

# A Biblical Theology of Reconciliation



God's Plan for Reconciliation  
and Justice in Jesus Christ

Barry Henning



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### God's Plan for Reconciliation and Justice in Jesus Christ

#### Introduction

This paper is a synthesis of multiple studies presented to the congregation of New City Fellowship of Saint Louis from 1992 until the present, addressing the theological foundation for our commitment to function as a multi-ethnic, socially and economically reconciled church. Randy Nabors, John Perkins, Harvey Conn, Jack Miller, Jonathan Seda, Craig Garriott, Carl Ellis, Tony Myles, Thurman Williams, and too many others to list here are given grateful acknowledgment for their influence, mentoring and insight.

What follows is an overview of the covenantal call of God for his people to commit themselves to live as the reconciled body of Christ. The sinful divisions that naturally exist between ethnic and socio-economic groups clearly continue to oppress our own culture and keep fueling the destructiveness that leads to the wars, injustice, violence and oppression that is a constant undercurrent of human existence. At the center of the glory and goodness of God is the good news of the Gospel: the reconciliation of all things through the Cross and Kingdom and Kingship of Jesus Christ (Eph1, Col 1). The beginning of the restoration of all things in the kingdom of God is here, now. It began in earnest with the coming of the Messiah and is moving toward the final restoration of God's original image of a godly and righteous unity among the nations, living in restored fellowship with God in every area of life in a completely renewed creation (1 Cor 15). As Jesus taught us in his final prayer, the intentional practice of this reconciliation displayed in the church now, serves as a witness to the nations of the ultimate victory of the redeeming presence of Jesus Christ and his kingdom in this world (Jn 17).

What will become clear in the Biblical narrative is that the kind of reconciliation God calls for in the covenant community requires an ongoing, deliberate effort to work for the full, participatory inclusion and "setting-things-right" between all the ethnic and socio-economic people groups in any community where people put their faith in Jesus Christ. As the risen Messiah and King, Jesus has now established his church, the "called-out-ones," as the location where this kingdom agenda of the restoration and reconciliation of all things is to be manifest to the world. It also seems clear from the biblical narrative this kind of reconciliation *must* be lived out on the local church level. This is not one option among many of how the church might choose to live. Our reconciliation with one another is a vital part of God's revealed agenda for the body of Christ to humbly love one another as God's Spirit-filled people and is necessary for the church to fully attain its maturity in Christ and fully manifest the presence of God's kingdom on earth (Eph 4).

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While we have experienced and know God tremendously blesses and grows his church in spite of our failings, we have to be careful not to interpret his blessing on us as a signal that he is unconcerned about our “separateness.” Our current state of practical segregation in much of the church, both in the United States and globally, hinders and cripples us in many ways. It diminishes our display of the glory of God and leaves both the people of God and the watching world with a deep sense there must be something more if God Himself really came to this world to set things right. Amazingly, the glorious, grace-filled response of God to his people is and always has been a commitment that he will not let our brokenness or sin deter him from his eternal agenda of the reconciliation of all things in Christ, with the commitment to present to himself one, holy, unblemished Bride. May the following study help us move more faithfully into the practice of God’s agenda of reconciliation in Jesus the Messiah.

Humbly and respectfully submitted,

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New City Fellowship of St Louis  
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## Acknowledged Biblical and Theological Presuppositions

As we consider what the Scriptures have to say about the issue of reconciliation in the church and how that needs to be applied today, it is important to address some broad principles of interpretation and theological presuppositions that are present in this paper. I recognize all of us as students of the Bible bring things like personal experience, knowledge of church history (broad or minimal), and knowledge of the Bible in general, including its various historical settings and our basic theological commitments to our study of Scripture on any given topic. The important question is if we are consciously aware of those influences and hold the right ones loosely and the right ones tightly in our approach to the text.

When it comes to the issue of reconciliation with one another in the body of Christ, here are some Biblical and theological presuppositions underlying this paper that I firmly hold on to.

1. There is a unity in the Covenantal work of God throughout history that is described in the biblical narrative and finds its full, mature, complete expression in the work of Jesus Christ. That means we can legitimately look for the expression of the unity of God's purposes throughout the Biblical narrative and in a proper way read back into early texts the underlying unity of that purpose. This does not mean we can do violence to the historical or cultural issues relating around a particular part of the story, or violate the intent of the application to the original audience, or ignore the progressive, unfolding nature of God's revelation, or violate the use of single words or phrases to read entire theological statements into one phrase. However, we do recognize, for instance, the full revelation of the relationship between the Father and Son and Spirit revealed in the life of Jesus does provide insight into Old Testament parts of the story that speak to this relationship in a less developed way and would be more obscure on their own if were not for the New Testament record. Knowing what we now know since Jesus has come, helps us see everything else more clearly. And this is equally true in this area of reconciliation.
2. We now know completely and fully that God's plan all along was to lead his people from among all the nations into a reconciliation and restoration of all things in the person of Jesus. It is a reconciliation that takes all of the death, division and brokenness of Genesis 3- the brokenness between man and God, between man and creation, between man and himself, AND between man and man- and re-unites and reconciles all those things back to God and, in that very process, back to each other through the death and resurrection of Christ. If this

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is true, then we should be able to look back at the Old Testament and the Gospels and see those purposes at work.

