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**EMBRACING THE OTHER:  
TOWARD AN ETHIC OF GOSPEL NEIGHBORLINESS**  
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**Abstract:** Xenophobia, or fear of the other, is not new to the human experience; although it is difficult to measure, there seems to be an intensified fear of the other in our recent history. The other includes persons from particular cultures, ethnicities, and the major religious traditions of the world. For specific examples, I will consider LGBT persons, undocumented immigrants, and Muslim Americans. Xenophobia marginalizes each of these groups in American life. Remarkably, our fears originate, in part, in a coterie of Christian leaders whose message stands in tension with the Christian Gospel, a message that includes a broad understanding of neighborliness toward others. A minority within the entire ecclesial community, this prominent and strident group of leaders perpetuates our fears. This small society does not (and must not) speak for all Christianity.

**The Human Condition, the World, and Evil:  
Where We are Right Now**

In the United States, the so-called “melting pot,” we nevertheless remain a society of others. Strikingly, much of our culture’s xenophobia originates within the Christian faith community itself. The shifting demographics within and beyond our borders, which are caused by the unprecedented migration and mobility of persons around the globe, demands that we reconsider faith and ministry in ways we have not previously done. The conversation, worldview, and rhetoric among Christians in the United States must change. It must change because what we say and do in the United States is heard and interpreted by many, Christians and otherwise, beyond our borders. Thomas Banchoff observes:

The fact that the United States is a Christian-majority country with a significant Jewish community has a global impact. For while one might be able to distinguish between the United States and Christianity (or the Judeo-Christian) at an analytical level, the juxtaposition and interpenetration of material power and religious tradition inflect world politics at the level of *perceptions* [emphasis mine]...Most citizens in Muslim-majority nations, for example, view the United States as a Christian nation...By its sheer economic, political, and military weight, the United States does multiply the influence of Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

Given this far-reaching influence, how we view, speak of, and care for the other within our own context matters abroad. Unfortunately, not all Christian leaders embody the kind of gospel neighborliness necessary for authentic dialogue in the global community of the twenty-first century. These leaders include Rick Warren, John Hagee, Rick Scarborough, Rod Parsely, Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, Scott Lively, and others. Collectively these leaders influence millions of followers via their mega-pulpits and numerous multi-media outlets. Their impact domestically and globally means that their message, some of which include dangerous rhetoric, is absorbed by the culture. This truth only magnifies the need for alternative voices to emerge if we hope to realize the transformation for which we long.

### Ministry and Mission

Without doubt neighborly voices exist within Christian leaders who engage in productive dialogue here and abroad. However, as well-intended as those efforts are, the conversation is muted for at least two reasons. First, there remains what Namsoon Kang calls a

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Banchoff, "Introduction: Religious Pluralism in World Affairs," in *Religious Pluralism, Globalization, and World Politics*, ed. Thomas Banchoff (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 29.

“residue” of “Westcentricm.”<sup>2</sup> Kang says, “there is a rhetoric of ‘Christianity-the-West’ versus ‘World Christianity-the Rest’ that assumes the West maintains the status of being discursively the normative and institutionally the center in world Christianity.”<sup>3</sup> This perspective perpetuates an “us vs. them” frame of mind that can limit dialogue. Second, local congregations rarely embrace statements issued by national religious leaders, particularly those from mainline denominational heads, if they are even made known to parishioners.

In the meantime, the conversation regarding alterity has found its way beyond the church community and into the wider culture via the recent popular television series, “Lost.” Over six seasons, “Lost” engrossed millions of viewers who watched fictional survivors of a plane crash find themselves stranded and “lost” on a mysterious and uncharted island. Soon, the survivors find they are not alone on the island. The survivors label the newly-discovered group simply as the “others.” The series took viewers on a journey that involved seeing “otherness” from multiple perspectives through the various characters. Philosopher Karen Gaffney observes:

Lost reveals the multiple ways in which otherness operates, how it both creates fear and is created by fear, how it serves as a divide-and-conquer strategy, how it creates an ‘us versus them,’ and how those who are associated with otherness are linked to savagery and to a lack of civilization.<sup>4</sup>

Gaffney concludes with the fitting question, “What is it about our current historical moment that has produced a television show that forces us to realize the socially constructed nature of otherness and see the apparatus of

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<sup>2</sup> Namsoon Kang, “Whose/Which World in World Christianity?: Toward World Christianity as Christianity of Worldly-Responsibility,” in *A New Day: Essays on World Christianity in Honor of Lamin Sanneh*, ed. Akintunde E. Akinade (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010), 35.

