

The Coming of the Kingdom of God in the Book of Acts

Barry Henning

Introduction

Just the title for this lecture series is a source of excitement and encouragement for me, and hopefully for all of us, as we seek to more faithfully understand and participate in God's glorious work of redemption in this world. Too much of the time discussions and preaching around the book of Acts deal only with the book as a collection of independent stories (the day of Pentecost; Peter and John's imprisonment; Saul's conversion; the Macedonian vision) or as a jumping off point for certain theological issues (the question of speaking in tongues; the place of deacons; the nature of church government; even a study of Paul's missionary methods). While every one of these issues has their place and are truly important to the church, the broader questions of the unfolding story in the book of Acts of the inauguration of the rule and reign of Jesus as the Christ, the risen King, bringing his kingdom to earth through the outpouring of the Spirit's power on the church, as well the questions of the nature of that kingdom and how it all is meant to equip us to also continue "what Jesus began to do and to teach" (Acts 1:1) in announcing the coming of the kingdom in our world today, are largely overlooked. This is an opportunity for all of us to clarify our call as the church to be the faithful people God who learn more deeply to love this world by praying for and living out that most essential, defining vision Jesus taught us to pray for: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

As we begin these studies I want to describe the scope and limit of this discussion. Here is a one (long) sentence definition of the kingdom of God:

The rule and reign of Jesus the Messiah, King of the nations, to bring the blessing of God's promised redemption and restoration to this sinful, oppressive and broken world through Abraham's offspring, the church, who are to be the reconciled people of God from among all the nations, anointed by the Holy Spirit to preach forgiveness of sins through the death and resurrection of Christ and labor for the reconciliation and restoration of all things in Christ by living out justice, mercy and humility, until the end when the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of Christ and the new heavens and the new earth become the home of righteousness forever.

From this definition, we want to concentrate especially on two issues: reconciliation and justice/mercy.

There are many statements and questions throughout the book of Acts that reveal the Apostles and leaders in the Jewish-Jerusalem church were in a process of understanding the reconciliation-justice nature of the kingdom of God. The fact that their expectations were centered around these issues- "what does the kingship of Jesus Christ and the coming of his kingdom mean specifically for the Jewish people in relationship to the world?" – is clear from the opening comments in Acts 1:1-8:

Acts 1:1 In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ² until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ To them he presented himself alive after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴ And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." ⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

This question, "Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" demonstrates that while the disciples had a very clear sense that his rule and reign as Messiah would extend over all the nations of the earth -Dan 7:13-14, Mt 26:62-64- (and I would argue from the ministry of Jesus, undeniably that his kingdom rule was to be one of justice for the poor -Lk 4:18ff; Mt 5:3, etc), they clearly did not fully understand all the implications of the reconciliation-justice nature of that kingdom rule and the way in which the gentiles would be enfolded as equal members of the kingdom. In their minds, all could come, but the practical, earthly expression of ruling and reigning in this kingdom was to be done by the Jewish believers.

It would take nearly 20 years of practical and theological training, culminating in the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, before they fully grasped the new, full nature of the kingdom of God and the place of the Jewish hope and expectations for the fulfillment of the Covenant with Abraham within the rule and reign of Christ; and it would take the book of Revelation to help them understand the full inauguration of Christ's kingship through the destruction of Jerusalem (Rev 10-11) and ultimately Rome (Rev 12ff, Dan 7 and 9), and the vindication of his kingdom.

My contention for much of the evangelical church today is that we need to re-learn both the reconciliation nature of the kingdom and the justice/mercy nature of that kingdom. For too long we have preached a gospel that emphasizes a purely individualistic, "soul" salvation, to the detriment of recognizing that we are called to collectively be the people of God, the body of Christ, a reconciled and reconciling family that holistically announces the kingdom through the power of the Spirit by doing justice and preaching grace.

Lecture One: The Old Testament Foundations for the Expectations of the Kingdom of God in the book of Acts

The Apostles and early Jewish Christians believed God had promised to redeem this world -to rescue and restore it from all of the evil, oppression and brokenness among the nations- (Genesis 3:15; 9:8-17) by making a covenant with Abraham to bless him in order to make him and his descendants after him a blessing to the nations of the earth (Genesis 12:1-4). His descendants would live out God's justice and compassion in this world as the community of God's people under His rule and reign, (Genesis 15; 17:9-14; 18:17-19), and ultimately defeat every evil expression of the kingdom of men and restore the world itself to a place of righteousness and goodness (Isaiah 2:1-4). That blessing would come to fulfillment through one of Abraham's descendants, the Messiah, who would pour out his Spirit on his people and establish this world-wide kingdom reign (Psalm 2; Daniel 7:13-14; Joel 2:28-32). Both through the ministry of Jesus and now through his death and resurrection, these early believers were fully convinced Jesus of Nazareth was this Messiah, the Lord of the nations, and that he would be fulfilling this promise to his people Israel.

As stated earlier and worthy of repetition, the place they needed to grow in their understanding of the kingdom was that this **full expression of the promise of God to Abraham included God bringing all the nations together as a completely reconciled-justice focused community, made up of Jew and Gentile, who would together, as the church "make known the multi-faceted wisdom of God to the rulers and to the authorities in heavenly places" (Eph 3:2-10)**. To restate our focus in this conference – I am suggesting the place we need to grow is both in our understanding of the kingdom of God as a place of reconciliation and as a place of justice and mercy. Let's see how these are intertwined in the Old Testament and come to their fullest expression in the book of Acts.

I. Reconciliation and Justice in the Old Testament

A. The Call for Reconciliation and Justice in the Genesis Account

Adam's fall into sin brought a kind of death that is defined by division, segregation and oppression (Gen 3). Many theologians have pointed out the clear implications of death entering the human race through Adam as creating four major areas of brokenness, division and injustice: man's separation from God, from each other, from himself and from creation. If God's agenda in salvation is the complete reconciliation of all things in Christ (Eph 1:9), it would seem that must include not only a profound reconciliation to God but also a profound reconciliation that expresses justice and healing to one another and touches every aspect of life.

