

A Suggested View of Biblical Reconciliation

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WITH A VIEW TOWARD CHANGE...

Moving! That cataclysmic event that makes grown men weep, women moan and children afraid happens at least once in their lives. Why does this event cause all of these seismic eruptions in so large of a swath of our pop

This is especially true when we are not the precipi

significant change that our Creator introduces in the lives of His new Kingdom people, the community called the Church of Jesus Christ.

11 Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called " Uncircumcision" by the so-called " Circumcision," which is performed in the flesh by human hands--
12 remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, 15 by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, 16 and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. 17 AND HE CAME AND PREACHED PEACE TO YOU WHO WERE FAR AWAY, AND PEACE TO THOSE WHO WERE NEAR; 18 for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So

that will alleviate what's preventing each of us mo

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In order to properly introduce our suggested need for starting this journey toward community reconciliation, I must go back one year ago when I was chosen to participate in a program developed and designed by the Resource Center for Pastoral Excellence¹ of Samford University. Its assignment was to work with a group of pairing partners of pastors. The assignment given to my group was to investigate the possible community transformation practices and principles involved in two distinct communities. Our goal was to investigate how a combined group of pastors from differing denominations could overcome the inherent barriers that existed among them to successfully bring about community development and revitalization using restorative biblical community principles. One community that was investigated is located in the heart of an urban area in Birmingham Alabama. It is the largest of the ninety-nine communities in this area. The community's name is Arlington West End Neighborhood (AWENA) and the group that was impacting this area was Mission Birmingham (their story is located elsewhere in this book). Rev. Fletcher Comer and Rev. Kervin Jones were given the assignment to review and report on this group's activities and their results.

The other assignment for our group was to investigate the activities of the Greensboro Pastoral group, which was located in the rural area of Hale County in a small

¹ Kristen Curtis, *Pahe*

town named Greensboro. I was responsible for working on reporting on the activities of the composite pastors and churches that made up the Hale county pastoral group.

The Greensboro area is one that is richly steeped in Alabama state history as well as its prestigious civil rights history. The development of the Greensboro area into a city is attached directly to the development of the city of Birmingham in Alabama history. The wealthy land owners who invested their capital into developing the major city of Birmingham as the “leading steel producing center of the south” also made it possible for close relatives who lived in the North to use their investment in ownership of land owned in the southeast corridor to begin to be developed for the increase of their familial control of the land in all of Alabama. Of course, the Indians who inhabited this land area had to be dealt with first. They were either moved further west or removed to reservations in Florida so that the surrounding land might be developed in to plantations for increasing the family production of crops like cotton, peanuts and various other commodities.

Slavery soon became a major part of the cash flow for this area and brought in a substantial amount of capital for this region as well as a split of some of the family members when the Civil War broke out. When the war ended and many of the vast plantations were broken up, some of the slaves were able to claim their “forty acres and a

many folk in this area face today. This will be developed more fully in a later section of this chapter.

With the above brief historical background fresh in our minds, I'd like to direct the rest of the comments in this section to the aforementioned co-laborers on this project, Rev. Fletcher Comer and Rev. Kervin Jones. In order to get to know the Greensboro Pastoral Fellowship and the surrounding community area, I first had to get to know these Pastoral Excellence Pairs partners, so that I might gain access to the privileged information that can only be deciphered if you are born and bred Alabamian especially if you are privileged to be from around this specific area of Hale County. There is a

shared experiences. They never really gave me “ALL” of the insider information but they did reveal enough to allow me the privilege of seeing their world in a different light than I could ever have without their friendship and openness of allowing me to share in their world.

Rev. Fletcher Comer is a dedicated pastor and family man whose childhood was somewhat troubled but through our Lord’s grace he persevered through some early challenges with a premature birth, personal family issues and through involvement with the St. Luke’s Episcopal Church found a “family” that not only loved him but nurtured him in the things of God. Several key individuals in this church poured their lives into his by teaching him to love God and eventually led him to salvation in Christ. He met his lovely wife Judith, “a perfectly good Methodist”, as he describes her in his testimony while they were in college and they were married and enjoyed participating on the debate team together. While he was here that he got a chance to serve as rector that he began to feel a call to the ministry.