<sup>3</sup> Kang, 35.

<sup>4</sup> Karen Gaffney, “The Others Are Coming: Ideology and Otherness in *Lost*,” in *Lost and Philosophy*, ed. Sharon M. Kaye (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 140.

ideology?”<sup>5</sup> In the United States, many equate Muslims with terrorism, immigrants with illegality and crime, and LGBT persons with moral and sexual deviancy. These groups are the current others in our culture. They are blamed for natural disasters, economic uncertainty, rising crime rates, societal discord and the so-called “breakdown” of the American family. They have advocates in the culture, but some of their strongest opposition comes from the aforementioned Christian voices.

### **Ecclesiology: An Honest Assessment of Today’s Church in the United States**

One of the strengths of American culture is that it may rightly boast a mosaic of religious diversity. It has also inherited one of its greatest challenges, as these same religious groups compete to shape and define the moral soul and character of our nation. Protestant Christianity has been the prevailing religious perspective. One could further argue that this perspective has been shaped by a theologically and biblically conservative manifestation of Christianity. This brand of Christianity in America, argues Bauer, goes by many names: evangelicalism, conservatism, and fundamentalism: “These forms of Christianity claim adherents on every continent; but it is in America they have taken root most firmly and borne the most fruit. They barely exist in Western Europe; their success elsewhere owes everything to American missionary work among the poor and undereducated.”<sup>6</sup> Bauer paints with a broad brush for sure, and it may be prejudicial to portray evangelicals, conservatives, and fundamentalists as a composite group. Unfortunately, the perception generated, largely by media, is that these groups are one and the same. More important, though, it is these groups, whether or not they are treated separately or collectively, that have given rise to the aforementioned

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<sup>5</sup> Gaffney, 147.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Bawer, *Stealing Jesus: How Fundamentalism Betrays Christianity* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1997), 8.

leaders who wield far-reaching influence over the religious conversation that occurs within and beyond our culture.

One might argue that the influence of these voices is simply overstated. The evidence suggests otherwise, however, and reveals how effective these leaders have been. Tom Sine points to the failure of biblical scholars and other Christian leaders who do not share the ideology of the religious right to see the gap between themselves and the message consumed by the average American Christian. Consider, for example, the religious literature read by folks in American congregations such as Tim LaHaye's popular *Left Behind* series.

Academics often don't recognize how influential [evangelical leaders] like LaHaye are...Much of his influence on the church and the culture, regrettably, has not been positive. The *Left Behind* series, written with Jerry Jenkins, is propagating his ideological views to an audience that reaches far beyond his evangelical culture. LaHaye's writings tend to foster both an eschatology of disengagement and the politics of fear. Those reading the *Left Behind* series often say, "Regardless whether you like the books or not, they certainly are biblical." But LaHaye's eschatology is not supported by a careful study of scripture. Most biblical scholars largely reject the eschatological assumptions of this kind of pop end-times literature.<sup>7</sup>

Despite my own cautioning against the questionable theology and biblical scholarship contained in these novels, they were popular even among my own parishioners. One dangerous aspect of LaHaye's message is that it encourages impressionable Christians to see no purpose in acts of justice if the world is going to end anyway. So, the reach of this coterie of leaders is real,

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<sup>7</sup> Tom Sine, "Who is Tim LaHaye?" *Sojourners Magazine*, September–October 2001, 36.

extending not only into the pews of congregations everywhere but deep into the arena of politics as well.

Christian conservatives have made a sharp turn toward politics especially to consolidate more power and influence in recent decades. Many of the aforementioned voices are intrinsically tied to principal pundits and elected officials in the power structures of the American political arena. Consequently, they exercise considerable influence over public policy, affecting the lives of people everywhere, both domestic and foreign. This matters because virtually all aspects of life in the United States has become politicized, including how we relate to our global neighbors. The conversation has fallen along partisan lines and the “language of partisan politics has come to shape how we understand others”<sup>8</sup> Combine this trend with the ideologies of Christian conservatives who have influenced and infiltrated United States politics and you have entire groups of “others” who are branded enemies of church, state, and society.