Genesis 1-11 functions as a preamble to Israel's specific role as the "least of the nations" chosen by God, through the promises to Abraham, to bring his salvation to the whole earth. The reconciliation purposes of God are revealed in this narrative in the most basic descriptions of God's overarching plans for mankind, and for Israel as his chosen people

1) The Unity and Dignity of Mankind in the Covenant with Adam

Every believer familiar with Scripture would acknowledge the dignity of all human beings as created in the image of God. Genesis 1-3 emphasizes God as the Sovereign Creator of all things and especially as the Creator of all peoples through the universal fatherhood of Adam and Eve: "Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living." Gen 3:20

As Harvey Conn points out in his lectures on "The Old Testament and the Poor"¹ the false religions and gods of the nations that surrounded Israel were a collection of myths and distorted stories created by the political/religious leaders of their age to spin their own explanations of life and, in the end, to justify the existence of the elite, ruling class who freely oppressed the poor. **The cultures of the Ancient Near East, as a general rule, not only oppressed women, but also used their pagan religious teachings to feed an ethnocentric ideal that further justified the oppression of people from different ethnic groups.² The Babylonian gods were only concerned with Babylon. The Egyptian gods were only concerned with Egypt, etc. God took time in the Genesis narrative to set Himself apart as the One true God who created women with a special status and, gloriously, created all mankind in His image. This revelation would break the entrenched myths and patterns of oppression and division that the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had lived under in Egypt for over 400 years.** God was giving his people Israel a global, universal perspective on the dignity of the nations as well as a clear revelation that he always had an active, Sovereign hand working for salvation and judgment among all the people of the earth. His purposes are laden with reconciliation-justice implications that become clear as the Law unfolds.

2) Seeds of Reconciliation and Justice in the Covenant with Noah

The emphasis on Israel's connectedness to the other nations continues in the account of Noah, who functions as a type of new Adam. **Out of the violence and oppression of mankind recorded in Gen 4-6, God washes away the evil of the world and starts fresh with another Covenant representative, Noah, that echoes the Covenant with Adam (Gen 8:15-17; 9:1-7) and includes a promise to never again destroy the earth by flood (Gen 8:20-22). Critically, there is also a demand for the dignity of every person's life that requires the forfeiture of life for taking another person's blood (Gen 9:5-6). In a newly re-birthed world, Noah is the one physical father of all the nations (Gen 10) and the dignity of mankind's basic unity is re-emphasized.** God's specific, detailed discussion of the table of nations in Genesis 10 is more than simply background material to the real story- the story of Israel. It is in fact, the main point for their (and our) story- that these are the nations they are to bless and ultimately help give spiritual birth to (Gen 12:1-3, Isa 26:17,18). **The problem is, the inclinations of the heart of men is still**

¹ Dr. Harvey Conn, *The Old Testament and the Poor* Lecture 1 Westminster Media

² *ibid*

evil and the nations are prone to hubris, taking the power of God for themselves (the Tower of Babel), and the injustice that follows. In his loving discipline, God separates the nations from one another through the division of language, for a season. In the larger context of Genesis 3-11, God's pronouncement in Gen 11:6 that if men are left unchecked to exalt themselves in their own minds and actions, "nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them," seems to be a reference to their capacity to return to a world consumed by the evil and violence of Genesis 6. The need to counteract the oppression, violence and division of the nations, sets us up for the great redemption promise of God given to Abraham.

3) The Budding of Reconciliation and Justice in the Covenant with Abraham

The Covenant with Abraham is never meant to be understood as an ethnic exclusion of other nations from Israel's thinking; instead it is meant to heighten their understanding of God's grace that called them into existence as a nation for the purpose of achieving God's global salvation- setting the nations back into a unity of seeking God's goodness (justice and righteousness) in the world.

- **The promises to Abraham in Genesis 12 are set in relationship to the table of nations in Genesis 10 and the division of the nations in Genesis 11, and as mentioned, begin to counteract that with redemption.** When Abraham is called as the man through whom the Messiah will come, the promise is stated in reference to all the descendants of Adam/Noah: "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you." Gen 12:3. That means the division of the nations as a judgment exercised by God in Genesis 11 is already on its way to being reversed in Genesis 12 through the blessing of salvation given to Abraham, who will become the father of many nations and a blessing to all peoples. The reconciliation of all men and all things through Christ Jesus (Eph 1:9,10) is already foreshadowed in the Abrahamic Covenant.

- **The "blessing" that Abraham is to bring to the nations is defined in Gen 18:18-19 by justice: by doing what is just and right.**

Genesis 18:18 "Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. ¹⁹ For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

- In Genesis 17 the inclusive, reconciling nature of God's salvation among the nations is emphasized in the sign of the covenant, circumcision, when Abraham is promised,

"No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham for I have made you the father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner- those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money,

they must be circumcised. Any uncircumcised male...will be cut off from his people.”
Genesis 17:12-13

Abraham will be the spiritual father of many nations. The sign of the Covenant is not to be given on the basis of ethnic heritage in an exclusionary form, but on the basis of covenantal relationship. Everyone who is in a faith-Covenant relationship with God, **even purchased slaves, are part of the Covenant family and must be given the sign of the Covenant. As the Scriptures will more fully reveal as the story unfolds, that Covenant sign brought with it the full rights and obligations of the Covenant family, and is going to include justice on behalf of those now brought into this Covenant relationship.**

B. God’s Call to Reconciliation and Justice Practices Expanded in the Covenant with Moses

When we come to the establishment of Israel as a nation-state who would uniquely reflect the righteousness of God and be the conduit of his blessing to the nations, the demand for practicing reconciliation and justice is more pronounced.

1) In particular, the place of the alien (stranger or foreigner) takes on a prominent position in God’s detailed commands for his people to implement these practices. Nine (9) times in the Exodus to Canaan narrative (Ex-Deut) God talks about Israel’s personal experience as aliens and the things they suffered, and uses that as a moral reminder of their need to show compassion and not mistreat, in general, any alien in their midst (Ex 23:21, 23:9; Lev 19:34; Deut 10:19). In sixty (60) additional references in the books of Exodus-Deuteronomy, God addresses the treatment of the alien or foreigner, who are described as “living among you” or “within your gates” (Ex 20:10; Lev 16:19; Deut 1:16, 5:14). **Just in Deuteronomy, in their final preparation before entering the land of Canaan, the Lord addresses the people of Israel and their response to the alien/foreigner twenty-six (26) times, and the issues of acceptance and justice are repeatedly addressed.**

2) How many other ethnic groups actually lived with the people of Israel? No one knows for sure. There is a hint of the diversity in the Exodus narrative when we are told, “many other people (Hebrew: “a mixture of peoples” Greek LXX: “a swarm of foreigners”) went up with them” (Ex 12:38).³ **What is clear is that their relationship with other ethnic groups was a vital part of their life as the people of God. What is also clear is that these relationship revolved around these two issues of reconciliation and justice; being included in the community and being treated with justice and compassion.** These issues will be addressed by God at every major, historic event in the life of Israel.