It was then that he found himself enlisted in the service and while functioning as a layreader for Episcopal service men, he read the entire twelve-volume set of the Interpreter’s Bible Commentary and he felt more called to be a priest. He finished his regular army service as a special project officer for the Commanding General at Fort Polk and his comptroller. It was here that he was offered a Regular Army commission as a Captain that God gave him a choice between two wonderful professional callings. He knew that he was being called to the ordained ministry.

God taught him to pray as he was looking to choose an English seminary and participating in a prayer fellowship and he met a lovely couple who were from

Mississippi who were called to minister to local blacks by helping them to improve their lives. Out of their faithful service the Karatana Christian Community was formed that led people to living “a common discipline for the healing of men and nations.” They lived as core members of this organization and were blessed by the ministry and the fellowship experienced there.

This couple was blessed with three sons of their own and the Lord led them to adopt a Black American Korean Buddhist. She was a full Korean Christian, who was fed by a local congregation and introduced to Christ and developed her faith. Their family accepted her as a foreign missionary to them! She led them to a deeper understanding of what civil rights and prophetic justice was as a common theme in God’s Word and allowed them to recognize how much there was that needed to be done in both of these areas. He pastored for seven years in the Greensboro area and is currently serving as a rector in Heflin while his lovely wife Judith pursues her seminary degree in Sewanee, Tennessee.

Rev. Kervin Jones comes from an extremely large family and lived in the Greensboro area all of his life. He experienced all of the racial strife and stigma that went along with being an African-American who lived in a small town that was and is significantly impacted by racial tension (seen, unseen and protected by the prevailing culture of Alabama at the time: “separate but equal!” This has left quite a “scar” on his soul as well as the life of this man. He has learned to live, tolerate and even survive in this arena but it still leaves its mark of wondering if this condition will ever really change and allow “one who has brown skin” to be free to be himself and a integral part of this society.

He's extremely intelligent and a great thinker who has a holistic worldview that no matter what the situation or circumstance, he has insight that brings the "real truth" out of the situation. He reminds me of Nathaniel in the Gospel of John when he responds

Many families' needs were met through this endeavor. They also held a yearly Easter joint afternoon service at one of the groups' church. This involved the host pastor putting together the program and one of the other pastors delivering the message. This has been extremely successful and enriching for the group as well as their members who participate in this endeavor. Unfortunately, some in the surrounding community have attempted to tear down the great things that have come out of the above cooperative activities. More will be written of this in the next section.

There were some telltale signs of area cultural dynamics that became evident during the time of this group. A number of Samford students were assigned to interview pastors from this group along with some of the area's long time residents who wanted to participate in "telling their stories." The interviews revealed some interesting tidbits about the Greensboro area as well the dynamics that are part of this cultural setting. Some selected observations are as follows: (1) a strong allegiance first to the state and then to the common birthplace of area residents was evident in all conversations with all interviewees. It was obvious that there is an inherent pride involved when either the state

LEADERSHIP EXHIBITED

The exhibition of effective leadership was obviously a part of the above accomplishments by the Greensboro Pastors' Group an

Jerusalem, then proceed to Judea, then to Samaria and on to the uttermost parts of the earth. The mention of these geographical locations can only bring to mind not only language barriers but also cultural, religious and ethnic roadblocks that would not just go away but the Gospel message must be contextualized so that everyone hearing the truth might have an opportunity to understand it.

A paradigm could be offered that might exist for the Greensboro pastoral group. It seems that a new leader needs to be established in order for the group to continue down the path that was revealed to Fletcher and shared with Kervin and then passed on to the other members of the group. It is possible for any event to be group-led but at sometime in the process, it seems a necessity for one person to step forward when things seem to get bogged down, who can get the group motivated and moving toward agreed upon targets.

