

God's Love Story and Redemptive Unity

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If there is one word that describes God and His story and the response He desires from us, the Body of Christ, I would have to say it is Love! There are many Scriptures that reveal God's love. For instance, from Genesis to Revelation, we see the unfolding story of God pursuing His rebellious creation (Romans 5:8), and His love is on full display through the life, death and resurrection of Christ. We also see that God is love (1 John 4:8), and it is within this context of God being love and loving us that God calls us to love others.

1 John 4:7-11 reveals His love and His desire for us to love,

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

God's love is radical for us, His followers! It is totally sacrificial! While we cannot love to the same magnitude as God, the love He calls us to is radical. Radical means from the “root” out. Some synonyms for radical are comprehensive, exhaustive, far reaching, holistic, sweeping, thorough. The love He calls us to is radical and comprehensive and far reaching. In fact, he calls us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44) and to love aliens, strangers, and those who are very much not like us. (Exodus 23:9, Leviticus 19:10, Deuteronomy 10:19, Hebrews 13:2). We are called to love all people, and the Lord knows it will be the most challenging with those not like us. His love is also one that is in perfect harmony with His justice.

The greatest display of God's radical love is that while we were his enemies, fighting against him tooth and nail, He sent His Son to die for our sin and to reconcile us to Himself. This incredible act of love made reconciliation possible for all of us by breaking down the dividing wall of hostility. This reconciliation brings warring factions to the table of peace, and God miraculously creates a new humanity that is **“one new man”** (Ephesians 2:11-22). **This is Redemptive Unity!** A oneness that comes through Christ! Paul is talking about the radical unity of the Jews and Gentiles that at the time would have been unheard of and not seen as possible. In fact, Paul called it the **“mystery of Christ”** (Ephesians 3:4-6). Our identity in Christ and our oneness takes precedence over every other identity we have, and there are no barriers between us as image bearers except ones that we have erected between one another.

In order to see our part in God's story of Redemptive Unity, we need to be reminded of where we are eventually going in the new heavens and new earth! This is our vision of our future reality! If we know where we are going, then we can look at the steps necessary for us to connect our story with God's story. We also need to back up and see where it all started (Creation), what happened (the Fall) and Jesus as the one who fulfills Love and Redemptive Unity (Redemption). Before we do that, here is a brief glimpse of what is to come!

Restoration – Two important aspects of the new heavens and new earth are:

- 1) **A place of complete Unity, Reconciliation, and Restoration**
- 2) **A place where people from every nation, tribe, people and language will together Celebrate the Lamb.**

Where we are going is a place of complete Unity, Reconciliation, and Restoration – The new heavens and new earth are a place where all relationships are reconciled and restored, and we as the Body of Christ dwell among Him with no sin and no suffering.

- **Isaiah 11:6-9 – In the kingdom of heaven even the wolf and the lamb enjoy relationship and reconciliation and the child and snake can play together**

“And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, And the leopard will lie down with the young goat, And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little boy will lead them. Also the cow and the bear will graze, Their young will lie down together, And the lion will eat straw like the ox. The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, And the weaned child will put his hand on the viper’s den. They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”

- **Revelation 21:3-4**

“And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.”

Where we are going is a place where people from every nation, tribe, people and language will Celebrate the Lamb.

- **Rev 5:9** And they sang a new song: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.”
- **Rev 7:9** After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.”

If this is where we are going, then it seems important that we begin to live in a manner that is consistent with what we will no doubt experience in this new heaven and new earth. Among other things there will be people of every tribe and nation. Why wouldn’t we begin to enjoy the benefits of this beautiful diversity here as a foretaste of what is to come in the promised coming kingdom?

Let's now consider God's love story and redemptive unity that began with creation and is fulfilled through Christ.