3) General laws of justice were to be equally applied to all (Deut 1:16,17). Israel was to keep in mind their own experience as aliens in Egypt as a practical reminder of what injustice felt like (Ex 23:9), and they were also called to image the moral nature of God, who “loves the alien” (Deut 10:19). The Law called the people of Israel to practice a type of kindness and compassion for the foreigner, the stranger and the slave that had nothing to do with their covenantal status. The call to compassion for foreigners

³ Keil-Delitzsch “Commentary on the Old Testament” Vol. 1, pp. 29,30 Eerdmans 1978

is an expression of the nature of God, who shows kindness to all without prejudice (Mt 5:43ff) being reflected in his people. This type of command is found in Leviticus 19:33, 34

"When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God."

4) But there is another set of commands that have a more specific focus concerning Israel's response to aliens and strangers who have freely entered into covenant relationship with God. In these texts, we see more clearly foreshadowed an explicit call for what the New Testament narrative refers to as reconciliation - the full, equal inclusion and just treatment of non-Hebrews who had attached themselves to the Covenant. These commands throughout Exodus – Deuteronomy are more than a reminder to be good neighbors to the immigrants and aliens who happened to make Canaan their temporary home and, in addition, to care for those foreigners who were servants and slaves. This is an Old Testament call for his people to practice genuine and full reconciliation and justice with the immigrants who became members of the Covenant family.

a) The evidence for this practical expression of reconciliation is found in the very events in which Israel was founded as a nation and would mark her history forever: the Exodus and the Passover.

"The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "These are the regulations for the Passover: "No foreigner is to eat of it. Any slave you have bought may eat of it after you have circumcised him, but a temporary resident and a hired worker may not eat of it. It must be eaten inside one house; take none of the meat outside the house. Do not break any of the bones. The whole community of Israel must celebrate it. An alien living among you who wants to celebrate the LORD's Passover must have all the males in his household circumcised; **then he may take part like one born in the land. No uncircumcised male may eat of it. The same law applies to the native-born and to the alien living among you.**" Exodus 12:43-49

As noted, when Israel left Egypt "many other people (Hebrew: "a mixture of peoples" LXX: "a swarm of foreigners") went up with them" (Ex 12:38). Apparently other oppressed nations saw the deliverance of God on behalf of the Israelites and decided to cast their lot with the Hebrews. The Israelites needed instruction on how to treat non-Hebrews. The significance of issuing this command on the very day of the Exodus can hardly be overstated. The difference between the status of the foreigner in the community of God's people and the practice of the other Ancient Near Eastern cultures provided a stark contrast. The Hebrews had seen the ills of ethnic superiority demonstrated in the Egyptian culture, not just against themselves, but against all non-Egyptians. That superiority / exclusion was clearly expressed in the refusal to fellowship at the meal table. Genesis 43:32, "...Egyptians could not eat with Hebrews, for that is detestable to Egyptians." This is the corollary issue Paul addresses in Galatians 2 when Peter refused to eat

with the Gentiles. The practical exclusion of other ethnic groups from intimate “meal” fellowship with us is a denial of God’s equal acceptance of all of us as members of his family through adoption.

b) The place of the circumcised, covenantally-bound alien in the community life of Israel, both in terms of privileges and responsibilities, is spelled out at several crucial points in the Covenant documents. After providing instructions regarding the various types of sacrifices and the work of the priests on behalf of the people, God gives regulations for the climactic offering on the annual Day of Atonement. This is a sacrifice for the “whole community of Israel” (Lev 16:17); for “the Israelites” (16:19); for “the people” (16:24), for “all the people of the community” (16:33). And who is included in this description?

"This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month you must deny yourselves and not do any work-- whether native-born or an alien living among you-- because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins." Lev 16:29,30

The implication that the atonement was made for the alien (those who had entered into a covenant relationship with God) as well as the native-born Israelite becomes clear in Leviticus 17 when all the restrictions and obligations are equally applied to both groups:

"Say to them: 'Any Israelite or any alien living among them who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice and does not bring it to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting to sacrifice it to the LORD-- that man must be cut off from his people.'" Lev 17:8,9

These are not simply foreigners who are temporary residents, but non-Hebrews who have entered a covenantal relationship with God. They are making sacrifices to God that is “a pleasing aroma to the Lord” (Num 15:14-16). The status of acceptance and inclusion accorded these aliens who were members of the Covenant community should have been obvious to the people of God. But the obvious eluded Israel, just like it eludes us. So the Law, as part of its needed function in their lives (and ours), gives explicit instructions on how to treat them. The substance of those instructions reveal that God required his people to treat these believing foreigners as equals, with justice and compassion, with the same status and privilege as the natural born descendants of Abraham.

c) An example of this equality in the community is found in the story of Ruth, the Moabitess, who announces to her mother-in-law Naomi, “your people will be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). Ruth is not only received as a member of the community, all the rights of the kinsman-redeemer are applied to her through Boaz. God’s ultimate evidence of her status in the community is the privilege she is given of being David’s great grandmother and part of the ancestral line of Jesus (Ruth 4:13ff, Mt 1:5). As an added twist of God’s clear commitment to reconciliation in the Old Testament narrative, Boaz, the husband of Ruth, was also the son of Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute who helped

Joshua and the Israelite army overthrow Jericho (Mt 1:5). This kind of “community embracing” of someone from a different, and even despised ethnic group is a practical demonstration of reconciliation that goes beyond what most contemporary churches practice. We need to remember that these Old Testament laws and historical examples were only a shadow of the full light of God’s glory that is meant to shine through the church.

The point of Ruth’s story is that it was not just some of the Laws in Israel which applied to the alien who had become part of the covenant community, it was that **all the laws applied; including the laws for the use of tithes (Deut 14), the laws of loaning money without interest (Deut 15), the laws of protection of property (Lev 25) and the laws of “joyful celebration” at the annual feasts (Deut 16). These laws ensured justice on behalf of these members of the community.** To live in Israel and be in covenant with God meant to be in community and covenant *with* his people for the blessings and the curses, the obligations and the promises of the Covenant.