In the culture wars of the early 1990s, for example, former Republican presidential primary candidate Patrick Buchanan galvanized Christian conservatives with what has been dubbed his “culture war” speech at the 1992 Republican National Convention. In his speech he warned against a litany of issues including abortion on demand and right for gays, should the American people elect Bill Clinton to the White House.<sup>9</sup> Bill Clinton won the election anyway, but the fundamentalist “fear machine” was set in motion. The fundamentalists embraced a strategy that is reactionary to any aspect of society they perceive as a threat to what they have labeled a “Christian Nation.” The problem is that reactionary

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<sup>8</sup> James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press), 105.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick J. Buchanan, “Address to Republican National Convention”, August 17 1992, transcript and audio visual, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/patrickbuchanan1992rnc.htm>.

fundamentalism offers nothing in the way of solutions for the “ills” of society. Hunter argues:

Fundamentalism...is a reaction to the discontents the contemporary world generates. Yet, it is also nihilistic because its identity is established, in the most primordial way, negatively – in reaction to the cultural deprivation of the late modern world. The proof of its nihilism is its failure to offer any creative achievements or constructive proposals for the everyday problems that trouble most people. Is it any wonder that fundamentalism tends to contribute to estrangement and cruelty?”<sup>10</sup>

Instead of solutions, we have witnessed a move toward the altar of political and coercive power by these strident voices. Using the influence of their mega-pulpits and relationships with powerful public officials and influential popular personalities, these leaders have helped cultivate an environment in which it is acceptable to marginalize, alienate, denigrate, torture, and even murder the other in our world. I would like to consider the following examples to show how Christian leadership has shaped the dialogue in our culture in unwelcoming terms.

### **The “Others”: Who is My Neighbor?**

#### *The “Other” as Muslim*

Diana Eck, director of the Pluralism Project at Harvard, observes that in the United States the “sharp edge of Christian prejudice has been keenly felt by many new religious communities.”<sup>11</sup> American Muslims, while not new to the United States, have certainly sustained the deepest blow in recent years. The claims of a few that President Barack Obama was a clandestine Muslim is telling of American attitudes towards Islam. In recent history the international community was embroiled in outrage over Florida Pastor Terry Jones’s plan to burn a

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<sup>10</sup> Hunter, 26

<sup>11</sup> Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2001), 309.

Koran on the ninth anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks on United States targets in New York City and Washington, D.C. Public outcries came from religious and political leaders across the liberal and conservative spectrum insisting that Terry Jones renege. Interestingly, some of those critics have had a history of inflaming anti-Muslim rhetoric. Few would argue that the acts of violence committed by terrorist over ten years were reprehensible. But this moment in history has been perceived by some Christian leaders as a “blank check” to marginalize and demonize Muslims in the United States and around the world. Curiously, there was little discussion in the public arena about what kind of climate would make it permissible for a pastor to think he or she could publically burn a sacred text of any kind.

One of the greatest religious offenders is John Hagee, pastor of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas. Pastor Hagee is unapologetic in his views of Muslims. He contends that “all Muslims are programmed to kill and we can thus never negotiate with them.”<sup>12</sup> Hagee’s name might not register on the radar of many Americans, but John Hagee has managed to inflame anti-Muslim rhetoric and exercise a great deal of global political influence over the United States in the Middle East. He was among several conservative Christians who could “easily get someone on the phone” in the George W. Bush administration.<sup>13</sup> Just over five years ago, Hagee founded Christians United for Israel (CUFI), a Christian Zionist organization whose purpose is “to provide a national association through which every pro-Israel church, parachurch organization, ministry or individual in America can speak and act with one voice in support of Israel in matters related to biblical issues.”<sup>14</sup> CUFI is

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<sup>12</sup> John Hagee, interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, NPR, September 16, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Scott McClellan, interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, NPR, June 2, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> “About Christians United for Israel”, Christians United for Israel, [http://www.cufi.org/site/PageNavigator/about\\_aboutCUFI](http://www.cufi.org/site/PageNavigator/about_aboutCUFI) (accessed March 24, 2011).



opposed to any two-state solution in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. CUFI has grown through hosting events in congregations across the United States. Its annual national summit has been attended by some of the most influential policy makers in the United States, making it a strikingly powerful organization.