Two of the strongest statements about God's unified plan for all history, centered in Jesus, speak in terms of this core issue of the recapitulation and reconciliation of all things in Christ in a way that has all the profundity and conciseness of John 3:16.

**Colossians 1:19-20** For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile (avpokatalla,xai) to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

**Ephesians 1:9-10** making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite (avnakefalaiw,sasqai ) all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

The breadth of that "reconciliation," that "summing up" or "uniting" of all things in Christ by his work on the Cross, is applied directly by Paul to thrones and authorities and spiritual powers (Col 1,2), to the creation itself (Rom 8), and very clearly and boldly to the relationships of God's people with one another in the church.

**Ephesians 2:14-16** For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

**Galatians 3:27-29** For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

The reconciliation in the church Paul describes as being purchased at the Cross, is of course nothing less than the unity and reconciliation Jesus prayed for:

**John 17:20-23** "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent

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me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

He died and rose again to bring this unity and reconciliation, in the church, to expression.

3. This ultimate purpose of God reconciling all things under Christ can be used to more fully illuminate our reading of the Old Testament, in the same way we use his ultimate sacrifice as The Lamb of God and his Kingship and his High Priesthood to understand much about the preliminary shadow of the sacrificial system and the Kingship of David and the Levitical priesthood. As we know, the better we understand the Old Testament, the better we understand the New. Where this becomes important is in how we listen to and understand the call to be a “reconciled” people of God- reconciled to God and reconciled to one another- that is present in the unfolding narrative, even though the exact word “reconciliation” may not be used. The practice of reconciliation is, nonetheless, very present. In addition, if we have eyes to see it, the call to reconciliation in the Old Testament very quickly moves front and center in the covenantal community life of Israel. Her failure to reconcile economically with the poor (the widow, the fatherless, the hungry, the sick, as well as the economically distressed) and the failure to reconcile “tribally,” or what we may call “racially,” with the alien/immigrant, is intimately tied to Israel’s expulsion from the land and an evidence of her idolatry.
4. One other presupposition I will freely acknowledge is that reconciliation, made possible through the atonement of Christ, always has a practical justice and mercy component to it. Genuine reconciliation is so connected in the biblical, covenantal narrative to the humble practice of justice and mercy that these issues cannot be separated. Talking about reconciliation without talking about justice and mercy is the equivalent of talking about loving God without loving his people.

**1 John 3:16-18** By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

**1 John 4:7-8** Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.

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Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

This connection between reconciliation with God and justice and mercy toward others was central in the life of Israel (Jer 22:15,16, et al), in the ministry of Jesus (Lk 4, et al) and in the founding of the church (Acts 2:44, 45; 4:31, 32). If we are going to meaningfully talk about the need for practicing the reconciliation purchased by Christ, in the church context today, we must equally talk about the look of justice and compassion for the poor and the one who is “alien” to us.

With these acknowledged premises in place, we can look again at the whole biblical story with some fresh perspective on the calling, and the privilege and the glory of God over his people as he reconciles us to himself and to one another.

## Reconciliation and Justice in the Old Testament

The commitment to a practical expression of reconciliation in the covenant community is already evident in the books of the Law and the premise for it is set in the opening chapters of Genesis.

- Genesis 1-3 “Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living.” Gen 3:20
- Genesis 6-10 “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

As Harvey Conn pointed out in his Westminster Seminary Lectures on “The Old Testament and the Poor”, God is revealing himself to his people Israel in the Genesis narrative as the God who is The God of all humanity and is intimately interested in the fate of all the nations. He is not a tribal god. This stands in direct contrast to the ethnocentric “creation myths” of the surrounding cultures. Women in general and people from different ethnic groups were often severely oppressed by these ethnocentric cultures. Their “gods” were only “their gods”- the gods of Babylon or Egypt or local territory in Canaan. They had no interest in the nations except to conquer and control them. In order to break through those entrenched, oppressive patterns of pagan cultures, the Genesis narrative sets God apart as the One who created woman with a special status and all humankind as intimately created in His image. God is giving his people Israel a global, universal perspective from the very beginning and revealing to them that he has an active, Sovereign hand working for salvation and judgment over the history of all the nations that is



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inextricably linked to his salvation work with the sons of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The division of the nations that began in Genesis 3-11 will now be reversed by God's Covenant promises to Abraham. Babel will ultimately be replaced by Pentecost.

