articles on missional ecumenism and I'm ready to sign up! What do I do now?" In this last of four articles I offer a response to my friend's question.

Lower the walls

The church in the West is severely Balkanized. The divisions stem from differences of geography and culture, personal conflicts between influential leaders, divergent readings of the Bible, diverse theological traditions, etc.

To move to a more wholesome and winsome place, Christians--individually and collectively (institutionally)--will need to lower the walls. In an earlier *Missional Journal* I discussed theological hospitality and referenced David Buschart's distinction between a fortress and a home.[1] Walls are the defensive structures surrounding the fortresses we build to protect ourselves. Walls are built largely, though not entirely, out of fear: Fear of the other, the intruder, the attacker. Walls presuppose a hostile world in which violence is the order of the day.

So, one important step to a practical expression of missional ecumenism would be to work at lowering the walls that divide us. This has individual application: How do I respond to believers who belong to a different branch of the Christian family? Do I see their differences as a threat? Do I hunker down behind my wall? Do I make a pre-emptive theological strike? Do I insist on "fixing" them before we can have peaceable dialogue? Or do I follow the way of hospitality and invite them into my theological home, engaging them in thoughtful and edifying conversation?

The same questions may be asked of Christian institutions: Are

we hostile or hospitable? Do we relate to other groups in a spirit of competition or compassion? Do we preach and teach with the goal of showing that we are right and other groups are wrong?

How do we lower the walls? I suppose that depends on the particular kind of wall that is creating the problem. Suppose the wall is hatred, pride, prejudice, fear, ignorance, racism, or perhaps a combination of these things. Lowering the walls will mean asking God to forgive us for the ways we have been complicit in any of these sins--as we surely have been--and pursuing reconciliation with those on the other side of the wall.

But lowering the walls may also mean reexamining our theological traditions, ways of reading Scripture, and ecclesiastic practices. I am not suggesting that any of these must be dismantled or destroyed, although in some cases that might not be a bad idea. Rather, I am proposing "re-valuing" of our theological walls along the lines of what I (and others) call "generous orthodoxy." [2] Orthodoxy is the body of truth recognized "everywhere, always, and by all" as Vincent of Lerins put it. Orthodoxy is an important wall that helps us define and protect the church.

However, some of us have added other stones to our walls beyond the primary stones of orthodoxy. Unfortunately, all the stones look the same to us and we feel the need to defend them all equally!

We *must* take some of these stones out of the wall. I'm not saying they need to be thrown away. One group may feel strongly that five-point Calvinism is the most faithful framework in which to understand the redemptive work of God in Christ. Fair enough. But is that a stone for the wall? Or to ask it differently, are those who don't hold a Calvinist position dangerous? Do we need to engage in theological warfare in order to compel their surrender or defeat?

Recently the popular Calvinist pastor John Piper has taken severe criticism from some of his Calvinist friends because he invited mega-church pastor Rick Warren to speak at this year's Desiring God Conference. Piper has done a good thing. He has lowered the wall between brothers. But don't miss the fact that he is paying a price for doing so--some Fundamentalist and Reformed folks are urging their followers to separate from Piper.

Calvinism may not be your "issue." But likely you have some such

stones in your walls that are harmful to you and to the mission of God. I contend that all of us need to examine our walls and take out some of the unnecessary stones, so that we can practice more hospitality and less hostility.

Cultivate a gracious spirit

Theological hospitality is gracious--it extends to others the welcome we received from the Father of Jesus. We don't need to "prove ourselves" in the Father's house--we are known and loved. The Spirit who works in us is gentle and persuasive, not aggressive or coercive. How might we practice more of this among ourselves?

We might start by giving others the benefit of the doubt. I find in myself a terrible tendency to rush to judgment. When I disagree with the opinions or actions of another believer I quickly determine that they are wrong. I even have the temerity to assess their motives: They don't value truth, they aren't willing to pay the price, they are "worldly," etc. Sadly, what I see in myself is widespread in the Christian world.

Recently Pastor Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan was interviewed at Covenant Seminary about a number of ministry issues.[3] When asked how he handled the question of homosexuality, Keller replied that he affirmed the traditional Christian ethic on this subject but added that, given the diversity of his congregation, he preferred to address the issue in private conversations rather than through preaching.