Hagee's perspective is false. Muslims are not programmed to kill any more than all Christians are without blame. Hagee's position offends reason and truth. Yet many American Christians share it unquestioningly. The unwelcoming response to the planned construction of Islamic Park<sup>51</sup> community center in New York City, just a few blocks from the former site of the World Trade Center, was telling. Rhetoric like Hagee's creates an environment in which it is acceptable to marginalize Muslims in the United States and abroad. The effects on the peace process in the Middle East are untold. Furthermore, voices that might offer alternative solutions to violence are lost in the conservative "noise" and may even sustain collateral damage. Such has been the case with Arab Christians who have lived side by side with Muslims for centuries in the Middle East. Razek Siriani of the Middle East Council of Churches in Aleppo, Syria, says, "It's funny what Americans think about things. They've never heard of Arab Christians. They assume all Arabs are Muslim-terrorists." He continues, lamenting that Western Christians may have made matters worse:

It's because of what Christians in the West, led by the U.S., have been doing in the East...to many Muslims; this looks like the Crusades all over again, a war against Islam waged by Christians. Because we're Christians, they see us as the enemy too. It's guilt by association.<sup>15</sup>

Arab Christians, however, might offer an invaluable contribution to the dialogue if not for the virulent and mostly unchecked xenophobia that originates from the

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<sup>15</sup>Razek Siriani, quoted in Don Belt, "The Forgotten Faithful," *National Geographic*, June 2009, 85–6.

few. Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, a monk with the Dier Mar Musa monastery near Damascus, engages in regular interfaith dialogue with Muslims. He observes:

You can't live alongside people for a thousand years and see them as the children of Satan. On the contrary, Muslims are us. This is the lesson the West has yet to learn and that Arab Christians are uniquely qualified to teach. They are the last, vital link between the Christian West and the Arab Muslim world. If Arab Christians were to disappear, the two sides would drift even further apart.<sup>16</sup>

The anti-Muslim protests at mosques around the country in the last year and the more recent congressional hearings on radical Muslims in the United States only inflame the issue. The conversation must be reframed for the establishment of authentic and transformative relationships with our Muslim neighbors.

*The "Other" as Undocumented Immigrant*

The face of the American population is rapidly changing. "We are well on our way to becoming a 'minority majority' country, with the number of foreign born higher than at any time in the past century. How we move from being strangers to neighbors is one of the great challenges of America's new century of religious life."<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, recent anti-immigration legislation, such as Arizona's SB 1070, serves as an obstacle rather than a way to meet the challenge. Despite denominational statements calling for immigration reform, the conversation has not changed. In fact, even the National Association of Evangelicals has issued a statement favoring immigration reform.<sup>18</sup> Even so, there remains

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<sup>16</sup> Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, quoted in Don Belt, "The Forgotten Faithful" (National Geographic, June 2009) 85-86.

<sup>17</sup> Eck, 296

<sup>18</sup> "Immigration 2009," National Association of Evangelicals, <http://www.nae.net/resolutions/347-immigration-2009> (accessed April 4, 2011).

within the ranks of some Christians a growing network of pastors who are opposed to immigration reform and align themselves with Tea Party activists. Texas pastor Rick Scarborough is the most notable as his organization, Vision America, has received endorsements from Texas Governor Rick Perry, evangelical author Tim Lahaye, and founder of Focus on the Family, James Dobson. Scarborough has declared that, if this country becomes thirty percent Hispanic, we will no longer be America.

Undocumented immigrants, as well as legal immigrants due to profiling, are vulnerable to a broad range of discriminatory practices, including indentured servitude, harassment, hostility, violence and misplaced blame of rising crime rates. For immigrants who are detained, many of whom have committed no crime and have a legal right to be in the United States, often find themselves in indefinite detention where they are exposed to more potential violence. For example, immigration detention centers are exempt from the Prison Rape Elimination Act of 2003.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, incidents of sexual violence have been on the rise for the last decade and usually go unreported because the offenders are often detention center guards.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the injustices the church remains relatively quiet beyond statements issued by national and denomination religious leaders. However, for a nation of immigrants, we need courageous leaders in local communities to extend the radical embrace of strangers.

### *The "Other" as LGBT*

Discrimination toward LGBT persons has been rightly described by many as the last acceptable form of prejudice in our American culture. It is unique among

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<sup>19</sup> Human Rights Watch, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/02/15/us-immigration-facilities-should-apply-prison-rape-elimination-act-protections> (accessed April 4, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> National Sexual Violence Resource Center, *National Prison Elimination Commission Report*, <http://www.nsvrc.org/publications/reports/national-prison-rape-elimination-commission-report> (accessed April 1, 2011).