- In Genesis 12 God directs his focus to accomplish his salvation particularly through the line of Abraham. That salvation is constantly set in this context of God's purposes for and inclusion of all the nations. When Abraham is called as the covenant representative through whom the Messiah will come, the promise is stated: "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you." Gen 12:3

- In Genesis 17 the inclusive nature of that salvation is emphasized in the sign of the covenant- circumcision- when Abraham is promised,

"No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham for I have made you the father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. .... For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner- those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. .... Any uncircumcised male...will be cut off from his people." Genesis 17:12-13

While we have traditionally focused on the extension of the Covenant promises from one Covenant Head to another – Abraham to Isaac to Jacob – perhaps we have failed to notice the equal emphasis on who is included in the Covenant family. From the very beginning 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. Anyone who is in faith-Covenant relationship with God is part of the Covenant family and must be given the sign, and hence, the full rights of the Covenant: *anyone* "born in your household" (a term denoting more than biological children) or "bought with money from a foreigner" (emphasizing the status of aliens who were brought into the family.)

- **Genesis 18:17-19** The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him."

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In this seminal passage, God reveals the nature and substance of the blessings that will come to the nations: they will learn to live out the righteousness and justice of God. What we will quickly learn in the Law is that this righteousness and justice requires love and care for one another that can best be described as the practical work of reconciling the nations to one another under God's kingship.

There is a continual emphasis in the Exodus-Deuteronomy narrative not only on the inclusion of Gentile groups in the Covenant, but also their status within the community, emphasizing the special care of justice and compassion they were to receive along with the poor, the fatherless and the widow. This is critical because it is the key building block to a truly redeemed and reconciled community.

Any alien/minority who entered into this covenant relationship with God, and any person who was socially or economically marginalized, was to be included with and given all the same identical rights and responsibilities of all God's people. God's appeal for his people to understand and practice this type of active compassion and acceptance was rooted in their own experience as aliens/minority who were oppressed in Egypt. Equally significant is the placement of these commands: the acceptance of the alien/minority and the poor is of primary importance to God because it is placed at the beginning of every defining event in the life of Israel.

## **The call for practicing reconciliation at the Exodus, the defining event of Israel's redemption and community experience:**

- Ex 12:48-49 "An alien/minority 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."

The difference between the alien/minority status in the community of God's people and the practice of all the other nations provided a stark contrast. The Hebrews would have seen the ills of ethnic superiority demonstrated in the Egyptian culture, not just against themselves, but against all non-Egyptians. That 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." Yet here, in the most precious, holy meal of all for the people of God, the alien/minority is invited to participate. This was important legislation because Exodus 12:37, 38 tells us that as the Hebrews left Egypt, "Many other people (Hebrew: "a mixture of peoples" LXX: "a swarm of foreigners") went up with them."

Apparently a good number of tribal groups who had suffered under Egyptian rule just like the Hebrews, saw Yahweh's deliverance and decided to cast their lot with Moses and the people of Israel. If they

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were circumcised, and entered into Covenant relationship, their status was clear: they were to be treated just like one born in the land.

**Later, with the giving of the Law at Sinai, the alien/minority and the poor and the need for a practical reconciliation are again front and center:**

The Law contains two types of commands that stand as rebukes to any form of segregation being practiced by the people of God, and at the same time promotes a call to reconciliation that actively embraces and includes others. On the one hand there are commands to not mistreat or oppress the alien/minority, and on the other hand, to be sure to include them in the blessings of the Covenant with distinctions based on covenantal relationship:

- Exodus 20:10 “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter...nor the alien/minority within your gates.”

Here, every alien is protected by the Sabbath laws and given the same privileges of rest the native born Israelite receives.

- Exodus 22:21, cf. 23:9 “Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt.”

The warning to not oppress an alien/minority is directly stated twice within a few verses of each other. Israel’s own experience is stated as the practical reminder of how destructive that kind of treatment is.

- Leviticus 16:29. “...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.” (Cf. Lev 17:8-16, 20:2, 22:18, 24:13-22.)

The wording of this passage makes it difficult to know the relationship of the aliens mentioned to the Covenant. Are they bystanders who have to follow certain community regulations? Or are they aliens who have covenantally bound themselves to the Lord? Regardless, the aliens of Exodus 12 who were circumcised would certainly have been included with the Hebrews in the Day of Atonement and the promised cleansing. What is important to notice is that God takes the time to once again remind his people these “minorities” cannot be ignored. The call to intentionally practice reconciliation is continually emphasized

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by God.

- 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/minority.” Cf Lev 23:22

Part of the practical implication of reconciliation economically and ethnically, requires these vulnerable groups all be given special-care status. God is not like the tyrant-gods of Egypt or Canaan or Babylon, (or Hinduism or Buddhism or Islam) but the Holy God, who is set apart from evil and full of righteousness, goodness and compassion. He is the one true God who gives special care to those who are especially vulnerable- the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the alien/minority. By grouping the alien/minority with the widow, the orphan and the poor, he is recognizing them as a people who can be easily taken advantage of, or simply ignored. To be the “people of God” who know God and reflect His character means a demonstration of the opposite of oppression or neglect- it requires an active caring and a compassionate sensitivity to the needs of the disenfranchised and making sure justice is done on their behalf.

