

the  
Good News of  
The Kingdom



The Biblical Call for Justice  
The Gift of Righteousness Through Christ  
Reconciliation

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# Reconciliation

## Introduction

My desire in this work is to help the church re-awaken to our call to live as a reconciled people of God - a reconciliation that crosses the current ethnic and socio-economic divisions that exist in too much of the church. My hope is that this paper will help all leaders in the church, especially pastors, elders and teachers, begin to see a commitment to reconciliation as a foundational, Covenantal, biblical responsibility for God's people. I hope we will be theologically convinced to look at the practical work of reconciliation on the local church level the same way we look at other fundamental responsibilities like preaching the Word, evangelism, administering the sacraments, fellowship and worship; namely, as a non-negotiable, biblical obligation. And wonderfully, not simply reconciliation as an obligation, but as a promise of the work Christ wants to fulfill in us by grace. I believe the evangelical and reformed church worldwide, of which I am very much a part, is fundamentally a group of believers who love God and desire to bring him glory. But I do not believe we have a well-developed biblical, theological conviction that the work of the church includes and requires a determined, purposeful commitment to reconciliation. If we did, the actions of the church would match that theology. May God grant us the grace of ears to hear, eyes to see and hearts to repent where needed. And may he work in us a unity and reconciliation that is immeasurably more than all we could ask or imagine.

## Chapter One Reconciliation: The Message of the Gospel

The history of humanity is a story of tremendous diversity. It is equally a history of tremendous tensions that pull nations, people groups within those nations and even small tribal clans in opposing directions of trying to protect their uniqueness on the one hand, and on the other seeking some level of unity for accomplishing greater purposes either by joining together with other groups or imposing their uniqueness on others. Empire building is one of the historical realities that have long contributed to bringing different people groups together. From ancient Assyria, Babylon, Greece, Rome and on into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, ethnic diversity has often been a forced reality of life. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Americans not only brought African slaves to help build their country, but business owners imported cheap Chinese labor at such alarming rates that the Federal Government passed "The Chinese Exclusion Act" on May 6, 1882, restricting Chinese immigration from fear of a slumping economy and loss of "American" identity. After the official end of British slavery in 1834, the English turned to a system of indentured servitude for the masses of cheap Indian labor available in their colony and imported thousands of workers to various European interests throughout Africa and other colonized regions until 1920, when the practice was banned. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Communist Joseph Tito forced hostile groups like the Serbs, the Croats and the Bosnians to live together as one country, Yugoslavia, under harsh dictatorial rule. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Arab states continue a system of functional indentured servitude by importing workers from India, Pakistan, the Philippines and North Africa. In Dubai, the multi-national work force is estimated to be close to 80% of the city's population.

In addition to Empire building, the mixing of ethnic groups through migration as a result of civil war, poverty, famine and the hope for a better life has always been a significant part of human history. Jacob and his family of sixty-six (Gen 46:26) migrated to Egypt because of famine, along with a large number of other ethnic groups in that part of the world (Gen 41:57). As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century we have been in the midst of one of the largest migrations of human beings the world has ever seen. In 2008, estimates put the number of worldwide legal and illegal immigrants somewhere around 200 million+ people. That means roughly one in every thirty-five human beings is an immigrant living in a foreign country. The diversity in many of the western nations is staggering. There are 192 official countries recognized by the United Nations and 179 of them have an Embassy in the U.S. In St. Louis, Missouri, in the center of the United States, their local

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“International Institute” recognizes 100 different ethnic groups living in the greater St Louis area, most of them arriving after the 1960’s and the greatest diversity coming in the 1990’s and following. Larger U.S. cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia and New York City have long had a great diversity of ethnic groups, where virtually every country in the world is represented, often in large scale numbers. During the 1990’s more immigrants moved to the United States than at any other time in its history, with estimates reaching 14 million new immigrants. By 1996, all fifteen nations comprising Western Europe had non-Anglo, immigrant populations of at least 3 – 10%. Refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi live in places like Pakistan, Iran, the United States, Syria and Germany.

The result of all this movement of people groups is that we live in a stunningly diverse world. Yet, in many places, and especially the United States, we live with equally stunning mono-cultural, ethnocentric churches. Even churches that claim to be “new movements” tend to be mono-cultural or ethnically exclusive. New “urban churches” focus on the “arts community,” or the new urban middle class. Worship services are offered to meet the desires of specific target groups- traditional, contemporary or classical. In the last half century, the freedom the evangelical church in the West has taken to intentionally segregate itself into almost every imaginable, self-contained group, whether based on one particular theological issue or worship style or “personal needs” assessment or ethnicity is unprecedented. Yet, the High Priestly prayer of Jesus remains unchanged-

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” John 17:20-23

The eternal purpose of God’s redemption in Christ remains at the heart of His work in history-

“And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.” Ephesians 1:9,10

And finally, the practical need of the body of Christ in all its social, economic and ethnic diversity to work closely together is still true today-

“For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body-- whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free-- and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. 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.... If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.... 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!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable....” 1 Cor 12:13ff.

These words of Jesus and the Apostle Paul are clear, unmistakable and explicit in their implications. Jesus prays for us to become one in the same way he and the Father are one, and he tells us he has amply equipped us for the task. Paul tells us the great overarching purpose of God in redemption is not only our personal reconciliation to God, but also our reconciliation to one another and the ultimate reconciliation of all things in Christ. He also explains that we simply cannot fully



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function as the body of Christ without embracing one another as mutually interdependent parts of one body. Furthermore, a close examination of the history and narrative of both the Old and New Testament Scriptures reveal substantial evidence that an intentional commitment to reconciliation was a vital part of community life both intended for Israel and brought to full expression in the early church. This depth of reconciliation called for by God even in the Old Testament, required the full, participatory inclusion in the community life of Israel of all ethnic and socio-economic groups who covenantally bound themselves to God through circumcision. When we come to the New Testament and look at the ministry of Jesus as he prepares his people for the great global expansion of God's kingdom, there is a foundation laid for a theological calling and practical implementation of reconciliation in the life of the early church and a fulfilling of the blessings to Abraham that became staggering in its scope as the history of the early church unfolded. Timeless hostilities between sworn enemies and the barriers of social and economic oppression were overcome in an amazingly brief period of time to bring people together as equal members of the family of God.

Why then, are we so divided in so much of the church today? How is it possible these straightforward commands and direct teachings, in so many ways, do not practically inform the life of the church? How did we get to the place where we became deaf to the loving commands of God that we must pursue a genuine reconciliation in the church and have lost sense that reconciliation with one another is as crucial to the Gospel as our personal reconciliation with God? That somehow we manage to justify our segregation and deny Paul's fundamental admonitions that one part of the body (made up of "Jews, Greeks, slave, free" 1 Cor 12:13) cannot say to another part either "I don't need you" or "I don't belong"? Obvious issues in the Western church such as the rise of nationalism after the Reformation, the practice of slavery tolerated in and by the church, colonialism in missions, the natural tendency of the human heart in every culture to practice favoritism and prejudice, and the extreme individualism and racism tolerated and even declared culturally acceptable by the church in the United States, all play a significant role. The more important, immediate question is this: if we open our ears to the Spirit speaking to the church, through the Word, will we hear a deep, profound call for reconciliation? Is this really a central part of the message of the Gospel we need to pay special attention to? Is a deep, practical commitment to reconciliation, on both an ethnic and socio-economic level, only the laudable but curious expression of a few isolated congregations throughout the evangelical church, or is this a mandate that all churches need to practice, every bit as much as all churches should practice preaching, worship, pastoral care, fellowship, mercy and evangelism?

In the following pages I would like to lay out a simple, biblical case for pastors, theologians and the general leadership of God's people to consider regarding the practical expression of our unity as the people of God with this question in mind: are we called by God to intentionally, explicitly and thoroughly pursue reconciliation across ethnic and social divisions as a necessary and fundamental manifestation of the Gospel? Is there a Biblical and Covenantal obligation in this that is vital to the life and witness of the church?

As a starting point for making the case that reconciliation is in fact essential to the life of the church and meant to be a normal expression of our community life, we can return to the three major New Testament texts cited above and find a rich teaching about reconciliation that provides the kind of clear, moral, foundational instruction and promise we need in order to embrace such a wonderful and daunting task.

## **The Prayer and Promise of Jesus Christ – John 17**

In John 17 Jesus shares his final prayer for the church just before he accomplishes the salvation of his people and shortly after, returns to the Father. Although Luke tells us in Acts 1:3 that Jesus taught

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his disciples about the kingdom of God for a period of forty days after his resurrection, virtually none of that teaching is recorded for us. We are told some anecdotal information in the Gospels that is invaluable to us as the Word of God, but there is no systematic teaching like that recorded in the main Gospel narrative. This prayer then, is the last major, written instruction of the mind and heart of Christ we possess, in which he bares his soul to the Father and communicates his deepest desires for us. It is a prayer for complete unity and a promise of the means to attain it.

The depth of the unity Jesus prays for is so complete that it throws us off guard in this broken, divided world. He doesn't pray for a general spirit of unity among us or only an organizational unity, though both of those things together would be marvelous in our eyes. He prays for far more; for a deep, thorough, complete unity of the kind he shares with the Father and by implication, the Spirit. If we think about the Persons of the Godhead in their unity, it is an astonishing revelation of what God actually intends for us to experience. The Father, Son and Spirit are Three in One: complete unity and diversity existing together (Mt 3:16, 17; 28:19; 2 Cor 13:14; Eph 2:18). They are completely interdependent and inseparable in everything they do. They are united in purpose and action in all things: in the creation of the world (Gen 1:1,2; Jn 1:3,10; Col 1:15,16) and in its salvation (Eph 1; Rev 5). Redemption is only achieved by the Father, Son and Spirit each fulfilling their task. The Son is sent and affirmed by the Father and empowered by the Spirit (Mt 3:13-17; Jn 14:25-27; Titus 3:5,6). The Spirit is sent by the Son and the Father (Jn 16:5ff). Their intimacy of fellowship is full of joy and purity (Jn 1:1,32ff; 14:9ff; 15:10; 17:20ff). Jesus only does the will of the Father and the Spirit does the will of the Son (Jn 8; 10:25-30; 16:16:13ff). Together, they manifest the glory of God as the Triune, eternal Creator and Redeemer (Rev 4, 5).

Jesus prays for us that we “may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.” What is our unity to look like? What should we be striving for in the practical life of the church? Unity and diversity deeply, concretely expressed (Jn 10:14ff; 17:20ff; Gal 3:26-29; Eph 4:1-7); complete interdependency (Rom 12:3ff; 1 Cor 12:12ff; Eph 4:11ff); united in purpose and action (Phil 2:1ff; 1 Pet 2:4,5); intimacy of fellowship and joy in a context of holiness (1 Pet 1:8,9; 1 Jn 1:1-4; 3:11ff; 5:1ff); affirmation and empowerment (Acts 2:17ff; 1 Cor 1:4-9; Eph 4:11-13; Phil 1:3); the manifestation of the glory of God (Eph 1:11ff; 3:7ff; 1 Thess 1:4ff; Heb 13:20,21). All this within a context of multiple nations, multiple languages and multiple social and economic realities being brought together under the Lordship of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:5ff; 13:1-2, 47-48; 14:1; 16:11ff; 20:4ff; Rev 7:9ff).

Instead, we have lots of division. Why do we have a “Southern” Baptist Church? Because in 1845 there was a disagreement between Southerners who were Baptist with the antislavery sentiment of northern Baptists, so they started their own denomination. Where did the “Free” Methodists come from? The mainline Methodist Church in the 1860's would not denounce slavery, and they charged pew fees that forced the poor to the backbenches of the church. So the “free” Methodists organized. Why do we have an Assemblies of God Church and a Church of God in Christ, both out of the same Pentecostal revival movement? Because one is white (AOG) and the other is black (COGIC). Why is there an African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME)?

“The AMEC grew out of the Free African Society (FAS) which Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and others established in Philadelphia in 1787. When officials at St. George's MEC pulled blacks off their knees while praying, FAS members discovered just how far American Methodists would go to enforce racial discrimination against African Americans. Hence, these members of St. George's made plans to transform their mutual aid society into an African congregation.”

Thankfully, many denominations have repented of their support of slavery and have officially asked forgiveness. Unfortunately, that has not been followed up with much real commitment to genuine

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reconciliation. The more acceptable alternative is to approve “diversity” without reconciliation. The Presbyterian Church in America (of which I am a member, who loves and respects the other members of the denomination) trumpets its commitment to diversity and has done a great deal in the last 15 years to actually embrace a real diversity of people groups. But on a practical level there is very little reconciliation. The largest minority in the denomination is Korean, and yet there is little to no Presbytery or General Assembly level communication between the Korean and Anglo churches, let alone congregation members learning how to embrace one another and work together with their diversity of gifts to advance the kingdom of God. The reality that we are an interdependent body is ignored. Instead we have established what we call minority “movement leaders” with official denominational positions for the various constituencies of the church: African-American, Haitian, Portuguese, Hispanic and Korean. In the end, this is a functional “separate but equal” approach.

Does God truly call us to, and expect us to achieve in some meaningful measure, the level of unity and reconciliation described in this prayer? I would answer the question with a question: how can we believe or strive for anything less? When Jesus tells us to pray, “your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven” and then we read of the unity and diversity of the nations worshipping God in Revelation 7, how can we ask for anything less? By way of comparison, how do we describe the biblical mandate for marriage? How many marriage ceremonies or seminars have we listened to where pastors describe God’s desire for husbands and wives in Genesis 2 to become one flesh, or in Ephesians 5 that our marriages are meant to image the relationship of Christ and the church? Patiently, faithfully, but consistently we are also reminded of the grace of God in Christ as the only foundation for building such a marriage. What is critical here is that we never tone down the message no matter how many divorces there are and no matter how difficult the task in holding a marriage together. Would we want pastors to preach anything less? So we repent, we seek forgiveness, we learn, we grow, we re-commit in marriage over and over again, because we know this is what God lovingly demands of us. At many key points along the way in the practical expression of becoming “one flesh” couples can stand back and say, “yes” and “amen” to the process. As hard as it can be it is so worth the blood, sweat and tears. Do we have this same sense of commitment to reconciliation in the body of Christ?

We evangelize with the same kind of relentless commitment and are even willing to die for the sake of preaching the Gospel to others. Pastors in training make great financial sacrifices, call their families to great personal sacrifice and travel to places all over the world in order to learn and teach sound doctrine. We work and work and then work some more on worship. Yet, none of God’s people would consider efforts in these areas vain or useless, even though they are often filled with lots of misunderstanding and at times severe failure. Why do we do all this? Because we believe God calls us to these things in his Word. They are covenantal, biblical obligations. We deeply know and believe these responsibilities have both immediate and eternal value. As Jesus prays for our unity to mirror the unity of the Godhead how can we settle to strive for anything less than a deep reconciliation that reflects everything God has revealed about his own unity in Scripture?

Yet, the practical questions remain in the hearts and minds of many: in this very broken, very divided world - divided not only by sinful hearts, generations of racism, tribalism and social injustice, not only in the world, but even *in the church*, mixed with the additional conflicting cultural experiences, language barriers and differing economic and social expectations we bring to the table- is it even in the realm of remote possibility to embrace such a hope for reconciliation and unity and commit ourselves to such a task? Aren’t we better off taking our current approach of realistically assessing and downgrading the expectations for reconciliation to something more manageable? Has Jesus given us anything that can practically help us see this level of reconciliation become a reality? His profoundly simple answer is this: “I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one.”

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It is clear from his prayer that Jesus believed the gift of this “glory” is enough to promote the kind of unity he prayed for. If the presence and gift of the “glory of God” over his people is so weighty and so profound that Jesus says it is enough to break through all the natural and sinful divisions we experience in this world and give us a foundation for deep and genuine unity, then it must surely be something profound and we ought to strive to make sure we have a strong sense of what that glory actually is. Unfortunately, for many believers and for many pastors and teachers, the glory of God remains something a bit abstract and intangible. For some it is associated on a practical level with a mystical aura or a sensation of the majesty of God; something people are aware of when they sense the real Presence of the Spirit of God, but still find intangible and hard to describe. And there is truth in that. There is a mystery to “Who” God is that ought to make us stand back in simple wonder and awe. For others “the glory of God” is the justifying phrase used to describe both the motivation and the goal of their work, regardless of the actual purpose of the ministry. It is the “ace card” that is played to excite the people of God. Listeners who love God and do care about his glory know it is generally a good thing and often give a “yes” and “amen” whenever God’s glory is invoked, but many simply have no concrete understanding of what it means and no way to discern if the “glory of God” they are being called to praise and sacrifice for is completely legitimate. Still others, in the tradition of Jonathan Edwards, describe the glory of God as “God’s delight.” The members of the Trinity delight in each other (which is the essence of God’s glory) and in turn God delights in us (manifests his glory) and wants us to delight in him (to glorify him). It is that “delighting in God” that is our highest end, versus the destructiveness of pursuing a self-centered, self-focused delight. And this is surely wonderful and true.

Yet, all of these definitions in some way seem to describe the effect of God’s glory without necessarily describing the substance of the glory. God’s Presence is glorious and awesome. God’s glory is our greatest goal. And surely, glorifying God is expressed in taking our ultimate delight in God and this is at the very heart of worship. I would further suggest, however, that behind these descriptions of God’s glory lies the unspoken reality of what Scriptures identify as the substance of God’s glory- which is simply his moral character; and more precisely, his goodness.

The closest thing we have in the Bible to what we might call a working definition of God’s glory is found in the Exodus narrative. The context is Israel’s unfaithfulness at Mt Sinai. Moses had been on the mountain receiving instruction for the newly formed nation and because he was gone forty days the people became restless and decided to change “gods” to someone who was more attentive to their perceived needs. As the story of God’s grace and discipline, and Moses’ faithfulness as a priest on behalf of his people unfolds, Moses makes a final appeal to God for the blessing of his presence to go with them on their journey as the only genuine evidence of their status as God’s people (Ex 33:12-16). The Lord responds to Moses’ request by affirming his presence would indeed go with the people, and then Moses says, “Now show me your glory.” And here is the profound answer from God: “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion” (Exodus 33:18,19).