“others” in that there exists bigotry toward gay men and women even among other marginalized groups. It is the one form of discrimination on which many groups find agreement. In the United States, Christian conservatives have led a fierce campaign against LGBT persons. Gays have been blamed by personalities such as Pat Robertson and the late Jerry Falwell for some of the most deadly events in the last century, including Hurricane Katrina and AIDS. The most frequent claim, of course, is that gays threaten the institution of marriage and therefore the very fabric of society. No evidence exists to support these claims, but that does not deter the opposition. In fact, more potent voices have only begun to emerge. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, for example, claimed to have raised over forty million dollars in support of the 2008 California Marriage Protection Act via the Mormons for Eight campaign.<sup>21</sup> This amendment proposal was an anti-gay measure veiled as an effort to protect “traditional” marriage. The Mormon effort was a profound influence in the passage of the amendment. The powerful sway of the Mormon church is joined by a chorus of popular voices that include Rod Parsely, Joyce Meyer, Rick Warren, and Joel Osteen. Each of these celebrity pastors has gone on record publically with their bigotry toward gays. Some of the more recent statements come from Joyce Meyer and Joel Osteen:

Joyce Meyer: “If I believe the Bible, then I don’t believe that a gay lifestyle or a homosexual lifestyle is the right way to choose to live. I believe that there’s something so much better.”<sup>22</sup>

Joel Osteen: “I’ve always believed the scriptures shows that it’s [homosexuality] a sin...I say it’s wrong because that’s what the scripture says...I don’t believe homosexuality is God’s best for a person’s life.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Mormons for Eight, <http://mormonsfor8.com> (accessed March 22, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Joyce Meyer, interview by Larry King, *Larry King Live*, CNN, May 19, 2005.

<sup>23</sup> Joel Osteen, interview by Piers Morgan, *Piers Morgan Tonight*, CNN, January 26, 2011.

Defense of these statements have been argued from the position of protected free speech and contention that these leaders are simply speaking the truth found in scripture. One might even argue that these positions contain no calls for violence toward homosexuals. While they *are* protected by free speech, the position that they are rooted in biblical truth is debatable, given the diverse scholarship on the matter.

An anti-gay statement from an influential pastor – or local one, for that matter – need not include explicit calls for violence to result in violent consequences. Such language fosters a climate in which it is acceptable to be hostile toward gay people. Rev. Harry Knox, who served on President Barack Obama’s Faith Advisory Committee and is now senior pastor of Metropolitan Community Church in Houston, Texas, echoes this point: “When people hear in church that God doesn’t love homosexuals, it authorizes people who are hateful in their hearts or fearful to go out and commit violence.”<sup>24</sup> Hate crimes toward gay people abound and confirm the truth of Knox’s words. For purposes of this discussion, however, one of the most poignant examples in recent history occurred after several evangelical Christian leaders, most notably Dr. Scott Lively, visited Uganda in 2009 to spread their anti-gay message.

Dr. Scott Lively is founder and co-founder of Abiding Truth Ministries and Watchmen on the Walls, respectively. These anti-gay organizations operate on a global scale. In March 2009, Lively and two other Christian evangelists led seminars in churches, schools, colleges, and even before members of parliament warning about the so-called gay agenda on the rise in Africa.<sup>25</sup> Lively’s stereotypical, inaccurate, and irresponsible

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<sup>24</sup> Harry Knox, News 39 Houston, Texas, transcript, <http://www.39online.com/news/local/kiah-osteen-gay-sin-story,0,2182508.story> (accessed March 31, 2001).

<sup>25</sup> Scott Lively, “Report from Uganda,” *The Family Resource Center* (blog), *Defend the Family*, March 17, 2009, <http://www.defendthefamily.com/pfrc/archives.php?id=2345952>.

characterization of homosexuality serves only to vilify LGBT persons in Uganda and elsewhere. This personal vilification is what landed both of Lively's groups on the Southern Poverty Law Center's list of hate organizations.<sup>26</sup> The fallout from Lively's anti-gay tour was ghastly. Members of the Ugandan parliament, with the full support of popular evangelical Ugandan pastor, Martin Ssempe, who has had strong ties with America pastor Rick Warren, submitted a proposed bill that would enhance already state sanctioned homophobia to include the death penalty for homosexuals.