Creation - Where we started – God created man in His own image (*imago dei*) and He made from one *man* every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth. He looked at all He created and it was good! (Gen 1:26-31; Acts 17:24-26)

- Every human being is to be treated with equal dignity as made in the image of God
- Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus”, makes it clear that our unity in Christ and the fact that we are made in His image transcend any divisions of race, class, and gender
- All human beings are of the same seed (from Adam and Eve)
- He gave man a benedictory blessing in Genesis 1:28 “to fill the earth and subdue it”. This benediction is often referred to as the creation or cultural mandate. As mankind filled the earth this mandate began to be fulfilled. Ethnic and language groups are a fulfillment of the cultural mandate given to Adam and to Noah. Genesis 10 shows the table of nations coming from Noah's 3 sons (Genesis 10:32)
- The development of diverse cultures and ethnicities is a part of God's creational mandate and intent for humanity.

The Fall – Where it went wrong

- The sin of Adam and Eve broke the relationship and the intimacy that man had with God as He sent them out of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:23-24). It also broke the relationship that man had with each other (see Genesis 4 and the rest of the Bible!)
- The Tower of Babel shows the division of ethnicities and language groups being part of the fall. He wanted them to continue to fulfill the cultural mandate by developing the latent potential God had embedded in his creation. So God scatters humans, in an act of grace. Pentecost shows the reverse of Babel and of Noah's fractured family. At Pentecost, the BIRTH of the church, believers of the whole world worshipped as ONE, hearing their own language.
- The Scriptures consistently show man's bias to favoritism and oppression including that which is based on ethnicity, class, and gender. (Leviticus 19:13-16, Psalms 72:4, Psalms 146:7, Zechariah 7:9 – 10, Amos 2:6-7, John 4:7-26, Matthew 23:25-27)

God chooses a people for Himself, Israel! Throughout the OT, God's people are called to be a blessing to others and to love and act justly!

God's people are blessed to be a blessing to the other nations - God sets apart a people, a nation for Himself through Abraham and his family to be a blessing to all the nations and families of the earth.

- **Genesis 12:1-3** "Now the LORD said to Abram, Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed"
- God's people from the beginning were called to be a blessing to each other and to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. God's people were never to just bless themselves.
- **Paul in Galatians connects the gospel to the Abrahamic Covenant**
 - **Galatians 3:8-9**
"The Scripture foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "All the nations will be blessed in you." So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer."

As part of His Love, God has a passion for Justice and Compassion! Loving others and acting justly are connected throughout Scripture. He consistently shows particular concern and compassion for those that are poor, mistreated, left out, suffer injustices, and do not have the structural support that they need. It is not acceptable that all are not treated fairly and equally and that some are oppressed and pushed down whether intentional or not. As I mentioned earlier mistreatment, favoritism, and oppression are revealed throughout Scripture, and God addresses it. This is part of sin and our sin nature. It is a lack of love, the opposite of love. **God is all about making right what is not right. We cannot separate Justice from His Love!** Justice and Love can also not be separated from His **Holiness!** (Leviticus 20:26, 1 Peter 1:15-16)

- **Neighborly love**, then, according to God's moral law, exemplified in the **fifth through tenth commandments**, calls for impartial kindness and justice to be shown to all (across ethnicity, class, and gender), an equal concern for the well-being of others. Moses grounds this behavior in God's character (Leviticus 19:3, 4, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18) and our responsibility as believers to imitate him "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2).
- **Leviticus 19:9-13** says to leave the gleanings from your vineyard for the needy and the stranger and to not oppress your neighbor.
 - 'Now when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰ Nor

shall you glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the LORD your God. You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another. You shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the LORD. 'You shall not oppress your neighbor, nor rob *him*. The wages of a hired man are not to remain with you all night until morning.'

- **The Psalms are filled with compassion for the needy and justice for the oppressed.**

- **Righteousness and Justice are the foundation of his throne!**

- **Psalm 72:4** – “May He vindicate the afflicted of the people, save the children of the needy and crush the oppressor”
- **Psalm 89:14** – “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you.” Also **Isaiah 11:4** reveals the importance of righteousness and justice to God now and in the new heavens and new earth “but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth”
- **Psalm 103:6** – “The Lord performs righteous deeds and judgments for all who are oppressed”
- **Psalm 146:7-9** – “Who executes justice for the oppressed; Who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free. The LORD opens *the eyes of* the blind; The LORD raises up those who are bowed down; The LORD loves the righteous; The LORD protects the strangers; He supports the fatherless and the widow, But He thwarts the way of the wicked.”

