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RECONCILIATION
CONFERENCE

In **Revelation 7:9** John tells us, *“After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”*

Now we all know this passage and know that it provides us with a picture of what God himself is committed to, what he himself has bound himself to accomplishing through the work of Jesus Christ his Son. We know that this is where we are heading and because of the work of God’s Spirit in us we long for the day when what John saw will be fully met in us who have put our hope in Christ. We know the goal but man do we find it difficult to walk in this clear purpose of God in the here and now. Indeed we find it so hard that we have perfected the art of coming up with all kinds of common sense sounding terms and principles to help us feel better about not really giving our effort toward living out now what God has destined us for in the future kingdom. And you know what, it is hard, it is challenging for us to actually walk in the reconciliation that God calls us to as his people. After all we are still wrestling with sin and brokenness. We are still wrestling with histories that are filled with injustices of all kinds. I mean if I just take the history of blacks and whites in this country I realize how complicated and difficult what God is calling us to is. And if you add to that the divisions that exist among the nations, well you know that it is not easy stuff that we are being called into. Now we all have a default setting in us that wants to actually retreat to what is comfortable and familiar, what we know. I can’t tell you how often I have thought to myself, “How in the world did I end up in this denomination? Indeed how did I end up in the church that I am in with all of its diversity of people and cultures? How does a black man who grew up in the inner city of St. Louis predominantly around other black people, who went to schools up until college that were predominantly black, who got saved, sanctified and filled with the Holy Ghost in the black church context end up in this place. I mean both my parents are from the south. My mom is from Louisiana and my dad was from Mississippi. Both of them grew up in a time where racial tensions were high. They both

watched their parents suffer injustice and indignities at the hands of whites and suffered them personally as well and both of them harbored a deep mistrust and suspicion of whites and passed some of that, though unintentionally, on to their kids. How in the world did I end up here? Why am I here? Why are you here? Why has God brought you to this conference? Why has he placed you in the churches that you are in? Why is he laying on your hearts a concern and a burden to see the church more faithfully walk in this commitment to be reconciled, to be more and more a reflection of Revelation 7:9 in the here and now? Well I can tell you for my own part that it is not because of my faithfulness or commitment to walk in these things and it is not because of your faithfulness or commitment either that you are where you are. We are here; we are in the various churches that we are in because God himself is faithful. He is faithful to lead his church in the very purposes for which he called us out to be his own people. We are here because of the relentless commitment of God to lead his church in these issues of reconciliation and justice.

And what is more we are where we are because God is desirous to impress upon our hearts the truth that unfortunately we are struggling to grab a hold of as the church in our local expressions. And that truth is that God himself has so put the body together that we can't be the full expression of what God is calling us to be without one another. To state it positively brothers and sisters and along the lines of 1 Corinthians 12: we both belong to and need each other. This is what I am learning and this is what I want to impress upon you from 1 Corinthians 12.

Now we all know this passage in which Paul compares the church to the human body. And of course we know that the immediate context is Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts. So it's easy to think that when Paul talks about the church being the body he is talking primarily about spiritual gifts. And so the idea is we need all the gifts to be operating in order to function well as the body of Christ. We need people with the gift of hospitality, the gift of exhortation, the gift of administration, etc. And that is all true and right. Glory to God for how he gifts his body for the work of ministry, especially those administratively gifted folk. Where would we be without Tony and Lisa or Virginia? But there are an interesting couple of verses that are set right in the midst of this discussion that I

think need to be reminded of. Indeed when Paul launches into his analogy he starts this way, *“The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.”* You all know that Corinth was a mess. There were divisions on every level. There were ethnic divisions and divisions around class along with the divisions created by their self-centered use of the spiritual gifts. So when Paul talks about the church as the body he is addressing all those divisions. He is telling the church in Corinth that God has so formed the church that in order for it to be effective in living out the gospel it has to deal with these divisions that exist in the church and pursue the unity into which all of us who are in Christ have been baptized. If I can sum up Paul’s words it would be something like this: stop perpetuating the division that the culture around you is consumed by. You were created in Christ belong to each other and you need each other to be the body. Verse 14, *“If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body.”* And then verse 21, *“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’”* And remember Paul is writing this letter to the church in Corinth. And so while we could talk about the invisible church and the unity that we have on that level, Paul is speaking to a local community of faith and pushing them to reflect in their life and ministry the unity that comes when Jew and Gentile, slave and free are together in the same body, together building for the kingdom of God. And if we embrace this truth that we really do need each other across racial lines, across class lines, etc. then it is going to change the way we do life and ministry in the church. It is going to have a discomfoting, rock-your-world kind of impact on the life and ministry of the church. It is going to force you out of your comfort zones on so many levels. It’s going to challenge you in ways you probably haven’t even thought of yet. But it’s all good. We need that kind of thing to help us grow and mature as the people of God. We need God to shake us up in that way so he can teach us how to walk

together in proclaiming the good news of his kingdom in our cities and in our world.

So what does this unity in the body look like in action in the local church?