“For the generations to come, whenever an alien or anyone else living among you presents an offering made by fire as an aroma pleasing to the LORD, he must do exactly as you do. The community is to have the same rules for you and for the alien living among you; this is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. You and the alien shall be the same before the LORD: The same laws and regulations will apply both to you and to the alien living among you.”
Numbers 15:14-16

“And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.... Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt.” Deut 10:16-19

5) The Covenantal call for the intentional practice of reconciliation and justice is actually heightened by giving special status to the alien in the Law.

There is a second set of references to the Covenantal position of the alien throughout the Genesis-Deuteronomy narrative. God’s demand for reconciliation not only required the inclusion of aliens with the same rights and responsibilities of the ethnically Hebrew people of God, the aliens were actually given a heightened, special status.

Part of the great revelation of God’s moral character is that he is not like the tyrant-gods of Egypt or Canaan or Babylon, but the One, True, Holy God, who is set apart from evil and full of righteousness, goodness and compassion. **As the one true God it is his very character to give special care to those who are the most vulnerable- the widow, the orphan, the poor, and tellingly, the foreigner. The Old Testament Scriptures often link these groups of people together- Lev 19:10, 23:22; Deut 10:18, 24:17-21, 26:12,13, 27:19. By grouping the alien with the widow, the orphan and the poor he is recognizing them as part of a category of people who could be easily disenfranchised from the benefits of the Covenant. These are people who can be taken advantage of or simply ignored because they lack**

normal access to social status and power. To be the “people of God,” who know God and reflect His character, means being a people who will demonstrate the opposite of oppression or neglect. It means his people will demonstrate an active caring and a compassionate sensitivity to the needs of the excluded and neglected.

The Law is dotted with admonitions that reflect this special status, which is to be accorded the foreigner as part of the disenfranchised groups.

- Leviticus 19:10 “Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for *the poor and the alien*”

Deuteronomy 24:19 “When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for *the alien, the fatherless and the widow*, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.” Cf Lev 23:22 ; Deut 24:17, 20, 21; 26:12, 13; 27:19

- Deut 10:16-19 reveals the moral weightiness of this status in the eyes of God:

“Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt.”

Reconciliation and justice in their most basic, practical expression include a commitment to use positions of power and privilege for the good of the naturally excluded. The great contrast between the people of God and all the other peoples of the earth is that we are image-bearers of God and are called to use whatever power we have to be servant-kings, servant-leaders, servant-men and women; a servant-community which actively works for the good of those who are at a place of disadvantage. This is the great statement of Jesus on the difference between God’s view of authority/leadership, and the view of non-believing gentiles (Luke 22:24ff). To oppress the alien is to violate the covenant with God. To exclude someone from the full blessings of the Covenant based on ethnic origin is to break faith with the very character of God - the compassionate Savior of all mankind.

6) The Old Testament Prophets continue to make the Covenantal call to genuine reconciliation and justice clear to the people of God and give it heightened attention in their prophetic words.

As the Prophets indict Israel for her failure to keep the Covenant with God, there are two patterns of sin that are constantly emphasized: idolatry and the sister sin of refusal to properly care for the marginalized in society, including the foreigner, the poor and oppressed (cf. Isaiah 1:15-17, 2:8; Jeremiah 2:1-12, 5:27-29; Ezekiel 5:8-10, 22:23-29; Amos 2:4, 5:11-13; Micah 1:3-7, 6:9-13). God’s design for his Covenant people to reflect his image in contrast to the ungodly nations around them, and their status as “a nation of priests” (Exodus 19:2) to the rest of the world was severely reduced, reshaped and even rejected by Israel through disobedience, idolatry and syncretism with the world cultures. As a result, love for the poor, the oppressed, the alien and by extension, the lost nations, was

replaced with oppressive practices of economic and social injustice, passive indifference and the pursuit of a religiously justified personal kingdom building of private wealth and power (Isaiah 1-5).

Anointed by the Spirit of God, they gave expanded understanding to God's intention to save and reconcile a people to himself and to one another from among all the nations of the earth through the work of the coming Messiah, fulfilling the promise to Abraham.

At the heart of this salvation is an inclusion of all ethnic groups as the one worshiping, fellowshiping, faithful and righteous people of God. The detailed promises of the fullness of God's salvation in the last days and the descriptions of the work of the Messiah all contain repeated emphasis on this reconciliation of former enemies both to God and to one another.

"In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.' The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore." Isaiah 2:1-4, Micah 4:1-3.

These redeemed and reconciled nations learn to put the just, compassionate Covenant Law of God into practice and are changed from nations who oppress each other into a people who work for each other's good. The only way to justify the continued separation and exclusion of another people group from deep, practical connection and relationship with one another, is to reduce the demands of the Covenant in such a way that we do not have to care for one another's needs or engage in the task of bringing this mercy to the world.

Isaiah, which contains the most extensive promises of the work of the Messiah, also contains the most extensive promises of the reconciliation of the nations to God and each other. The heart of the message is like a rising tide throughout Isaiah. The Messiah will fulfill God's call on behalf of his people to be the Servant who lives out the justice, mercy and compassion the Covenant required and as a result of his obedience, the "alien" who attaches himself to Israel will become a countless multitude of men, women and children from every nation on earth who will be cherished and embraced by God in the midst of his Covenant people. They will ultimately become the full expression of the people of God who are empowered by His Spirit to bring God's justice to the nations of the earth as the kingdom of priests, which he intended all along.

• **Isaiah 9:7** "Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever."

• **Isaiah 11:3,4** "...He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth."

• **Isaiah 14:1, 2** "...Aliens will join them and unite with the house of Israel. Nations will take them and bring them to their own place. And the house of Israel will possess the nations as menservants and maidservants in the Lord's land."

• **Isaiah 25:6-8** "On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples.... On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth."

• **Isaiah 26:17-19** "As a woman with child and about to give birth writhes and cries out in her pain, so were we in your presence, O Lord. We were with child, we writhed in pain, but we gave birth to wind. We have not brought salvation to the earth; we have not given birth to the people of the world.' But your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You, who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy. Your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead."

• **Isaiah 42:1-4** "Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.... He will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope."