Some of Keller's critics quickly jumped on his comments. One person suggested that "his response is so shameful it poisons every word he's ever preached." Another stated, "Pastor Keller knows what he ought to be doing, but he's not brave enough to do it."

Observe not only the lack of grace in these comments but also the confidence in judging the motives of a brother. Keller gives his own reasons for not preaching about homosexuality. It is fair to question his reasoning and challenge his decision. However, it is quite another thing to propose that this undercuts the entire value of his ministry or to think you know that the *real* reason for his decision is cowardice.

This is the sort of backbiting that undermines the church's credibility before a watching world. I confess to having

participated in such small-mindedness in the past. With God's help I am seeking a better way.

Look for partnerships

Lowering the walls and cultivating a gracious spirit allows us to consider the possibility of partnering with other Christians in ministry and witness. I am not suggesting a program for ecclesiastical reunion, although there are places and times when the Holy Spirit may lead Christians in these directions. Sins of the past need to be confessed and forgiven and, in situations where past offenses have resulted in separate churches and denominations, reunion may be desirable.

But a friend of mine used to say, "You can't unscramble scrambled eggs." I think this may be true with much of Christian history--any large-scale agenda to reverse a process that has resulted in 224 distinct denominations in America^[4] seems unrealistic. And there are some features about all this diversity that are actually healthy and energizing.

So I prefer talking about partnerships among individuals, organizations, and churches. These would be relationships that encourage God's people to work together in a spirit of trust and love across traditional, theological, cultural, or denominational barriers. Some of this takes place already through interdenominational ministries--Christian schools, crisis pregnancy centers, campus ministries, and mission agencies.

Partners maintain their distinct identities, their unique theological flavors, or particular ministry emphases. But they make common cause in service to the kingdom of God. Such partnerships can be across the street, across town, or around the world. They are easier to form and easier to manage than mergers. They may be long or short term. And they will normally focus on specific kingdom objectives.

Partnerships of this sort remind us that we need other members of the body--including those who are not part of our tribe--to carry out God's mission. They encourage us to see other Christians from the perspective of common faith and the one Spirit rather than the perspective of our "correct theology" and their distance from our "truth." With this comes a greater humility about our own place in the kingdom, a greater appreciation for the work of the Spirit in the world-wide church, and a greater openness to the gospel among those who will see

that we are indeed disciples of Jesus (John 13: 35).

Pray for the mission

In his moment of extreme crisis, Jesus prayed for the mission (John 17). He prayed for protection for his disciples, he prayed for them to be focused on the mission, and he prayed for their unity. Christians in the West need to be reminded that the unity Jesus prayed for is a supernatural reality that calls us beyond *our* best strategies to something only the Holy Spirit can produce in us. So prayer must be part of the missional agenda.

I am thinking not just about the prayer of individuals but about missional-ecumenical prayer that brings churches and Christian organizations together to seek the blessing of God on a particular community, or people group, or nation, or the world. The late Pope John Paul II said it well: "When Christians pray together, the goal of unity seems closer. The long history of Christians marked by many divisions seems to converge once more because it tends towards that Source of its unity which is Jesus Christ. He 'is the same yesterday, today and forever!' (Heb 13:8)."[5]

So what might happen if churches in the same community were to gather regularly to pray for the mission of God? Suppose they asked the Lord to give them eyes to see the needs around them and ways they might be a blessing to those in their own neighborhoods. What if they asked the Lord of the harvest to send workers into the harvest field? What if they prayed that all competitiveness and gossip between Christian groups within the community would cease? Would we see more of what Jesus prayed for: More unity among his disciples resulting in more people who believe the message (John 17: 21-23)?

I admit that I have not had much experience with this kind of prayer. I think that says a lot about the Christian culture that has shaped me over many years. But I also sense that the wind may be shifting, that a new generation of believers is looking for something better, and that God may be up to something wonderful in our day.



[1] *Missional Journal* 4.1 at <http://www.biblical.edu/images/stories/faculty/vol4no1.pdf>.
[2] *Missional Journal* 1.6 at

<http://www.biblical.edu/images/missionaljournal/vol1no6.pdf>.

[3] <http://www.resourcesforlifeonline.com/audio/8568/>.

[4] *Missional Journal* 4.2 at

<http://www.biblical.edu/images/stories/faculty/vol4no2.pdf>.

[5] *Unum Sint*, section 22 at

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint_en.html.



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