

**“A CHRIST FORMED CHURCH FOR A CHRIST REDEEMED WORLD”**  
**CONSULTATION ON THE GREAT COMMISSION**  
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## **INTRODUCTION**

January 20 this year I gathered in Meridian, Mississippi, to celebrate the ministry of a once vibrant church. Its history is rather remarkable, at least until the last thirty years. The facilities are magnificent--majestic vaulted ceilings, beautiful stained glass windows, richly carved woodwork, a grand pipe organ, spacious classrooms and fellowship hall. For many years, the pews were filled with enthusiastic, committed worshipers who sang from the United Methodist Hymnal and its predecessors. Glorious music once filled the sanctuary and choir loft. Children's laughter and giggles once resounded from the crowded classrooms. Young people gathered for Methodist Youth Fellowship, study sessions, and outings. Active adult groups and committees met during the week.

At its height, the church averaged 400 to 500 in worship, apportionments were paid in full, and mission giving was enviable. The congregation was structured according the *Discipline* and it used United Methodist literature and devotional material. The worship reflected strong liturgical sensitivity. The church was widely recognized for its commitment to evangelism and mission. It was one of the sought-after appointments in the Mississippi Conference. Eleven clergy were called into ministry from that church and many are currently serving in the Conference.

We gathered to celebrate the congregation's ministry, and to anticipate its closing in June. The attendance now averages seventeen and most of the remaining members are over seventy years of age. The meager financial resources are consumed with utilities, building maintenance, and pastor's salary. Missional giving is now minimal and the deteriorating building stands vacant except on Sunday mornings when the seventeen or so gather for worship.

I arrived early January 20 and walked through the neighborhood. The church is surrounded by occupied houses. Children peeked through the windows. Adults and youth passed on the sidewalks. Some houses are now dilapidated and a few former business establishments are crumbling. Cars travel the streets around the church. People in the neighborhood were on their way somewhere on that cold Sunday morning, but it wasn't to church.

The service was bittersweet. The sanctuary was once again filled with worshipers of all ages. People came back home to give thanks for what the church had meant to them. I asked several questions: How many of you were baptized here? Probably seventy-five people raised their hands. How many first made your profession in Jesus Christ and were confirmed here? Again, many raised their hands. How many were married at this altar? Again, a couple of dozen folks responded. How many had your children baptized at this altar? More hands went up. Then, we gave people an opportunity to testify to the church's impact on their lives. The testimonies were profound and moving as one by one they came to the microphone and shared how significant the church had been in their spiritual pilgrimage.

Listening to the stories, reviewing the history, and visiting the community caused me to ask the obvious and simple question: Why is this church closing? It isn't because the pastors have been untrained. In fact, up until the most recent appointees, they were all seminary graduates and most graduated from United Methodist or Methodist seminaries. Neither is it because there are no people in the neighborhood. The community has declined economically and the people who now surround the church are a different color from those who worshiped there. Poverty now dominates life in that neighborhood once populated by middle class working people. Alternative economies have developed, including drugs and prostitution. A fence around the church is symptomatic of the isolation of the church from the neighborhood and the preoccupation with security and safety is obvious.

The church has died while being strategically placed in the midst of a fertile field for mission and evangelization. In fact, if one were to look for an ideal location for a mission station in Meridian, Mississippi, this would be it! Yet we gathered to sing, pray, recite the Creed, read

Scripture, remember, and testify that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior as a benediction on a church in a neighborhood where the gospel of Jesus Christ is needed more than ever in its history.

Something is wrong with that picture! And it is a story all too familiar in every city in the United States. And, that community and church are a macrocosm of the world with its diversity and poverty. What accounts for statistically strong churches with well-trained pastors and all the resources the denomination makes available can let a community crumble around it and people for whom Christ died go untouched by the church's ministry? What forms churches that thrive on homogeneity and affluence but crumble in the face of diversity and poverty?

The answer is not to be found in sociological analysis and demographic surveys, though sociological dynamics are evident and the demographics have changed. The solution does not lie in more strategic planning processes, marketing proposals, or changes in the styles of worship. Explanation of the church's demise lie in a distorted theology, an inadequate Christology, a myopic understanding of evangelism, a parochial interpretation of The Great Commission, and a privatized/personalized image of discipleship. The solutions lie in a renewal of theology that calls forth a Christ-formed Church for a Christ-redeemed world.

