



THE MESSAGE BOARD
A Newsletter from
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Personal Reflections

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Community

I spent almost the whole of the months of January and February of 2010 with pastors and congregations, beginning with the “Together in the Lord” ministers’ conference the first week of January all the way through the last Sunday of February with the installation of Dr. Jeff Haggray at the First Baptist Church, Washington, DC.

Across the country, I find us talking much more about the church as community. How refreshing this is for a number of reasons. First, it signals to me a much healthier theological engagement about what it means to be church. Secondly, if converging lines of evidence are signs of the movement of the Spirit, then this is a place where God is at work among us. Third, it is one aspect of the healing that God is doing in our life as ABCUSA.

The truth is that fear has had a field day among us: first, the fear of the absolute fracturing of ABCUSA over the issue of homosexuality, and then, the fear of financial implosion brought on by the Great Recession. Neither has occurred.

If it is true that “perfect love casts out fear,” then the obverse is also true, that “fear casts out perfect love.” Fear undermines community and the care we have for one another. Fear triggers our “reptilian brain,” our instinctual survival behaviors and thinking; and in fear we act for self and not for others or for community. Fear restricts both our compassion and range of behaviors; agape love enlarges both our compassion and our range of behaviors.

Covenanted Christian community—*communitas*—is the nursery for the seed of agape love sown in our hearts by Christ’s redemptive activity. The promises we make to God and to one another as a covenanted community define the rich seedbed that enables agape love to take root and grow. At First Baptist Church, Trenton, NJ, where I served, we read the church covenant before entering the service of communion, a wonderful spiritual practice. In rehearsing our promises to care for one another and to seek the common good of the church in accordance with the scriptures, we were tending our garden, breaking up the hardened soil of resentment and hurt, fending off the weeds of indifference and self-absorption as we spoke again our promises to God and to each other. Renewing this practice—perhaps with a rewritten covenant that reflects joy as well as obligation—would strengthen each of us.

The church as covenanted community is not about my psychological needs for affirmation and belonging, or for that matter, any of my other felt needs—although by the grace of God those needs are fully met in community. The paradox is that these needs are seldom met through making them the focus of our life. Their fulfillment, rather, is a by-product of our practice of love, peace and justice in community.

Church is more than the services/products it offers us. *Communitas* is not an instrumental relationship where I give to get. In Christ we are shown a more excellent way—living for others. Living for others opens one to receive true community, true belonging as a gift through Christ whose invitation to his banquet table is the basis for our belonging to one another. In this vein, Gerhard Lohfink draws our attention to the multiple uses of the reflexive pronoun “one another” in the pastoral epistles as evidence of the form Christian community takes, a mutual concern for the other that surpasses in its rich imagination life as commonly experienced where self is the center. That is why religious consumerism runs counter to the very nature of church as community.

We have just celebrated 400 years of Baptist life and witness, a life that is rich in theology and service. The modern missionary movement, the social gospel with its emphasis on justice, the Civil Rights movement, and the full inclusion of women in church leadership all have roots in Baptist life.

We are a people noted for our emphasis upon soul freedom, the responsibility of the individual before God, and its social counterpart, religious liberty. But it would be wrong to assume that with our emphasis on freedom and liberty that Baptists have not also been deeply concerned about community.

As I said earlier, I am hesitant to use the term “community” to name the practice of the early Baptist community because in our culture, characterized as it is by “expressive individualism,” we hear “community” and we immediately focus on our psychological and social need for connection: my need for community—support, intimacy and belonging. That is how our culture predisposes us. But that is not the heart of the life of community in either the New Testament or the early Baptist tradition, though again, as I said earlier, those important needs do get met in community. They are not the focus, or church would be no more than a collection of individuals seeking their own good.

Perhaps New Testament and early Baptist understandings are best captured in the language of 1 Peter: *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.* Here the emphasis focuses not on our psychological needs, but on the missional nature of the church.

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Community

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Throughout the scriptures it is clear: God's missional strategy, rooted in the self-giving life of the Trinity, has been to insert among the nations of the earth a people through whom the unbroken reign of God might be seen and experienced, first through Israel and now also through the community of Jesus' disciples. This "holy nation" established in the death and resurrection of Christ by the power of the Spirit is an eschatological community that lives as a contrast culture to life under the powers and principalities. In this community, the "already but not yet" reign of God is made flesh in the power of the Spirit. Holy Spirit manifests herself in a community that lives on the basis of love and grace; that offers forgiveness and reconciliation; that renounces retribution and patterns of domination; and that erases social distinctions to create a new humanity that is one in Christ Jesus. So when 1 Peter speaks of God who has *called us from darkness into his marvelous light*, he is describing the reality of life in the community called the church. This reality offers hope because it manifests the power of God at work in the present to reorder and redeem God's beloved creation.

One of the emphases I have come to appreciate in the Orthodox churches is their understanding of the life of the church as missional. In the presence of the church as an eschatological community, one participates in the "already but not yet" reign of God through worship, *koinonia*, and *diakonia* as windows onto God's new creation where the future is anticipated, not as a linear extension of the present, but as advent and resurrection.

In much of the writing and discussion about the church as community, there is an increased consensus that three essential practices mark the church which lives as an eschatological community through which the power of God to reconcile and renew the created order is seen.

(1) The eschatological community is sustained by worship. Worship draws us into the very life of the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In worship we enter into and experience the eternal in communion with God. Through song, prayer, praise, testimony, scripture, broken bread and sacred cup, we are drawn into the promised reality of God's reign that reshapes our imagination, renews our minds, corrects our vision, and encourages our hearts and gives shape to our life as community.

(2) The eschatological community is matured through discipleship. Walter Brueggemann refers to scripture as our alternative script. Through prayerful proclamation, hearing, study, meditation and reflection, Holy Scripture molds and shapes the life of the contrast community. Its truths and values incorporated through and reinforced by shared spiritual disciplines is the holy ground of our continuing conversion towards love of God and love of neighbor.

(3) The eschatological community expresses its new life in Christ through service in ministries of mercy, justice and peace, which are the fruits of love. *By their fruits you will know them*, said Jesus. 1 Corinthians 13 describes the height of love enacted and Matthew 25, its breadth. The eschatological community, though a set-apart community, must nonetheless fully identify with the world in its brokenness. Our life together is always cruciform. The Spirit of Christ never leads us to disdain the world, but to love it and to give ourselves for it as he did. But that same love requires that we be a distinctive community if we are to be a window onto life in God's kingdom.

Gerhard Lohfink describes aptly our new reality as community when he writes in *Jesus and Community*:

- "What is meant is not a church without guilt, but a church in which infinite hope emerges from forgiven guilt.
- What is meant is not a church in which there are no divisions, but a church which finds reconciliation despite all gulfs.
- What is meant is not a church without conflicts, but a church in which conflicts are settled in ways different from the rest of society.
- What is meant, finally, is not a church without the cross and without passion narratives, but a church always able to celebrate Easter because it both dies and rises with Christ."



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