• **Isaiah 56:3-7** "Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.' And let not any eunuch complain, 'I am only a dry tree.' ...to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off. And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to serve him...these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations."

Lecture 2: The Inauguration and Beginning of the Fulfillment of Reconciliation and Justice in the Kingdom of God in the work of Jesus, the Messiah

By the time we come to the close of the Old Testament narrative, it is clear the people of Israel are still waiting for God to bring this great, promised inauguration of his global rule and reign to expression. Israel herself has failed miserably in her calling to bless the nations of the earth, and none of the promises of Isaiah 2, or of Ezekiel's vision of the expanded Temple and worship of God have come anywhere close to being realized. They are still waiting for the Messiah. We know from the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus there was a great deal of talking and chatter among many of the Jewish sects that the possible time for the fulfillment of Daniel 7 and 9 was at hand.⁴ They were hoping the time of the Messiah had come. In the person and ministry of Jesus, the fullness of God's plan to bless his people and make them a blessing to the nations, to establish the fullness of God's kingdom rule, is given birth.

A. Reconciliation and Justice as hallmarks of the kingdom of God in the ministry of Jesus

1) God's Old Testament call for his people to include and even give special treatment to the poor and alien was fleshed out in living color in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus announced his ministry as a fulfillment of Isaiah's promise –

Luke 4:18-21 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

If we remember the Old Testament categories of the poor and the oppressed, they included the orphan, the widow and the foreigner. As Harvey Conn points out, it seems that Jesus expands that category to include all the disenfranchised, including the morally excluded- the tax collectors and the other "sinners" (Matt 11:19).⁵

2) What is critical in the proclamation of the kingdom by Jesus is that the invitation to follow Him included a call to pursue reconciliation and justice. They are intertwined and inseparable. As we list some of the Gospel narratives that support this conclusion it is going to be hard not to see the stories simply as a call to the universal spread of the Gospel – for individuals, without reference to being part of a reconciled community- the way we are accustomed to viewing them. The contention here is that the message of reconciliation with God has also, always been an invitation into a covenantal relationship that involved reconciliation and inclusion in the covenant community that meant justice for the oppressed.

⁴ N.T. Wright "Jesus and the Victory of God" Fortress Press

⁵ Harvey Conn *The New Testament and the Poor* Lecture 1 Westminster Media

The vast majority of Jesus' ministry was not conducted in the more Jewish, ethnocentric center of Jerusalem, but in "Galilee of the Gentiles", a reference to the racial variety and mixture in and around the region where Jesus grew up and did most of his work. The ethnocentric power base in Jerusalem is being challenged in a significant way by the reality that the long-awaited Messiah is announcing the coming of the kingdom, and his work is not focused on Jerusalem (though she is clearly not excluded). Something new is happening. And that new, full, final expression of the promise to Abraham is being lived out among the diverse peoples of Galilee of the Gentiles.

One of the "nature-of-the-kingdom-of-God" declarations that Jesus makes which highlights these issues is the story of the Roman centurion who asks Jesus to heal his paralyzed servant, and then expresses his faith that Jesus is truly the "Lord" by telling Jesus he does not have to physically come to his home- he can heal by his mere word (Matthew 8:5-9). Jesus' response:

Matthew 8:10 When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. ¹¹ I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. ¹² But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

3) The question, if we continue to think about Gospel proclamation without real reconciliation and justice, is simply this: as Jesus preached good news to the poor, including foreigners, could it possibly be that he was withholding from them the "full rights of sons" (John 1:12; Gal 4:4-7) and expecting them to "make it" as individuals outside the community of God's people? If all the benefits of the Old Testament community were extended to the foreigner who bound themselves to the Lord, like Rahab and Ruth, how much more were the love, acceptance and commitment of the community to be expressed in the fullness of salvation in the New Testament people of God? That commitment, to include the gentiles as fully reconciled partners in the unfolding of the kingdom comes to its clearest expression in the Gospel of John

4) Reconciliation and Justice in the Kingdom proclaimed in the Gospel of John.

I am suggesting that John's Gospel was not written exclusively with Gentile readers in mind and that addressing Greek dualistic and early Gnostic thoughts were John's main concerns -although it certainly has application to those issues. Instead, if we adjust our starting point perspective just a little bit, I think we will find at the center of John's Gospel there is a message of reconciliation-justice; not just between men and God, but also with a deliberate emphasis on the acceptance of Gentiles in the Jewish covenant community- of the great fulfillment of the promises to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through the Messiah. In addition, if we stand back and take a broad, but careful look, there is a very profound message that everything the Jewish community experienced in her history as the chosen vessel-people of God, was now being climactically re-lived and fulfilled through the life of Jesus- the faithful Israelite- both on behalf of the Jews and also on behalf of the Gentiles through the fullness-of-salvation/reconciliation work of the Jesus the Messiah.

a) Every major, community defining event of the history of Israel is not only re-lived and addressed in the ministry of Jesus as described by John, but explicitly, at every single point those defining redemptive acts for Israel are offered and applied to the gentiles.

John 1:1-13 - This is almost like reading the Genesis / Abraham narrative all over again, only this time the focus is on the fulfillment of the promise in Jesus, the Son of God.

John 1:29 - When John the Baptist introduces Jesus he is declared to be the “lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” This is clearly a reference to the Passover lamb in Exodus 12, whose blood was put on the doorposts so the angel of death would “pass over” the members of the Covenant community as they feasted on the lamb in a fellowship celebration of their deliverance. Now, John the Baptist says, The Passover Lamb, Jesus, has come and he is given to take away the sin of the whole world- all the ethnic groups of the earth. But the Passover Lamb was not only a symbol of forgiveness, it was also a testament, within that forgiveness, to God’s commitment to redeem his people from the oppression of Egypt. **Not only are the Jews being told the Messiah has come to set them free from Rome’s tyranny and fully establish the reign of Christ, but the Gentiles are being made the same offer – to come out from under the darkness and oppression of Rome, as well as their own sinfulness, reflecting the offer to the mix of nations that went with Israel out of Egypt in the Exodus narrative. (The apostles will pick up this theme in their letters to the churches as they talk about Christ being seated at the right hand of the Father, far above all rule and authority, head over everything for the church - Eph 1:20ff- and his redemption of the gentiles from darkness and oppression of their own sin and cultures they were a part of (Eph 2:1ff; 1 Pet 2:9,10).** The Jews and Gentiles who read this story in John’s account, after some reflection and a little explanation, would have seen the implication that these new believers from the whole world were meant to be welcomed into the new community of God’s people as full-fledged members of God’s Covenant people because they had the same “exodus/deliverance” experience as the Jews, now fulfilled in Christ.