## **CHRIST IS SOVEREIGN OF CREATION AS WELL AS THE HUMAN HEART**

The death of this church and the hundreds across the denomination in similar settings is a profound theological challenge to and indictment of the church, the seminaries, the general boards and agencies, the annual conferences, and every clergy and lay person in the denomination. Such dying churches and others that will inevitably follow them as populations shift are visible signs of our failure to fulfill the mission we so glibly, even self-righteously, affirm: “to make disciples of Jesus Christ.” They are evidence of our privatized, individualized, and institutionalized distortion of the Great Commission and the church’s call to evangelization and mission.

A hint of the distortion was shared by a former district superintendent. Approximately twenty-five years ago he arrived for a charge conference. After seeing children playing on the sidewalks in front of the church, the Superintendent asked, “What are you doing to welcome neighborhood children into the church?” A leader of the congregation responded without embarrassment or hesitation: “Nothing. We’ll burn the church down before we have those kids in this church.” There were no gasps of disbelief or reprimands or call to accountability or even a reminder of what Jesus said about welcoming and hindering little children. How can a church called into being by Christ for sharing in the redemption of the world so casually contradict its nature and mission? Could it be that we have formed churches around other values than the primacy of the gospel expressed in The Great Commission?

Although we have become more subtle in most communities, the basic theological problem remains. Communities crumble and churches die while we read, study, affirm, and consult about The Great Commission. We have so privatized and internalized Christian discipleship and defined evangelism and the church’s mission as institutional advancement that we can ignore social, political, and economic contexts as unrelated to what it means to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In fact, I contend that our limiting evangelism to personal salvation, our bifurcation of the gospel into personal and social, and our preoccupation with the institutional church and our limiting spirituality to the inner life are contributing to the death of

our churches, undermining evangelism, and contributing to the world's suffering. We thereby advocate a Christ-formed human heart while forming churches around the values of the market formed world.

One of the destructive heresies of the last two hundred years is the notion that there is a personal gospel and a social gospel and that discipleship has to do only with the transformation of the human heart and not with the salvation of the world (cosmos). Such a heresy contributes to the current politicizing of evangelism and fragmenting of our collective witness. Those who speak of personal salvation are considered evangelicals and those who address issues of poverty and racism and other "social concerns" as constitutive to discipleship are labeled as "liberal."

But the gospel proclaims Christ's sovereignty over the entire cosmos as well as the human heart. Paul declares plainly the cosmic scope of Christ's sovereignty: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of *all creation*; for in him *all things in heaven and on earth* were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers--*all things* have been created through him and for him. He himself is before *all things*, and in him *all things* hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might have first place in *everything*. For in him *all* the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all things, whether on earth or in heaven*, by making peace through the blood of his cross"(Colossians 1:15-20). [italics added]

The Great Commission begins, not with the announcement of Christ's sovereignty over the human heart and the church, but with his sovereignty over the cosmos as the Risen Christ announces: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age"(Matthew 28:18-20).

"*All* authority in heaven and on earth" and "make disciples of all *nations*." Could it be any clearer that the *world* in all its structures, its principalities and powers, as well as its individual human hearts, is the focus of Christ's salvation and that making disciples involves the transformation of churches, communities, neighborhoods, nations, and cultures into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

The watchword of Jesus preaching, teaching, and action was 'the kingdom of God.' The reign of God, the purposes of God, God's vision for a redeemed and healed creation has come near in Jesus of Nazareth. He is the very incarnation of the divine realm and reign. Every where he went and everything he did brought the divine reign into reality. He pointed to the signs of its dawning and called disciples whose mission was to share in the divine reign of justice, compassion, mercy, generosity, and joy. As disciples they were to live now as though God's new heaven and new earth had already arrived in its fullness, for in Jesus Christ it had arrived. The Crucifixion of Jesus represents the powers of this old world that compete with the power of God's new creation; and the Resurrection proclaims that in Christ Jesus the decisive victory over the powers of sin and death has been won! So, we can live now in the light of Christ's reign over all creation, not just Christ's power to change the individual human heart. Christ is the power to change the universe, including neighborhoods and congregations!

