



Missional Journal

BIBLICAL SEMINARY

David G. Dunbar, President

February 2011 Vol. 5 No. 1

Click below to access past
Missional Journals

[Archived Missional Journals](#)

Blog with Dave

[Share Your Thoughts](#)

Quick Links

[Biblical's Website](#)

[C4ML at Biblical](#)

If you are interested in supporting our
vision for seminary education

click below

[Institutional Advancement](#)

[Planned Giving](#)

copyright © 2010 David G. Dunbar

Aliens and Strangers

A fast from politics--that's what I proposed in the last *Missional Journal*. In light of what James Davison Hunter has termed the "politicization of nearly everything" it seems wise for the church to recalibrate its approach to cultural engagement. In spite of three decades of political activism, we have seen little return on investment. In fact, if we accept the basic assessment of sociologists like James Hunter and David Kinnaman,[1] our enlistment in the culture wars has subverted the power of the gospel.

How shall we proceed from here? One possibility is the privatization of faith resulting in a faith that is "privately engaging and socially irrelevant." [2] In the late modern period many Christians have adopted this tactic. I suggested in an earlier article that Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God is at odds with such an approach. [3]

The "Soft Difference"

We need to reclaim a powerful biblical image of the church's place in the world--the image of God's people as "aliens" or "strangers." The prototypical biblical example is Abraham who "made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country" (Heb. 11:9; cf. 11:13; Gen. 23:4). Later his descendants lived as aliens first in Egypt (Ex. 22:21) and subsequently in Babylon and the many other cities of the Diaspora.

The New Testament employs this theme to describe the status of Christians who live in the world but are actually citizens of another and better country (Phil. 3:20; Heb. 11:16). The First Epistle of Peter provides the fullest development of this idea. Peter writes to "God's elect, strangers in the world" (1 Peter 1:1) reminding them that they have been called out of darkness into the light; therefore, "I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul" (1 Peter 2:11).

How do Christian aliens live? They usually live quietly, unobtrusively. Paul exhorts the Thessalonians, "make it your ambition to **lead a quiet life**, to mind your own business and to work with your hands . . . so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders" (1 Thess. 4:11-12). Christian aliens are conscious that their place is on the margins. Because they lack access to the corridors of power, they are less inclined to try to dominate or reshape society in the name of the gospel.

This does not mean that Christians have no mission in the world or that their mission is simply negative--an absence or a disengagement from their surroundings. Miroslav Volf has argued persuasively that 1 Peter presents the relationship of the church to the world as one of "soft difference." He explains:

I do not mean a *weak* difference, for in 1 Peter the difference is anything but weak. It is strong, but it is not hard. Fear for oneself and one's identity creates hardness. . . . A decision for a soft difference, on the

other hand, presupposes a fearlessness which 1 Peter repeatedly encourages his readers to assume (3:14; 3:6). People who are secure in themselves--more accurately, who are secure in their God--are able to live the soft difference without fear. They have no need either to subordinate or damn others, but can allow others space to be themselves. . . .They seek to win others without pressure and manipulation, sometimes even "without a word" (3:1).[4]

For Peter the soft difference is manifested when believers "live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Peter 2:12). In the face of persecution Christians are not to retaliate, but to follow Jesus who when he suffered made no threats, but entrusted himself to the just judgment of God (1 Peter 2:23-24). Like the master, the disciple is to repay evil only with blessing (1 Peter 3:9).

Nor should we see this merely as an evangelistic strategy or a missionary method. "The soft difference is the missionary side of following in the footsteps of the crucified Messiah. It is not an optional extra, but part and parcel of Christian identity itself." [5]

Pursuing Shalom

So what does it mean to follow Jesus into a world where everything is politicized and the name of the game is to dominate others by leveraging power on behalf of one's own group or cause?

James Hunter says that the calling of the church is to be a community of peace: "the vision of this community--the hope for which it longs and the ideals to which it strives--is the vision of shalom." [6] This is not merely personal, psychological peace. Nor does it refer simply to an individual's reconciled relationship to God in Christ, although it clearly includes that (Rom. 5:1).