Hostility toward LGBT persons quickly intensified and was punctuated by the murder of gay rights and human rights activist David Kato in January 2011. Jeffrey Gettleman, East Africa bureau chief for the *New York Times*, recounted the consequences of Lively's visit in this way:

I think a lot of people in Uganda, and the part of Africa where I live – in Kenya – and most of this continent and probably most of this world, there's many people who are homophobic. But it didn't take a violent form. It was – people thought that – in Uganda, people thought gay people were strange, that they were outliers. But they weren't really fired up to do anything about it. It was only after the visits by these Americans, who billed themselves as experts in dealing with homosexual issues, that the Ugandan politicians and church groups got really angry about it and suggested killing gay people.<sup>27</sup>

Condemnation of the legislation was swift among gay rights activists, religious leaders, and government officials on an international scale. Evangelicals in the United States, however, were slow to denounce the legislation.

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.defendthefamily.com/pfrc/archives.php?id=2345952> "Hate Map", *Southern Poverty Law Center*, <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/hate-map> (accessed April 9, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey Gettleman, interview by Michel Martin, *Tell Me More*, NPR, January 28, 2011.

How would they denounce state sanctioned murder of homosexuals while maintaining the anti-gay position that inspired the legislation? Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church and author of the bestselling book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, was among them. Rick Warren explained his long silence on the matter by saying, “As an American pastor, it is not my role to interfere with the politics of other nations.”<sup>28</sup> Many in the evangelical community shared in his reluctance and sentiment. Meanwhile, as in the case of Muslims and undocumented immigrants, the rhetoric that vilifies LGBT persons goes largely unchecked in American congregations.

Much of this will not come as a surprise to many who follow these and other justice issues in our world. At first glance it even seems contradictory to recent findings about religious people in America. In their sweeping survey of religious life in America, sociologists Robert Putnam and David Campbell conclude that, overall, religious Americans actually make better neighbors.<sup>29</sup> However, they judge good neighborliness on the level of giving to philanthropic endeavors (church offerings included), participation in civic duties, and level of trustworthiness. But these characteristics look more like the marks of a good citizen than a neighborly follower of the gospel. This makes their most telling find all the more compelling – religious Americans are less tolerant of dissent and civil liberties: “The fundamental correlation between religiosity and intolerance has been confirmed in dozens of studies over the last half century.”<sup>30</sup> This poses a difficult challenge to those neighborly Christians whose voices get lost in the noise of the political and religious right.

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<sup>28</sup> Rick Warren, “Letter to the Pastors of Uganda,” YouTube video, 6:32, posted by “saddlebackchurch,” December 9, 2009, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1jmGu9o4fDE&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1jmGu9o4fDE&feature=player_embedded).

<sup>29</sup> Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 443–93.

<sup>30</sup> Putnam and Campbell, 482.

## A Christology that Generously Embraces Our Enemies, Strangers, and Sinners

The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37) has become a tired and worn text, “making it difficult to recognize how revolutionary a message it bears.”<sup>31</sup> However, if the recent remarks of Alabama Governor Robert Bentley are any indication, then the parable requires further reflection. Governor Bentley made these remarks during his inauguration speech on January 17, 2011, at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, the very same church once served by Martin Luther King Jr: “Anybody here today who has not accepted Jesus Christ as their savior, I’m telling you, you’re not my brother or my sister.”<sup>32</sup> Appropriately, Governor Bentley’s words caused a stir. Questions abound: What do his words (or any politician that holds similar views) say about how he will serve and govern those whom he does not consider a “brother or sister” (his so-called neighbor)? What about people who have not “accepted” Jesus Christ as both “Lord and Savior,” and who perhaps never will? What message does it send to those across oceans or within other national borders? Bentley’s words have been spoken and consumed. This solitary, profound instance, suggests we ignore the Gospel narratives at our own peril and at our own spiritual woundedness. The lawyer’s question in the Good Samaritan parable is more than “just” the stuff of children’s Sunday school:

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and

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<sup>31</sup> Bawer, 36.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Bentley, ABC News, Birmingham, Alabama, transcript, accessed May 3, 2011, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/alabama-gov-robert-bentley-criticized-christian-message/story?id=12648307>.