Here, God himself wraps the definition of his glory in the context of his goodness. Where the NIV English text reads, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you,” the Hebrew carries the sense of “the complete expression of my goodness”. In context, it is a goodness that is free to show mercy and compassion to absolutely anyone, including a group of ungrateful people who turned to idolatry after experiencing the greatest deliverance from sin and oppression ever witnessed at that point in human history.

The essence of God’s glory is in the moral goodness of God’s character; his glory is his ethical nature. The term glory and goodness in this sense is not a limited definition but meant to be taken as a full expression of everything that is good about God- his righteousness, mercy, compassion,



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judgments, kindness, grace and love. As we will see in the following texts, that goodness is expressed in everything God is and in everything he does: even in the use of his strength, power and Sovereign dominion over all things. If we look at the revelation of God's glory throughout Scripture and keep this Exodus 33:19 theme of the "complete expression of God's goodness" in mind, it will help us understand the narratives more fully, and in turn, will help us understand why Jesus was so confident the gift of God's glory in us is sufficient to produce reconciliation and unity.

In Exodus 14:4 God's glory/goodness is seen as he crushes the evil, dictatorial rule of Pharaoh, and that glory is exalted in praise in the Song of Moses precisely because God worked the wonders of the Exodus deliverance: "Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you-- majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders? (Ex 15:11). In Leviticus at the dedication of the Tabernacle, the glory of the Lord, the goodness of God, is so magnificent it is tangible, visible to the human eye. And with that glory, comes blessing (Lev 9:23; cf 1 Kings 8:22ff). Throughout the Exodus narrative whenever there is sin and rebellion, it is answered by the manifestation of God's glory- his goodness- and evil and sin are overwhelmed and turned back (Num 14; 16; 20). When Achan sins by taking the plunder of Ai for himself, he is exhorted to "give glory to God"- a way of acknowledging God is good and Achan is the one who has sinned and brought disaster to Israel (Josh 7:19,20). When the Philistines capture the ark of the covenant, the dying wife of Phineas names her newborn child "Ichabod," referring to the captured ark, because "the glory has departed from Israel" (1 Sam 4:21). The ark can be equated with the glory of God because it is the central symbol of God's goodness- the place of atonement and covenant blessing for the people of God. When David is king and the ark is finally brought to Jerusalem (1 Chron 16), he leads the people in worship and urges them to "glory in God's holy name" (16:10) and rejoice because God fulfills his good covenant promises to his people. He also urges the people to "Declare his glory among the nations" (16:24), which means declaring his goodness because of his marvelous deeds. The fullness of his goodness is seen in his majesty that spreads strength and joy (16:27). There is even glory (moral goodness) in his strength (16:28) because God uses it to establish the earth (16:30) and to rule among the unruly nations (16:31-33). Giving thanks to God is itself a moral goodness, and so we "glory in God's praise" (16:35) because he is so good in being our Savior (16:35).

The glory of God is transferred to men as a gift. Saul was called to be a godly king who ensured the people of God lived out the goodness of God as defined by the just and righteous demands of the Law (Deut 17:14ff.) Even though he failed miserably in his calling, it was nonetheless the position he held, and so David laments his death with these words: "Your glory, O Israel, is slain on your high places" (2 Sam 1:19). Saul was Israel's glory because he was the one who was to lead them in goodness. When Job reflects on the nature of his life before all his great trials came, he remembers all the good things God had strengthened him to accomplish (29:1-17) and sums up his previous perspective on his life: "My glory will remain fresh in me" (29:20).

In the Psalms the glory of God as an expression of his goodness is even more prominent. David praises God for manifesting his glory (Ps 3:3) because he showed goodness in delivering him from his enemies. God himself laments the sinfulness of men who turn his "glory into shame" by loving the opposite of goodness- empty words, lies and false gods (Ps 4:2). God's glory is manifest in the goodness of the created universe and in turn, the universe declares that glory back to him (Ps 19). Without missing a beat, the creation glory/goodness is then correlated to the glory/goodness of the Law (Ps 19:7). The King of Glory (Ps 24:7) is the one who creates the world in goodness (24:1,2) and pours out blessing, vindication and salvation on the righteous (24:3-6). "The place where God's glory dwells" (Ps 26:8) is a place of love, truth, wonderful deeds, and an absence of lies and evil deeds (26:1-7). The glory of God is wrapped in the goodness of his strength, which is exercised in and through the storms of creation to work blessing for his people (Ps 29, cf Judges 5:19ff; Josh 10:11). When David prays for the glory of God to be "over all the earth" (Ps 57:5, 11), he is asking for the

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evidence of God's goodness to be made known everywhere as it was revealed in saving him (and his people) from the hostility of the nations (57:1-4), and fully manifesting his love and faithfulness (57:7-10). When Solomon prays, "may the whole earth be filled with his glory" (Ps 72:19) he is asking for God's goodness to be expressed in delivering the needy and the afflicted of the earth who have no one to help (72:12ff). Asking for the kindness, mercy and compassion of deliverance and forgiveness is asking God to demonstrate the glory of his name (Ps 79:9, Ps 85).

When we turn to the prophets, Isaiah serves as a prominent example of the link between God's glory and his fundamental goodness. Isaiah looks at the failure of the people of Israel and prophesies a day when "the Branch of the LORD will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land will be the pride and glory of the survivors in Israel." (4:2). "Then the LORD will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over all the glory will be a canopy" (4:5). Are these simply flowery, intangible words? What does this glory mean? It is another way of describing the goodness that will flow from God through his people:

"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. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD." Isa 2:2-5

When Isaiah is ushered into the Throne Presence of the Eternal God, he finds himself surrounded by angels who eternally proclaim, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God all mighty"(Isa 6:3). God's holiness is not simply the absence of sin, but also the presence of righteousness and goodness. So Isaiah goes on to say, "The whole earth is full of his glory"(Isa 6:3). That means God's holiness, his glory/goodness is present everywhere and in everything. The glory is so great and so good that Isaiah crumbles in awareness of his own lack of goodness and is only able to be in God's Presence through atonement (6:5-7).

Isaiah prophesies the promised ministry of the Messiah with the terminology of glory: "And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken" (40:5). What will they see?

"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. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this." (Isa 9:7)

"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him-- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD-- and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. 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. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist." (Isa 11:1-5)

When the Messiah comes, his ministry is "the complete expression of God's goodness" (Ex 33:19) made visible. John tells us, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (1:14).

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What did they see? The goodness of God revealed in Jesus blessing a wedding celebration (Jn 2), cleansing the court of the Gentiles at the Temple in anticipation of the new temple, made up of Jews and gentiles as living stones in that temple (Jn 2, cf Mt 21:13, Eph 2:19-22, 1 Pet 2:5), discipling religious leaders in God's love for the world (Jn 3), forgiving and restoring a Samaritan woman who was oppressed in sin (Jn 4), healing the sick (Jn 4, 5), feeding the hungry (Jn 6) and doing so many good deeds and miracles of compassion and kindness that, "If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written." (Jn 21:25)

The greatest evidence of God's glory/goodness is his willingness to send his own Son to the cross for sinners. In John 12 Jesus prepares his own heart and the hearts of his disciples for that great and dreadful day of salvation with these words:

Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. .... "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!" Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." 12:23-28

Jesus is "glorified" in his death, declared and manifested as good, because his death is the ultimate expression of God's goodness for sinners. Jesus prays for the Father to glorify his own name, a prayer for God to demonstrate the full extent of his goodness. The Father confirms that he has already demonstrated his glory/goodness and will do it again- possibly a reference to sending the Son and manifesting all his glory through him, and then completing the expression of his goodness by punishing Christ for our sins. It is no wonder John later sees a vision of heaven in which all the saints, all the angels and all creation sing to the Father and the Son, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" (Rev 5:13)

The Apostle Paul picks up the theme of God's glory as moral goodness and it becomes a recurring theme throughout the book of Romans. He tells us the great downward spiral of men is tied to "exchanging the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles" (Rom 1:23), which in turn leads to a deeper descent into evil (Rom 1:24ff). It is only "to those who by persistence in doing good, seek glory, honor and immortality, [that] he will give eternal life" (Rom 2:7). The great problem is that no one actually seeks God or seeks good (Rom 3:11, 12). "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," an expression for failure to achieve the level of God's moral goodness (Rom 3:23). Amazingly, righteousness and the glory that comes with it can only be received as a gift through faith in Christ (Rom 3:21ff). Once received, this glory is so weighty and so profound that despite sin and suffering in this world we are free to "rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" (Rom 5:2). We can expect to see "the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living" (Ps 27:13). Because of our union with Christ, "the glory of the Father" that raised him from the dead, guarantees us freedom to live a new life of righteousness (Rom 6:4), even embracing the sufferings of Christ and sharing "in his glory" (Rom 8:17, 18). The glory/goodness of God is so profoundly at work in the world that even the hardness of Israel's unbelieving heart is Sovereignly used by God to bring salvation to the nations (Rom 9-11). Paul concludes,

"Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen." (Rom 11:34-36)

With this understanding of God's glory filling our hearts and minds, the depth of Jesus' promise, "I have given them the glory that you gave me that they may be one as we are one" takes on a far

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greater force for genuine hope in reconciliation. What is able to break down all the barriers and divisions of men and create real reconciliation and unity? The deep, profound, practical expression of the goodness of God, his glory, manifest in and through us to one another and to the world.

When we look at the early church in the book of Acts we should be amazed at the level of unity and reconciliation they enjoyed, despite the natural divisions and animosities that existed. Rich and poor, slave and free, Jews and all the other nations (Gentiles) living and worshiping together as one body, within an amazingly short span of time. Not an absolute, perfect unity. But still a far greater, practical demonstration of reconciliation than we enjoy today. There is simply no comparison. One central dynamic in their life as a church that promoted this unity was the manifestation of God's glory/goodness to each other in their practical needs.

“They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 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. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” Acts 2:42-47.

These verses have been quoted or referred to countless times over the generations to help define and defend the practices of the church. They are the paradigm, the model expression for all churches in all cultures and all ages of what the people of God ought to look like and how we ought to function as the body of Christ. There will certainly be variables and contextualization, but the fundamental principles revealed are timeless. And in the center of the paradigm, along with teaching and fellowship and prayer, is this equally foundational description, “All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.” They did good to one another. They manifested the glory Christ had given them, now unleashed through the power of the Holy Spirit. This expression of glory is repeated almost immediately in Acts 4, after a second powerful proclamation of the Gospel:

“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.” Acts 4:32-35.

The phrase, “there were no needy persons among them,” points us back to the original call for God's people to live out God's glory in the Law, where Moses told the people of Israel to cancel debts every seven years and told them,

“However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today. For the LORD your God will bless you as he has promised, and you will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. You will rule over many nations but none will rule over you. If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs.” Deut 15:4-8



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The promises of Isaiah 2 and 4 were being fulfilled. Those who took up swords against one another and earlier called for the death of Jesus were now turning those swords into plowshares and using their resources to provide bread (Isa 2:4). Over the new community of God's redeemed people was a canopy of glory that provided shelter and refuge (Isa 4:6). In the full, Pentecost and Jubilee expression of God's glory through the Spirit, God's people not only lend freely to one another, they sell their homes and give food to anyone in need. This glory of God goes well beyond cultural expressions of niceness and being a "good person." This glory can only be produced by the presence of the Holy Spirit because it leads us to give away our own resources of physical security in a time of famine; even more, it teaches us to "love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked" (Luke 6:35). And the result is glory to God: "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Mt 5:16 ESV).

Several years later as Paul reminds the Corinthian believers of their unity with the Jerusalem church (2 Cor 8), he appeals for their assistance in helping these believers in a time of famine. He describes their practical expression of goodness as something that will result in praise to God. Even though the word "glory" or "glorify" is not used, the basic ideas are still obviously expressed:

"This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"  
2 Cor 9:12-15

Without this concrete expression of God's glory in and through us, the church can never practically experience the fullness of reconciliation and unity Christ has purchased for us. This lack of expression of glory does not negate the reality that we are in fact united in Christ. We are. It just means we will have limited success in expressing that unity. Even doctrinal unity, as absolutely necessary and foundational as it is and as much as doctrinal truth is itself a part of the glory of God over us, without a practical expression of goodness and love, it is not enough to promote the depth of unity Jesus prays for. But that is the negative. The positive promise of Jesus is this: he has given us the same glory the Father gave him that we may be one. By the power of the Holy Spirit, through the resurrection power of Christ, simply doing good, manifesting the full expression of the glory of God will promote the reconciliation and unity of the church in profound ways.

In 1992 a group of believers in St. Louis, Missouri started New City Fellowship of St. Louis. We began the church with a prayer for God to bring black and white Christians together as a reconciled expression of the body of Christ, proclaiming the Gospel through the power of the Spirit in Word and deed. St Louis, to this day, remains a very openly, racially divided city. Yet, God has blessed this congregation to become a body of believers worshipping in two locations, with members from some 15+ nations and a staff that includes Anglos, African-Americans and African leadership from Togo and Congo. The congregation includes a large population from Congo, Liberia and other parts of West Africa and Burma. Worship services are multi-lingual and include songs in English, French, Spanish, Chin (Burma) and a variety of African tribal languages. The Elders and Deacons of the church are also from a variety of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. The congregation regularly hears preaching from Anglo, African-American and African pastors, plus a variety of visiting pastors from places like India, Pakistan, Kenya, Congo and Togo. In addition to the undeserved, gracious blessing of the Spirit, what "holds" this congregation together?

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Besides the all important, foundational, clear preaching of the good news of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, there has been a commitment to manifest the glory of God by “doing good” to one another and to the community around us. That means especially taking care of the practical needs of the fatherless, the widow, the poor and the immigrant, and is expressed through commitments to love by tutoring inner-city children, taking care of the homes and basic physical needs of widows, providing basic life needs for newly arriving refugees and immigrants, providing job skill training for teenagers from fatherless homes, and helping single moms who are overloaded with responsibilities – all in a context of continually speaking the message of God’s love in Christ. These are done both for the members and new attendees at the church, as well as the general community at large (Gal 6:10).

In addition, there is a practical commitment to love one another in the church body through making sure all the basics needs of the members of the body are provided for, as well as intentional commitment to fellowship and prayer in a system of “house churches” (Acts 2:42-44). What we have seen and continue to experience is that this commitment to live out the glory God has invested in us, has provided a context for genuine reconciliation to grow.

This does not mean we do not suffer the same trials, difficulties, sins and failures of every other church. We do: sometimes in spades. At one point we had a significant Hispanic population, but some serious sin and conflict on several levels led to the slow loss of most of those believers from our fellowship. We have also suffered the loss of significant African-American leadership at different points, as well as a scandal or two in some of our community ministries. And yet, by the unstoppable grace of God that super-abounds wherever sin abounds (Rom 5:20), we have continued to mature and grow in both in our reconciliation and overall ministries. A central, key component in that reconciliation is this practical expression of glory. Words, even great theological truths spoken in love, without action – without love and glory in action – would not be enough (1 John 3:16-20). But because there is a practical, hands on “doing of goodness” that the congregation is mobilized and equipped for (Eph 4:11-12) within the context of the Gospel of grace, we are truly, slowly, seeing ourselves being “built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13).

## **The Cross of Christ: The Death of Our Hostility and the Birth of our Unity – Ephesians**

Still, reconciliation is no easy matter. The divisions in this world that have grown out of the sins of oppression, injustice, arrogance and ignorance are deep, long lasting and from a human perspective, hopelessly ingrained in tribes and nations, communities and neighborhoods. In 2008, as African nations continue to emerge from their first generation attempts at governing themselves as nation states under the dictatorial rule of tribal leaders, (often placed in power by the Colonial powers who preceded them), the tribal abuses could hardly be more dramatic. Entire national resources have been pilfered by those in power and political control has been maintained through traditional forms of empire rule: the systematic suppression of opposing ethnic groups through political, economic and oftentimes, ruthless military oppression. The evidence of the divisions comes to the surface in times of national elections, when the hopes of the oppressed often ignite in riots, mass protests and tribal killing. Kenya, Zimbabwe, Congo, Uganda, Sudan, Somalia are all recent examples. In the worst cases, like Rwanda, things degenerate into genocide. The remains of South African Apartheid, North African Muslim/Christian conflicts and the general oppressiveness of Islam leave an entire continent reeling under the divisive hostilities such tyranny leaves in its wake.

China and India, which comprise one third of the world’s population, constantly struggle with religious and political hostilities and oppression. Human rights are routinely trampled. The recorded stories of abuses are legion. One United Nations Human Rights report describes the abuse of children in India:

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“With credible estimates ranging from 60 to 115 million, India has the largest number of working children in the world. Whether they are sweating in the heat of stone quarries, working in the fields sixteen hours a day, picking rags in city streets, or hidden away as domestic servants, these children endure miserable and difficult lives. They earn little and are abused much. They struggle to make enough to eat and perhaps to help feed their families as well. They do not go to school; more than half of them will never learn the barest skills of literacy. Many of them have been working since the age of four or five, and by the time they reach adulthood they may be irrevocably sick or deformed—they will certainly be exhausted, old men and women by the age of forty, likely to be dead by fifty. Most or all of these children are working under some form of compulsion, whether from their parents, from the expectations attached to their caste, or from simple economic necessity. At least fifteen million of them, however, are working as virtual slaves. These are the bonded child laborers of India.”

The conflicts in the Middle East, ethnic tensions in Europe, the vast disparities between rich and poor in Latin America and the exclusive suburbs and inner-cities of the United States all point to an entire globe that is engulfed by human division. Even in the most progressive university campuses in the United States, the practical separation of students into ethnic enclaves in every situation from the lunchroom to Christian campus groups is simply the dominant reality.