But this is where the process hit a snag. It is difficult to change interpreters in the middle of any process unless the replacement can speak the same language and dialect as the original spokesperson. In my observation, Kervin would have been the obvious choice to be this new “interpreter” but this would require years of stereotyping and culturalization to be abandoned and the development of a new dynamic that would allow a group of pastors to be led by one of them that was from a different ethnic and cultural group.

If you add to this the ever-changing focus of busy pastors’ schedules and one can imagine how easy it is to let other “pressing issues” be promoted to the top slot in one’s daily schedule. However, in the estimation of this author, if endeavors like these are going to be successful by any measurement over the long haul, a Herculean conscious

effort must be developed and infused by the Spirit, bathed in prayer and pursued with passion if the desired results are to be accomplished.

STRENGTHS/SERIOUS REALITIES/CHALLENGES LEFT

This section begins by considering the strengths exhibited by the Greensboro Pastor's Group and then continues with observations of serious realities and the challenges that may be faced by this group. These observations may not be obvious to the core leadership group because they represent a 'normal' operating pattern. To an outsider they seem to stand out as barriers that prevent the group from moving to a deeper level of a true reconciled relationship.

Let's begin with the group's areas of strengths. It's obvious that there is a centralized attempt to build relationships among participants through prayer. Since this fellowship was born out of the effective prayer efforts of the Tuscaloosa Prayer Summit, it's obvious that the group has attempted to keep this discipline as a central focus. The prayer summit impacted Kervin Jones at a very difficult time in his ministry career. Out of it, he received clarity as to what his continued ministry would be and how he need to get to know others in a closer way so that reconciliation might be the center of their relationships and activities. It was obvious after attending their group's prayer meeting for the first time, they had lived up to their joint commitment to Lord.

There was a strong group relationship that led to some growing one-on-one relationships. This was obvious with Kervin and Fletcher as well as with several other

There was also an initial enthusiastic and “charismatic” leadership displayed by Fletcher and then by Kervin after Fletcher was reassigned to Sewanee. Fletcher’s insight, wisdom and influence on the group were obvious, likely because he had learned to decipher and communicate in a common way as to be able to present ideas that might have been rejected by the group if they came from someone else. He had learned to contextualize the message of change in such a way that others could not only see it but were willing to work toward helping implement change for the benefit of the group and the immediate area.

The group was also experience driven. As a result, they began to share their personal struggles in the realms of pastoral challenges and ministry endeavors. Many persons are aware that a pastor walks a lonely path as he or she goes about doing the work of the church and the community. This group became a sounding board that could be used to bounce feelings and problems off of one another so that they could receive encouragement and gain strength to continue in ministry. This is a strength that needs to be retained and built upon so that the group might flourish in future endeavors.

The group has a strong sense of community through their identification with being long time area residents. This awareness of their common history and family connections provides each of them a platform that still connects them today. As an area that was the center for slave trading and cotton growth, quite a few of these residents find themselves linked historically through connections that bind them culturally and/or seminally because of past activities by their ancestors. This brings with it a common awareness for the area’s way of life and its background that can either be a platform for the continuation of it or at least lead to them having a respectful discussion as to what the real issues are

that prevent them from partnering to make changes that can positively impact area residents.

As we shift our focus to a more testy area, readers should note that what follows are comments that were extracted from personal observations. They come as a summary of the many experiences I've had in the 9(-)0.479431(c)3.11

grow spiritually, the likelihood is that you won't. But you can grow spiritually if you will set goals in important areas and then achieve them.

No one grows spiritually by osmosis or without overcoming the resistance to change.

You cannot propel yourself forward by patting yourself on the back.