John 2 - The end of the Temple-era is coming. The Messiah has come to pronounce judgment. It is not insignificant that the judgment revolves around this specific issue that the Gentiles were not welcome at the Temple. By overturning the tables and confronting the leaders, Jesus was signaling that a new day had come. This signaled the end of the Temple worship as it was known. Ultimately, his resurrected body would replace the limited symbolism of the earthly Temple (Jn 2:19). Peter and Paul would pick this theme up later, and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, reveal the full implication of Christ’s work in making Jew and Gentile the new “holy temple,” united in Christ (Eph 2:19ff; 1 Pet 2:4ff). The foundation for this full reconciliation-justice theology and application in the life of the church is laid out here in the ministry of Jesus in John 2. **The Temple was not only the place of worship. It was also the chief representation of the place where the offerings of food were kept for distribution to the widow, the orphan and the alien (Deut 14:28ff, Mal 3:10)**

John 3 - To this Jewish leader, and to the Gentile readers who are listening in, Jesus points out that God has sent him to be lifted up on a tree, just like the serpent was lifted up in the

wilderness for the free healing of any who looked at it (Num 21:8,9). The offer of free grace to Israel as she rebelled during her wanderings in the desert, is now held out to “anyone who believes” (Jn 3:15). Then, Jesus makes one of the most amazing, clearest statements of God’s commitment to save and reconcile people from every nation and tongue in these six words, “For God so loved the world” (Jn 3:16). If we look at this through the eyes of the first Gentile readers, the breadth and inclusion of God’s invitation to salvation is simply astounding.

John 4 - The end of Jerusalem as the Physical Center of Worship. When Jesus meets the Samaritan woman, there are two inter-related issues he addresses. One issue relates to her personal sin and misery and her deep need for having her heart satisfied with the love of Christ. The second issue relates to division between the Jews and Samaritans over worship. This part of the passage has often been interpreted as the woman’s attempt to “change the subject.” While that may have an element of truth in it, the time Jesus took to respond to her questions and the amazing revelation he made about God seeking worshippers who would worship in Spirit and truth, seems to suggest Jesus was dealing with something more substantial than simply her evasion of his piercing questions.

If real healing is coming, it must somehow address these broader questions as well. **Real quenching of her thirst would address both the close inter-personal brokenness and injustice she experienced, as well as the broader social-religious brokenness and injustice. Jesus tells her the time has come when worship will no longer be defined by Jewish Jerusalem, but by worshippers *everywhere* who worship in Spirit and in truth (Jn 4:23, 24). This message, at one the same time, opens the Gentile readers’ understanding to the universal, reconciling nature of the work of Christ and invites the Jewish reader to embrace reconciliation on a broad scale in worship. It is obvious but still needs to be pointed out that this woman’s redemption and all the promise of reconciled worship is in a context of freeing her from a lifestyle of bondage and oppression. To worship in Spirit and in truth, includes setting people free from the bondage and lies of oppression and brokenness.**

John 5-6 - After Jesus feeds the five thousand in John 5 (shows compassion and justice), he has a follow-up dialogue with the crowd in John 6 and uses the miracle of multiplying the bread to tell them that his ministry is one that will multiply and bring life “*to the world*” (Jn 6:33). The universal call is repeated when he tells them, “*everyone* who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life” (Jn 6:40). He makes a direct comparison with the giving of his life as bread from heaven to the manna the Jews received in the wilderness wandering. And the promise again is, “whoever eats this bread will live forever” (Jn 6:58).

John 7 - Jesus appears at the Feast of Tabernacles and announces himself as the source of life and satisfaction for all who thirst (Jn 7:37-39). The Jews had a long tradition of recognizing the ingathering of the food harvest as a promise pointing to the ingathering of all the nations as

servants of God.⁶ *The universal offer of the Gospel, as well as the implication for reconciliation* could not be more pointed than when Jesus stood on the last and greatest day of the Tabernacle Feast and announced, “If any one is thirsty let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him” (Jn 7:37-38). **Why is there a reconciliation theme here? Precisely because this was the feast established at the inauguration of Israel as a nation. It was not a feast simply about individual salvation, though it clearly implies and includes that and is there in the offer when Jesus says, “if any one thirsts – let him come.” The “any ones” who would respond were being invited into the community of the redeemed. The tents were a reminder of their corporate experience of deliverance. What Jesus was offering was more than a personal relationship with God. It was also a place at the table with the sons of Abraham (Luke 13:28-30). Why is there justice here? This was also a feast celebrating their collective deliverance from the oppressiveness of Egypt and establishment as the community of God’s people where justice would be practiced. The Jewish expectation was that Messiah would come and bring that deliverance/establishment of God’s kingdom to its fullest expression by defeating Rome and ushering in the global reign of God (Dan 7, Isa 2, etc). To respond to the invitation of Christ in this setting was to be invited into that kingdom community.** No wonder the response of the Jewish leaders was to try and seize Jesus (Jn 7:30-32, 44ff.); he was completely undermining their ethnocentric control of God’s people.

John 8:12 - Jesus starts a long theological discussion with the Pharisees by stating, “I am the light of the world” (Jn 8:12) and tells them when they claim they are “Abraham’s offspring”, that the ones Jesus sets free will be “sons” who belong “to the family” forever (Jn 8:35).

John 9 - as he heals a man born blind Jesus announces, “I am the light of the world” (Jn 9:5) and the collapse of the Jewish, ethnocentric misinterpretation of the kingdom is threatened yet again (Jn 9:22, 28-29). **It is just an obvious thing to note that the proclamation of Christ that he is the light for the world is set in the context of doing mercy; of setting things right.**

John 10 - Jesus describes his role as the great Shepherd of God’s people (Ezekiel 34:23) and uses some of the clearest reconciliation language to this point in the narrative, “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen, I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice and there shall be one flock and one shepherd” (Jn 10:16).