How can oppressor and oppressed ever come together? How can rich and poor be reconciled? How can members of warring tribes, after generations of abuses, truly be united? It would take something of earth shattering proportions to bring real, genuine change that could produce reconciliation out of such division. But something more than earth shattering has taken place. Something heaven and earth shattering has happened. The SON OF GOD appeared in human flesh, fully identified with us as a man and all the wrath of God- the justifiable anger and retribution that should be poured out on all the divisive and destructive acts of sinful men- has been poured out on Jesus Christ on behalf of his people, and peace has been purchased both with God and with each other. To restate this in as bold of terms as possible, the death of Jesus Christ has purchased not only personal forgiveness and restoration before God, but also forgiveness and restoration with one another. The Apostle Paul states it this way:

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.”  
Ephesians 2:13-18

The first four chapters of Ephesians is one long discourse from Paul on reconciliation. Too often it is read from an individualistic perspective and we miss this overall message of reconciliation not only to God, but profoundly, to one another. Believers are often encouraged to understand the vast richness of their personal salvation heritage in Christ. Chosen, loved, adopted, redeemed, forgiven, predestined and marked with the Holy Spirit, are all themes in Ephesians chapter one that we are (rightly) encouraged to take to heart, reflect on and allow to shape our understanding of the depth of God’s love to us personally. Good pastors and preachers know that one of the most important thing for any individual believer to do is precisely to believe and apply these things to themselves. Nothing can replace a personal faith that says, “Christ loved me and died for me” (Gal 2:20).

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But that is still only an application of the main point Paul is making. One of the most important things is the personal application, but it is not the only important thing. The great promises of Ephesians one are all stated in plural and corporate terms: “blessed us” (1:3), “chose us” (1:4), “predestined us” (1:5), “given us” (1:6), “we have redemption” (1:7), “lavished on us” (1:8), “guaranteeing our inheritance” (1:14). The reason Paul is not addressing this on an individual basis is not simply a matter of indifferent grammatical style, but it is plainly because he is addressing the church as a reconciled group. He wants us to know that what has been promised to me personally has been promised to all God’s people corporately. We are not to think of these things only as true for ourselves, but equally true for every member of the body. And at the very heart of all these amazing promises of our status as sons, is this climactic declaration of God’s purpose in giving all these sonship graces to us:

“And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment-- to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.” (Eph 1:10)

The Greek word translated “bring together” in the NIV, means to “sum up” or “unite,” and then Paul adds, “all things... in Christ.” He tells us in the most comprehensive way possible that reconciliation, all things being brought together and unified in Christ, is nothing less than the full revelation of the mystery of God’s will in his saving purposes in Christ which include his redemption of creation, the universe, and critically, the restoration of us human beings to one another. All the related promises are made to “us” corporately, because they are commitments God has made to all of us to effect this unity and reconciliation. Paul is unpacking the depth of the “glory” Christ has given to us so that we may be one (Jn 17:22). Together, and only together, all of us are thoroughly equipped with this presence of God’s glory to fulfill the purpose of being united under Christ’s Headship. Together, through the anointing of the Spirit, we have been predestined to manifest the praise of God’s glory (Eph 1:14). Together we need the anointing of the Spirit to understand just how far this reconciliation and manifestation of God’s glory extends (1:16ff).

If we think of our unity only in terms we can imagine through human reasoning we will miss the full measure of what God intends to accomplish. The power of God to effect this reconciliation in the world is rooted in the resurrection power of Christ who Sovereignly over-rules every other power for the sake of us collectively as his church (Eph 1:19-23). All of us were dead in sins (2:1); but now, “God, who is rich in mercy, has made us alive with Christ” (2:5). And together, “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works” (2:10). If we exclusively individualize these texts, we miss the larger glory of God’s purpose in reconciling us to one another and on a practical level we miss the actualization of that glory on the scale God intended.

Beginning in Ephesians 2:11, Paul unfolds more completely the foundation of our reconciliation. How can it be that Jews and Gentiles are truly, substantially, deeply united as one in Christ? The Jews had a covenant heritage with God. They were his chosen people. They had generations of special knowledge of God’s Law and generations of living under the promises of God’s grace and kindness (Rom 2:17-3:1). The Gentiles- all other ethnic groups- were truly without hope and without God in this world (Eph 2:12). How, in such a brief moment in time, could the history of this division be undone? Paul’s answer: “through the blood of Christ” (Eph 2:13).

In Ephesians 2:14-18, Paul lays out this foundational truth as something we must continually focus on in order to build and experience deep unity in the body of Christ. We must make much of the shed blood of Christ as the basis of our peace. The work of Christ in purchasing salvation and reconciliation is of first importance (1 Cor 2:2,15:3) and is the very central issue on which everything else hinges. Jesus talks of the relationship of his death to the unity of body in John 10:



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"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ...I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me-- just as the Father knows me and I know the Father-- and I lay down my life for the sheep. 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." (John 10:11-17)

Here in Ephesians 2, Paul tells us why and how the death of Christ can effectively bring reconciliation between enemies; reconciliation so profound that Paul states it as an accomplished fact: Christ "has made the two one" (Eph 2:14). The basis of Paul's confidence is found in the Cross of Christ:

"For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit." (Eph 2:14-18)

The barrier to reconciliation is "the dividing wall of hostility." The dividing wall of hostility, Paul tells us, is "the law with its commandments and regulations". What does Paul mean? According to John Calvin, and subsequently many commentators in the Reformed tradition, this is fundamentally a reference to the ceremonial aspects of the law. Circumcision, feast days, sacrifices, etc, all marked the Jews as a separate people, different from all the other nations. According to Calvin and many others, since those outward ceremonies have been done away with by the shedding of Christ's blood, they now no longer stand as a barrier to Jews and Gentiles being one. "The mark of difference has been taken away; for ceremonies have been abolished." Gentiles do not have to practice Jewish ceremonial customs to be acceptable to God. They only need faith in Christ.

While this explanation certainly has exegetical merit and a strong appeal, it does not seem to sufficiently take into account either the historical seriousness of the divisions addressed or the breadth of the promise to reconcile. There was a major hostility between the Jews and other nations. They had a long history of hostility. Enslaved by the Egyptians, at war with the Philistines, the Amorites, the Syrians and a host of smaller Canaanite nations, invaded and crushed in the north by the Assyrians and in the south by the Babylonians, their history would have naturally fed anger, resentment, self-protection and hostility. They had suffered their homes being burned, their women being raped, their pregnant women killed, starvation to the point of eating their own flesh and blood for survival, their Temple and capital city burned to the ground and dismantled and then being exiled to a foreign land. Then they suffered under the dictatorial empires of Babylon, Persia, Greece and ultimately the hard rule of Roman law. The mutual hostility was deep and humanly impossible to overcome. It is hard to imagine the simple, no matter how symbolically important, removal of outward religious ceremonies as something that could destroy the resulting hostility and bring actual peace.

Instead, we might find a better explanation in Galatians 3 where Paul tells us that Christ "redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Gal 3:13). The "law with its commandments and regulations," as Paul refers to it in Ephesians 2, called for the death of all who broke the Law (Deut 28). Oppression and injustice call for judgment. The Jews had every reason imaginable to be hostile to the Gentile nations. They were an immoral, violent and ruthless people towards the Jews. Of course, the Jews were guilty of the very same things. They had worshipped idols, shed innocent blood, cheated the poor, offered their children on altars of fire as a sacrifice to false gods (Isa 1-5), and by the time Paul wrote the book of Ephesians, conducted a mock trial of

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Jesus, claimed the dictator Caesar as their only king and crucified the very Son of God. There was one notable difference between them and the Gentiles; they claimed exclusive knowledge of the One, true God, and despised the Gentiles as “unclean.” In return, the Gentiles hated the Jews and blasphemed the God they claimed to worship (Romans 32:17-24).

Jews and Gentiles alike were, by the biblical account (Rom 3:9ff), both under a very deserved judgment. Just like many hostile tribes and nations today, they were stuck in a cycle of mutual animosity and judgment that each side deserved. What could break through all that hostility and bring unity? Only the death of Christ. By taking on human flesh as a man while at the same time remaining fully God, and having been given the God-ordained position of acting as our legal representative (Rom 5), Jesus Christ offered himself on the Cross and the justified, deserved and lawfully required wrath of God that should have been poured out on Jew and Gentile, was instead poured out on Christ. The just condemnation of the Law was satisfied. Even more, its legitimate claims for wrath and punishment were so completely addressed, it was abolished as the barrier to reconciliation.

Paul speaks this way about the Law in a number of other contexts for the believer in our personal relationship to God. He never denies the glory of the Law as a revelation of practical righteousness (Romans 3:31, 7:7, 12), but he states clearly that if we are to ever have a relationship with God, it cannot be based on our ability to keep the Law (Rom 3:19, 20; Gal 3:10-13). In fact, righteousness in every sense of the word, both as the basis of our standing before God and in the practical expression of righteousness in our lives, can only be produced as a gift (Rom 3:19-28; Gal 5:5,6; Phil 3:9). So Paul speaks of the Law, particularly as the means of bringing us into right relationship with God, as something we are “dead to” (Rom 7:4, 6; Gal 2:19). If we try to go back under the Law as the means of attaining righteousness, we have “fallen from grace” (Gal 5:4). We are free to pursue righteousness precisely because we have it as a gift and the condemnation of the Law no longer has any power over us (Rom 6:14, 8:1-4; Gal 2:19-21, 3:1-5, 5:18).

In Ephesians 2, Paul seems to be applying this freedom from the condemnation of the Law in our relationship with God as the basis of our reconciliation with one another. We do not need to hold onto hostility and resentment and put one another under the condemnation of the Law, because Christ has paid the penalty of all our sins. The wrath that should rightly be poured out on the member of the oppressive or guilty tribe or social or economic group can be freely forgiven. Their deeds have been justly punished through his death on the Cross and the condemnation of the Law has been abolished.

Part of what makes this “work” as the basis of reconciliation is the reality that every one of us is guilty of sins worthy of punishment (Rom 3:10ff). We were all “dead in transgressions and sins” (Eph 2:1ff.). Only the blindly self-righteous can hold themselves apart from other forgiven believers and refuse to be reconciled. This is something intuitive to every believer who has truly, personally experienced the love of God in Christ (1 John 2:20), but still needs to be taught because of the ongoing stubbornness of our hearts (Acts 10; Gal 2:11ff).

But there is more. We are not simply in a state of neutral forgiveness; the work of Christ on the Cross actually made us one (Eph 2:14). This is reminiscent of the language used by Jesus in Matthew 19:6 to describe marriage, “What therefore God has joined together, let man not separate” (cf. Gen 2:24). In both instances it is something God Himself has done to us. Later in Ephesians Paul will talk about the unity of the marriage relationship and the commitment of husbands and wives to love one another with these words:

“After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church-- for we are members of his body. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a profound

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mystery-- but I am talking about Christ and the church.” Eph 5:29-32

Two people becoming one flesh, under the Lordship of Christ, is the perfect analogy to the church described in Ephesians 2: two hostile groups becoming one new man, under the Lordship of Christ. Just as husband and wife must work out their oneness, so the people of God must intentionally be committed to developing and expressing the unity that is already purchased for us by Christ. There is, existentially, a reality to the marriage unity. This is what makes divorce so hard, so tragic and often, so devastating in its effect. God “hates divorce” because it is a fundamental breaking of a covenant obligation (Mal 2:14) and is so often connected to violence (Mal 2:16). There is also an existential reality to the oneness of the church, and whether we are free enough to acknowledge it or not, our separation creates all kinds of negative effects (some of which we will address later) and has also, too often, rooted in violence.

In order to draw us more fully into a practical mindset to understand and apply the depth of our unity, Paul goes on to tell us:

“For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” Ephesians 2:18-22

The family unity is complete. We have the same Holy Spirit inside and we all have access to the same Father. Echoing Old Testament references to the foreigner and alien, and the promise of Isaiah, “Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say, “The LORD will surely exclude me from his people” (Isa 56:3), Paul tells us in every way he can that we are united: as fellow citizens; as members of one household family; as those having the same foundation and the same chief cornerstone- Christ. He expands the foundation imagery to say we are all being built into one structure, one building that is actually the holy temple of God. The comparison to the original Temple could not be missed. We are the new dwelling place of the Spirit of God (1 Kings 8:10ff.) and the emphasis is on all of us, Jew and Gentile, being built “together.”

The glory of that new Temple structure, the living body of Christ, is further described in Ephesians 3. Paul starts to tell the church how he is praying for our understanding to blossom and grow under the power of the Spirit to lay hold of the breadth the reconciliation of the Gospel brings, but he stops for a moment to reflect on the grace of God poured out through him to be an administrator and messenger of this reconciliation to the Gentiles. Paul uses of this phrase- “the administration of God's grace given to me for you... that through the Gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members of together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Eph 3:2,6) is a revealing perspective on his view of his ministry. He was not just starting churches. He was planting reconciliation-based churches and saw himself as an Apostolic administrator of God's plan to fulfill his eternal purpose described in Eph 1:9,10.

Paul then reveals something profound about the nature of the reconciled church:

“His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.” Eph 3:10-12

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The word “manifold” is best translated as “multi-faceted” or “much varied” and is even used in the sense of “marked with a great variety of colors.” Now, the full, multi-faceted wisdom of God would be made known through a multi-ethnic church. What is this “wisdom” Paul is referring to, and how does reconciliation play such a vital role? Solomon prayed for wisdom – “a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong” (1 Kings 1:9) - and God answered him with, “discernment in administering justice” (1 Kings 1:11, 12). Jesus Christ was wisdom on display (Mt 12:42) and he was filled with the Spirit to bring justice to the nations (Isa 42:1). That meant he would 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” (Isa 11:3,4). Now the whole church (Acts 2) is filled with the Spirit and through this ingathering and unity of believers from every nation and tongue, the wisdom of God which is rooted in bringing justice to the nations through the word and deed of the Gospel in the power of the Spirit (Acts 1:1ff), becomes a display of his glory that all rulers, and even authorities in the heavenly realms must acknowledge. This was the original purpose of God creating all this human diversity – so that our unity and diversity might reflect the glorious (full of goodness) unity and diversity of the Godhead. In Christ, this purpose is now to be finally and fully realized.

When Paul returns to his prayer for the church in Ephesians 3, he prays to the “Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name” (Eph 3:14). And what is his prayer? That we would have the love of Christ and the power of the Spirit “to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” (Eph 3:17,18); in context, a specific reference to the extent of Christ’s love to bring people together from every tribe, tongue, language and nation (Rev. 5:9,10) to manifest his glory and wisdom. In fact, he wants us to know, in this matter of reconciliation and the manifestation of his glory, that God is able to do more than we could ever imagine (Eph 3:20,21).

It is no wonder Paul appeals to the diverse churches of the Roman Empire in Ephesians 4-

“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to one hope when you were called-- one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it” Eph 4:1-7.

The full manifestation of the glory and wisdom God intends to display through the church can only reach its maximum expression as the ethnic and socio-economic diversity of the body of the Christ works together, with each part contributing the gifting God has Sovereignly distributed to it for the sake of the whole (cf. Rom 12:3-5). We need pastors, evangelists, teachers and prophets from among the Greeks, Romans, Jews, Asians, Hispanics, Africans and African-Americans to help prepare God’s people for works of service (cf Antioch, Acts 11:19ff) so that the whole body, from all the ethnic groups, may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:11-13). The implication is clear: no one ethnic group of believers can attain this fullness of the expression of Christ in a segregated state. But that is really the focus of the third passage of Scripture in 1 Corinthians 12.

## **One Body, Many Parts and Two Things We Are Morally Bound Not To Say 1 Corinthians 12**

Two practical realities fed the need for the early church to live out its faith in a context of genuine reconciliation. First, there simply was no other “church” to go to. When the original Apostles went



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with their missionary teams, preached the Gospel and started new churches, everyone was invited to the same group. There was no competition of denominational claims or special interest Christianity to appeal to the peculiar desires of unbelievers or new Christians. There was only one church. Second, the major cities of the Roman Empire were multi-ethnically and socio-economically diversified by the strong, iron fisted rule of Rome. Like all Empires before and after them, the Romans conquered people and relocated them at will, often to existing Roman cities as slaves and artisans. Corinth was one such example. First it was completely destroyed by the Roman army in 146 B.C. and then rebuilt by Rome in 44 B.C. The city was re-populated with a mixture of Italians, Greeks, Asians and Jews. As these diverse and often hostile people groups responded to the good news of the Gospel and gathered together as the church at Corinth, they were immediately drawn into the need and the call for reconciliation.

The narrative of 1 Corinthians tells us, among many other things, the struggle of this church to move towards unity. The divisions referred to throughout the book are so numerous it is obvious even to the casual reader that only the power of God through the Cross of Christ could effectively produce reconciliation. There were social divisions between rich and poor (1:26-31, 11:7-22); theological divisions (15:12); divisions over who was the best Apostle/Teacher to follow (1:10-17); divisions over spiritual maturity (8:1ff); and divisions over spiritual gifts (14:1ff). And yet, despite the list of sins and failures, Paul relentlessly presses the case for unity because of his confidence, not in the Corinthians themselves, but in God, who “will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful” (1 Cor 1:8, 9).

Although Paul’s biblical reasoning with the Corinthian church for unity is spread throughout the entire book, for our purposes we want to focus on this key statement in chapter 12:

<sup>12</sup> “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. <sup>13</sup> For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body - whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free-- and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. <sup>14</sup> Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? <sup>18</sup> But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. <sup>19</sup> If they were all one part, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup> As it is, there are many parts, but one body. <sup>21</sup> 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!” <sup>22</sup> On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, <sup>23</sup> and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, <sup>24</sup> while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, <sup>25</sup> so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. <sup>26</sup> If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. <sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” 1 Cor 12:12-27

Paul’s argument here is simple, but has profound implications for the life of the local and global church. He describes the foundational unity and diversity of the church, and then makes two very exclusive statements. The unity and diversity of the church is summed up in one short phrase- “one body, many parts.” The analogy is drawn from the human body. The implications are meant to be as obvious as the nose on our face. To be a whole body, to be able to give full expression to what the

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body of Christ can be and do, we need all the parts, and those parts are defined in ethnic and socio-economic terms. The spiritual gifting of the body is given not just to different individuals, but to different ethnic and socio-economic groups; to “Jews and Greeks, slave and free” (12:13). Paul’s phrase, “Jews and Greeks” seems to be a synonym for “Jews and Gentiles” in the Corinthian (Greece) context. The full maturity of the body of Christ, the full expression for which it was created by God, can only be achieved as the gifting of each diverse element of the church is brought together and learns to function in the same way the intricate inter-relationship of the parts of the human body function. The Jews and all the other multitude of nations and ethnic groups, as well as believers from the great diversity of social backgrounds that range from slave to free, are all equally needed members of the body.