One might say that the biblical understanding of peace is as wide as creation and as far-reaching as the curse. Shalom was God's original intent for the world; and the restoration of shalom is the work of the Messiah: "Of the increase of his government and peace [shalom] there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever" (Is. 9:7). The word of the angels to the shepherds proclaimed God's "peace to men on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14).

This has profound implications for the lives of the people of God. The disciples of Jesus are described as "peace-makers" (Matt. 5:9). Peter says that the righteous person "must seek peace and pursue it" (1 Peter 3:11 quoting Ps. 34). Paul instructs believers "as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Rom. 12:18). And Paul believes that the power of the gospel transcends even the deep chasm between Jew and Gentile: "He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near" (Eph. 2:17).

So Christians are people who wait, pray, and work for the full manifestation of the peaceable kingdom. They neither retreat into a private sphere removed from the world; nor do they try to leverage power to dominate or control the world. Hunter says,

. . . their engagement with the world proclaims the shalom to come. Such work may not bring about the kingdom, but it is an embodiment of the values of the coming kingdom and is, thus, a foretaste of the coming kingdom. Even while believers wait for their salvation, the net effect of such work will be a contribution not only to the good of the Christian community but to the flourishing of all.[7]

The Flourishing of All

I like that phrase. It emphasizes what is best about the history of the church. There are many dark stains in our history that opponents frequently and justly

call to our attention: corruption, crusades, persecution, and collusion with oppressive social structures (including racism). But the bright spots are there as well: ministry to the poor and the outcast; health care and the development of hospitals and orphanages; prison ministry; disaster relief; major contributions to the development of universal education (including the education of women); and a variety of reform movements that have improved the welfare of millions.

Since the 1980's Christian witness has been most visible in political activism. Consequently we are known more by what we are against than what we are for.[8] ***And there are things to be against***, but even in opposition we need to propose constructive alternatives. Can we reclaim the best of our history, living out the "soft difference" that in word and deed will point the world to Jesus?

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give and answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with ***gentleness and respect***, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against ***your good behavior in Christ*** may be ashamed of their slander. (1 Peter 3:15-16).



[1] James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World* (Oxford, 2010); David Kinnaman, *unchristian: What a new generation really thinks about Christianity* (Baker, 2007)

[2] Os Guinness, *The Gravedigger File* (IVP, 1983), p. 166.

[3]<http://www.biblical.edu/images/stories/MissionalJournal/vol4no5.pdf>

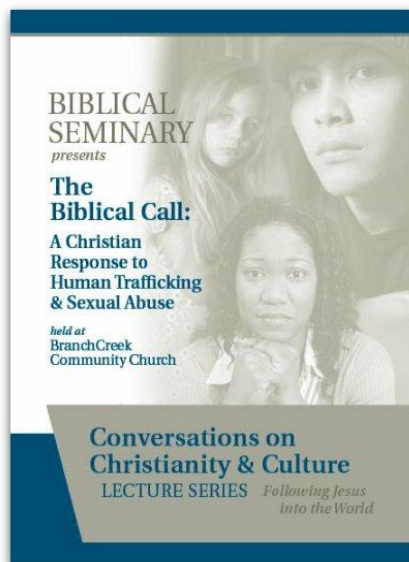
[4] Miroslav Volf, "Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter," *Ex Auditu* 10 (1994): 24.

[5] Volf, p. 25.

[6] Hunter, p. 228.

[7] Hunter, p. 234.

[8]<http://www.biblical.edu/images/stories/MissionalJournal/vol4no6updated.pdf>



This Conference is FREE and open to the public. Registration is required.

Bible Seminary Presents Conversations on Christianity & Culture Lecture Series

The Biblical Call: A Christian Response to Human Trafficking and Sexual Abuse

When: March 17- 19, 2011

Where: BranchCreek Community Church

Speakers:

- *Diane Langberg, PhD* - Author of *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*
- *Bethany Hoang, MDiv* - Director, International Justice Mission Institute
- *Pearl Kim, JD* - Assistant District Attorney, Delaware County
- *Bob Morrison, MBA* - Co-chair, Berks Coalition Against Human Trafficking

[More Information and Registration](#)