**Finally, when the people of God are given a restatement of their history and calling in Deuteronomy just before they enter the land, the practice of reconciliation as it relates the alien and the poor is emphasized yet again.**

- Deuteronomy 1:16, 17 “...hear the disputes between your brothers and judge fairly, whether the case is between brother Israelites or between one of them and an alien.”
- Deut 10:16-19: “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) “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 “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

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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 "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 the practice of reconciliation and expose racism, tribalism or exclusion of someone who is either ethnically or socially “marginal” for what it is: the abuse of status and power. Those who are dominant members of any group or 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; in short, a servant-community which actively works for the good of those who are at a place of disadvantage.

To oppress the alien is to violate the covenant with God. To exclude someone from the full blessings of the Covenant -which include justice and mercy for those in need- based on ethnic origin or social status, is to break faith with the very character of God - the compassionate Savior of all mankind. All of this needs to shape our understanding of the kind of reconciling commitment God is expecting us to pursue in the church today.

## **Early examples of the practice and need for reconciliation in the pre-monarchical period**

To demonstrate reconciliation was needed in the Covenant community, and that it required an intentional commitment to be worked out in the life of Israel, all we need to do is to highlight a few stories

Moses' wife is a Cushite (Num 18) - which obviously is an issue of reconciliation Aaron and Miriam must deal with. It is not a small issue. The exclamation point is seen in the discipline given to Miriam. We can

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easily reduce the importance of this passage to an abstract issue regarding Moses' leadership status, and miss that the context has to do with ethnic divisions. It is also interesting that Jethro, his father-in-law, was already a Midianite priest when Moses met him, and this non-Hebrew is used by God to give Moses wisdom and insight in how to organize this vast group of people (Exodus 18). The gifting of the people of God in their ethnic diversity is already present in the life of Israel long before the Apostle Paul so richly and fully describes it for us in 1 Corinthians 12.

But perhaps the greatest story about the practice of reconciliation in the pre-monarchical period begins with the story of Rahab. She is a Canaanite prostitute who rescues the spies Joshua sent into the land. She marries a Hebrew named Salmon and becomes part of the lineage of Jesus (Matt 1:5). One of the most powerful parts of her reconciled heritage is that she had a son named Boaz who married another alien-covenant believer named Ruth, who became the great, great grandmother of David. If we are not careful we can read the whole book of Ruth as if the connection to David was the only, major theme of the book and miss the fact that this book is the deepest, fullest picture of the practice of reconciliation in the covenant community we have in the Old Testament narrative. All the rights of the Covenant community life-gathering leftover harvest, the protection of the family, and the eventual rights of the kinsman redeemer are all given to this woman who naturally had no claim to these benefits, until she professed her faith in Yahweh and was brought into the family of God.

If this kind of all-inclusive reconciliation and blessing and acceptance and love had been given to African slaves, Native Americans, Asians and all others who put their faith in Christ in the early days of the European expression of the body of Christ in this great land of ours, who knows how different things would be today?

## **Reconciliation and Justice in The Prophets**

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).

However, in God's faithfulness he raised up Prophets to remind the

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people of God of their Covenant obligations and his great global and cosmic saving and reconciling purposes. Anointed by the Spirit of God, these faithful covenant witnesses give expanded understanding to God's intention to save and reconcile a people for himself from among all the nations of the earth through the work of the coming Messiah.

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

On the negative side, the judgments of the Prophets are most often focused against an idolatry that permitted the practical expression of reconciliation with the poor and the alien to be ignored.

- 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. This is "anti-reconciliation." He often simply refers to these people 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 greater, eternal, faithful agenda of God to reconcile all things together in Christ is revealed in the conclusion of Amos' prophetic ministry as he promises the "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...." 9:11,12.

James quotes this passage in Acts 15:13ff as proof that God has given covenant community status to those from the Gentile nations who put their faith in Christ. God's unstoppable agenda all along.

- 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 made up of a people God called for himself from the Gentile nations.

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- Micah and Isaiah echo the same Prophetic condemnation of the people of Israel for their failure to live as a reconciled community, followed by the promises about the days of the Messiah and the picture of all nations reconciled to God and each other is expanded.

**Isaiah 1:15-23** “When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause. “Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. <sup>19</sup> If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” How the faithful city has become a whore, she who was full of justice! Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers. Your silver has become dross, your best wine mixed with water. Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not bring justice to the fatherless, and the widow’s cause does not come to them.”

**Isaiah 2:1-4** (Micah 4:1-3) “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.”

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, fulfilling God’s initial promise to Abraham in Gen 12 and 18. This is the promise that the reconciling plan of God for the nations will, finally, come to expression in the days of the Messiah.



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rest of 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 his prophecies. 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. True reconciliation will take place.

- 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."
- 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."

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- 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.”