In practical terms, that means a group of rich Christians meeting without the presence and gifting of the poor as an intricate part of the church will, of necessity, be handicapped. And vice versa. The poor without the rich will be limited in their expression as the church. It also means a group of only Anglo, or only African-American or only Asian, or only Kaamba (Kenya) or only Tutsi (Rwanda) or only Buganda (Uganda) or only homogenous-of any kind- of believers, will be thwarted in their ability to fully manifest the wisdom and kingdom of God as the church.

One quick objection is, “How could this possibly apply to a group of believers who live in a homogeneous community?” A seemingly honest question, to which only one reply is needed: kindly point out such a community. Show one part of the world, or even one community where there is not some level of either social and/or ethnic (tribal or clan) diversity of some kind, in some form or fashion present in the community or within walking distance or a short drive. Even the most intentionally segregated wealthy communities are only minutes away from the poor, or widows, or fatherless children. Wealthy communities can only exist with a sub-strata of low-income workers present in some form, who help provide the manual labor and traditional craftsman needs for the community. In the most homogeneous of U.S. suburban communities, Mexican and other immigrant workers repair roofs, landscape lawns, cook in restaurants and provide a host of other services. And lower income neighborhoods and entire cities are only a quick trip down the road. Even in rural areas throughout the villages of the world, clan and family and tribal differences exist in close proximity to one another. Except for extreme cases where a small people group intentionally seek isolation -and suffer the consequences- the reality is that the world, overall, is populated in regions of varying degrees of diversity.

Since the people of God actually live in real, diverse communities, the movement of the church towards multiple forms of segregation has to have an element of intentionality about it, even if it is not always malicious. Those who are different, ethnically or socio-economically are excluded by an active refusal to care enough about them to include them. This is aided by a preaching of justification and salvation that leaves out the corporate nature of our salvation (more on this later). While this practical segregation by many Christian communities does not mean God is thwarted in his freedom to bless and use the church despite her constant tendency to move towards homogeneous conformity, Paul does lay down a rule for the church in all generations that is a normative principle that cannot be ignored; it is a rule that excludes homogeneous or segregationist thinking: we cannot say to one another, ‘I don’t belong’ or ‘I don’t need you.’

Paul spends a significant portion of 1 Corinthians 12 stating the obvious about how inter-connected the body is, when it might seem to us he could summarize this truth in one or two phrases. In comparison, many of Paul’s statements and teachings in his letters are so dense, so compact, that preachers and theologians will spend hours and pages unpacking the significance of one sentence. But here, Paul goes out of his way to make sure we do not too quickly read past the practical implications of being one body with many parts. He speaks at length because we need to pay

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attention to something we are naturally prone to explain away in self-deceptive, sinfully sophisticated and dismissive terms.

The first statement or mind-set that Paul absolutely forbids relates to the persons who might feel like their gifting, in the context of their social, economic or ethnic position, excludes them from being a valuable part of the body. "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. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be?" (12:15, 16). In these words Paul communicates something to the Corinthian believers that should be, in turn, communicated in every church, in every community of believers in the world. Every believer, regardless of their position in life, is a vital, gifted part of the body of Christ. The clear application is for those who would see themselves, or be seen by others, as "lesser" members of the body. Their gifts are actually indispensable to the full expression of the church in its call to disciple the nations and live out the kingdom of God and they need to know that God wants them to own this truth for themselves: "I cannot say, 'I don't belong.'" The kind of thinking that says, "I don't belong" allows for self-pity, a diminished view of ourselves that is beneath the dignity God has given us and allows us to think we can isolate ourselves from certain parts of the body of Christ, both to our own detriment and to theirs.

The context for these statements by Paul flow directly out of the admonitions he began in 1 Corinthians 11:17, "In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good." The first problem Paul addressed was the mistreatment of the poor at their fellowship meals. They had a custom of sharing a meal together at their church meetings where, very likely, the rich provided the food and drink for everyone to share. Somewhere over the course of time these meals degenerated to the point where the poor were neglected. The rich ate their fill of the food they brought and even got drunk, while the believers who had nothing were left to go hungry, humiliated and despised (1 Cor 11:21, 22). This attitude of superiority and divisiveness (1 Cor 1:26-31) was brought over into an assessment of the value of spiritual gifts. Those who were considered "weaker" and "less honorable" (12:22-23) were treated as insignificant parts of the body and made to feel they had no valuable gifting for the body. Contextually, it is not difficult to assume the same rich or powerful or socially dominant members of the Corinthian church who ate and drank their fill at the meals, also looked down on the "slaves" and others from lower social classes as unimportant members of the body. (In the excessively segregated church in the West, the exclusion has gone even further. The rich and poor not only do not eat together; too often they do not worship, fellowship or minister together in any form.) Paul's remedy is to strengthen the heart of the "weaker" believer by reminding them and everyone else that God has Sovereignly distributed the gifts and Sovereignly placed the various members of the body exactly where he wanted them to be, and that without each part, there would be no whole body (12:18,19).

Paul then goes on to rebuke the socially dominant members of the church by forbidding a second mindset. He tells them, "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!'" (12:21). His choice of body parts is not irrelevant. We naturally think of our eyes and head as more important than our little toe, unless we stub it on something hard. But soon enough, we can forget about it again. Those who saw themselves as socially, and consequently in terms of gifting, more important, would have a natural, sinful tendency to ignore the "lesser" parts of the body. Paul tells them in no uncertain terms, "You cannot say, 'I don't need you.'"

But why does he say this? And is it true? In what very practical way does the church need rich and poor, slave and free, Jew and Asian and African and Anglo all working closely together? Haven't we proven we can have "church" without a real, practical commitment to reconciliation? If you ask a group of middle class, socially dominant Christians in the West to explain precisely why and how they need the poor, there is most often an awkward silence. There is an obvious answer that is not spoken

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in a straightforward fashion but is nonetheless the operating mode of much of the church: “Actually, we can have segregated churches and still be the church. We don’t need rich and poor or those from different ethnic backgrounds to be ‘in church’ together in order to have a genuine expression of real Christians functioning as a real church.” And this is, to a degree of course, true. This reality occurs, quite literally, the vast majority of the time every Sunday morning in the United States. But what the local church cannot be, in this condition of segregation, is the full manifestation of the body of Christ that God intends. A segregated church, racially and/or socio-economically segregated, will be handicapped, because it will be missing vital parts of the body. The only way to accept that handicapped condition as normal is to re-define what normal, whole or healthy means. This, in turn, can only come from redefining or limiting the nature of the kingdom and the purposes of Christ for us as his people.

The answer to the real, practical need for reconciliation is rooted in the purpose of the kingdom of God and the call of the great commission. The kingdom of God is meant to be the manifestation of God’s rule on earth, by the Spirit, in and through his people (Mt 6:9ff), gathered from all the nations (1 Pet 2:4ff). It is a kingdom that is to be marked by justice, compassion and humility (Micah 6:8) where the poor, the vulnerable and the disenfranchised are given special attention by the people of God (Isa 11:1ff; Jer 22:15,16; Amos 5:15,24; Luke 4:18ff; Acts 4:32ff; James 1:27). The kingdom, as Jesus told us, is here for the benefit of the poor. The Great Commission is a call to disciple all the nations, baptizing and teaching everything Christ has commanded us (Mt 28:18-20). The very nature of these commands (given the vast size and problems of the poor of the earth, as well as the great diversity of the nations) requires reconciliation and an “all hands on deck” involvement to fulfill this kingdom/great commission mandate.

The idea of an all Anglo or all African-American or all Kaamba (Kenyan), or all Chen (Burmese), or all rich, or all “youth oriented,” or all “art-driven” church accomplishing these kingdom and great commission mandates in a segregated fashion is, on the very surface of things, simply not possible. It does not even make practical sense to think that a group of wealthy Christians meeting in an all wealthy church, isolated from poor believers, would have the wisdom and knowledge needed to demonstrate justice and compassion to the poor of their broader community or to the poor of the earth. Nor would it make sense to think that an all African-American church in a U.S. inner-city neighborhood could either. The only way to exist in this form- as a segregated church- and still try in some fashion to be faithful to this kingdom calling requires us to deny at very basic level, the need for reconciliation and in some way, deny the nature of the kingdom of God calling for compassion for the poor and needy as one of the central, defining, Covenantal, kingdom obligations of the church. Or if we do not dare deny that, to find a way to only minimally engage in these kingdom issues, through the financial support of others who are “called” to such ministry. Any of these options, by definition, will result in a handicapped expression of the church and the kingdom. Instead, God has formed the parts of the body in such a way that they are truly “indispensable” to one another (1 Cor 12:22).

What makes the need to be reconciled so important? The answer is simply this: in order to fulfill this multi-faceted mandate of the King, to see all nations reconciled under Christ and all nations learning how to implement the justice, mercy and humility of the kingdom of God, the poor need the rich who have gifting, talent, compassion and resources to bring to the table, and the rich need the poor who likewise, Sovereignly, have gifting, talent, compassion and resources to bring to table. The different ethnic groups need one another for the same reason.

Having said that, and at the risk of being misunderstood, it still needs to be stated at this point that the poor and oppressed of the earth have a position of greater attention and focus in the Scriptures. God is determined to make sure his people give special attention to the most needy, and so he gives them gifting that makes them indispensable to the fulfillment of his kingdom purposes. In a



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foundational sense, the poor often understand the issues of the kingdom in a way the rich do not, because they understand the needs for justice and compassion from a practical, experiential level (which also, often, comes wrapped in and related to ethnic oppression). In addition, the poor are also, generally, people of greater practical faith. God has made sure the “lesser” members of the body have greater honor. At least, that is the picture the Scriptures paint.

The intent here is not to glamorize “the poor” in a broad sense that would suggest being poor in and of itself has spiritual merit. The poor are just as capable of having materialistic, ungrateful, blindly racist, self-serving hearts as the unbelieving rich. The poor we are talking about, the poor who are “blessed” (Luke 6:20), are also those who are “poor in spirit” (Mt 5:3) and look to God for their deliverance (Psalm 14:6, 22:6, 34:6). The Word of God consistently reveals God going out of his way to demonstrate his commitment to call the poor and the “formally uneducated” and the despised things of this world to confound the powerful and arrogant (1 Cor 1:26-31, cf Deut 7:7ff).

God is, in the highest sense, the kind of God who looks after the oppressed of the earth (Ps 72:1-4, 12-14) and he is committed to teaching his people to have the same character. The Old Testament people of God were intentionally led into a long period (400 years) of oppression, in part, to be prepared to be a people of genuine compassion, justice and humility (Gen 15:13,14 cf. Ex 22:21, 23:9). Their leaders were constantly subjected, by God’s permissive and willing hand, to learning lessons through the practical experience of oppression (Abraham and Pharaoh, Gen 12; Joseph in Egypt; David and Saul) and poverty of resources (Moses in the desert wanderings, Deut 8:2ff; Joshua at Jericho; Gideon with his 300 vs. 110,00; David vs. Goliath). Why? So they might be people of faith, humility and compassion. This pattern is repeated in the ministries of Christ (Luke 2:1-7, Mt 4:1ff, 8:20, Phil 2:6,7), the Apostles (Acts 3:6ff, 1 Cor 4:9ff), and the early church (Acts 4:32ff). Since the close of the New Testament, most of the ministry of most of the church in most countries has been conducted in very humble, poor circumstances. This is not because God is indifferent to the needs of his people and carelessly leaves them in poverty. It is because he has an agenda for us that is defined by being part of his kingdom of justice and righteousness on behalf of the poor of the earth, and the church has a need to know on an experiential level what it means to walk in faith, humility and love in those humble circumstances.

In addition, when it comes to the practical exercise of faith, James speaks bluntly when he says, “Listen my dear brothers; Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have insulted the poor” (James 2:5,6). What was the insult? Saying to the poor, “Sit on the floor by my feet,” while saying to the rich, “Here’s a good seat for you” (James 2:3,4). Such actions demonstrate a lack of understanding how much the poor and oppressed must daily exercise their faith and trust God through a constant barrage of trials and difficulties. In many ways, in the West, the insult is on a far greater scale, through communicating a “not welcome here” message to the poor by building church structures and conducting worship services that are really meant to appease middle class sensibilities and have the effect of making the poor feel out of place. These things may not be done maliciously, but they are done without an urgent sensitivity to and high regard for the poor. Reconciliation with the poor is not seen as something of significant practical value because among other things, the purposes of the kingdom in manifesting justice for the poor of the earth are not clearly embraced.

In addition, it is not that the poor or formally uneducated only bring valuable perspectives on issues of justice and compassion, they also bring valuable teaching gifts and theological insight. Remember that the original Apostles were after all, by and large, poor and formally uneducated. Their gifting for leadership was not in any way related to their social status. It was a remarkable thing for highly educated Pharisees, government workers and wealthy business people to come and sit at the feet of fishermen and learn about the kingdom of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. This kind of thing can only

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happen in the upside down kingdom of God.

When it comes to fulfilling the great commission call to teach all the nations of the world the full richness of what Christ has revealed in his Word, how could Anglos, or any other single ethnic group, possibly think they have the experiential and cultural breadth of knowledge and understanding to accomplish this task as a mono-cultural group? This is not meant to undermine the universal authority of the Word of God, or to say God cannot speak in a universal way through specific individuals speaking the timeless truths of God's word. He clearly does that. But there needs to be a recognition that apart from the foundational work done by the Apostles, no one ethnic group is invested with all the gifting needed to teach the rest of the worldwide body of Christ the full understanding and implementation of the kingdom. This was already evident in the book of Acts where the church at Antioch had prophets and teachers who were Jewish -Barnabus and Saul, and possibly black and Greek North African -Simeon, called Niger and Lucius, as well as a member of the political elite – Manaen (Acts 13:1). As Paul established churches throughout the Roman Empire it is clear he was not focused on only appointing ethnic Jews to positions of leadership; two of his more prominent pastors and co-workers were Timothy, half Greek and half Hebrew (Acts 16:1), and Titus, a Greek (Gal 2:3). As we know from the early history of the post-Apostolic church, some of the most prominent teachers were from a variety of national and ethnic backgrounds: Clement and Origen, were Egyptians; Tertullian, was the son of a Roman Centurion; Cyprian, was from present day Tunisia (North Africa); Jerome, was from the present day Balkan Peninsula (Southeastern Europe); and Augustine of Hippo, was from present day Algeria (North Africa).

Yet, in too many local churches and entire denominations, we only have one preaching voice from one ethnic group trying to understand and communicate the whole message of God that is intended to have a multi-national focus and application (Mt 28:18-20). Ethnically segregated groups of believers have become comfortable with hearing from their own. The old divisions of the church at Corinth where one says, "I follow Paul" and another, "I follow Apollos," have been allowed to play out in grand scale where we no longer have to openly wrestle with such issues of reconciliation because we have "baptized" and legitimized segregation to such an extent that we think it is healthy and natural for believers to coalesce around one, culturally dominant teacher. But the Word of God remains unchanged: "You cannot say, 'I don't need you'" to the different ethnic and social groups that make up the body of Christ.

## Initial Conclusion

These three passages of Scripture - the High Priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17, the message of God's eternal purpose of reconciliation in Ephesians 1, and the Sovereignly designed, inter-dependent relationship of the ethnic and socio-economic members of the church described in 1 Corinthians 12- all point to a need for reconciliation on a far broader scale than the church is currently practicing. But these are not the only Scriptures that address this issue. We need to look at the broad, Covenantal obligation to reconciliation revealed in the Old Testament

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## Chapter Two The Old Testament Call for Reconciliation

There is common agreement among believers that the Gospel presents some form of reconciliation in the New Testament when it describes God's people as those who have been brought together into one Body / Holy Nation (Eph 2:19-21, 3:6; I Peter 2:9,10). In the Apostle's Creed we confess we believe in "one, holy universal church." We also believe everyone who believes in Christ has the "authority to be called children of God". A fuller description of this designation/title in Scripture, as sons and daughters of God, is important for understanding the bearing this has on reconciliation. The false "sons of God" are presented in Genesis 6:1ff as those ungodly rulers who took a false divine-authority to themselves and used their "pseudo-god" position to oppress and do violence, including the arbitrary, forceful taking of women. This kind of mindset was reflected in Pharaoh of Egypt when Abram traveled there with Sara, and was a real, oppressive threat (Gen. 12:10ff). God addresses these kings who claim to be "gods" but use their authority for injustice in Psalm 82. He debunks their image when he declares, "I said you are gods; you are all sons of the Most High. But you will die like mere men; you will fall like every other ruler," Psalm 82:6,7. In contrast, God establishes his True Son on his throne (Psalm 2), who rules with justice, righteousness and compassion (Isaiah 9, 11). When Jesus is accused of blasphemy "because you, a mere man, claim to be God", he appeals to the demonstration of his God-like character of doing justice and performing miracles of compassion as proof that he is in fact "God's Son" (John 10:31-38). Everyone who puts their faith in Jesus is given the authority to be called children of God (John 1:12). We "participate in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4) and are truly God-like, not in substance, but in image. We use our status to pursue the same justice, righteousness and mercy that God commits Himself to. Jesus is in fact the "first-born of many brothers" (Romans 8:29) who will carry the family image.

