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MOVING FROM CENTRIFUGAL TO CENTRIPETAL

A Sermon on Colossians 1:15-20

John E. Toews

I was in my first teaching assignment at Fresno Pacific College [Fresno, California] in the early 1960's. One day when I came to school I heard the depressing story of the previous night's decisive action by the President and Dean of Students. They had learned the afternoon before that a group of students was going to a movie theater that evening. The President and Dean staked out the theater, let the students go in, went in after them, and ordered them back to the dormitories. A mid-night meeting with the students followed. The President and Dean thought they had protected the students from sin. They had defended the integrity and the witness of the church.

I was angry. I said to myself that this was no way for the leaders of a Christian college to act. We were in the sixties. Today profound changes are engulfing the world, the church, and our students. Our task is to engage the larger forces that are fundamentally changing our world.

The Center and Boundary Maintenance

I grew up in a centripetal world, a world that was deeply centered. There was a larger cultural synthesis about the nature of reality. Recall with

Dr. John E. Toews, Professor of New Testament at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, presented this chapel sermon in conjunction with the Consultation, October 10, 1994.

Two critical benchmarks for centering in a centrifugal world are Christology and a people in community.

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me some of the images and slogans we heard repeatedly in the middle of the century: “racial integration,” “the family of man,” “global village,” “spaceship earth.” These images caught our imagination. That was the world that gave birth to the United Nations, the United Church of Christ, the World Council of Churches, the Vatican Council and Ecumenism, the National Conference of Christians and Jews, and the National Association of Evangelicals.

Philosophers talked about the unification of all reality. The French philosopher-theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin asserted that “everything that rises must converge,” and used words like “hominization” and “planetization.” The urbanologist Lewis Mumford claimed that “civilization is the never-ending process of creating one world and one humanity.” The sociologist Pitrim Sorokin believed that human civilization was moving from independent and isolated groups to “a state of one unified, universal, interdependent whole.” The historian Arnold Toynbee dreamed about a “synthesis” of world religions. The philosopher Karl Jaspers proclaimed “the world is closed. The unity of the earth has arrived.” The world was centered. The dominant forces moved toward the center, toward the convergent, toward the universal. People dreamed about a more profound centering that would unify the diversity of human experience and reality.

The centered ethos of the larger cultural synthesis was reflected in the church. The Christian church was confident about its center. It believed the gospel would triumph throughout the world. The title of a Protestant bi-weekly *Christian Century* summarized the confidence of the church. This was the century in which the world would become Christian.

Even smaller denominations, which like the Mennonites lived with considerable tension with the theology of the dominant paradigm, were secure about the center. In fact, they took the center so for granted that they were preoccupied with boundary maintenance, with clearly defining and reinforcing the circumference of the church to make sure the faithful knew and respected the boundaries. I cannot recall any serious discussion of the center in the 1950’s, 60’s or even the 70’s. We all knew what the center was. All attention was focused on the boundaries, e.g., movies, dancing, smoking, card-playing. The President and Dean of Students believed they were serving the church by engaging in boundary maintenance actions.

The Center Gives Way

Something happened in the late-sixties. A revolution occurred. The center began to give way, and then collapsed. We moved from a centripetal world to a centrifugal world, a world that has no center. The dominant

forces today are moving away from any kind of center into uncentered and chaotic diversity.

Christian college presidents and deans of students today do not track people to movie theaters to defend the faith. They now struggle with how to define, even to talk about, a center for the Christian faith, for the church, for their institutions.

I grew up in a centripetal world. I now live in a centrifugal world. You live in a centrifugal world. The Bible teachers gathered for this consultation think and teach in a centrifugal world. Seminary students are preparing to enter ministry in a centrifugal world.

William Butler Yeats said it well at the end of World War I, "things fall apart; the center cannot hold." Kenneth Clark quoted that line in the last of his great Civilization series for TV. Clark comments that there is no center, nothing to hold together the industrial, electronic and nuclear civilization of our time. "One can't be optimistic," he concludes.

You can read any of the major cultural analyses of American or Canadian cultures today, and they all expound the words of Yeats. We live in a world that is falling apart. There is no center to hold things together. People live in fear and uncertainty because "things fall apart; the center cannot hold." This deep anxiety drives people in search of a center that will give some sense of security. Unable to find a center that will hold they turn in on themselves.

The world in which we talk about biblical interpretation, in which we prepare for ministry, is a world in which "things fall apart; the center does not hold."

Jesus Holds Things Together

Do we have anything to say to such a world? Can we find any center that will guide our work in biblical interpretation and our ministries in such a world. I commend to you the words of Paul "in Christ all things hold together" (Col. 1.17). Christ is the center. He holds all things together. Nothing is excluded. My thesis comes from a larger text in Colossians to which I draw your attention. The line, "in Christ all things hold together", is part of a hymn or confession that Paul quotes in the middle of Colossians 1:15-20.

The Colossian hymn addressed a group of Christians for whom there was uncertainty about the center. Life felt out of control. Destiny was determined by fate rather than divine will and power. Therefore, people, even Christians, engaged in the worship of angels and various ascetic practices in order to please God.

