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BOOK REVIEW

Richard P. Church. *First Be Reconciled: Challenging Christians in the Courts*. Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2008. 230 pp. Pbk. CDN\$22.99.

First Be Reconciled is about the critical role of discernment and conflict resolution in the church. It traces the exegetical and theological history of the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 6 and its application within the Anabaptist tradition. The book is the outworking of conversations between Church and his professor and mentor, Stanley Hauerwas. Hauerwas introduced Church to the works of John Howard Yoder, and Yoder's works deeply affected Church's perspective on his calling as an attorney and in his previous role as an assistant professor of religion at Windgate University. Church is particularly interested in how Christians resolve disputes, whether they should be involved in litigation, and whether the church is living up to its responsibility of being a witness of reconciliation to the world.

The opening chapters deal with key texts from Paul's letters to the Corinthians in which Paul reminds believers that God has reconciled them to himself through Christ, has given them the ministry of reconciliation, and has entrusted the message of reconciliation to them. In light of this ministry to which they are called, he urges them not to take one another to court. Church thoughtfully explores what Paul had in mind when he wrote to the Christians in Corinth regarding avoiding secular courts. Church argues, "the clarion call is clear—the means by which Christians resolve disputes is at the very heart of the church's witness to the gospel. The resurrection names the power of the cross to produce reconciliation in a world of violence and enmity" (135). Church insists that the church in the world is to be an "eschatological forerunner" (111) by witnessing to the

coming kingdom of Christ. The church is a community of God's people "both located in and called out of the world for the purpose of making known that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the eschatological destiny of the world" (110).

Church traces the history of some of the church's reasoning on litigation, beginning with a close reading of 1 Corinthians 6. He contends that modern litigation practices raise similar concerns to those raised by Paul in his letter to the church in Corinth. Church also claims that Paul was concerned with two main issues regarding the witness of the church, which, he believed, was compromised by their involvement in litigation. Paul was concerned with the disunity of the body of Christ and the lack of distinct boundaries between the identity and ethics of the church and those of the world. Through involvement in litigation, the body of Christ compromised their calling as ministers of reconciliation.

Church devotes two chapters to locating the political and theological changes occurring during the time between the early church and the church during the reformation. He argues that these changes account for our modern perspective on litigation, which is far removed from the early church's perspective on the matter. Furthermore, Church aptly outlines the history of the church's relationship to civil forms of dispute resolution in the church at the time of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, and locates key contextual changes during the period between Augustine and Luther, particularly the changes in litigation within and outside the church.

Church's following chapters deal with the use of civil law, particularly within the Mennonite context. According to Church, Mennonite reflection and praxis clearly illustrate that ethical resources are available for an imaginative and counter-cultural community to forgo litigation. Drawing on the works of Yoder, Church clearly presents a challenge to the church today to take up the task of discernment regarding its relationship to the civil court and to determine "the analogies or disanalogies between those practices and the world of 1 Corinthians 6, other relevant biblical texts, the gospel witness as a whole, and the church's memory and practice" (18). Church's main argument is clear: the

manner in which disputes are resolved within the church directly affects the church's witness to the community it is called to witness to. For him and the Anabaptists, litigation undermines the ability of the church to be the unique reconciled people of God, and therefore, the church must resolve disputes according to a different set of practices, and must adopt the alternative politics of 1 Corinthians 6 and Matthew 18 because it lives in the midst of a sinful world. By living in light of the cross the church declares that "the cross and resurrection more truthfully narrate the world than any history of secular power and violence" (111).

Yoder's solution is for the church to resolve conflict through the process of dialogical discernment as seen in Matthew 18. Yoder insists that the absence of such difficult conversations leads to violence and the silencing of alternative voices, and it is for this reason that dialogue is necessary for reconciliation: "Nonviolence is the essence of the gospel alternative. The process of dialogical discernment is the alternative to the silence of violence" (124). Yoder describes the ethical practice of Matthew 18 as "weak occasionalism," which asserts that there are limits "to the number of decisional constants which can be carried into one context from others, so that it is very clear that ongoing discernment of the church must be seen as God's own work and not simply our replicating or transposing what God did before" (127). Weak occasionalism is rooted in the belief that "God might have yet more truth to speak in and through the church" (127) and that God might do something different to solve similar situations. By committing to this collective process of discernment and dialogue, the church commits itself to "a set of practices and a group of people skilled in moving forward in their lives together," rather than committing to "a closed theoretical system that can hypothetically answer every ethical dilemma abstracted from time and place" (127).

This work unmistakably urges the modern church to reconsider its involvement and the involvement of its members in civil litigation. (The book does not address criminal cases.) Church makes a strong claim for the necessity of the church to internally mediate disputes between parties with the ultimate goal of reconciliation. In failing to do so, the church's witness is

at stake. Embodying Christ's reconciling work is what it means to be the church, and to be a people capable of witnessing to the power of the resurrection. The church must offer the world an alternative, namely, reconciliation in the midst of violence and strife. The church's practices of Matthew 18 contain the appropriate resources to heal broken relationships and to re-establish peace. Clearly, reconciliation and forgiveness are central to the church's concept of justice and are radically different than what the secular courts offer or award.

One possible weakness of the book is its lack of tangible solutions and practical ways of handling disputes in churches. Church presents more of a theoretical position on the importance of discernment and internal dispute resolution without offering specific details about how the church can go about doing it. Another weakness is Church's presumption that most churches already have a community of believers that are mature enough to forgo litigation in our materialistic and individualistic society in which litigation provides a sense of power and protection. In order to be able to practice such a counter-cultural method of dispute resolution, pastors would need to mature the faith of their congregations by preaching about reconciliation, selflessness, non-materialism, and other such topics in order to transform members' thinking and to foster in them the desire to be a people set apart as peacemakers and ministers of reconciliation despite the culture of litigation in which they live.

Church's study is coherent and remains faithful to the interpretation of key biblical texts on the matter. He successfully outlines the history of the church's relationship to civil governing structures, and the church's changing stance regarding the use of litigation. It is a challenging book insofar as it urges Christians to reflect on what it means to be witnesses to the new eschatological kingdom, and what it means to be radical peacemakers and ministers of reconciliation in a culture of litigation, self-interest, and violence.

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