This is important for our understanding of reconciliation on at least two counts. 1) It gives us the sense of divine dignity God has placed on all believers (Galatians 3:26-29). This status supersedes all other gender, ethnic or socio-economic classifications and is meant to be a major point to instruct us in our acceptance of one another. 2) It also gives clarity and definition to the purpose of our reconciliation. We are here as agents of God to bring his justice to the nations through the preaching of the Gospel and establishment of his kingdom (Isaiah 2:1-5; 42:1-4; Matthew 28:18-20). If we are to fulfill this call to bring salvation and the outworking of God's justice to all the nations, no one ethnic or socio-economic group can do it alone. We need the redeemed gifting of all the ethnic, socio-economic diversity of the nations to fulfill this glorious task (1 Corinthians 12:12, 13).

But what about the issue of reconciliation in the Old Testament? Are their Covenantal obligations and teachings of the Old Testament that speak directly to our responsibility to be reconciled?

There are at least two important reasons for asking this question. First, God's moral character does not change. If reconciliation is a moral issue, a matter of true righteousness which calls for a reversing of the division and segregation caused by sin and is truly a part of the eternal purpose of God, then we would expect to find a call to righteousness in reconciliation spelled out, even if in seed form only, in the Old Covenant. Second, as with every other moral issue, the Covenantal obligations laid out in the Old Testament would prove crucial for understanding the fuller expression of reconciliation required of the church in the New Testament.

### The Call for Reconciliation in the Genesis Account

On the most basic level, Adam's fall into sin brought a kind of death that is defined by separation, or for the purpose of emphasis here, segregation (Gen 3). Many theologians have pointed out the

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clear implications of death entering the human race through Adam as 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 to one another.

While the term "reconciliation" does not exist in the Old Testament, if we look at the biblical narrative with this theological issue in mind, we will find there is an abundance of evidence of a clear, moral, Covenantal call to a deep, practical expression of reconciliation. More specifically, if we read the Scriptures with a view towards Israel's responsibilities to immigrants, or aliens, we are going to see the call of God to practice reconciliation is clearly woven throughout the entire fabric of the history of redemption. Like much of biblical truth and revelation, the call to reconciliation is in seed form early on in the Genesis narrative, gets expanded upon throughout the Law, grows into being a part of the great fullness of God's salvation promised through the coming Messiah in the Prophets, reaches its climactic accomplishment in the ministry of Christ, and is then embedded in the DNA of the church as part of our foundational nature as the people of God. We can begin by stepping back and examining the Covenantal backdrop of God's commitment to reconciliation in the narratives of Adam, Noah and Abraham.

The whole book of Genesis functioned as a Divine history lesson for the Hebrew people, just as it does for us. God's revelation in Genesis unfolds his original purposes for all creation and especially for his crowning achievement: mankind, made in his image. The disastrous sin of Adam and the near destruction of the world in Noah's day reveal the glorious story of God's astounding love and covenant faithfulness to redeem and save, despite the evil intentions of men. 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

## **The Unity 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

The rub, so to speak, comes in the practical implications. Even as late as 1787 in the Constitution of the United States of America, slaves were assigned a value of three fifths (3/5) of a person for purposes of representation and taxation. As noted earlier, in that same year, the African Methodist Episcopal Church started when African members of the white dominated Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia discovered just how far American Methodists would go to enforce racial discrimination against African Americans.

By contrast, in this formative Covenant document for the people of God, the Lord was making a very distinct point in revealing himself as the God of all the nations. For the Israelites to acknowledge every other ethnic group as equally created by God and endowed with the very same image of God as themselves, was an idea that stood radically opposite to the ethnocentric creation myths of the surrounding pagan cultures Israel was called to bless. As Harvey Conn points out in his lectures on "The Old Testament and the Poor" 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. The Babylonian gods were only



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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 implications that become clear as the Law unfolds.

## **Seeds of Reconciliation 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. In a newly re-birthed world, he is the one physical father of all the nations. Within the story of the division and dispersing of the nations, there is a pointed reminder of our basic unity in Noah. Genesis 6-11 reaffirms the universal connection of the nations through the account of Noah both in his calling to re-establish the original Covenant with Adam to "be fruitful and multiply and cover the face of the earth" (Gen 1:28, cf. 9:7) and in the listing of the table of nations, "These are the clans of Noah's sons, according to their lines of descent, within their nations. From these the nations spread out over the face of the earth after the flood." Genesis 10:32

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). As many others have pointed out, the story of the tower of Babel is reversed on the day of Pentecost when Jesus Christ, the real "second Adam" (Romans 5) began a reconciliation process that would extend to all the nations of the earth.

## **The Budding of Reconciliation in the Covenant with Abraham**

When we turn to the Covenant with Abraham, God's commitment to reconciliation starts to rise to more and more prominence. There is a traditional theological approach to Genesis that wants to emphasize a "narrowing" of God's focus to the descendants of Abraham, in an exclusionary way, as the true people of God. This theological mindset can mistakenly feed our own ethnocentric Christianity even as it fed the pride and ethnocentricity of many Jews. There is a narrowing of focus in the narrative. But the focus on Abraham is never meant to be 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.

- 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. 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. The reconciliation of all men and all things through Christ Jesus (Eph 1:9,10) is already foreshadowed in the Abrahamic Covenant.

- 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

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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.

## God's Call to Reconciliation 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 is more pronounced. In particular, the place of the alien (stranger or foreigner) takes on a prominent position in God's detailed commands for his people to practice reconciliation. 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.

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). What is clear is that their relationship with other ethnic groups was a vital part of their life as the people of God. As we will see, every single historic event in the history of Israel includes direct commands and instructions on how they were to treat non-ethnic Jews.

As we look at these passages of Scripture dealing with the place of foreigners in the life of Israel, we need to address an important distinction. Some of the passages in Exodus-Deuteronomy address the responsibility of Israel, in general, to the resident alien. God called his people to practice a kind of compassion and justice for the foreigner among them that was unlike the normally oppressive practices of other Near Eastern Cultures towards different ethnic groups. Even household slaves were to be given a Sabbath day of rest (Ex 20:8-11). 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 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."

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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 with the immigrants who became members of the Covenant family.

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."

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. He was acting like a "pagan", not in line with the Gospel. 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.

Yet here, in the most precious, the most holy meal for the people of God, the meal celebrating redemption, the alien who was circumcised was invited to enjoy the feast as a full participating member of the community. In fact the admonition is startling: "he may take part like one born in the land."

This explanation for the requirement of circumcision in order to eat the Passover meal was not a one-time point of administrative clarification for a one time, historic and special event. If it were, it would be hard to argue that God was making a moral demand for reconciliation. Instead, what we find throughout the Law and the Prophets is an often-repeated demand from God that clearly and forcefully called upon the Hebrews to recognize and grant full rights, full privileges, and full inclusion in the Covenant community to the alien or foreigner who attached themselves to God through circumcision. Their struggle with tendencies of racism and exclusion were evident early in their national history. Moses had married a North African, Cushite wife, which became the basis for racial prejudice and questioning his position of leadership (Numbers 12:1ff). As we will see later, Israel's failure to practice reconciliation was listed among the fundamental reasons for the exile and one of the

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first issues addressed when they returned from Babylon.

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 more 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 the same status and privilege as the natural born descendants of Abraham.

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). To live in Israel and be in covenant with God meant to be in community and covenant *with* his people for both the blessings and the curses, the obligations and the promises of the Covenant.



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“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

The not-so-obvious question for church leaders in both denominational structures, as well as local congregations is simply this: do we treat people from other ethnic and socio-economic groups as complete equals?

## **The Covenantal call for the intentional practice of reconciliation 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 church is to be a community of people who reflect the glory of God in caring for all the disenfranchised, counteracting the normal abuses of the dominant culture.

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

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· 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.”

- Deuteronomy 14:28-29 (cf. 26:12-15) spells out the practical implications of this in the use of tithes:

“At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year’s produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites...and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows...may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.”

- Deuteronomy 16:9-14 pre-shadows the ingathering of all the nations of the earth at the Feast of Weeks and is to be celebrated with rejoicing. It is not simply a polite tacked-on statement that the alien is to be included. Their presence prefigures the very substance of what this Feast promises, the ultimate ingathering of the nations. Their inclusion with all the other disenfranchised groups emphasizes again the character of the One True God.

“Celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles...before the Lord your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name—you, your sons and daughters, your men-servants and maidservants, the Levites in your town and the aliens, fatherless and widows living among you. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and follow carefully these decrees.”

- Deuteronomy 24:14-21 addresses general social legislation for the special care of the poor and vulnerable, and in each issue addressed –just and prompt wages, proactive justice, food from the harvest- the alien is included as one who is to be given special attention.

“Do not take advantage of a hired man who is poor and needy, whether he is a brother Israelite or an alien living in one of your towns. Pay him his wages at sunset.... Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge.... When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back and 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.”

These related sets of commands get to the heart of God’s prohibition against the practice of racism, tribalism or exclusion of someone who is either ethnically or socially “marginal”: it is the abuse of status and power. Those who are dominant members of any society are always in a position of power. Reconciliation in its most basic, practical expression includes 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.

Can we imagine the practical significance this type of theological understanding and commitment would have had on the church in the newly developing United States if all foreigners, including slaves, who heard and responded to the Gospel, were given the full status of community rights and blessing within the church? The question however is not simply an historical curiosity. What would be the effect today if, in the United States, the culturally dominant white church repented and began to live

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out her true calling to the African-American believers, as well as embracing the immigrant and refugee groups who are entering their cities and communities? And not only in the States, but in every region of the world where tribalism and socio-economic exclusion is too much the norm in the church?

## **The Old Testament Prophets continue to make the Covenantal call to genuine reconciliation 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).

Isaiah's indictment in Isaiah 5:8 of the abuse of the power of the wealthy who "add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live in the land alone," reads like an accusation written for the modern American suburb. Many U.S. suburban communities developed as "white flight"- a means of effectively removing both blacks and the poor from the neighborhood.

The Prophets not only reminded the people of God of their Covenant obligations to the non-Hebrew believers, they also emphasized God's great global and cosmic saving purposes. 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 worshipping, 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.

- Amos spends most of his prophetic energies denouncing the people of Israel and Judah for their failure to live up the demands of the Covenant to practice justice and mercy on behalf of the oppressed. He often simply refers to them in general terms as "the poor" or "the needy" or "the oppressed", but we know from the Gen-Deut background that this is a general term that specifically includes the widow, the fatherless and the alien (Amos 2:6,7; 3:9,10; 4:1-3; 5:7-12, 24; 8:4-6). The importance of this rebuke as it relates to the alien is revealed in the conclusion of Amos' prophetic ministry as he promises the gracious, last days fulfillment of God's salvation with these words: "In that day I will restore David's fallen tent...so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name, declares the Lord...." Amos 9:11,12. The Apostle James quotes this passage in Acts 15:13ff as proof that God has given Covenant status to those from the Gentile nations who put their faith in Christ.
- Hosea promises Israel that after their exile, "...the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people', they will be called 'sons of the living God'" (1:10, 11). Paul tells us in Romans 9:25, 26 that this vast number of "Israelites" was actually made up of a people God called for himself from the Gentile nations.
- Micah and Isaiah echo the same Prophetic promise about the days of the Messiah and the picture of all nations reconciled to God and each other is expanded.

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“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 19:23-25 “In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance.’”

·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.”



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·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 49:6 “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob.... I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”

·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.”

Jeremiah addresses the issue of idolatry as he warns the people of Judah of their certain exile. The practice of idolatry, either falsely misrepresenting the nature of who God is, or outright replacing him with a god who is more to our liking, is at the root of racism. It is the only way we can justify neglect or the outright oppression or exclusion of the marginal members of society, including the alien. Jeremiah addresses the practical results of Judah’s idolatry: they failed to take special care of the poor and needy and the alien in their midst. While we know from the rest of Scripture and personal experience that we all sin in many ways, and that Jeremiah could have highlighted any number of failures, he emphasizes the sins of neglect and oppression of the poor and alien as the full fruit of idolatry.

·Jeremiah 5: 27-29 “Like cages full of birds, their houses are full of deceit; they have become rich and powerful....they do not plead the case of the fatherless....they do not defend the rights of the poor. Should I not punish them for this?”

·Jeremiah 7:5-7 “If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow...then I will let you live in this place....”

·Jeremiah 9:23-24 “Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom...but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight.”

·Jeremiah 22:3-4 “This is what the Lord says: Do what is just and right.... Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow...for if you are careful to carry out these commands, then kings who sit on David’s throne will come through the gates of this palace....”

·Jeremiah 22:15-16 The practice of inclusion and the special care and consideration given to the disenfranchised, including the alien, is at the very heart of knowing God. Anything less is rooted in idolatry and needs to be repented of. Although the alien is not specifically named in this passage in Jeremiah, we know from all the other biblical texts that this is a representation of the whole group of excluded people, which does include the alien..

“Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar? ...your father did what was right and just, so all went well with him. He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me? declares the Lord.”

Ezekiel enters the exile in Babylon with the people of God and faithfully proclaims both the certainty of the complete fall of Jerusalem, and afterwards, the certainty of their return. Once again the place of the alien is emphasized right along with God’s work among the Hebrews.

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God never stops addressing the people of Israel as a reconciled whole. They are one people, the ethnic Hebrews and the foreigners who have entered covenant relationship. It was important to include this distinctive recognition of the alien. The words and admonitions are not uselessly redundant. They are critical because the heart of man always tends towards racism and exclusion.

· Ezekiel 22:27-29 “Her officials within her are like wolves tearing their prey; they shed blood and kill people to make unjust gain. Her prophets whitewash these deeds....the people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice.”

Remarkably, the great, gracious prophetic promise of the return to a land that will become so expansive it will have to be without borders (Zechariah 2:1-5), includes a special recognition of the alien. Apparently people from other nations who had also been conquered by Babylon and relocated in this great city would also see and hear of the mighty acts of God through Daniel, his three friends and the many Israelites who were learning to turn from idolatry and practice the true compassion and justice of God. Just as the “swarm of foreigners” in Egypt saw God at work in the Exodus, a new group of aliens would attach themselves to a Covenant relationship with God and his people in Babylon. How were they to be treated when the land was restored?

·Ezekiel 47:21-23 “You are to distribute this land among yourselves according to the tribes of Israel. You are to allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who have settled among you and who have children. You are to consider them as native-born Israelites....in whatever tribe the alien settles you are to give him his inheritance, declares the Lord.”

In the period of the post-exilic Prophets, God continues to address his people in terms of their Covenant calling to be His means of salvation for all the nations of the earth, and of their responsibility to practice reconciliation with the alien.

One of the important issues addressed by Haggai and Zechariah was the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple. Why is the Lord concerned that the people rebuild the Temple? Because it was the location and present symbol of his presence, where all his people gathered to worship him, receive his grace and blessings and practice justice and compassion for the poor and alien (Deuteronomy 14:28,29, Isaiah 56:7). By demonstrating God’s love concretely through the tithe practices of caring for the poor and alien, the people of Israel were exhibiting God’s great salvation purpose to ultimately bring together people from all the nations of the earth - “the desired (pl) of all nations” who would love and serve him.

·Haggai 2:6 “This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the Lord Almighty.”

·Zechariah 7:8-10 “And the word of the Lord came again to Zechariah: ‘This is what the Lord Almighty says: Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of one another.’”

Seventy plus years after Haggai and Zechariah, Malachi addressed the people of God about their continued unfaithfulness in light of his continued love and grace. They are not destroyed because He does not change (3:6). A core part of their disobedience lies in their refusal to tithe. Why is that so important? God says, “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house” 3:10. Food for whom? For the widow, the poor, the fatherless and the alien – Deuteronomy 14:28,29.

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And what will the result be? “Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land” Mal 3:12. The nations will see how the people of God care for all those immigrants and widows and fatherless who come to them, and they will bless God.

·Malachi 3:6-12 “I the Lord do not change, so you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.... Will a man rob God? And yet, you rob me....in tithes and offerings. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this, says the Lord Almighty, and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven.... Then all nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land....”

The Covenantal call to reconciliation- how the people of God treat one another from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds- how those in positions of social power treat the marginalized, is so central to the salvation purposes of God, and so central to the display of his glory among the nations that a failure to practice this kind of intentional, focused care and inclusion of the marginalized helped destroy the credibility of the Old Testament people of God as a witness to the nations and invited the discipline of the Father. But thankfully, God’s discipline is always redemptive in character. His ultimate purpose was to produce a universal kingdom made up of men, women and children from among all the nations of the earth who would be reconciled through the work of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Now we need to turn our attention to the fulfillment of God’s reconciliation purposes in the New Testament.

# Reconciliation

## Chapter Three Reconciliation in the New Testament

At this point it is valuable to remember the progressive, unfolding nature of God's revelation and work among his people. The biblical story makes it clear that God teaches his people in stages the full measure of his plans and purposes. Theologians and Bible scholars have long acknowledged this pattern and talk about theology in developmental terms. What was true but only partially revealed about the "seed of the woman" in Genesis 3, and the "seed of Abraham" in Genesis 12, does not come fully to light and understanding until the birth of Christ, and even then it isn't until Paul states the relationship in such clear terms in his letters to the churches that the full light of understanding dawns (Gal 3). This is true for the doctrine of the Trinity, the work of the Holy Spirit and many, many other truths of Scripture. When we look back from the light of the New Testament we can see the seed of all these truths more clearly in the Old Testament, though in less developed form. This is also true for issues of reconciliation. Even though the Old Testament laid out demands for reconciliation, the true depth of that plan and purpose of God does not come to light until the New Testament. In the ministry of Jesus, the fullness of the plan is given birth, but it does not come of age, so to speak, until God brings it to full expression through the church in the book of Acts.

### The Ministry of Jesus

While it is obvious to every believer who reads the New Testament story that Jesus came to bring salvation to the whole world and reconcile men to God, it seems it is less obvious there is an intentional focus in his ministry on reconciliation between men across racial and socio-economic lines. When we look at the Gospel narrative through the reconciliation lens, we will find a significant part of Jesus' ministry addresses this issue.