Well let me start by discomforting you a little bit to make my point about what this looks like in 3 areas of the life of the church. When we think about the pursuit of the unity that God calls us to in the body in our local churches we often reason something like this: if we are going to reach the African-American, Asian, Latino, African or other community (you name it) we need leadership from those communities or some families from those communities who are willing to help us in the process of becoming more diverse, multi-ethnic, or multi-cultural. And I think people mean well when they approach it this way. They want to send a clear message to those communities that we are serious about and committed to being more diverse. But can I just say it this way: black people are not evangelism tools. Asians, Latinos, Africans, etc. are not evangelism tools. When Paul went to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles I don't think he was thinking simply. I need to get some Gentiles in here who can reach more Gentiles so that we can look more diverse. Paul and Barnabas were together commissioned by one of the more reconciled churches in the New Testament. They knew how desperately the Jews needed the Gentiles and how desperately the Gentiles needed the Jews and just how much their life and ministry together would be shaped by their unique cultures and perspectives. Listen when you are reaching out to other people groups and communities the real issue is whether or not you recognize how much you need those communities and people groups to be who God is calling you to be as his people and whether or not you are willing to let those communities and people groups shape the way you do life and ministry. If you do recognize and are willing then I think you will see people from among the nations saying, "Amen I want to be a part of this body of believers."

Leadership

If we really embrace our need for one another it is going to shape the way we think about leadership. Of course we all know that if you are going to reach our communities we need to have leadership that reflects the diversity of the

communities to which God has called us. That goes without saying! However, when we operate from the position of belonging to and needing each other it means much more than just adding a black, Asian, or Latino to our staff or ministry team. It means welcoming, in fact inviting that person's perspective in the decisions of the church or ministry and not just in areas of ethnic issues. Contrary to popular belief I do know more than just black culture. Amen I know some things about black culture and am happy to speak about what I know in those areas. But I know some other stuff too by the grace of God. It's not a lot but hey...! Seriously if the only time I spoke at New City is when it was on something related to black people what would that communicate to the congregation or the community at large. Amen that is not the case at all here! But the way we do leadership should reflect that we really do need one another. It's not just African-Americans who need a black pastor, or Africans who need an African pastor or Asians who need an Asian pastor or Latinos who need a Latino pastor. The whole church needs and benefits from a diversity of leadership. So when we bring people on staff it shouldn't be just so we can reach that people group but because we recognize the immense benefit to the entire body or ministry to having the perspective of brothers and sisters from other cultures.

Along with this is the need to be constantly checking ourselves so that we don't fall into default mode when we are looking at leadership in the church.

Whenever we are looking to bring people on staff we wrestle to ensure that we are holding fast to our commitment to ethnic leadership. And it's not a quota system type thing either but a desire to be intentional about reconciliation and that means being intentional about hiring, training, developing, ethnic leadership.

Worship

If we really embrace our need for one another it is going to shape the way we do worship as well. And of course you know that worship is more than just what songs you sing. It has to do with expressiveness or lack thereof (can I say amen when the preacher says something that's on point without everyone turning to look at me pensively). It has to do with preaching styles. You know Barry and I are both passionate preachers but we are still different in the way we preach. I

actually had someone say to me that someone remarked that my preaching was too loud. Now I don't know what to do with that. I get hype and my voice level rises. But it goes without saying (or should go without saying) that our worship needs to reflect the diversity of the cultures that we are trying to reach. And of course this is in no way easy. And everyone gets stretched. But that is good for us. I actually believe that worship in a cross-cultural, multi-cultural, or multi-ethnic context is one of the places that God teaches us that very valuable lesson of mutual submission to one another. And when we actually submit to one another in this way we actually find this strange thing happening, that we actually learn how to appreciate one another's culture more. And in point of fact we actually begin not only to appreciate but to actually own in a good way the cultural expressions of our brothers and sisters. I find myself now singing songs from other cultures with as much passion as I do the songs from my own heritage. My kids are running around the house singing Mambo Sawa Sawa. I'm turning to my wife like what is happening to us? And of course I haven't stopped loving African-American culture. I still love black culture but I am also learning to love the cultures of my brothers and sisters who God has placed among us. And that wouldn't happen without this context of letting the cultures in our midst shape our worship.

If you are in an established church that you are trying to move in this direction it means having a music team that is on board with this vision both in terms of thinking through how to actually accomplish this in the service itself but also in terms of prayerfully seeking out people from the culture you are trying to reach to be a part of that music team. And just a helpful little note: all of this takes time. You don't get there over night.

Missions

If we really embrace our need for one another it is going to shape the way we do the ministry of justice and mercy both locally and globally. I'll just say it like this. The problems that plague the black community are not just issues for the black community and the black church to respond to. They are issues of compassion and justice to which God is calling all of us as his people to respond. The

problems in Congo are not just issues for Congolese people and the church in Congo to respond to. They are issues of justice and compassion to which God calls all of us as his people to enter into. The problems within the Latino community are not just issues for Latinos to respond to but for all of us as God's people to enter into with compassion and justice. And it is the same with the Asian community and other communities. Now I don't mean to say that our job is to fix all the problems of the world. We are not Christ. But we are called to enter into the injustice and brokenness of our brothers and sisters and to bring the love and compassion of God to bear. And there are so many practical ways to do that that don't require a lot of brain power but just a willingness to enter in and love with what God places in your hand. So it can look like everything from tutoring children in communities of need to relocating into a community of need and wrestling together with the people there in the midst of pain and suffering and announcing the love of Jesus in word and deed. It can be everything from supporting orphans in Congo or other places around the world to actually being a part of a mission's team to those places to bring the practical love of God through word and deed. I could go on. The challenge for us is to see these issues of justice and mercy as issues we respond to together.

Brothers and sisters if we really embrace our need for one another it is going to change the way we do these things and more. And yet here again is the encouraging news. God is faithful. He himself will not only lead us into these things but give us the power by his Spirit to actually do them. Jesus said, **"12** Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. **13** Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. **14** If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it." Let's ask God to do this work of reconciliation and justice through his people for his glory, in the name of Jesus and by the power of the Spirit.