- **The Minor Prophets are full of God’s passion for the oppressed and His criticism of the oppressor.**

- **Micah 6:8** - "He has told you, O man, what is good: and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God
- **Zechariah 7:9 – 10** – “Dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another”
- **Also Amos 2:6, 5:11; Micah 2:1-3; Nahum 3:1**

If we are members of the majority culture (those people who are typically the holders of power, possibly numerically dominant and/or key influencers in the development of societal mores and norms) we cannot afford to turn a blind eye to anyone who fails to experience Biblical justice. When we see justice unevenly applied, as a people of faith we must stand with

confidence on the authority of the Scriptures and speak boldly on behalf of the oppressed. We cannot be dismissed from these injunctions from the Scriptures. God's heart is for justice and that should be the heartbeat of his people.

Redemption - JESUS is the fulfillment of Love and of Redemptive Unity

Some ways that Jesus fulfills redemptive unity and a love that is so radical to us:

- **Jesus chose very different disciples and reached out and loved those that were not like Him and those considered outcasts. (Mark 2:15)**
- **Jesus showed the greatest act of love with His sacrifice and calls us to Love our neighbor as ourselves and to Love one another (Romans 5:8, Matthew 27:37-40, John 13:34-35)**
 - **The Biblical word, hospitality, has the meaning of brotherly love for the stranger and foreigner! Hospitality is not simply entertaining guests but showing love to those different than us as we would our own brother. (1 Timothy 3:2)**
- **God's love for justice/hatred of injustice continues to be seen through the life of Christ. (Matthew 8:1-3, 23:27-28)**
- **Jesus death and resurrection created the Unity of the Body of Christ and He calls us to live out this unity. (Ephesians 2:14-15, Colossians 3:9-11, Galatians 3:26 – 28, John 17:20-23)**
- **Jesus is the great Reconciler and calls us to a ministry of Reconciliation. (Ephesians 2:14 – 16, 2 Corinthians 5:18-21)**
- **Jesus calls us to make disciples of all the nations. (Matthew 28:18-20)**

Jesus chose very different disciples and reached out and radically loved those that were not like Him and those considered outcasts.

- The twelve disciples would never have been together outside of Jesus. For example, Matthew a tax collector and Simon the zealot who was anti - government; James and John (sons of thunder) who were loud fisherman. Only Jesus can bring such diverse people together.
- In addition to the disciples, Jesus hung out with tax collectors, prostitutes, beggars, and those that no one else wanted to associate with in their lives. He had an inclusive table fellowship that included people across class as well as gender.

- **Mark 2:15** – “And it happened that He was reclining *at the table* in his house, and many tax collectors and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many of them, and they were following Him.”

Jesus showed the greatest act of love with His sacrifice and calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves and to love one another - Jesus said the two greatest commandments were to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Matthew 22:37-40

- **Romans 5:8** - But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us
- **Jesus emphasizes our call to Love with the Great Commandment (e.g., Mark 12:31, Luke 10:25-37).** “After summarizing the ethical requirements of the moral law of God for the believer’s life by saying: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27), Jesus is met with the self-justifying question: “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). In other words, the lawyer who queried Jesus was seeking a delimitation of the demands of neighbor love. Jesus answers with the story of the Good Samaritan, and makes it clear that the better question is “Am I a good neighbor?” Jesus’ application of the story shows that those who obey God’s command to love neighbor don’t attempt to delimit the obligation of neighbor love, but rather show mercy indiscriminately and even at significant personal cost (Luke 10:36-37). On this basis, Christians are enjoined by the moral law and by Jesus’ direct exhortation to show love, care, concern for the well-being of, justice, mercy, and kindness to all people, with impartiality “(*Example Pastoral Letter Used by the Mississippi Valley Presbytery Referred to in the Penultimate Resolutions in Overture 43, p.3*)
- **John 13:34 -35** - "A new commandment I give you to love one another, just as I have loved you, love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples" – When we love each other, we show the watching world that we are followers of Christ.
- **1 John 4:11-12** - "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us." People see the Lord through our love.