Here is the Church's mission: The church is called into being and formed by Christ to bear witness to Christ's redemption of the *world*. It is for the *world* that Christ died; it is the *world* that has been reconciled by the blood of the cross; it is a new heaven and a new earth that is on its way through the power of the Cross and Resurrection. It is the world, the neighborhoods, the nations that are the focus of God's salvation in Jesus Christ. The Church points beyond itself to Christ's redemption of the world.

Limiting Christ's salvation to individual human souls and defining evangelism primarily as church growth while ignoring social structures, political domination, and economic forces is to operate from a very deficient Christology that reduces the Cosmic Christ to a private chaplain of the individual personality. Such a low Christology undermines the Great Commission and actually subverts the mission of the church to make disciples of all nations. Such a privatized and individualize Christology provides the underpinning for dying churches located in prime missional contexts and gives credence to a truncated discipleship that ignores the communal dimensions of the Christian gospel. It supports an evangelism that falls woefully short of the Great Commission which calls for communities (nations), ecclesial and otherwise, that live under the authority and sovereignty of Jesus Christ.

The central message of the gospel is that in Jesus Christ God has acted decisively to save, redeem, and transform the world into the realm of the new heaven and new earth. God has triumphed over the powers of sin and death against which our neighborhoods and states and nations continue to wrestle.

## **THE CHURCH AS A SIGN OF CHRIST-REDEEMED WORLD**

The church is to be a sign, foretaste, and instrument of a Christ-redeemed world. What does a Christ-redeemed world look like. It is a world in which all creation is healed and the groaning creation is renewed, from the scarred majestic mountains to the polluted mountain streams, from the depleted ozone to the microscopic cell. It is a world in which all people know their intrinsic identity and worth as beloved children of God, created in the divine image and redeemed in Jesus Christ. It is a world in which all barriers among human beings are removed and the human family is one, a world in which there is neither male nor female, bond or free, Jew or Gentile, black or white, rich or poor, old or young, a world in which dividing walls of hostility have crumbled and violence and war have ceased. In a Christ-redeemed world justice permeates all relationships, the lowly are exalted and the exalted are brought low, good news is brought to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind and the year of jubilee justice is every year! It is a world where agape love expressed in vulnerability, servanthood, and self-emptying is the most trusted power and dominate reality and the goal after which all strive to be made perfect.

Only a Christ-formed Church can bear witness to a Christ-Redeemed world. But what does such a church look like? It approximates in its life and actions God's new heaven and new earth. It is a community shaped by, motivated by, and empowered by the Crucified, Risen and Ascended Christ, the Christ to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given. A Christ-formed church is a community which seeks to live the Jesus story in the neighborhood, the nation, the world in which it is located. It seeks to make disciples, not to save itself or even primarily to save the individual for heaven after death; but it summons and forms disciples in communities for the purpose of sharing in Christ's mission of redeeming the world. It is preoccupied, not with getting more people into its membership, but getting its membership into Christ's redeemed world. It is as concerned about shaping communities and neighborhoods that reflect Christ's reign as forming individual disciples.

A Christ-formed church acknowledges in what it is and does that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Christ. Under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the Christ-formed

church obeys what Jesus commands, goes where Jesus goes, and welcomes those whom Jesus loves and for whom Jesus died.

The first command of Jesus in both Matthew and Mark is **repentance** in response to the dawning of God's reign. Repentance, turning toward a Christ-redeemed world, is the persistent stance of a church under the authority of Christ. A Christ-formed church lives with the tension between the world dominated by sin and death and the world redeemed and made new in Jesus Christ. With the vision of God's new heaven and new earth ever in the forefront, the Christ-formed church measures its growth, not by membership or any statistical gain, but by how closely it resembles the new world ushered in by Jesus Christ. Until those criteria become the reports on Charge Conference records and the subject of consultations with Pastor Parish Relations Committees and the standard by which we measure pastoral effectiveness churches will continue to put their trust in marketing campaigns built on self-seeking consumerism. A Christ-formed church measures its faithfulness by a very different standard than the market logic of statistical growth, fulfilled self-identified needs, upward mobility, and institutional prominence; and it repents in the presence of a Sovereign Savior who comes in what the world considers weakness and foolishness.