when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."<sup>33</sup>

Here Jesus underscores the two commandments that underpin his entire public ministry: love of God and love of neighbor. This beloved, but careworn, parable spoken by Jesus shapes an ethic of love that becomes paramount for early Christians. Gerd Theissen writes:

The primitive Christian ethic of love of neighbor is a radicalization of the Jewish ethic. What is new is the twofold commandment to love God and one's neighbor come to the center and is explicitly called the greatest commandment. It already exists before Jesus, but not in such a central position.<sup>34</sup>

The parable of the Good Samaritan is Luke's way of communicating the "weightier things of the law." Simply put, loving one's neighbor is the more important admonition. The implications for Christians everywhere are compelling. Understanding this parable in theological terms means "we need to see the image of God in everyone, not just the members of our [own] group."<sup>35</sup> "There is no dichotomy between the commands to love God and love neighbor. Indeed, when one loves God, one lives out love for others as well."<sup>36</sup> I think it is fair to

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<sup>33</sup> Luke 10:30–37, NRSV.

<sup>34</sup> Gerd Theissen, *The Religion of the Earliest Churches: Creating a Symbolic World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 66.

<sup>35</sup> Amy Jill-Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 146.

<sup>36</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel of Luke, vol. 9*, *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 228.

say that most Christians would agree with this assessment. Where this parable causes us trouble is when we try to identify with, and label, the character according to our current context.

Amy Jill-Levine suggests this is an antagonistic parable highlighting the adversity between the Samaritans and Jews of old. To understand it today would mean reading the parable in this way: “The man in the ditch is an Israeli Jew; a rabbi and a Jewish member of the Israeli Knesset fail to help the man, but a member of Hamas shows him compassion.”<sup>37</sup> Bawer offers the more common Christian interpretation, suggesting that the disenfranchised are represented by the Samaritan and show Christians how to love; meanwhile, both the priest and the Levite represent the oppressive religious establishment.<sup>38</sup> But if I may offer another possibility: in consideration of our discussion of “others,” the man or woman in the ditch is the other: the Muslim, the gay, the immigrant, the stranger, the foreigner. The robbers, if I may suggest, are the strident voices among Christian leadership whose use of degrading language strip others of their dignity and humanity.

“‘Radical neighborliness’ is a matter of action; not who performs that action,” Culpepper writes. “Jesus has turned the issue from the boundaries of required neighborliness to the essential nature of neighborliness. Neighbors are defined actively, not passively.”<sup>39</sup> Proximity of the neighbor does not matter, nor does the neighbor’s identity. Theissen writes:

First, love of neighbor becomes *love of enemy* (Matt. 5.43). Here one’s enemy is not just one’s personal enemy. Rather, “enemies” are spoken of as a group which has the power of persecution and discrimination. Second, love of neighbor is extended to become *love of the stranger* (Luke 10.25).

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<sup>37</sup> Levine, 149.

<sup>38</sup> Bawer, 37.

<sup>39</sup> Culpepper, 238.

In the exemplary story of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan proves to be a “neighbor,” not on the basis of a pre-existing status but on the basis of his behavior. Thirdly, love of neighbor becomes *love of the sinner* (Luke 7.36). The woman who was a sinner, who is discriminated against by [her accusers], is accepted by Jesus, and she responds with her love by moistening his feet with her tears and drying them with her hair.<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps the most poignant understanding of neighborliness comes from Martin Luther King’s own understand of the Good Samaritan when he asks, “what happens to the person in the ditch if we don’t help them?”<sup>41</sup> The neighborly Christian, then, is the one who responds, provides, cares, and advocates for the other. Xenophobia has no place among neighbors. And curiously, proselytizing and expectation of conversion are absent from this narrative. As far as we know, all figures in this parable continue their lives living out their respective faiths. It is plainly an extension of Gospel neighborliness without any questions asked or any expectations of repayment. Thus, every time the lawyer’s question is asked by any one of us, Jesus’ answer will always same: *Love your neighbor, no questions asked.*

### **Worship: Neighbors and Sacred Space**

So, if Christian neighborliness is a matter of action what does it look like in our current historical context? The possible answers are many. But we can hardly begin to entertain them until we move beyond popular notions that the Christian faith is a private matter. Jesus invites us to join him in a public ministry that imagines the possibilities of the reign of God in the present moment. Yes, the eschatological hope of the “not yet” sustains but we must remember and participate fully in the “now”

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<sup>40</sup> Theissen, 66.