John 11 - The great hope of the Jewish people (except the Sadducees) was that at the final end of history and time, there would be a resurrection of the dead; a time when the physical universe itself and all who were the true people of God would be restored to a condition of eternal, physical blessing. Jesus further highlighted the reality that he was the hoped for Messiah by raising Lazarus from the dead. John tells us the reaction of the Jewish High Priest, Caiaphas, is a Sovereign, Holy Spirit directed proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus for both Jew and Gentile, in order to reconcile them as the one people of God.

⁶ “The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah” Alfred Edersheim Book IV Chapter VII, pp. 156ff Eerdmans 1976

John 11:49 - Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all!⁵⁰ You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."⁵¹ He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation,⁵² and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.⁵³ So from that day on they plotted to take his life.

John 12 - By the time Jesus enters Jerusalem in what has accurately been referred to as the triumphant entry of the king to complete his ministry, there is such a crowd following him that the Pharisees protest to one another, "Look how the whole world has gone after him" (*Jn 12:19*). *This could be a reference to the size of the crowd, but is more likely a reflection on the fact that a diverse group of people from many ethnic backgrounds had gathered around Jesus. The next verses tell us specifically, "there were some Greeks who went up to worship at the feast" (Jn 12:20).*

John 17 - Finally, after four chapters of telling the disciples in multiple ways they must concretely, practically love and care for each other, both by physical demonstration in washing their feet (*Jn 13*) and through constant reference to the love of the Father and the Son and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in and through them (*Jn 13:34-35, 14:15ff, 15:9ff*), the climax of Jesus' teaching is found in his High Priestly prayer in *John 17* that "they may be brought to complete unity to let the world know that sent me and have loved them even as you loved me" (*Jn 17:23*).

Reading *John* both from the perspective of the original Greek and Gentile readers, and in light of what we know about the whole Old Testament narrative, there is an unfolding emphasis on the message of reconciliation-justice. For the Jewish reader, and for those who were present at the events, the reconciliation of the Gentiles as part of God's people should have been increasingly dawning on them, because every event of the history of Israel, from the Creation narrative (*Jn 1*), to the promise to Abraham as a blessing to the nations (*Jn 1,3*), to the Exodus Passover Lamb (*Jn 2*), to the Temple (*Jn 2*), to the desert experience of the snakes (*Jn 3*), to the place of Jerusalem (*John 4*), to the manna in the wilderness here in *John 5- 6*, to Israel's appointed feasts (*Jn 7*), to what it meant to be Abraham's offspring (*Jn 8*), to the compassion of God (*Jn 9*), to the promise of the great shepherd (*Jn 10*), to the hope of the resurrection (*Jn 11*), to the coming of the king to Jerusalem (*Jn 12*), to the fulfillment of the High Priest's prayer for Israel to become a priesthood of believers (*Jn 17*) was being "fulfilled." All these events in the life of Israel were being given their fullest expression in the ministry of Christ, and there was a constant drumbeat that it was for the whole world. All the nations were being included in the Covenant family with the same type of identical, but richer experiences of redemption, lived out on their behalf by the Second Adam who was appointed as their representative (*Rom 5:12ff*).

Lecture 3: The Full Expression of the Coming of the Kingdom of God in Reconciliation and Justice in the Book of Acts

While God's commitment from both the Old Testament scriptures and the coming of Jesus as the Messiah to fulfill God's promises clearly reveal the nature of God's kingdom as a rule and reign of reconciliation, justice, restoration and healing, the Jewish-Apostolic led early church was still in the process of understanding what this all meant. Roughly the first half of the books of Acts (Ch 1-15) reveals how their understanding of God's kingdom purposes matured, while the second half (Ch 16-28) tell the story of how the expansion of God's kingdom as an increasing place of the Jew-Gentile, one people of God, being blessed by God and blessing the nations, became a reality.

While it would take almost twenty years before the Jewish-centered Jerusalem church would fully embrace Gentile Christians (Acts 15), in historical perspective and considering the tectonic shift this commitment demonstrated, the speed at which reconciliation-justice was becoming a reality was remarkable evidence of how much God was working these purposes in the DNA of the early church. If we contrast the hundreds of years that elapsed during Israel's time in Egypt, the hundreds of years of lessons during the period of the Judges and the lengthy lessons during the times of the kings of Israel, this outworking of sanctification came at lightning speed.

If we look at the flow of the book of Acts for evidence of God's commitment to reconcile his people, we do not have to go any further than the first major event in the opening chapters, the day of Pentecost. On that day, God gave the church its first, primer lesson on reconciliation: Galilean Jews, in Jerusalem, declaring the praises of God to "God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5-7). This was God's initial lesson for the Jewish believers that he had salvation and reconciliation purposes that went far beyond anything they had imagined. Pentecost was evidence the curse of the Tower of Babel was going to be reversed and the salvation-reconciliation promises of God would spread to the nations. One interesting side note to consider is the likelihood that in addition to their tribal, regional language, all the Jews visiting Jerusalem from these far reaches of the Roman Empire most likely spoke either Greek, or possibly Aramaic, and almost certainly Hebrew. It is very plausible the Apostles could have spoken this Gospel message in a common language- Hebrew- that already everyone understood. Peter's sermon to the crowd seems to underscore this possibility. So why would God go out of his way to produce the miracle of each man hearing the Gospel in his separate, regional language, unless it was to clearly foreshadow the global-reconciliation nature of the Gospel that would speak in to the "heart language" of the nations?

The interconnectedness of reconciliation and justice Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-35. There is also, however, an immediate emphasis on the justice/mercy nature of the kingdom of God. These Jews who came together from a variety of social and even cultural backgrounds (cf Acts 6) are described as anointed by the Spirit (Acts 2:38) and members of a new community where miracles of compassion (which is the real focus of supernatural healing) and unity of fellowship and justice on behalf of the poor and needy are practiced:

“Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.” Acts 2:43-45

These same two themes are repeated immediately in the next story that runs from Acts 3 through chapter 4. As a result of an act of compassion and the preaching of the Gospel, Peter and John are brought before the Sanhedrin and are persecuted. In their defense, Peter simply reminds the Jewish authorities that their work, in the name of Christ, is simply fulfilling God’s call to bless Israel so she may bless the nations:

“And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, 'Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.' When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.” Acts 3:25,26

They re-group with the church for prayer and ask for a fresh anointing of the Spirit’s power to boldly proclaim and demonstrate the nature of God’s kingdom rule in Christ (Acts 4:30); their prayer is answered (4:31) and the result is reconciliation and justice:

“All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.”