Part of our collective “blindness” in the church for many generations now, has been our ability to read such passages and talk about the good news of the gospel, and even the establishment of churches, as isolated individuals or isolated people groups who have no Covenantal responsibility to be united together under the Kingship of Jesus Christ to practice the reconciling love of caring for widows, the fatherless, the poor and immigrant that God has called his people to all along. We talk about Covenant theology and name many of our churches and institutions with a “covenant” tag, but we seem to think of the Covenant as only a theological construct, and not a directive from God on how to organize and live as a Covenant community. What God actually promises and calls us to is to proclaim a salvation that brings people into the life of the Covenant community, where we are bound by the glory of God to work out his reconciling love.

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 a lack of reconciliation. As Jeremiah addresses Judah and the impending exile, he especially notes their failure to take special care of the poor and needy and the alien in their midst

- 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....”

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- 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 “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.”

The practice of reconciliation in the inclusion and special care given to the disenfranchised, including the alien/minority, is at the very heart of knowing God. Anything less is rooted in idolatry and needs to be repented of.

Ezekiel enters the exile to Babylon with the people of God and faithfully proclaims to them both the certainty of the complete fall of Jerusalem, and then after that historical event, the certainty of their return. Once again the place of the alien/minority is emphasized in both proclamations.

- Ezekiel 14:6-8 “Therefore say to the house of Israel....When any Israelite or alien/minority living in Israel separates himself from me and sets up idols in his heart....I will cut him off from my people.”
- 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/minority, 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/minority. Apparently, just like at the Exodus, people from other nations who had 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. As a result, new aliens/minorities would attach themselves to a Covenant relationship

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with God and his people. How were they to be treated? “Consider them as native-born Israelites.”

- 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/minorities who have settled among you and who have children. You are to consider them as native-born Israelites....in whatever tribe the alien/minority settles you are to give him his inheritance, declares the lord.”

## The Post-Exilic Prophets

- 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.”

Why is the Lord concerned the people rebuild the Temple? Because it was the location and present symbol of his presence on earth where all his people were to be gathered to worship him and to receive his grace and blessings, including the reconciliation practice of justice and compassion for the poor and alien/minority (Deuteronomy 14:28,29, Isaiah 56:7). God’s great salvation purpose was ultimately to bring together people from all the nations of the earth - “the desired (pl) of all nations” who would love and serve him.

- 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/minority or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of one another.’”

Zechariah joins his voice with Haggai’s to remind the people that true fasting consists of a commitment to these basic issues. The work of active compassion, acceptance, love and reconciliation with the disenfranchised will always remain a priority for God’s people.

- 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....”

Seventy plus years after Haggai and Zechariah, Malachi addresses the people of God about their continued unfaithfulness in light of his

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continued love and grace. They are not destroyed because He does not change. But 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. And what will the result be? “Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land” 3:12. The nations will see how the people of God practice the reconciling love of God and care for all those immigrants and minorities and widows and fatherless who come to them, and they will bless God.

Many of these passages from the Prophets and the Psalms have been referred to throughout church history as the biblical/theological support for the universal proclamation of the Gospel. But for some time we have grown accustomed to thinking of the universal proclamation as an issue in itself, without reference to the nature of the relationship between the nations once they have become members of the Covenant community. Our contention is that the Law, the basic defining structure for righteousness among the Covenant people, explicitly addressed these issues in its insistence that the Israelites practice reconciliation by extending all the benefits and acceptance of being full members of the community of God's people to any foreigner/alien/immigrant/minority who, by faith, entered a Covenant relationship with God and his people. The prophets held the people of God accountable to these obligations, and the promise was that in the age of the Messiah, the ultimate Covenant Head would bring this to expression with a world-changing force.

## **Reconciliation and Justice in the New Testament**

At this point it is valuable to remember again 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. We have seen this is also true for issues of reconciliation.

Even though the Old Testament laid out God's demands for reconciliation, the true depth of the plan and purpose of God remained a mystery that does not come to light until the New Testament and how this would be achieved in Jesus of Nazareth. 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. While the kingdom was "near" in Jesus, it comes in full power when the Son of Man is seated the right hand of the Father and pours out his Spirit on his all his people- young and old, men and women. It is then most fully explained by the apostolic letters, and most by Paul, the apostle to the gentiles.

## **Reconciliation as a theme in the announcement of the kingdom of God by 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 all men to God, it seems in the current environment of the church 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 reconcile with 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

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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."

It is very telling the initial response from the people of Nazareth was "all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" (Lk 4:22). Until, that is, Jesus reminds them of God's intention all along to include even the enemies of Israel in his Covenantal blessing of salvation; a commitment the people of Israel often rejected:

**Luke 4:25-29** <sup>25</sup> But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, <sup>26</sup> and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. <sup>27</sup> And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." <sup>28</sup> When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. <sup>29</sup> And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff.

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, apart from the issue of reconciliation - the way we are accustomed to viewing them. The contention here is that the message of reconciliation with God has always been an invitation into a covenantal relationship that involved reconciliation and inclusion in the covenant community. So much so, that by the time we get to the Acts narrative, the more dominant Gentile churches are asked to provide physical relief for their poor Jewish brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. The appeal is based on the 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

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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 in the church, 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" 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 reconciling purpose of God's commitment to the poor and the foreigner in mind, we can see reconciliation all over the Gospel narrative.