<sup>41</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), 285.

part of the axiom. Hunter calls for a faithful presence in which “we are fully present to each other within the community of faith and fully present to those who are not.”<sup>42</sup> Nothing can offer a more a more profound witness than the church’s most public act: worship, particularly our gathering for the Eucharist.

William Cavanaugh describes the Eucharist as “that performance which makes the body of Christ visible in the present. If the church is to resist disappearance, then it must be publicly visible as the body of Christ in the present time, not secreted away in the souls of the believers or relegated to the distant historical past or future.”<sup>43</sup> In our gathering for word, prayer, and sacrament, we are active participants in God’s imagination for a new kind of altar. This is not the altar of coercive power that sacrifices others. No, at this altar, we are reminded, in the words of Jürgen Moltmann, that “Jesus’ history is first of all an expression of God’s solidarity with the victims of violence and torture. Christ’s cross stands between the countless crosses set up by the powerful and the violent throughout history, down to the present day.”<sup>44</sup> That means it stands in the detention centers and torture chambers of the state, including our own government. It stands with gay persons, disowned by society, rejected by faith communities everywhere, and too often beaten and left for dead. It stands with our sisters and brothers of faiths, as well as those caught in the crossfire of our conflict. It means we, too, who gather at the Eucharistic altar must also stand with the other. In doing so we become the other, because we no longer participate in a system that leaves people for dead at the margins. It means we call out our own if necessary, albeit in love, so that vilifying rhetoric does not get a pass.

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<sup>42</sup> Hunter, 244.

<sup>43</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 1998).

<sup>44</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today’s World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 65.

Re-visioning what it means to be a neighbor, and thereby learning from our neighbors will not be an easy challenge in parish ministry, especially for local leadership. For one the consumer mentality of people, when it comes to choosing a faith community, means some people will leave when these issues are addressed. We have to be willing to let that happen. Another factor is that emerging generations are keeping their distance from the church. Putnam and Campbell label this group the “nones” because they are choosing no religious affiliation. As they explain, “This youthful generation seems unwilling or unable to distinguish the stance of the most visible, most political, and most conservative religious leaders from organized religions in general.”<sup>45</sup> Yet, there may be opportunity here because, while they maintain their distance from the church, they may be most willing to hear alternative voices.

That is why local clergy must claim their prophetic role in the local parish, as well as the community at large. To abdicate this role only perpetuates the current climate and further alienates emerging generations already repelled by the church. Scott Appleby, director of the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at Notre Dame, explains for example that peace building is often hindered first because of the “failure of religions leaders to understand and/or enact their potential peace-building roles within the local community.”<sup>46</sup> He further suggests that clergy may need to form relationship they are not accustomed to. The new global landscape, “might feature Catholics Mormons, Jews, Muslims, agnostics, and atheists forming an ethical alliance against a rival bloc of Catholics, Jew, Mormons, agnostics, and atheists. Often the first task of religious peacemakers is to challenge or otherwise neutralize their belligerent coreligionists.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Putnam and Campbell, 131.

<sup>46</sup> R. Scott Appleby, “Building Sustainable Peace: The Roles of Local and Transnational Religious Actors,” in *Religious Pluralism, Globalization and World Politics*, ed. Thomas Banchoff. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 127.

<sup>47</sup> Appleby, 128.

The same can be true of relationship building with our neighbors. Like Samuel who responds to God by calling in to account the leadership of his own mentor, Eli, we need leadership willing to call into account those who would misrepresent the neighborly gospel of Jesus Christ. We need leadership willing to risk the embrace of others in our world. It may well be that new voices arise from the “nones” in our midst.

Given the influence Western Christians still have in the global community we need alternative voices who are willing to gather around a different kind of altar; one that is a metaphor for life and compels us to embrace the other. Perhaps, we embrace this “Gospel neighborliness” as the Sufi poet, Rumi, who speaks to us even today across space and time, understands it:

*Where Jesus lives, the great-hearted gather.*

*We are a door that's never locked.*

*If you are suffering any kind of pain,  
stay near this door. Open it.<sup>48</sup>*

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<sup>48</sup> Coleman Barks, trans., *The Essential Rumi* (Edison, New Jersey: Castle Books, 1997), 201.