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). What we want to note as critical in the proclamation of the kingdom is that the invitation to follow Jesus is also a call to pursue reconciliation between men. 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



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that involved reconciliation and inclusion in the covenant community. So much so, that by the time we get to the Acts narrative, the predominantly Gentile churches are asked to provide physical relief for their poor brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. The appeal is based on Old Testament covenantal community obligation right out of the Exodus narrative,

“At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality; as it is written: “He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little.” 2 Cor 8:14,15.

The question, if we continue to think about Gospel proclamation without real reconciliation, 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?

When we read the historical record of the ministry of Christ with the Old Testament covenantal purpose of God’s commitment to the poor and the foreigner in mind, we can see reconciliation all over the Gospel narrative. 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. During the six centuries prior to Christ’s ministry this territory was ruled successively by Babylon, Persia, Macedonia, Egypt and Syria, while constantly experiencing infiltration and migration. The Jewish population was a minority among the dominant Gentile groups. The extent to which Jesus did most of his ministry in this ethnically diverse community is a profound stamp on the nature of the finally inaugurated kingdom rule and reign of God. 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.

This is not to deny the extremely important reality that Jesus clearly came to his own Jewish people with a priority commitment to bring them the message of salvation first (Matt 10:5). But at the same time his ministry involved leading his followers into contact with Syrians (Mt 4:23) rich Romans (Mt 8), poor Samaritans (John 4) and even a Syrophenician, Greek woman (Mark 7). The point here is that Jesus not only brings personal salvation to individuals, he calls them to become a part of the reconciled community of God’s people who practice justice, mercy and compassion and who also learn to call one another “family” (Luke 8:21). The rich are invited to take care of the poor (Zaccheus, Luke 19:1ff) and even the poor are urged to forsake worrying about themselves (Matt 6) and pursue God’s kingdom agenda of giving to everyone who asks, including enemies (Luke 6:27ff.). The twelve disciples, though all Jewish, are a clear picture of reconciliation in process as the socio-economic and political differences between a tax collector (Matthew), a political zealot (Simon) and local fishermen (Peter, et al) would have required a whole new view of one another as followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

The theme of God’s global salvation and call for reconciliation is woven throughout the narratives of the first three Gospels and comes to light strongly in the Gospel of John. Bible scholars and teachers have long acknowledged John’s book is addressed in language and terms Greek and other Gentile readers would be able to relate to. I would suggest the book also serves as a strong polemic to Jews on the scope of God’s commitment to reconciliation. There is, I freely acknowledge, a presupposition at work here in reading the Scriptures with a reconciliation point of view in mind. Part

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of the presupposition is that the universal offer of the Gospel without reconciliation as part of the ultimate goal and purpose of salvation seems to be, on face value, a diminished presentation of the Gospel. It allows, on a very practical level, a type of individualism that permits neglect and indifference towards other members of the Covenant family that God himself disallows in the rest of Scripture. Unless there is, in the offer of the Gospel itself, an offer of entrance into the community of God's people, with full acceptance and a commitment to love and care for one another, the door is open for an individualistic expression of Christianity that ultimately justifies the kind of ethnic and socio-economic division that men have always been tempted by and exists in so much of the church today.

On the other hand, if reconciliation truly is the central, stated, eternal purpose of God in Christ, then we should be able to read the Gospels with that purpose in mind. The more detailed theological perspectives concerning reconciliation that Paul and the other Apostle address should be built on a foundation that was clearly laid out by Jesus in his overall ministry and teaching. When Jesus told his disciples, "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come" (Jn 16:12, 13), the reconciliation of the nations as one new man in Christ has to be at least one of the major areas of truth the Spirit would more fully reveal. Paul certainly seems to speak in these very terms when he says,

"In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations *as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets*. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus." Ephesians 3:4-6

With a biblical, Holy Spirit revealed reconciliation point of view in mind, we can go back and re-read the Gospel of John and look for the ways Jesus laid this groundwork for what would become the full, mature call for the New Testament church to practice reconciliation. In addition, if we look at this book through the eyes of first century Gentile and Jewish readers, the message of Christ to reconcile and include the nations in God's salvation purposes, and thus fulfill the promises to Abraham, stand out in astounding ways. To restate the proposition and offer a brief introductory summary, I am suggesting that John's Gospel was not written exclusively with Gentile readers in mind and addressing Greek dualistic and early Gnostic thoughts (though it certainly has application there), but at the center of John's Gospel there is a message of reconciliation; of 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; and if we stand back and take a careful look, 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 climactically on behalf of the Gentiles through the fullness-of-salvation/ reconciliation work of the Jesus the Messiah.

When we take the forest view of John's book we find that 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. The effect is that the very things historically that make Israel the community of God's people are –in the Messiah- given their fullest expression by being offered to the gentiles through him. The gentiles are simply and profoundly offered complete community status as part of the Covenant people of God and are to be treated, so to speak, "as one born in the land."

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was with God in the beginning. <sup>3</sup> Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. <sup>4</sup> In him was life, and that life was the light of men. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in

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the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.<sup>6</sup> There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John.<sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe.<sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.<sup>9</sup> The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.<sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.<sup>11</sup> He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.<sup>12</sup> Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God--<sup>13</sup> children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." Jn 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 may be giving the Gentile reader, who may have known nothing of the Genesis account, a primer on God's saving, reconciling purposes for the nations since the beginning of creation. God, and Jesus as the second Person of the Godhead, created everything (Jn 1:1-3, Gen 1:1ff); he is the light of all men (Jn 1:4, Gen 1:27); he has been rejected as the light (Jn 1:5, 10, Gen 3:1ff); but has still graciously and Sovereignly come to bring light (salvation) to all men (Jn 1:9, Gen 3:15, 12:3), and he offers the status of being children of God, not on the basis of ethnic heritage, but solely on the basis of receiving this as a gift of faith (Jn 1:12, 13; Gen 12:1-3). The whole book starts with a foundational message of reconciliation: a Jewish author telling the nations of the earth that God has set his love on all of them since the very beginning of time.

When John the Baptist introduces Jesus he is declared to be the "lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). 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. The Jews and Gentiles who read this story in John's account, after some reflection and a little explanation, should 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 because they had the same "exodus/deliverance" experience as the Jews, now fulfilled in Christ.

In chapter 2, John tells us about the first interaction Jesus had with the established Jewish, religious leaders in Jerusalem. The place is the Temple and the encounter is in the "court of the Gentiles." The Jewish leaders had perverted Temple worship and made it a source of corrupt political power. 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. Their space was crowded out by permitting their court to be overrun by moneychangers who would assist in the buying and selling of animals for the daily offerings. 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 theology and application in the life of the church is laid out here in the ministry of Jesus in John 2.

In John 3 one of the teachers of Israel, Nicodemus, comes to Christ because he is amazed at what he is seeing and hearing. 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

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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.

In chapter 4, John takes his Gentile readers to further proof of the universal message of Christ’s salvation and reveals important truths about reconciliation in 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.

Perhaps we can understand the issues of worship as just one more area of severe brokenness and division in the life of this woman. She was certainly a sinner. And also, certainly sinned against. She was at this well in the middle of the day, by herself, most likely because of her reputation. She was an outcast. Division was a major theme in her life. And it was not only in her personal life, but also in her religious-social life. Here was a Jew talking to her about healing and salvation, and she immediately, as it were, jumps from the area of personal brokenness to the larger area of the division between Jew and Samaritan. 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 as well as the broader social-religious brokenness. 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.

After Jesus feeds the five thousand in John 5, 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). Reading this 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. For the Jewish reader, and for those who were present at the event, 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, 4), to the desert experience of the snakes (Jn 3), to the manna in the wilderness here in John 6, was being “fulfilled.” They were given the fullest, richest 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).

In 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). This Feast, instituted by God at the inauguration of



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Israel as a nation, had a specific reconciliation message built into it. The “tabernacles” were tents the Israelites were meant to live in for seven days as they remembered their “tent” experience in the wilderness (Deut 16:13ff) and re-committed themselves to being a people who would not trust in human resources for their deliverance, but in the Lord their God. This feast followed immediately on the heels of the Feast of Weeks, a celebration of the final harvest of the year (Deut 16:9-12).

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. 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.” This was also a feast celebrating their collective deliverance from Egypt and establishment as the community of God’s people. The tents were a reminder of their corporate experience. The “anyones” who would respond were being invited into the community of the redeemed. 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). 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.

The rest of the narrative of John’s Gospel is constantly interwoven with themes of God’s universal, all-ethnic embracing message of salvation. In John 8:12 he 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). In John 9 as he heals a man born blind he 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). In 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). By the time Jesus enters Jerusalem 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). 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).

One of the questions we need to ask ourselves as we read John’s story relates to our own cultural and theological blinders. Have we allowed a spirit of ethnocentric salvation to permeate our hearts and minds the same way the first century Jewish leaders did? Have we fallen prey to the very thing Paul warned the gentiles against in Romans 11:17-21, and become ethnically arrogant like the Jews before us? Is it really conceivable that God would direct John, under the inspiration of the Spirit, to highlight our call to reconciliation with God and one another in such a rich and consistent way, and then expect us to remain racially and socio-economically separated and distinct from one another in



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all the intimate expressions of the family of God in worship, prayer, the Lord's Supper, fellowship and caring for one another's needs? Can we remain physically segregated and still claim we are "spiritually united" and believe we have fulfilled God's desire for unity among us, simply by remote organizational connection, or through an occasional partnering around social issues?

## Reconciliation in the Early Church

When we read the story of Acts and the accompanying letters from the founding Apostles of the church, the call for reconciliation to be implemented on a deep, practical and widespread scale is unmistakable. The manifestation of the kingdom of God in the early church still stands as God's model for us to imitate and build on. The early church, in nearly every community except Jerusalem, lived not only in a context of varying degrees of opposition and oppression, but almost certainly in a body-life context of rich and poor, slave and free, Jew and converts from all other Gentile nations living out their faith and worship intimately together.

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?

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 was becoming a reality was remarkable evidence of how much God was working these reconciliation 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.

The evidence for God's commitment to salvation-reconciliation quickly unfolded in the movement of the Spirit in the Acts narrative. While Peter's preaching is Jewish-focused in chapter 2, already in chapter 3 Peter echoes the promise of God to include and bless all the nations of the earth when he reminds his Jewish listeners,

"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

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It seems doubtful, from the rest of the early Acts story, that Peter fully grasped the implications of what he was saying at this point in time, even though Jesus had specifically promised and commanded his apostles to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Peter reverts to a “less than” inclusive language in Acts 6 when he appears a second time before the Sanhedrin in Acts 6 and states, “The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead-- whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel.” It is not that this statement is untrue, or not a prophetic word to the Sanhedrin, but Jesus seems to have rarely missed an opportunity to confront his accusers with the global nature of his salvation.

In Acts 6 the apostles are confronted with another reconciliation 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 Apostles quickly repent and immediately make a reconciliation-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).

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 Apostles 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. 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 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 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

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reconciliation is on nearly every page.

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." 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 calls for unity in the New Testament letters have a much greater force and powerful relevance for us when read in this light.

- Paul's benediction in Romans 15:5, "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus"
- His plea to the believers at Philippi, "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose," Phil 2:1-2,
- His apostolic announcement to the reconciled, blood-bought Gentiles in Ephesus, "you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit," (Eph 2:19-22),
- John's reminder, "If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother," (1 John 4:19-21)
- His exhortation, "I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the

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beginning. I ask that we love one another. And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love," (2 John vv.5-6),

· Peter's descriptive word to the church that elevates all of us to the status of foreigners in this world, "Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul." (1 Peter 2:11)

All these passages carry greater weight and relevance to our calling to pursue reconciliation in our increasingly diversified world when we realize how diverse the early church actually was and the amount of reconciliation that was, of necessity, an ongoing dynamic of church life. As the New Testament narrative also reveals, the early church struggled with these issues of reconciliation. The divisions in Corinth included the rich despising the poor and disregarding them at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17-22); the Jewish believers were tempted to look down on the Gentiles (Galatians); and even Peter was guilty of refusing to eat with his Gentile brothers and sisters (Gal 2- more later on the implications related to the doctrine of justification). The work of reconciliation is an ongoing, intentional battle that we must engage in, and the practical need for reconciliation in the church today is every bit as vital an issue as it was for the early church.

The history of my own denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America (formerly part of the Southern Presbyterian Church and the Reformed Presbyterian Church Evangelical Synod) reads like the story of Peter in Acts 10-11 and Galatians 2, but without anyone learning the lessons. Sean Lucas, a former professor at Covenant Theological Seminary, has pulled together historical data that paints a vivid picture of the ethnic superiority that helped shape the Southern Presbyterian Church and remains an unchallenged part of the DNA of the Presbyterian Church in America:

"Eighty year-old J. E. Flow was a long time contributor to the conservative *Southern Presbyterian Journal*. Raised in the segregated South, trained at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, he had been an evangelist based in Concord, North Carolina, for the past eighteen years. But now, at the height of the agitation in 1954 to merge his beloved Southern Presbyterian Church, with the northern Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, he attempted to state a positive vision that would justify the existence of southern Presbyterianism beyond his own rapidly declining life. At the center of the vision were five commitments: the "old school" interpretation of Scripture and the Westminster Standards; the Presbyterian form of church government; the grassroots principle of church oversight, symbolized in the role of diaconal care; the spiritual mission of the church; and "the purity and integrity of the White man of North America upon whose shoulders are laid the burdens of the world" (J. E. Flow, "Positive or Negative?" *Southern Presbyterian Journal* (29 September 1954): 8-9).

Sean Lucas goes on to note:

"In 1958, Dan McEachern publicized a new organization called "Presbyterian Laymen for Sound Doctrine and Responsible Leadership." The need for this group arose from the fact that 'these laymen are convinced that the *liberal ministers* in our Church are taking our Church, in many of its programs, down strange roads which are in violation of the Standards of the Church and contrary to the desires of an overwhelming majority of the members of our Church.' But

when McEachern laid out his evidence for this charge, he pointed to a number of issues: the funding of the PCUS Council on Christian Relations by the Fund of the Republic, an organization that also funded "the NAACP and other race mixing organizations"; booklets published by the Council which represented "race mixing propaganda of the worst sort" and

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which “were written by some of the most radical men and women in the country” who “belonged to a number of Communist front organizations”; the invitation to James Robinson to speak at the

Women’s Conference, a minister who had previously served the NAACP and “who freely admitted to having belonged to a large number of Communist front organizations”; and the 1957 PCUS emphasis on Christian Citizenship, “which consisted mainly of a race mixing program.” And these activities were the result of the church’s continuing relationship with the National Council of Churches, which represented meddling northerners and liberal southerners destroying civilization in America.

The theological objections (alleged violations of church doctrinal standards) merged seamlessly with social and cultural protests, contravening conservative social mores (Dan H. McEachern, “Shocked Into Action,” SPJ (8 October 1958): 10-1).

And yet there even was more going on here. Grassroots Presbyterian organizations like McEachern’s would continue to spring up—Concerned Presbyterians, Presbyterian Churchmen United, Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship, as well as groups in Selma, Alabama, and Jackson, Mississippi. They would not only serve as an organizational base for the Presbyterian Church in America, founded in 1973. They would also share members with other political and social organizations that would lead in the forging of a modern conservative ideology that would translate quite well in the 1960s. Fed up fed up with northern intervention in southern problems, distraught over American failures in Communist Vietnam, and fearful of race-based crimes played out on the television every night, these southerners forsook the Democratic political party

of their forefathers and moved solidly to the political right, voting for Goldwater, Wallace, Nixon, and Reagan. That this modern conservative ideology would have a “God and Country” overtone that would find a natural home in the world of southern evangelical Protestantism should not be surprising at all. Rather, these southern Presbyterian conservatives of the postwar era were a highway marker between the old and new Christian right and would eventually serve

as the back bone of the Republican Party over the final decades of the twentieth century. (Leo P. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: the Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983); Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (New York: Guilford, 1995).

In a spirit of Christian charity we can perhaps say that none of this should be read as malicious racism, anymore than the response of the leaders in the Jerusalem church to Peter eating with the gentiles should be read that way. However, it should, minimally, be read as a failure to act in line with the Gospel, as Paul pointed out to Peter in Galatians 2. Part of what permits this kind of reasoning to go unchecked is a lack of clear biblical-theological understanding of reconciliation as part of the message of the Gospel. Which brings us to a discussion of that most cherished of protestant reformation doctrines- justification by faith.



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## Chapter Four Reconciliation With One Another as a Fundamental Expression of the Doctrine of Justification

For the sake of time, I will begin this chapter by referring readers to the work entitled “Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision” by N.T. Wright, the Anglican Bishop and New Testament scholar whose recent writings have stirred a great deal of productive and sometimes provocative thought in the worldwide church. There simply is not room in this paper to restate or engage in an extensive hermeneutical explanation for everything about to be said about reconciliation as a core part of the doctrine of justification. That would require a whole additional book- which Wright has amply supplied, and others need to expand upon. The main point I wish to seize upon is that Wright and others have made a very biblically rooted case that Paul’s discussion of justification includes a direct and inescapable contextual application to inclusion in the community of God’s people; that the doctrine of justification is not only about our personal restoration to God, but also about our restoration to one another. Paul’s contention with Peter in Galatians 2, indeed the whole force of his argument throughout the book of Galatians against those trying to persuade gentiles to be circumcised and follow special Sabbaths and feast days as a true sign of inclusion in the family (and therefore, people that Peter and Barnabus could actually eat with), was that membership in the community of God’s people- being called “sons of God” and “Abraham’s seed” and “heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:26-29), and therefore, in fact, accepted members of the household of faith- was based on justification by faith in Christ.