## **Reconciliation in the overall nature of the ministry of Christ**

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.

Even though Jesus clearly came to his own Jewish people with a priority commitment to bring them the message of salvation first (Matt 10:5), his ministry involved leading his followers into contact with Syrians (Mt 4:23) rich Romans (Mt 8), poor Samaritans (John 4) and at least on one occasion, a Syrophenician, Greek woman (Mark 7). 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



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(Peter, et al) would have required a whole new view of one another as followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

## **The centrality of the reconciliation of the nations in the Gospel of John**

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, perhaps most 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. If the eternal purpose of God stated in Ephesians 1 is the reconciliation of all men under Christ, then we would expect the theological foundation for that to be laid out in a book that is oriented to the non-Jewish reader. 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 and see it present in the narrative. 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 (italics added)

## Reconciliation and Justice in the Gospel of John

*Tony Myles*

With a reconciliation-in Christ-purpose-of-God in mind, we can go back and re-read the Gospel of John and look for the ways Jesus laid the 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 readers, the message of Christ to reconcile and include the nations in God's salvation purposes stands out in astounding ways.

1. The universal, redemptive and reconciling character of God's work in the world is expressed in the first verses of John chapter one:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,<sup>1</sup> 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 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 is 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); 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

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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, would have seen the implication that these new believers from the whole world were meant to be welcomed into the new community of God’s people as full-fledged members 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 made it quite clear the Gentiles were not welcome at the Temple 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. 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 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

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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 the extent of 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 presence and 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 worshipers *everywhere* who worship in Spirit and in truth (Jn 4:23, 24). This message, at one and 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

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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).

When we put the cumulative effect of the first several chapters of John together and start 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, we can see 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 as the Covenant Head, 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 the redemption of Israel , now lived out on their behalf by the Second Adam who was appointed as their representative (Rom 5:12ff). By faith in Christ and union with him, we all have the shared history that marks us as the sons of Abraham (Rom 4).

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 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

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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 anyone 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”, the true reality is this: 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 most indisputable 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

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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 express genuine reconciliation by loving and caring 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, potential, cultural and theological blinders. Have we allowed a spirit of cultural or ethnocentric expression of the church to permeate our hearts and minds the same way the first century Jewish leaders did? 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 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

*Noel Sengele*

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, 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 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 into 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



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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

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 Apostle's 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 Apostle's themselves in the outpouring of the Spirit on the new Samaritan believers (Acts 8:14-17). If we look at this passage only from an "apostolic authority" point of view, we can miss the relational, reconciliation lessons here. Yes, Peter and John, as representatives of the Jerusalem Apostles were given a

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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 Samaritans 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, nonetheless there ought to be a freedom to look back at the “seed thought” in light of the full flowering of revelation and see the connection. So when God explains Saul/Paul’s future ministry to Ananias and says, “This man is my chosen servant to carry my name before the Gentiles...and the people of Israel” (Acts 9:15), we ought to read this in light of the full revelation Paul is given, and expresses in Ephesians, that this was a message about a salvation that very much included reconciliation. As the Acts story continues, the reality of this reconciliation is on nearly every page.

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 the gentiles needed salvation. Even the

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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). 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 Acts 13:1. Barnabus and Saul are Jews but Simeon called Niger and Lucius of Cyrene are most likely from North Africa.

## **The Theology of Reconciliation in Paul's Ministry and Letters**

The deepest theological revelations about the reconciliation nature of the work of Christ come from the writings of Paul, which should not be a surprise because of his calling as the apostle to the gentiles. We have already referred to various parts of his letters touching on these themes but it may be helpful to see how much this central issue of reconciliation – as Paul declares it to be (Eph 1:9,10)- shapes the entire book of Ephesians and the whole of Paul's gospel ministry.

### **Ephesians and the theological and practical themes of the reconciled church**

Sometimes we allow the issues of personal calling, salvation and assurance to dominate our thoughts in a way that they become the lens through which we consider all Scripture. The opening chapter of Ephesians is a case in point. While the glories of the depth of the love and promises of God listed here does provide a treasure trove of the riches of God's grace

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for each one of us personally, and they should (and must!) be personally applied, this should not be confused with saying a personal, individualistic application is the main focus of Paul's teaching.

**Everything in Ephesians 1** is written with a corporate, "us" view of the church in mind. The emphasis is these blessings are for all of us, specifically as those who have been brought into the reconciliation-of-all-things-in-Christ purposes of God. Sixteen times in verses 3-14 Paul only uses the plural "us" or "we" or "you" (pl) or "your" (pl). The whole tenor of the book shouts this is more than simply making sure he is using the plural because he knows his audience is made up on more than one person. Instead, from the opening section of the book, he is placing an emphasis on the reality we need to deeply embrace that all these astounding blessings of God are for all of us, each and every one of us, *with no one excluded*.

