

2001 Hate Crimes and the Spirit of Prejudice

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Biblical Basis for our Call

The Bible places extraordinary emphasis on love. Both testaments enjoin us to love God (Deuteronomy 6:5, reaffirmed by Jesus in Matthew 22:37). First John 4:16 says that “God is love.” Jesus taught that when we love others, no matter their attitude toward us, then we are like God. “But love your enemies, do good...Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:35-36).

Thus, our God puts a major emphasis on love throughout the Holy Scriptures. Throughout his word, he commands us to love: “Whoever does not love, does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:8). “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8). “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:33-34). “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another” (John 13:34). “His command is that you walk in love” (2 John 6). “We should love one another” (1 John 3:11). “Love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27 and 35). “Anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20). “This is my command: Love one another” (John 15:17). “Do everything in love” (1 Corinthians 16:14).

Our culture seems increasingly comfortable with violence. On any given day in our neighborhoods we hear of acts of prejudice such as lynchings, killings, beatings, mutilations, slanders, attacks against houses of worship, etc. Such horrendous acts of violence and hatred continue to occur at an alarming rate. The media and other communication technologies already support a culture of violence and its proliferation. As Christians, we are

saddened, shocked and outraged at such displays of inhumanity committed by human beings against each other. But we also recognize that the potential for such evil is in every one of us.

The Call

As followers of Christ, we are to live lives of love and compassion. Biblical love expresses itself in action, not passive acquiescence. Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." In James 1:22 we are instructed to "be doers of the word and not hearers only," and James 2:17 tells us that "faith without works is dead." We must admit our own prejudices and take action in the world to prevent the crimes which stem from hatred. We are commanded to "overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21).

The prophet said, "Hate evil; love good, and establish justice" (Amos 5:15). We recognize the proper hatred of evil and wicked acts. As Christians, we will sometimes find ourselves in moral disagreement with others. Nonetheless such disagreement and hatred of sin must not generate hatred of people. God instructs us not to hate persons, but rather to love them (Romans 12:9; Psalm 45:7; Leviticus 19:17; I John 4:20) and to treat them as we would want to be treated (Luke 6:31).

The Bible lays on us a complex responsibility. We must first be honest enough to recognize our own prejudice and allow God's Spirit to purify our hearts. "Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think" (Romans 12:2). Second, we are called to exercise compassion toward the victims of hate crimes. Finally, we must address the root causes of these horrific acts. "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow (Isaiah 1:16,17).

The Response

We encourage Covenant individuals, member congregations, and the ECC prayerfully to consider our response to this call by seeking opportunities for honest spiritual introspection, actions of compassion, and ways to contribute to healing the brokenness of our society. We commend Christian education that focuses on biblical compassion and justice, and growth in our understanding of the Great Commandment.

We encourage churches to be agents of God's compassion in their own communities and in the culture at large. We encourage congregations to develop advance plans for responding to the immediate tragedies of hate-crimes. We commend our Covenant congregations which have already helped rebuild burned houses of worship and shown compassion to other hate crime victims.

We encourage individuals and congregations to stand in the gap in their own communities to seek healing for the causes of hatred. We hope that many will help rebuild structures and provide a variety of assistance to individuals and communities that have fallen victim to tragedy through systemic injustice. We encourage awareness of and involvement in activities like mentoring at-risk youth or reintegration of parolees. Counseling, lectures, prayer groups, mobilizing local support efforts, tolerance training, education programs, and youth camping experiences will also help minister to victims and prevent further outbreaks of violence.

We encourage the ECC to develop liaisons with organizations whose mission is to provide support and assistance to those groups being persecuted and who conduct research on hate crimes.