Since the Reformation, and certainly in the extreme individualism of the West since then (particularly in the past 50 years), almost everything about the glorious doctrine of justification in the reformed and evangelical church has been viewed exclusively in terms of the status of acceptance this provides for the individual believer in their relationship with God. While this is undeniably glorious and incredibly liberating for the individual believer to understand the assurance of their salvation and all that it brings in the expression of the kingdom of God is based exclusively on the finished work of Christ as a gift, most wonderfully, this is not all there is to this doctrine. The full truth of this doctrine is that it provides us both reconciliation to God as a gift through Christ, and reconciliation to one another. These are the two pillars of the Law- to love God and our neighbors as ourselves- and the work of Christ provides both of them to us a gift, by faith. We are declared righteous and therefore accepted before God and granted the rights of sons, AND we are declared righteous and therefore accepted with one another and granted all the rights of being in the covenant family.

This wholistic reading of the promise of salvation, and particularly the doctrine of justification, as a two-sided reconciliation -Godward and manward/corporate - makes the rest of Scripture fit together so much more clearly. This is why Paul can talk about the gospel as a “righteousness from God” that is given to the individual who “does not work, but trusts God who justifies the wicked” (Romans 4:5) and then seamlessly make the case that this means the gentiles are equally heirs of this world with the believing Jews. (Romans 4:16-17). He has not “stepped out of” a discussion of justification at this point in the text (and in the process leave us confused about how this all applies to us as individuals) and then jumped back in again to return to his main point about our individual salvation in 4:22-24 in order to assure us that, just as Abraham was individually justified, so, we are as well. It’s all one package. He is telling us that justification means both righteousness before God for the wicked person and membership (as a former part of the gentile community) in new the community of God’s people, made up of Jew and gentile, for that same person: that is, justification provides us with a complete personal and corporate reconciliation that ultimately is expressed in the redemption of this world.

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Interestingly, the term “justification” isn’t used in any of Peter’s letters, or John’s for that matter. But it doesn’t have to be. The real center of our salvation is Christ Jesus himself and being found “in Christ.” Justification is part of what we get “in Christ” along with the Holy Spirit, communion with the Father, the kingdom as our inheritance and a host of other things. When Peter speaks about our faith in Christ, he speaks the same way about reconciliation as Paul does (and for that matter, James and John as well). He tells us “as you come to him, the living stone...you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:4-5). The “new birth into a living hope” (1:3) that we have received in Christ binds us together with other believers as a new, living temple where we- together- offer service to God. As we “come to him” and are found in him, there is an automatic inclusion into the corporate body. Peter returns to this theme a few verses later when he says, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” 1 Peter 2:9-10. Every title given to the Jews and applied to them corporately in Exodus 19:5-6 is now applied to the new gentile/Jew people of God.

While many, many believers and pastors and theologians would completely agree with the previous paragraph, it is stunning there is so little sense of practical implication for reconciliation and the need to grant each other, on a congregation/community level, the very status God Himself has given us. The only way to live in a practical denial of these truths and not embrace one another across previous tribal and socio-economic divisions is to narrow our focus so much to our individual salvation (and those who happen to be culturally like us) that we close our eyes and ears to the need to intentionally embrace one another and walk together.

Both James and John speak directly to this issue. James warns against socio-economic discrimination in particular and says,

“My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.<sup>2</sup> For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in,<sup>3</sup> and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,”<sup>4</sup> have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?<sup>5</sup> Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?” James 2:1-5

John says this:

“We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments.” 1 John 4:19-5:2

These passages need to be read in light of the reality of New Testament church life; congregations where former enemies, both Jew and gentile and slave and free, were being brought into binding covenant relationship with one another and who now had the privilege and obligation to carry out God’s commands to carry each other’s burdens, take care of each other’s physical needs and embrace one another as equal family members in the household of God. This is the doctrine of

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justification (without the term being used) spelled out in the plainest language possible. Much of the evangelical and reformed church of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century stands guilty of the kind of lying John warns against (which is simply another way of stating Paul's accusation against Peter of denying the truth of the Gospel). There are far too many corporate confessions of sin at a variety of church gatherings that take place in a context of racial exclusion which never come near the truth of how great the sin of segregation and racism in the church really is. There have been hundreds and thousands of calls for a spiritual renewal and spiritual re-awakening in the church with absolutely no acknowledgment that part of the core change that needs to take place is not simply some slightly newer or deeper understanding of the atonement or the love of Christ or the power of the Holy Spirit on a personal level, but instead, a deepened awakening and understanding of how all of those things enable us to be reconciled and deeply love our brothers and sisters across the current racial and economic divisions. May we have another reformation and re-discover justification by faith, but now in all its dimensions, including the restoration and reconciliation to one another that God himself reveals to us as our standing and calling in this great doctrine.

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## Chapter Five Practical Objections

Imagine being told all these glorious truths from the Word of God, the Creator and Redeemer of all men - that you are now reconciled to him and that you have been made a member of the family of God- and then being told that even though you have put your faith in Christ you would not be welcome in a local church because of the color of your skin, your tribal background or your social or economic status in life. While many believers would recoil at such an idea, in practice this happens all the time. The message that someone is not welcome can come in many forms. Racism, tribalism, contribution to a “racialized culture” or any form of active or passive exclusion or oppression of any ethnic or socio-economic group or person who is a believer from full fellowship and full, practical involvement in the life of the church, is an act of denying the very nature of the reconciliation message of the Gospel. Paul described the simple, but very telling actions of the Apostle Peter in refusing to eat with Gentiles at Antioch in precisely these terms (Gal 2:11-14).

These are bold statements that beg for several questions to be answered. Among them, how do we reconcile a major Covenantal failure by the church in this area with the apparent ongoing blessing of God over the church? And secondly, how can the church theologically justify segregation if it is, in fact, clear that Scripture calls us to be reconciled?

To recast the first question, it would seem a very plausible, opposing argument could be made against the real, practical importance of such comprehensive reconciliation. After all, the realities of church life both in the United States and around the globe seem to prove the point that the church is doing quite fine without a practical commitment to reconciliation. The growth of the church in Africa, Latin America, China and other parts of Asia, as well as the strength of many evangelical congregations in the United States are real. Conversions, baptisms, discipleship and even a renewed commitment to social justice in some parts of the church, are encouraging. At the same time, the vast majority of churches seem to have little biblical conscience for a serious congregational or denominational level commitment to ethnic and socio-economic reconciliation. Seminaries simply do not address these issues in their preparation of church leaders. On the positive side, there is an interest in diversity within the overarching framework of many denominations, but it remains in practical terms, a “separate but equal” approach. Tribal, ethnic and social divisions exist even in the church in Africa and Latin America to varying degrees, though not as much as they do in the extremely segregated church in the West. So if there actually is a Covenantal call to reconciliation, and if it is fundamental to the maturity of the body and the full manifestation of the kingdom, one important question that needs to be answered is, “why does God seem to be blessing his church so much while there is a predominately universal practice and acceptance of ethnic and socio-economic segregation?”

The answer does not seem that complicated. The blessing appears to be simply and profoundly, the grace of God. It has always been God’s good, gracious commitment to bless his people despite, at times, our severe misunderstanding of his purposes and even lack of practical obedience. That is part of the nature of grace. It is evident in the prophetic declaration of Balaam over the people of Israel who, with all their desert failings, are still described with these Spirit-prompted words:

“I have received a command to bless; he has blessed, and I cannot change it. “No misfortune is seen in Jacob, no misery observed in Israel. The LORD their God is with them; the shout of the King is among them. God brought them out of Egypt; they have the strength of a wild ox. There is no sorcery against Jacob, no divination against Israel. It will now be said of Jacob and

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of Israel, 'See what God has done!'" Numbers 23:20-23

It is also evident in the church at Corinth, who again, despite a list of sins no church I know of could imagine within its ranks, still receives this blessing through the Apostle Paul:

"I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way-- in all your speaking and in all your knowledge-- because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful." 1 Corinthians 1:4-9

The reality of this grace, despite severe sin and brokenness in the practice of God's people, is also evident in the lives of individuals throughout Scripture and church history. King Solomon is perhaps one of the greatest examples of a man who was extremely, covenantally blessed, and yet betrayed God and his people in almost unimaginable ways through the wide spread establishment of idolatry in Jerusalem and the breaking of nearly every covenantal obligation the king was called to uphold (cf Deuteronomy 16 and 1 Kings 1-4). As already noted, it was also possible for Peter to walk three plus years with Jesus, have a reconciliation-specific vision at the home of a Gentile tanner (Acts 10), be the first Apostle to witness the Spirit's baptism of Gentiles (Acts 11), and then, years later, refuse to eat with Gentile believers at Antioch (Galatians 2). As the history of the Old and New Testament saints reveal, the people of God have a proven capacity to go extremely long periods of time in a state of self-justified lack of obedience and neglect of important spiritual truths. John Newton, the famed pastor, one time slave trader turned abolitionist and author of "Amazing Grace," announced his conversion to Christ in 1748 and still practiced slave trading until 1758. The fact that the church of the twenty-first century can operate under so much blessing while there are so many practical, real divisions in the church is not testimony for a self-justifying stance that assumes we must be doing things right. It is, instead, a testimony to the practical depth of the power of God's grace and the Gospel over his people.

We need to be awakened to the reality that the modern church's failure to follow the prayer of Christ, her refusal to intentionally engage in the stated purpose of God in history and her virtual rejection of the practical implications of reconciliation for the life of the body, have a terrible and negative impact in the church even though we are graciously blessed by God. Dysfunction and disobedience always carry negative consequences. Solomon's failure affected the history of Israel from his reign forward. The devastating blow to the unity of the body demonstrated by, of all people, the great Apostle Peter, so undermined the message of the Gospel that Paul was compelled to confront him on the spot with his failure. The slaves taken captive and transported by John Newton during his ten year awakening to the evil he was participating in, surely longed for him to see the error of his ways much sooner and suffered the consequences because he did not.

In the same way, our segregation and policies of separate but equal racism have, to a certain graciously mitigated degree, negatively affected the global church. On one level, this practical segregation undermines the credibility of our witness to the world. It leaves us too open to the charge that our Christianity is simply a cultural expression of our desire to have a "god" after our own image; namely, one who blesses our own cultures and our personal way of life while we practically exclude those different from us with a sense of impunity. To the unbelieving world we can look like one more special interest group that wants to justify its own existence and point of view. Wonderfully, God in his great grace saves people nonetheless, simply because he is so loving and so determined to save. That does not mean we ought to be careless about our Gospel witness and continue to excuse racism. Paul rejoiced when the Gospel was preached, even if it was by those who did so with wrong



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motives (Phil 1:15). But that is a testimony to the overarching, Sovereign love of God for a lost people and not an endorsement of a ministry lifestyle fueled by sinful jealousy.

Segregation also leaves us experientially disconnected from one another in the church, both on a local and global level. That failure of genuine relationship negatively enables us to live with limited theological perspectives and justify practical deviations from our Covenantal responsibilities. In its most serious consequences our lack of connectedness allows heresy to run far too rampant among the unprotected flock of God's people. Theologian John Frame, in his epic work, "The Knowledge of God", reminds us that theology is never biblically portrayed nor deeply understood apart from interpersonal relationships. The Word of God always provides the authoritative outlook on life (the normative perspective), but it is revealed in the context of God's living relationship with his people (the existential perspective), and in their relationships with others and the world around them (the situational perspective). When we leave out one of the three perspectives we run a greater risk of not fully understanding the truth of God.

This "threefold perspective" on the knowledge of God is clearly stated in I John 3 and is specifically related to issues of walking with the poor.

"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" I John 3:1 - the normative perspective

"We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us."

I John 3:14-20 - the situational perspective

"Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us."

I John 3:21-24 – the existential perspective

God himself tells us, and the ministry of Jesus confirms, there is nothing that can replace the need for doing theology in a context of living relationships with the poor, the immigrant, the handicapped and the oppressed – namely, those normally marginalized and excluded by the dominant culture in power. When we walk hand in hand with the excluded, that experience sharpens our attentiveness to Scripture, opens our heart more deeply to the heart of God and helps correct faulty theological conclusions we can form when we live in a segregated vacuum. In that vacuum we can stubbornly and dangerously convince ourselves that our faulty perspectives are in fact good, logical theology. The theological history of supporting slavery in the U.S., Apartheid in South Africa and the current dangers of the Prosperity Gospel are all examples of this. The effect of segregating the rich from the poor can hardly be overstated when it comes to this not-so-new prosperity Gospel (cf Phil 3:19; 1 Tim 6:5). If we remain segregated from the poor, it is much easier to justify consumerism and the pursuit of personal pleasure while we ignore the needs of brothers and sisters both in our own communities and around the world. In order to truly reflect the kingdom of God with our wealth, we need wisdom from the Spirit speaking through the Word, but that must come in a context of reconciled and vital

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relationships of the poor and the rich walking together. James, in the second chapter of his Old Testament Prophet-style book, reminds us that a special recognition of the poor and the value of their presence in the kingdom of God is essential for the life of the church, if we are going to avoid being guilty of evil discrimination (James 2:1ff).

The second question, which needs more consideration than can be given here, is how the modern evangelical and reformed church can theologically justify segregation. If the call to reconciliation is so clear, then how do Bible-believing pastors and scholars seemingly overlook the obvious? Again, the answers are not, at their root, complicated. In addition to the blindness that segregation itself breeds, evangelicals are just as capable as anyone else of using the Bible to promote a self-serving and self-justifying theology. One of our many sins is our failure to simply apply the truth we preach to ourselves in practical and obvious ways. We say we believe the heart is deceptive beyond our ability to comprehend (Jeremiah 17:9); we say we believe we all fall terribly short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23); we say we believe we have blindness to sin that we need God to address. But when confronted with the reality of racism, we simply retreat to a variety of theological machinations and protective walls to defend ourselves. The congregational lifestyles, denominational practices and theological grids that have been developed over the years to justify segregation are a fortress that only the Spirit of God can break through.

Here are a few of the current theological justifications for segregation in the West.

- “The Gospel is best declared, received and lived out in a more homogeneous context.”

This approach to church mission was given popular support by Ralph Winters of the U.S. Center for World Missions as the “homogeneous unit principle of church growth.” In “The Bridges of God” he states: ‘People become Christian fastest when least change of race or clan is involved’. In “Understanding Church Growth” (1970, 3rd Ed. 1990), Winters and C. Peter Wagner argue, “people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers.” While many pastors and theologians have argued against this approach to missions in theory, in practice it is an apt description of the vast majority of western churches. One of the popular Scripture proofs cited for what is in practice, this homogeneous principle, is Paul’s description of his evangelistic outreach in the diverse Roman world of his day:

“And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, not being myself under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; to them that are without law, as without law, not being without law to God, but under law to Christ, that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might gain the weak: I am become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some.” 1 Corinthians 9:20-22

This has provided theological justification for continued segregation in the church on a variety of levels and in its most simple expression often sounds something like this: “I need to respond to the cultural issues of the people in my area of influence and their specific needs. They are the ones we are committed to reaching and so our focus, as a church, has to address their needs specifically”

However, this passage in 1 Corinthians 9 is only telling us how Paul evangelistically approached the lost; namely, reaching out to them in their own context, as much as possible, in a way that would not unnecessarily confuse the message or make the Gospel difficult to hear. It does not tell us either the content of the message Paul preached, which was a Gospel of reconciliation for all the nations (see Acts 17 and Paul’s sermon at Athens), nor does it suggest he was laying down a blueprint for how to do church. In the greater context of the actual Corinthian church that emerged, Paul obviously

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took an approach to evangelism that led to an outcome radically different from the “homogenous” principle. The Corinthian church was made up of Jews and Greeks, slave and free.

The city of Corinth was a very wealthy, major seaport and the fourth largest city in the Roman Empire. They were heavily influenced by their history of Greek philosophy, including the practice of paying public speakers and measuring their worth by the amount of money their followers were willing to pay for the privilege of being taught. Paul met them “at their point of need” by confronting their culture with the message of the Gospel in two fundamental ways.

First, he deliberately made sure he did not conform to their prideful emphasis on human reason and oratorical ability. “When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.” 1Cor 2:1-5

Second, as a means of emphasizing the free nature of the Gospel and God's love, he deliberately refused their financial support. “If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.” 1 Cor 9:11, 12

In order to help the Corinthians understand both the free offer of the Gospel and the need to receive it in humility, Paul had to bring them the message of salvation in a way that went against the natural human pride of their culture. His commitment to be “all things to all men” cannot be understood in any way as a compromise of the message of the Gospel itself. Instead, it was simply a loving willingness to sacrifice his personal freedom in areas that were indifferent to the heart of the Gospel, but could be a stumbling block for others. When he was with the Jews in Jerusalem he made Temple vows (Acts 18:18). When he was with the Gentiles he refused to even suggest they needed to keep ceremonial days or circumcision as a sign of their faith (Col 2:16). These were areas where Paul could flex and change with the cultural environment and not be inconsistent. But the message of reconciliation as part of the core of the Gospel (2 Cor 5), and a call for humble unity in the church (1 Cor 1), were stated boldly and in no uncertain terms.

The result of Paul's ministry was anything but a homogeneous church. Corinth was made up of a cross section of people, as already noted, that seems to have minimally included slave and free, Greek and Jew (1 Cor 12:13). The fruit of his ministry and his commitment to “become all things to all people,” clearly was not a call for a homogeneous church.

· “Reconciliation will not come to expression until heaven and eternity. For now, we simply live with division as a practical reality in a fallen world. Though we do not have a physical unity now, we do have a ‘spiritual’ unity that will have to wait until heaven to have its full expression. I can't wait to get there.”

In order to excuse and find a certain level of comfort and acceptance about current failures of the church, leaders have often talked about heaven as the final expression of all we long for (which it is), while ignoring the reality of the changes we need to make now. How many times have well meaning pastors and teachers quoted passages like this one in Revelation and seen it only in terms of eternity?