You have seen the billboards along the highways: "Remember that love you neighbor thing? I meant it! God." Remember that Jesus said that all commands (law) can be summarized in this "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your strength and with all your mind; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Remember that Jesus said, "Anyone who would be great among you must be the servant of all." Remember, Jesus said, "Suffer the children to come unto me and do not hinder them for to such belongs the kingdom of God." Remember, "Come unto me, all who you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls"(Matthew 11:28-29). Remember when Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake

will find it”(Matthew 16:24-25). Jesus meant those, and he meant them for the church as surely as for individuals! Knowing Christ’s promises and commands is essential for a Christ-formed church.

That means a Christ-formed church must major in teaching! Not since the time of Constantine has the need for recovery of the teaching office at every level of the church been more evident. The church cannot be formed by Christ if it does not know the Scriptures and the traditions that shape our identity and which contain the promises and commands that determine our mission. But it must be more than intellectual understandings. Churches formed by Christ are led by pastors formed by Christ. Seminaries and conferences cannot be content with teaching pastors to think critically about the Scriptures and the tradition; pastors must themselves be formed and shaped by the gospel by which they seek to form and shape congregations.

A Christ-formed church obeys what Jesus says. It goes where Jesus goes. Following the call to repentance, Jesus invited the first disciples to “Come, follow me.” We know where he goes. Jesus goes into the hurting, broken, dangerous, alienated places of the world where the principalities and powers of sin and death continue their life-denying hold on the human family and God’s creation. Matthew makes it clear where we can find this Sovereign One: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me”(Matthew 25:35-36). Jesus goes among the poor, the suffering, the dispossessed, the marginalized, the despised and rejected. A Christ-formed church is present with the same persons, those whom Jesus calls “the least of these” and those whom Charles Wesley calls “Jesus’ bosom friends.”

Another terrible heresy of our time is the notion that one can be a disciple of Jesus Christ and be isolated from the poor, the imprisoned, and the suffering of the world. John Wesley knew that to follow Jesus meant to live with the poor and to visit the imprisoned; and he would no more neglect ongoing relationships with the impoverished than he would avoid weekly

participation in corporate worship and the Eucharist. In fact, he indicated that if there is a conflict between acts of piety and acts of mercy, we must choose the act of mercy.

Going where Jesus goes means going into the risky, dangerous places such as the communities that surround many of our strategically located but dying churches. Churches formed by Christ know that true security does not lie in their chainlink fences, barred windows, and uniformed guards. Rather it lies in the congregation's willingness to lose its life in service to the poor and suffering neighbors both near and far away.

Saturating the neighborhood with Christlike actions and ministries gives the church the authority to speak about a Christ-redeemed world. Any affirmation without a willingness to follow him into the hurting places is hollow. Peter's affirmation, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God" is the correct affirmation. But when Jesus said that the Son of Man must go to Jerusalem where he would suffer and die, Peter's affirmation was exposed as shallow and premature. Only a church willing to follow Jesus to Jerusalem, the center of secular and religious power and potential death, can speak with authority about a Christ who redeems the world through a cross.

Let us remember that Jesus did not claim ultimate authority in Matthew's Gospel until after the Crucifixion. The Cross and Resurrection became the means by which Christ's authority was claimed and authenticated. There is no authority on the comfort side of the cross or an Easter without a Good Friday. It is hard, if not impossible, for a plush, opulent, comfortable, status conscious church in a poverty stricken and diseased world to have any authority in pointing to a new world redeemed and transformed by a Cross! Unless the church is present where Jesus is present, it has nothing to say to a changing neighborhood and a suffering world. It can move to another affluent, homogenous neighborhood and in the name of "going where the people are." It is far more important for the church to go where Jesus goes than to go where 'the people go,' meaning 'our kind of people.'

Finally, the Christ-formed church for a Christ-redeemed world welcomes those whom Jesus welcomes and loves those for whom Jesus died. As a sign, foretaste, and instrument of

Christ's redeemed world, the church is to look like the redeemed, reconciled family of God. Hospitality and reconciliation are at the heart of the biblical message and the Incarnation. Jesus lived in his world as though God's new community had already been formed. He welcomed and reconciled the ostracized and the scandalize and the strangers, ate with tax collectors and known sinners, touched and healed the unclean and diseased, forgave even those who sought to destroy him, and promised paradise to an executed criminal.