These Christians were so anxious about life without a center that they were attracted to false teachings and practices in the quest for hope and security. They searched for subjective experiences that would assure them that God was present in history. They wanted assurance that God was able to protect them from the powers of evil that seemed to overwhelm them.

Paul makes two points for anxious Christians that are instructive for us today.

Jesus is Lord of the Cosmos

Paul's first point is that Jesus is Lord of the universe. The Lordship of Jesus means two things for Paul. First, it means that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. Jesus reveals the nature of God in the world. He reveals the character and power of God.

Secondly, the Lordship of Jesus means that he is the firstborn of creation. The first phrase, the image of God, defines Jesus' relation to God. The second, the firstborn of creation, defines his relation to creation. "Firstborn" language means priority of rank and sovereignty, here in relation to the created order. Paul explains what this sovereignty means in two phrases.

"All things were created in him" is the first phrase. God's creation takes place in Christ and is dependent on him. All created reality, even the cosmic principalities and powers, were created in, through and for Christ. Therefore, all created reality also is subject to him.

The second phrase which explains Christ's sovereignty over creation is the line from v. 17, "in him all things hold together". Christ is the sustainer of the universe. He is the unifying force of creation. He holds all things together.

Paul's first word to Christians fearful of life without a center is that Jesus is Lord. He represents God to us as the creator and sustainer of the universe. We do not need other gods, earthly or supernatural, to be assured of the presence of God in history.

Jesus is Lord of the Church

Paul's second point to the anxious Christians of Colossae is that Jesus is the head of the body, the church.

The "headship of Jesus" is defined by two phrases. Jesus is "the beginning", a term which again denotes primacy. Jesus is "the firstborn of the dead." He is the firstborn of a new creation of resurrected people.

The two terms, "beginning" and "firstborn of the dead", are used beginning with Genesis 49:3, to describe the founder of a people. The beginner and the firstborn of the dead is the founder of a new social order,

a new humanity. To say that Jesus is the head of the body as the beginning and the firstborn of the dead is to say that he is the founder of the church. Jesus is Lord of the created order because he created it, and now Jesus is head of the Church because he founded it. The church is Jesus' new people in the world through which he expresses his Lordship.

Paul offers two reasons for the importance of the church as the people of Jesus' lordship in the world. First, the church is the means of demonstrating that Christ is preeminent in all things. The concern again is primacy or sovereignty. The issue of primacy here is that "all fullness in him was pleased to dwell". Christ is the place in whom God takes up residence. The context where God's fullness is fully present is in Christ as head of the church. Do you want to experience the full presence of God in history? If you do, you do not do it off by yourself, or by worshipping other gods, Paul says. The church under the Lordship of Jesus is the place of the presence of God.

Secondly, the lordship of Jesus through the church is critical because Jesus as head of the church reconciles all things. The unity of the created order has been shattered by the power of sin. All reality and all people exist in alienation, in a state of enmity and strangeness. But God in Christ has reconciled all things. Heaven and earth have been brought back into their divinely created order. The universe is again under its head. Cosmic peace is being restored. This cosmic reconciliation has been achieved through Christ's death on the cross. The cosmic nature of this reconciliation is expanded in Col. 2:15; Christ's reconciliation includes the disarming of the principalities and powers, the supernatural beings and the socio-political structures of order in the world that bind, oppress and alienate people.

The church is the place of the presence of God in history, and also the community of reconciliation. Jesus as the founder of the church is the reconciler. He reconciles all reality in order to bring it into the context of the new humanity he is founding.

Do you want to experience God? Center in the Church. Do you want to experience reconciliation with God, with fellow people, with nature? Center in the Church.

Answering Centerlessness

Paul answers the centerlessness of his time by calling Christians to first the Lordship of Jesus, and secondly to the priority of the church. Jesus is the Center. The church under the lordship of Jesus is the community of centeredness. It is the place where God dwells in Christ and where reconciliation occurs through Christ.

I suggest to you that Paul gives us two critical bench marks for centering in our centrifugal world, a Christology and a people in community. Both are critical pegs on which to anchor our hermeneutics in turbulent times.

The Bible was written for the people of God by leaders of this people to pastor this people in diverse and difficult times. We interpret the Bible and minister in a post-Christian world. Our central task as teachers in a such a world is to point people to the center of Christian faith, Christ and the people of Christ in the world, and to build that center.

Our hermeneutic obviously must be textually based because we are interpreting the normative writings of the church. But more than that, our interpretation must be Christologically centered and it must build the church trying to find its way in the high waves of the transition from modernity to post-modernity. As the rest of the letter makes clear, a hermeneutic that is not transformative, that does not challenge the most fundamental values and experiences of pagan people and culturally accommodated Christians, can hardly be Christologically centered or build the church of Jesus Christ in the world. In other words, I suggest that we appropriate this text by working at a hermeneutics that is Christologically and ecclesiologicaly centered, and that is theologically and experientially transformative.

“Things fall apart; the center does not hold”.

Jesus holds all things together.

Jesus is Lord and the Church is Center.