It has been my personal and group experience that most of the time the lack of movement toward positive change is rooted in my own choice to procrastinate rather than a matter of the impossibility of making change in our current reality. In my estimation one serious reality that must be addressed by the Greensboro group is the current existence of a "Limited Group Vision." When individuals or groups begin to rely on S.O.P.'s (Standard Operating Procedures) then a lac

on an even deeper level why a new leader is necessary. In all major shifts in the Scriptures, God always chose one man (or woman, in the case of Deborah or Lydia, the seller of purple) to implant his vision and then he or she was required to pass this on to the rest of his people for implementation. This does not mean that the group does not get to contribute ideas about how or what things can be implemented. What it does is set the standard as to what the group's values must be in order for the individual or group to accomplish their prescribed God-given vision changes.

This gap normally leads to community division, which often leads to a limited "leaderless" vision that only further entraps the individual and/or group participants into further activities also becoming entrapped in inertia. Everyone knows that something needs to change but no one seems to be called to take on the challenge of hearing from God what "that" needs to be and how it needs to be implemented in the group dynamics

By the way, this last statement might reveal more than anything about the current group operational patterns. I have yet to hear from the group collectively what their stated group mission and vision goals really are. Because this organizational gap has not been clearly defined, that would lead to a lack of group pastoral vision for combining resources, and even the stretched resources brought to bear by trying to involve many pastors who are also bi-vocational in their ministry roles. This leaves the latter group challenged to be involved in a meaningful way because of the existence of continued community division. This exists because there is a lack of clearly stated group and community development goals.

This leads to a formation of “loose” networks” which can be debilitating for the group because no plan has been developed to overcome the lack of resources that are needed in order to engage the group in taking on activities that could lead to church, personal and community goals being accomplished. This reminds me of the bureaucracy that torments our capitalistic governmental system. The term democracy supposedly sets the required targets that all government agencies are supposed to be pursuing but it seems that each of them operates independently from the other as they pursue their area’s selected goals detached from all the other entities’ planned activities. This eventually becomes so debilitating that it leads to further ineffectiveness and eventual demise. No organization that remains leaderless can hope to effectively establish and/or accomplish even loosely stated activity goals.

As I peruse the limited choices this group has, if it genuinely desires to overcome the inertia that plagues them it seems imperative that a “charismatic leader” be identified. With this need addressed, the group is then free to develop a strategic plan that will allow

the group to accomplish its God-given mandate for Greensboro churches and their community.

According to the 2000 Census results, there are several challenges that the

charismatic leader that has some of these skills) who can lead the group to begin to address some of these issues. They could also partner with others to help the community resolve the issues that currently are crippling the growth of the Greensboro area.

Participants in the pastoral group currently do some things to make a dent in a couple of areas. One pastor is involved ministering to current and released prisoners to make sure that they are transitioning back into society in a meaningful way. The group as a whole runs a summer camp for hundreds of youth at two area schools (soon to be one), working with community partners to shore up learning gaps for students that did not do very well in the previous school year.

Any mission and/or vision set by the pastoral group should be designed to address some of these collective issues. Such an intentional approach would greatly affect the

CONCLUSIONS

Two principles plagued me from the outset of this project. They both are taken from a leadership seminar that I attended some fifteen years ago called, “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People” by Steven Covey.

The first principle of highly effective people was to “begin with the end in mind” and the second one was “put the big rocks in first.” I will not take the time to recount everything that has to do with these two teaching principles but a summarized warning that comes from these seminar points is that in order for an individual or organization to be successful in any endeavor in life there must be thought given at the place of beginning. Planning of any project should include by envisioning what the expected end will be for the project. Then there can be designed a practical plan that will allow for the accomplishment of goals and measurement of results to ensure the project has reached the planned and expected outcome.

The second step that one must take is to make sure the he or she has “put the big rocks in first.” This is accomplished by arranging their lives to first include the valued activities that are most important and will keep a person grounded in who they are rather than being caught up in what they are trying to achieve. The list must include in order: (1) one’s relationship with their Creator; (2) putting the priority of their family above all other relationships; (3) the provision of maintaining a balanced involvement with friends and hobbies; and, (4) developing a viable plan that will allow them implement the above

items appropriately in order to accomplish their life purpose while being involved in working for a living.

Having had the opportunity to participate in this project has allowed me to live by the above principles, especially the third, and the