A Christ-formed church is more concerned about extending Christlike hospitality and demonstrating the power of Christ's reconciling grace than it is deciding who is in and who is out. As Peter Storey reminded the General Board of Discipleship recently, "Every time the disciples asked Jesus something it was about who is in and who is out, who is up and who is down." We seem to have fixated on the disciples' questions more than Jesus' responses. Much of the New Testament in general and the *Book of Acts* in particular is occupied with how Christ transforms the table manners of the church through reconciliation and the practice of hospitality. And, the Eucharist is not only a remembrance of the Last Supper; it is an anticipation of the heavenly banquet when "people will come from the north and the south, the east and the west, and sit at table with all God's children." As Paul reminded the Corinthians, excluding the poor from the table by whatever means is to partake of the Lord's meal unworthily and to invite the church's death.

A Christ-formed church walks the streets of its neighborhoods and welcomes the strangers, those who are different. Strangers become friends and together they work for neighborhoods that reflect God's justice and compassion. A Christ-formed church obeys all that Jesus commands, goes where Jesus goes-into all the world, and welcomes and reconciles all from whom he died.

## **CONCLUSION**

Let me tell you about another church in Mississippi. It is located in a neighborhood similar to the one that is closing in June. They share similar histories and almost identical

demographics. It appeared a few years ago that they would share a similar fate, death. But things began to change when a clergy couple was appointed a few years ago. They are both second career. He was a prominent attorney on his way up the ladder of prestige and wealth. She was a well positioned public relations director for a major state university. They simultaneously began to evaluate their own lives and vocational calling in the light of Christ's sovereignty over creation. Both decided to enter seminary, which they did at Duke. Upon graduation, they were assigned to this "dying" church in a radically changing neighborhood.

They began to teach and preach the Jesus story with passion and commitment. They visited the people inside and outside the church, reaching out with a hospitality born in grace, God's grace in Jesus Christ. They noticed the children playing around the church, walking the sidewalks. The pastors, along with a few key lay persons, began welcoming the children. It became evident that a day care center and after school ministries were needed. But the only adequate space was a large classroom occupied by the matriarchs of the church. The pastors visited the elderly women in their homes and talked about the children and how Jesus welcomed little children as signs of the kingdom of God. Those women decided to give up their classroom to the neighborhood kids. I visited there a few months ago. I stopped by the room full of children, singing "Jesus Loves Me" and I got the impression it was more than a song. Then the pastor said, "Let's go meet the women who gave up their classroom." We went into the chapel and around the altar the women gathered for Sunday School. It is only place left for a class to meet. But where could be more appropriate than at the altar where those elderly women acknowledge week after week Christ's authority over even their classroom space?

But the story of Court Street Church continues. That church is leading the effort for that neighborhood to be a Shalom community. They are studying the possibility of combining the children's day care with an adult day care where some of the women who gave up their class will spend part of their days with the children to whom they gave their space. Instead of saying, "We'll burn the church down before we have those kids in our church" they responded, "We'll give what we have so those kids will know that Jesus loves them."

One church, though faithful in many ways, failed to see that the Great Commission includes making disciples of 'nations' and that Christ's sovereignty extends to neighborhoods as well as human hearts. That church is dying. Another church has chosen to live under Christ's sovereignty over ALL, even their classrooms and their neighborhood, and they are becoming a Christ-formed Church bearing witness to a Christ-redeemed world; and the church and the neighborhood are coming alive and acting like disciples of Jesus Christ.

A Christ-formed church can obey what Jesus says, go where Jesus goes, and extend hospitality to those whom Jesus loves and for whom Jesus died because they know that the Christ-redeemed world is on its way. We are an Easter people! We know who has won and who will win! The decisive, critical victory has already been won. It was won in the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the One to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has now been given. We can, therefore, give ourselves to making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that Jesus told us. We do so with courage and hope because of the promise: "Lo, I am with you always even to the close of the age."