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“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.” Revelation 7:9, 10

But providing Scripture proof for something that is inherently indefensible, segregation, leaves us in the awkward position of twisting Scriptures to teach the very opposite of the writer’s intent. To leave the practical expression of our reconciliation for eternity means we have to deny the “already” side of God’s promises. While we can easily confess perfection waits for eternity in all things, nonetheless God has invaded the here and now with the real presence of his eternal kingdom. He has taught us to pray for his kingdom to come and his will to be done now, on earth, as it is in heaven. Everything we do on earth as the people of God is built upon and guided by the heavenly and eternal realities that give them meaning. Our worship is mirrored in heaven (Hebrews 12:22) and that informs our worship here. Our citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20) and that informs how we choose to live now. Jesus has gone into the “heavenly sanctuary of God” that is not part of this creation and offered his blood on our behalf, and that frees us to enter the throne of grace with boldness and confidence for the needs of today (Hebrews 9). In the same way, our eternal reconciliation and the vision of all God’s people from among all the nations gathered in his presence, is meant to have a real manifestation here and now. The glory that Jesus gave us in order to help us achieve this unity was not simply for eternity. When we pray for the manifestation of God’s kingdom rule and reign, we pray for today- “your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10), and that certainly includes his “will” for us to be reconciled.

· “The call to take the Gospel to the nations is only a call to the universal proclamation of salvation and the global concern of God that all people from all nations would know him; it is not a call to reconciliation.”

This is simply incomplete theology, but is the practical operating theology of many, many evangelical churches and mission agencies. The Scriptures do make it abundantly clear that God has a commitment to spread his message of salvation over the face of the earth, and that different people are gifted to take that message to different groups. Paul speaks about his ministry and the ministry of Peter in these terms:

“On the contrary, they saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews. For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles.” Galatians 1:7, 8

However, this is not a justification for segregation or taking an attitude of indifference in calling for reconciliation in the life of the church. Peter and Paul’s message to their respective “mission fields” was the same: “embrace one another from among the nations; be reconciled.” (1 Peter 1:22; 2:9,10; 3:8 and Ephesians 2). In 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, Paul ties the message of our reconciliation to God directly to our view of one another as “new creations”, and then he says, “God has committed to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:19). Is this only a message of reconciliation to God, and not a message of reconciliation to one another? Is there a Gospel that does not include reconciliation? The Apostle John argues just the opposite. He says anyone who claims to love God but does not love his brothers does not really know God (1 John 4:7-12).

While it is hard to pin down exactly all the locations Peter and Paul preached, we do know that Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, always went to the Jewish synagogue first (Acts 13-26), and that

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Peter, the Apostle to the Jews, clearly had a ministry among the Gentiles throughout the Roman Empire (1 & 2 Peter). Neither of them preached a Gospel that allowed functional segregation.

· “Theological purity is a prerequisite for practical unity and reconciliation.”

In the name of theological purity we have divided the church into almost countless denominations and independent factions. Some estimates list as many as 38,000 distinct “Christian” groups across the world. While there is no doubt there are many, many heresies that should separate genuine believers from false prophets and spiritual charlatans, it is also true that many believers share the same basic beliefs in the Trinity, Creation, the Word of God, the person and work of Christ, the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the Second Coming of Christ. There are variations in understanding, but among God’s people across the nations there is an amazing consistency of theological agreement.



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## Chapter Six Necessary Steps To Reconciliation

In this chapter we will briefly look at a few of the practical commitments that will be required for reconciliation to take place first of all on the local, congregational level, and then on a broader denominational and structural level. It is not that the broader systemic issues are not equally important, but the reality is that those structures will only inevitably change and follow suit if the local churches are involved in the work reconciliation. The wineskins of the church will change as new and deeper expressions of the kingdom break out. So what must local churches do if they are not living out reconciliation in their communities? In bullet point, here are some of the issues we have learned to address. This is not an exhaustive list. It is also not a complicated list. Thanks be to God this work of reconciliation is not something exotic or elusive to the average believer. It is all actually quite simple. It is however, surprisingly hard on our egos and self-serving agendas.

Of first importance: believe the good news of God's commitment in Christ to produce this reconciliation in your community. Like every other aspect of righteousness, this comes as a gift. Don't start with self-deprecation and a resolve to try harder. Start with the clean, purifying confession of sin (Psalm 51) and receiving both the free forgiveness of God and the free promise of righteousness as gift through the work of Christ on the cross (1 John 1) and the power of the Spirit to walk in new obedience in this area (Galatians 3:1-5). Openly confess your sins to brothers and sisters from other ethnic/socio-economic groups that you have excluded and ask for forgiveness (Galatians 2).

Seek reconciliation in worship by including worship from all cultures, including learning to sing in everyone's language (John 4). Give opportunity throughout the service for a variety of expressions of the unity of the body by making sure people from the different groups are participating in leading the rest of the church and have input on the overall worship. Make sure translation is used whenever necessary.

Look for God's gifting of leadership from each of the communities represented (Acts 5). Be intentional about investing in that leadership and allowing them to take their place in providing ministry and direction for the church as a whole. This is especially true for (though not limited to) elders, preaching pastors and deacons in the church.

Build community through Christians of various backgrounds embracing one another in home gatherings where the love of Christ is practiced on a more intimate level; where burdens are shared; where fellowship meals can take place; and where all the basic needs of life are provided for one another (Acts 2/4).

Make ministry to the most marginalized- the widow, the orphan and the immigrant/refugee- the work of the whole body, with all the elders-pastors and other leaders equipping God's people for works of service and ministry (Eph 4).

Finally, the following is brief paper I wrote for some of my denominational leaders who asked a group of us the question:

"What would the Presbyterian Church in America look like if we were more successful in reaching the diverse cultures of North America and what changes would have to take place? What would we like to see happen? Where do we see God already at work and how can we build on that and learn from that?"

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A preliminary statement. Please know that everything that is said here is said with genuine love and respect for believers and churches in the PCA. It is also said with a keen awareness of my own need to grow in these areas, and an absolute conviction that the righteousness (practically expressed) that we long for, can only come by grace through faith in Christ and the work of the Spirit. I am not meaning to be at all judgmental or simply beating anyone with guilt. I hope and trust that is not the reaction. But somehow, at some point, we do need to become better at a serious, critical self-analysis that lets us ask really hard questions without being defensive. I also know the discipleship process for all of us, personally and corporately is just that- a process. And I remain very open to ongoing, constructive dialogue.

I am going to start with the presupposition (Jn 17, 1 Cor 12, Eph 1) of a needed commitment to reconciliation and not simply diversity. If we want to remain a somewhat diverse denomination without practical reconciliation throughout the denomination- impacting local churches, presbyteries, denominational structures and agencies- then we can simply keep doing what we are already doing. I am not sure how to become more effective without eventually getting around to this fundamental issue of a deep, paradigm-shifting change to intentional reconciliation that is both ethnic and socio-economic in scope.

Where that would eventually lead us is to a genuinely multi-ethnic-socio-economic worshipping and kingdom-justice focused community of churches, with multi-ethnic leadership throughout every aspect of the denomination. Presbytery's would have multi-ethnic Licensing and Ordination Committees; Multi-ethnic MNA and MTW committees on both a Presbytery and Denominational level would be making vision and implementation decisions as a reconciled team, with input from the different ethnic-socio-economic groups represented in the churches. The "coordinator" of many of the denominational "Agency Teams" would be non-Anglos. Covenant Seminary and Covenant College would be intentionally staffed from the majority-world ethnic groups. The "presidents" of the College and Seminary would come, in turns, from the Anglo community but also from leaders of these different ethnic communities. Denominational magazines, Sunday school curriculum (CE&P) would take on new issues as it turned primarily from the perspectives/concerns of intellectual, upper middle class Anglos to include the pressing issues of immigrants, refugees, the poor and reconciliation within the churches and denomination – described and addressed by them, without an added cultural spin. We would begin learning from and being instructed by our brothers and sisters instead of always being in the position of giving instruction.

The poor are a big part of this picture because the "increasing diversity" of the United States is being fundamentally fueled by an increase in poor immigrants (legal and illegal) and refugees. There are, certainly, highly educated and middle-class-successful immigrants. But they are not the majority. In addition, the very nature of the kingdom of God is that it is "for," "on behalf of" the poor (more on this later).

"What must we do to see the PCA embrace such a vision and move positively in this direction? In other words, what would it take to get there?"

Let me say again, I am very grateful for the PCA, reformed theology in general and the faithfulness and commitment of so many in the denomination to seeking God's glory. I am also immensely grateful for the increase in mercy ministries and ethnic diversity within the denomination. These are all positive signs. At present we are culturally and financially entrenched in a white-centered power system that no one will easily let go of. What makes it doubly hard is that many elements of our Christian practice in our churches and denominational structures are interlaced with cultural Christianity which has been given a theological covering that produces a near-impossible grid to break through. Nothing short of a cataclysmic shaking will likely change this. Two things that bring me great hope: In response to the preaching of the Word and the conviction of the Spirit, we may, together, repent and change. If not, the other good news is that God is in the business of bringing the cataclysmic changes necessary to move his church along (ala Acts 1:8 becoming a reality through Acts 8:1; the church throughout much of her history including current cataclysmic events throughout

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Africa in general and South Africa specifically). So, with that caveat, what would it take to see changes take place and actually get there?

The following comments are just to affirm that ortho-doxy and ortho-praxis really do affect each other. And since the PCA is a highly focused “orthodox” denomination, one of the crucial areas for significant change to take place is to address our fundamental theology, which really does shape so much of what we do. So I will address both the theological changes and then some of the praxis changes that I think need to happen.

## **A theological/practical embracing of the kingdom for the poor**

Genuine reconciliation and the deepest expression of the unity and diversity of God’s people are tied to the nature and purpose of God’s kingdom and the focus of the ministry of Christ and the church in this world. Jesus came to set captives free, to release the oppressed, and to establish a kingdom reign that would be marked by justice on behalf of the poor (Isaiah 9, 11, Luke 4, 6). In the ministry of Christ and the early church, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, slave and free were all called to be a part of the new community of God’s people who would live out Jubilee with each other and amazingly, to bless the unbelieving, rebellious nations by practicing Jubilee to her enemies (Luke 6, 11). The “Lord’s Prayer” is a kingdom-jubilee prayer for God’s will to be done in providing daily provision of food, forgiveness of sins and financial debt, and protection from Satan’s opposition- all which was profoundly evident in the early church (Acts 2, 4).

Our increased segregation over the past 50(+/-) years, both ethnically and socio-economically, has produced a Christianity in many of our churches that is simply ethno-centric and self-absorbed. And as we all know from counseling couples in crisis over the years, self-absorbed people simply won’t reconcile. To attempt deep, long term reconciliation among different groups who are vying for their own agendas is a recipe for more entrenched segregation. The end result, “best case” scenario is what we currently have- a Plessy v. Ferguson church culture of “separate but equal.” Rich and poor, slave and free, black, white, latino, asian are called to the same sacrifices and service- to forgive and love one another in a community that is constantly embracing one another and the outcast and broken- both the broken rich and powerful (who are outside the kingdom- Matthew, Zacchaeus, Paul) and the broken poor and disenfranchised- especially the widow, orphan, immigrant, and handicapped poor (Luke 4:18-21, 38-5:32; Mt 5:3-12, 25:31ff, etc).

If we do not have this kingdom-for-the-poor agenda at the center, we will (as we have done) erect structures and systems that increasingly exclude the poor and needy. We will (as we have done) build churches, worship services, seminary training programs and mission strategies that appeal to the sensibilities of the rich and middle class, and in a hundred unspoken ways push the poor away from us. The net result, because we are not truly walking in humility with the poor, will be an almost unavoidable paternalism as we seek to do mercy ministry to the poor, versus humbly walking with the poor.

So, what would it look like to reverse this? There must be an intentional commitment to be a welcoming, embracing community, in every aspect of church life, for the powerless and poor. The flow of the ministries of the church, as well as the allocation of resources must move in their direction. In a good way, there are many realities nudging us in this direction, and I want to affirm the many good things happening in our denomination. But it has not yet changed the denominational power structures.

In addition to what is already happening, what else can we do? Many, many of our churches are in changing neighborhoods. Immigrants, refugees and other long standing minority groups in our culture keep invading the suburban community. These are tremendous opportunities to embrace the richer, fuller focus of the kingdom. Everything from theological training to worship styles to Session, Diaconal and Teaching Elder leadership to the development of outward focused ministry teams needs to be energized

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for reaching out to these diverse and often poor communities. Wonderfully, there are lots of examples of interest in this all over the PCA with individuals within local congregations. What's holding us back? In the limited conversations I have had, many pastors are not convinced the kingdom actually is focused on the poor and that this kind of ministry is absolutely central and crucial to the life of the church. It is an "add on"; simply an option to be considered, encouraged among the few "specially called", and too often, dismissed. Many of their people who are engaging in these types of ministries are quietly frustrated. But without a practical shift here in the theological perspectives and practical commitments of the teaching pastors, the vast majority of the new people groups will be excluded from their churches. This is closely connected to the next paradigm shift that's needed.

## **A theological/praxis embracing of reconciliation as a covenantal obligation**

If we do not see the call to reconciliation as a fundamental, moral obligation of the church that Christ has both called us to and will Himself equip us for- we simply won't do the hard work to make it happen. We read the Scriptures with heavy cultural blinders and plug in the perspectives and dynamics of an all white, suburban, middle class church and believe we can understand and apply these Scriptures (to ourselves and to every other ethnic group as well) fully and adequately while ignoring the historic realities and context of an early church doing theology in a context that was seeing sworn enemies and totally opposing world views and cultures all being called to humbly, lovingly embrace one another in local congregations.

Many of our pastors are overwhelmed with the needs of their congregation members and think that a commitment to reconciliation is a) not really necessary for them to be a faithful church and b) something their busy, hectic, already messed-up-marriages, workaholic, and otherwise struggling congregations (who also carry the white man-middle class burden of carrying the load for most of the world) simply do not have time for and is unrealistic. (That last parenthetical line may be a bit overstated.)

But the great freedom of the gospel and the kingdom is precisely to die to self and lay our agendas aside and take up God's agenda and find the life we were looking for. I am not naively suggesting that embracing reconciliation is easy or a cure-all for the self-absorbed struggles with sin. But it does, phenomenally, help put many other things into focus and perspective that our Christian communities constantly stumble over- the use of wealth, as a Covenant blessing to help others; the equipping of the body for significant ministry, actually laying down our lives for our enemies; the context of worship, that is meant to be inclusive and not bound to one culture; the purpose and focus of education and career- namely, to be equipped to seek justice and do good, which is the only "calling" the Bible talks about and applies to everybody; the assessing of life decisions being tied to an eternal kingdom of righteousness and reconciliation that has already begun and being confident that all our labors are not in vain because they lead into this coming kingdom at the return of Christ; the accompanying confidence that the darkness of the world's problems will not defeat the kingdom of light, etc.

The lack of focus and commitment to reconciliation means our energies go elsewhere. And the elsewhere, if it's not for the poor and for reconciliation, eventually ends up being some version of "I can have my best life now." The prosperity gospel is simply the natural offspring of a church that refuses to focus on the poor and reconciliation.

Part of the very practical change the church must make to reach out the poor and bring their leadership perspective to the table is to train and ordain men without the current demand for a seminary degree, or an equivalent Masters of Divinity degree by some other means. Our M. Div. standards are very culturally shaped. We are not simply making sure men understand the basic and deep doctrines of the faith and can handle the Scriptures

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well- we are demanding the equivalent of a Ph. D., and in the process, culturally absorbing them into our system of thought.

This leads to one other major paradigm shift that I believe is necessary for us to embrace. We must theologically and practically embrace the humble circumstances necessary to express the kingdom.

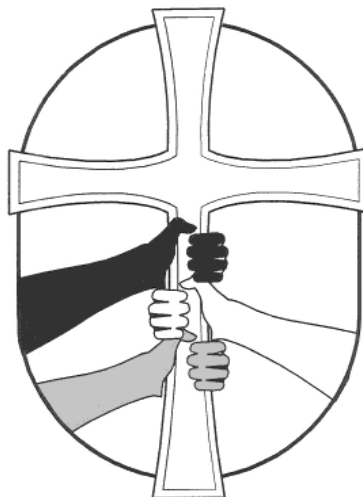
The paradigm of our culture and of a great many of our churches is one of educational and financial power, personal efficiency, task accomplishment and a rather naive idea that we are the change agents for the whole world. This isn't all of us all the time; but it is a part of most of us a good deal of the time. We can hardly talk about starting a project without turning to questions of "national model" and "global impact" within a few sentences. The model and the teaching of Jesus, the apostles and the early church is that the kingdom moves forward in humble circumstances. It's not just individually that God's power is made known in weakness, it's also corporately. The one church that is the most pitiful in John's letter-message from Jesus is Laodicea. This theme of God choosing to lead his people in humility runs all the way through the history of Israel (cf esp Deut 17:14ff) and into the fullness of the expression of the kingdom in the life of Christ (too many passages to list), the apostles (see esp. 1 Cor 4:1ff and 4:16), and the church (1 Cor 1:26ff). The fundamental reasons for God directing his people into these humble, dependent conditions are centered on the issue of the Israel being a people "for the poor" and then, when the full expression of the kingdom comes in Christ, the church pursuing a kingdom that is focused on the poor.

When we come to the poor from positions of power we naturally tend towards paternalism. That leads to the second reason for humble circumstances: it is the boasting in human power (of any kind) that actually feeds division (1 Cor 1:10ff). If we do not see this as a theologically revealed paradigm for the church and something which we must practically embrace as Israel was called to and Jesus and the apostles lived out, I don't think we will ever experience large scale reconciliation because our paternalism will always be a barrier. The implications, of course, are pretty revolutionary (cataclysmic to our current systems). Our colleges, seminaries, church buildings, pastor's salaries, missionary support levels, church planting strategies and world mission endeavors would all change and move towards the poor, instead of seeking to bring the poor up to our standards and comfort level. Again, some things are happening here. But it is not what is driving the thinking of the church leadership as a whole. The church would be a genuinely prophetic voice against the cultural abuses of wealth and power, instead of being viewed, by many in and outside of the United States, as a willing conspirator with these values. But more importantly, the poor would be valued and genuinely embraced, deep reconciliation would be fostered and there would be a real sense of the kingdom of God being lived out in the body of Christ.



# NOTES

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