**Ephesians 1:9-10** "...making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."

**In chapter 2** Paul explains the deep focus we need to embrace for us to fully comprehend what God has done through the work of Christ. After reminding us (again with the constant use of the plural) we were all dead in sin, all made alive by his grace, all seated with him in the heavenly places, and all created for good works he has prepared in advance for us to do.....he then urges us to see one another for what we are: the one, new, redeemed, re-united humanity in Christ.

**Ephesians 2:13-17** "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near."

He concludes by telling us when it comes to citizenship in the kingdom, for everyone the "alien" status has been removed. There are only those who have equal access to the One Father (2:18), who are "fellow citizens," and are "members of the household of God" (2:19).

**In chapter 3** Paul starts a thought related to this unity, quickly diverts his focus to an important, related truth, and then picks up his initial thought again several verses later. The main point he returns to is

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how this great unity and reconciliation of all things in Christ and the reuniting of the nations into one, new, man has led him to a very specific prayer for us-

**Ephesians 3:1** For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles-.....

**3:14-21** .... For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, <sup>15</sup> from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, <sup>16</sup> that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup> so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith- that you, being rooted and grounded in love, <sup>18</sup> may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, <sup>19</sup> and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. <sup>20</sup> Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, <sup>21</sup> to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

While this prayer can have many side applications, the main focus is simply this: because we are all members of the same family, without distinction, we need the strength of God's Spirit in us to know the presence of Christ and the extent of his love both to see how far reaching this reconciling love goes and that in *this reconciling purpose, God is able to do more than all we ask or imagine*. The strength to love across our divisions requires the strength of God in the tangible presence of Christ, and when it is present, he is able to break down the dividing wall of hostility.

This takes the tremendous, far reaching promises of this passage out of the realm of a blank slate that we can simply fill in with any number of desires we might have, and powerfully and keenly focuses them on the fulfillment of God's agenda expressed throughout Covenant history and now fully revealed in Jesus the Messiah: that God can re-unite humanity into the humble, loving, righteous people of God he created us to be because of the work of Christ on the cross.

The content of the prayer ought to grab our hearts and minds as we acknowledge the wrestle and challenges involved in a real, tangible unity in the local church of rich and poor and people from a variety of social and ethnic backgrounds coming together with a unified vision of the kingdom of God, held together by a common relationship of faith in Christ. Nothing except the extraordinary power of God and presence of Christ doing more than we can assess or imagine could possibly break through the barriers of brokenness, racial division, mistrust of the poor and the rich towards each other, the negative stereotyping, generational wounding and

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pain that is present in the history of the church, let alone the history of the world. And yet, this is the power of the reconciliation Jesus bought and paid for and what he has promised to accomplish in us. It is part of the core reality of what the church needs to be praying for and giving herself to.

Before Paul tells us his prayer, he takes a moment to tell us his entire apostolic ministry and teaching was always centered in this message of the reconciliation of all things, and all men, into Christ.

**Ephesians 3:4-7** <sup>4</sup> When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, <sup>5</sup> which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. <sup>6</sup> This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. <sup>7</sup> Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power.

When Paul says, "of *this* gospel I was made a minister," this must of necessity correlate to Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 2:2, "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." The one statement has to be shorthand for the other. They cannot be two separate or competing areas of focus in his preaching, but rather, two different ways of talking about the same thing. When we remember the context of 1 Corinthians 2, it was in fact addressing the issues of unity in Christ versus the divisions and disunity Corinth was struggling with.

What this passage also tells us is that wherever Paul and the other apostles preached and planted churches, they preached the gospel in a way that called men to reconciliation to God and to one another as part of the foundational proclamation of the good news. They did not preach the cross of Christ in a narrow way as only a means of personal salvation, but like Jesus with the woman at the well, it was a message of both personal healing and reconciliation across all the attending broken relationships that plague humanity.

Do we preach the gospel and plant churches and live our church community lives with the call and practice of the reconciliation purchased by Christ as central to the gospel? While there are some who, not maliciously at all, think that cross-cultural ministry is the calling of a few either gifted or devoted church planters, this passage would suggest just the opposite. This the call of all God's church and all who proclaim the gospel to preach the reconciliation of all things in Christ.

**In Ephesians 4** Paul begins explaining to us how the reconciliation we have received in Christ is to be lived out. There are

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always books being written about the different aspects of the Christian life that contain some reference to “10 Essential Steps” or “5 Key Ingredients”. Those kind of books can have more or less value depending on the insights. If we want to know **the real key ingredients to living out our reconciliation in the church, then we just need to pay careful attention to the Holy Spirit inspired word of God through the apostles who were addressing this very issue.** So Paul begins,

“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, <sup>2</sup> with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup> eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup> There is one body and one Spirit- just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call- <sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism, <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” Eph 4:1-6

**All the instructions beginning in chapter 4 through chapter 6** need to be read in light of the eternal purpose of God to reconcile all things under Christ, and the call of the church to live that out. Here is Paul’s “top ten” list, as it were, of how we make this happen:

An approach to one another of humility, gentleness, patience, long-suffering love and an eager, intentional pursuit of our unity as members of the one family of God 4:1-6

An acknowledgement we have all been taken captive by Christ and given gifts, and that the role of servant leaders is to equip and unleash the various gifts of the reconciled/reconciling community for works of service (as defined by Christ our King) 4:7-12

This unleashing of gifts and teaching each part of the diverse body to express its gifts in a context of love for one another, is precisely what will bring the unity, and maturity and fullness of the image of Christ and the kingdom to its greatest expression 4:13-16

We have to “put to death” the misdeeds of the body and need to stop living like unbelievers who still walk in darkness; instead we need to put on the new righteousness we were created for and is ours as a gift- truthfulness, caring for each other’s needs, speaking encouragement, being kind and tenderhearted toward each other and always forgiving each other in the same way Christ forgives us

We need to walk in righteous love which means sexual purity, purity in speech, discerning God’s will instead of giving ourselves over to the “will” of the broken culture, being controlled by the Spirit and not by mind-altering drugs or alcohol, speaking

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spiritual truth to one another and being thankful for each other and submitting to one another in the Lord 5:1-21

Humbly being faithful to one another as husbands, wives, children, employers and employees 5:22-6:9

There is no secret knowledge or wisdom or unique, special technique to growing as the reconciled church that is not rooted in the practical application of these issues. These things are what the Spirit's wisdom and the insight of love are really all about:

**Philippians 1:9-11** "And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, <sup>10</sup> so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, <sup>11</sup> filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."

**Paul ends his letter in chapter 6** with a critical reminder there is a battle to be fought for the reconciled church to live out her calling. If the whole letter is about the great mystery of the gospel, now revealed, that God is bringing about the reconciliation of all things in Christ, then the first application of Ephesians 6:10ff speaking about spiritual warfare, must have some reference to that work of reconciliation.

The authorities and the cosmic powers and the spiritual forces of evil are not just arrayed against us in our personal walk with God but are arrayed against us corporately in this display of the reconciling love of God. So we need the armor of God over us all, in all the ways described, so we can stand against the attacks of the evil one who has every intention of sowing division and hatred and bitterness and lack of forgiveness among us.

In his final statement about the nature of the opposition of evil to the message of reconciliation in Christ, Paul asks for prayer for himself to clearly and boldly proclaim "the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains." (6:19,20). He already told us the mystery of the gospel is centered in the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile. If we look back at Paul's initial arrest in Jerusalem, here is what we read as he gave his testimony to the angry mob at the Temple:

**Acts 22:17-22** <sup>17</sup> "When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance <sup>18</sup> and saw him saying to me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.' <sup>19</sup> And I said, 'Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. <sup>20</sup> And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed



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him.' <sup>21</sup> And he said to me, 'Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'" <sup>22</sup> Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live."

This is very reminiscent of the response at the synagogue in Nazareth in Luke 4 when Jesus began talking about the love of God for the gentiles. The gospel of reconciliation to God and to one another always disturbs the segregated status-quo. May it disturb us as well.

Finally, the themes of reconciliation and unity in the letters of the apostles have a much greater force and powerful relevance for us when read in the light of this actual, living-together reconciliation called for in both the Old and New Testaments. We need to remember the early church was of necessity an ethnic and socio-economic mix. Slave and free, Scythians, Barbarians, Greeks, Jews and all other groups were gathered in cities as one church. The call for slaves and masters to walk together, for Jews and Gentiles to embrace each other, were not addressed to segregated congregations. These were local churches with all the different parties, including former enemies, in close Covenantal relationship with each other.

**Romans 15:5** "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus"

**Phil 2:1-2** "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,"

**1 John 4:19-21** "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,"

**2 John vv.5-6** "I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the 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,"

**1 Peter 2:9-10** "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may

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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.

**Revelation 5:9 -14** And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth." Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped.

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 their weekly meals (1 Cor 11:17-22); the "Judaizer" believers were looking down on the Gentiles for their failure to be circumcised and keep certain cultural/ceremonial aspects of the law that were necessary, in their thinking, to be fully accepted members of the community (Galatians); and even Peter was guilty of refusing to eat with his Gentile brothers and sisters (Galatians 2). The Gentiles in the church at Rome were struggling with honoring the Jewish Christians who had recently returned from a temporary exile- (Rom 1-4). The sin of preferential treatment for the rich had to be addressed by James (James 2) and John goes out his way to say reconciliation with God without loving reconciliation to one another which includes the practice of justice and compassion is a lie (1 John 3, 4).

What all this confirms is simply that the work of reconciliation is an ongoing, intentional battle the church must constantly engage in. The

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biblical case for addressing the issues of racial division in our own culture, and in the church, are simply as old as the question of Cain: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The answers of what that “keeping” looks like, are fleshed out for us in the Covenantal Word of God, both in very specific commands and in wonderful stories of practical application throughout the history of God’s people.

May the Lord richly bless us to enter more fully into the eternal plan of God now revealed: the reconciliation of all things in Jesus Christ.

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