In Acts 6 the apostles are confronted with another reconciliation/justice lesson, a building block in developing their understanding around the issue of providing food for the Greek-Jewish widows. These were Jews whose mother language was Greek and were either natives of the Greco-Roman territories or had close affinity with them. The natural tendency to not consider the full implications of reconciliation was evident even in this Jewish, but culturally diverse community. The Greek widows were not being cared for in the daily distribution of food, while the Hebrews widows were. The clear emphasis is on ethnic differences and the tendency of the human heart, even of believers, to not fully embrace all the implications of reconciliation. The Apostle’s quickly repent and immediately make a reconciliation-justice type move with the appointment of seven deacons to make sure these widows were provided for; six of the deacons are Greek Jews themselves, and the seventh, is a Syrian convert to Judaism (Acts 6:5,6).⁷

In Acts 8, the Lord takes the lesson, not just of salvation for the nations, but of salvation-reconciliation to the next level for the Jewish Christians by involving the Apostle’s themselves in the outpouring of the Spirit on the new Samaritan believers (Acts 8:14-17). If we look at this passage only from an “apostolic authority” point of view, we can miss the relational, reconciliation lessons here.

⁷ “The Book of Acts” F.F. Bruce p.129 Eerdmans 1979

Certainly Peter and John as representatives of the Jerusalem Apostles were given a clear, special place of authority among the Samaritans that would experientially confirm their appointment as the “foundational” leaders of the global church. But is there not also an experiential lesson that runs back to the apostles? Namely, that these Samaritan brothers and sisters were now equally, undeniably members of the same family, because they had the same Holy Spirit poured out on them, and were to be treated with all the respect, love and support accorded the Jerusalem believers? Is it unreasonable for us to think that the prayer of Jesus in John 17 came into their thinking in a substantive way at some point in this experience?

From Acts 9 on, God’s commitment to the outworking of the salvation-reconciliation-justice message of the Gospel intensifies at warp speed with the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, and equally, in the lives of the Jewish-Jerusalem church. It is important to re-emphasize here that we are not simply asking the question if God is committed to the Gospel going to all the nations. Everyone agrees with that. The question is, did God design the Gospel to be preached, explained and lived out with a specific reconciliation-justice focus built into the message of the Gospel?

While we have to be careful not to read back into any part of the biblical narrative later theological developments that were not yet revealed, or more importantly entirely misconstrue the theology of a text simply because similar words are used, (for instance, misreading and conflating “the sons of god” in Genesis 6:2 with the “sons of God”-KJV- in John 1:12), nonetheless there ought to be a freedom to look back at the “seed thought” in light of the full flowering of revelation and see the connection. So when God explains Saul/Paul’s future ministry to Ananias and says, “This man is my chosen servant to carry my name before the Gentiles...and the people of Israel” (Acts 9:15), we ought to read this in light of the full revelation Paul is given and expresses in Ephesians, that this was a message about a salvation that very much included reconciliation. **As the Acts story continues, the reality of this reconciliation is on nearly every page. Part of the point we are making is that it also included justice for the poor and is made clear by the appeal of the Jerusalem apostles that Paul refers to in Galatians 2:10 “All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.”**

Before shifting his emphasis to the ministry of Paul, Luke takes time to tell us about God’s commitment to deepen the church’s understanding of reconciliation through the story of Peter and the Italian Centurion, Cornelius. It seems that part of the problem Peter and the Jerusalem leaders had with preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles was not their lack of understanding that the gentiles needed salvation - even the Pharisees believed in trying to gain converts from the nations (Mt 23:15); the real rub was that salvation meant an actual embracing of each other. So when Peter returns from his amazing evangelistic journey to Caesarea, **the criticism from some of the believers is stated in opposition to the reconciliation implications of his actions: “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them” (Acts 11:3).** This harkens back to the issues of the Passover Feast and God’s commitment to treat newcomers “like one born in the land.” Are issues of justice also present in this narrative? Clearly, because Peter goes to Cornelius’ house and Cornelius tells Peter, “Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, ‘Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor’ (Acts 10:31).

But the movement of God toward a reconciliation-Gospel proclamation could not be stopped. The urging and movement of the Spirit through his people was simply too strong:

“Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.” Acts 11:19-21

By the time we return to the church at Antioch in Acts 13, the flowering of reconciliation has begun in earnest. This predominately gentile church seems to be a clear mixture of multiple nations including Jews, which we can easily surmise from the description of the leadership team in 13:1. Barnabus and Saul are Jews but Simeon called Niger and Lucius of Cyrene are most likely from North Africa. The Apostle Paul is set apart by God to be the main movement leader who will help bring the reality of the kingdom of God to its fullest expression. One side note regarding Paul's ministry to the Corinthians is important to note. **Some have quoted Paul's statement in 1 Cor 9:22 "I have become all things to all men so that by all means I might save some," as some sort of justification for a more limited social or even ethnic perspective ministry in church planting. The reality described in the book of Acts is that Paul went to both Jew and Gentile in Corinth (Acts 18) and called them to the same body of Christ where they had to wrestle with reconciliation issues of all kinds- hence 1 Corinthians.**

As Paul's work progressed and more and more Gentiles came into the family of God it led to the final crisis the Jerusalem-Jewish church would have to face, the final changing of the old wineskins in terms of reconciliation: is there any way in which Gentile believes must become fundamentally, culturally Jewish in order to be fully accepted, equal members and participants of the community of God's people and fellow heirs of the final, eternal expression of the kingdom, when all things are completely renewed and set right for eternity?

The last answer to that question addressed in the book of Acts is found in the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 and is perhaps most notable for its brevity. The letter presupposes everyone understands the central issue is faith in Christ; cleansing by his blood, receiving the grace of his forgiveness, the Spirit and the righteousness we all need as a gift. The intent of the letter is to affirm and recognize one another as accepted by God; there is to be no distinction. The words of caution and wisdom are simply to remove cultural barriers by not forcing customs on one another, while being culturally sensitive especially to the Jews who are the spiritual forbearers and had the Gospel first proclaimed to them, and for the Gentiles to abstain from the all too prevalent practices of sexual immorality that plagued the Roman culture.

The pastoral letters to the churches continue to address these issues of practical reconciliation and justice as much as any other issues and are so much a part of the fabric of the theology of their letters that if we were to cut out every portion that addressed one of these issues, there would be very little left to read.