It is also important to note that The Biblical word, “hospitality”, has the meaning of brotherly love for the stranger and foreigner. Hospitality is not simply entertaining guests but showing love to those different than us like we would our own brother.

- “The Greek term that is often translated into the English term “hospitality” is the word φιλόξενος. The word is a combination of two concepts, that break down as follows:

- φιλό (pronounced Philao) is one of several words for “love” in Greek. Being a more precise language than English, classical Greek has a few different ways to express the word “love.” In this case, the word that is used means “brotherly love” or “to love like a brother,” and is how we get the name Philadelphia — the City of Brotherly Love.”
- The word ξενος (Xenos) which makes up the second half of the word we render “hospitality” actually means “stranger” or “foreigner” and is where we get the word xenophobia which is the fear of strangers/foreigners.

“In light of these two words being combined, hospitality as commonly understood, isn’t exactly the best way to express this biblical truth. Instead of simply “entertaining guests” the word becomes “one who loves “strangers” like you would your own brother.” *That’s a big difference*, and completely changes the way we see this term used in scripture...”
(Benjamin Corey, “*True Biblical Hospitality: Loving Immigrants, Strangers, and Enemies*”)

- One of the qualities of an elder is to be **hospitable** – **1 Timothy 3:2** – “An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach”

God’s love for justice/hatred of injustice continues to be seen through the life of Christ

- One way that Jesus addresses injustice is through love and compassion and healing and restoring those that no one cares about and considers outcasts and rejects.
 - **Matthew 8:1-3** – “When Jesus came down from the mountain, large crowds followed Him. ² And a leper came to Him and bowed down before Him, and said, “Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.” ³ Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, “I am willing; be cleansed.” And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.”
 - The priests would determine if the skin disease was leprosy or not, but if it was, you would have to be separated from those who are clean. It meant isolation and living with other lepers.
- Jesus continually criticizes the Pharisees for their unjust treatment of others and their hypocritical lifestyle
 - **Matthew 23:27-28** “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸ So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.
- Jesus shows his heart to bring justice through the Parable of the Persistent Widow

- **Luke 18:7-8a** – “now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly.”
- Jesus was not apathetic toward injustice and his call to us to love our neighbor as ourselves does not allow us to be apathetic toward injustice!

Jesus death and resurrection created the Unity of the Body of Christ and He calls us to live out this Unity.

- **He crushed the barrier between people of different ethnicities, classes, and genders.** He brought together Jews and Gentiles and made them one in Christ (Ephesians 2:11-21).

Ephesians 2:14-15 – “For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall.... so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man...”

- “It is this stunning truth that Paul declares, a truth which he calls the “mystery of Christ” and the “mystery of the Gospel.” In Ephesians 3:6 he states, “This mystery is that through the Gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promises in Christ.” It is of no small significance that Paul ends his letter to the Ephesians with the request that they pray for him in this way: “Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the Gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.” Notice that Paul does not say he is in chains for declaring the Gospel. He says he is in chains for declaring the “mystery” of the Gospel. The mystery of the Gospel upsets the status quo of race and resistance has never been far away.”
(Committee on Mission to North America - PASTORAL LETTER ON RACISM Approved at the March 2004 MNA Committee Meeting as the Committee’s Recommendation to the Thirty-Second General Assembly, p.6)
- **“While establishing groups based on natural affinities is not always wrong, it should be undertaken with great care.** This approach is the basis of the homogeneous principle of church growth, which has been a significant principle in the church growth literature of recent decades. But could it be that planning for the growth of the church along natural affinity lines has become an obstacle to the supernatural work of the Spirit that would show a watching world the power of the Gospel? Francis Schaeffer argued that the final and conclusive argument for the truthfulness of the Christian faith is “observable oneness among true Christians” *(The Great Evangelical Disaster, 170-171)*. Surely there is no greater or more conclusive argument for the truthfulness and power of the Christian faith than observable oneness among true Christians across the lines of race. This is a oneness that is not natural and it is for this very reason a powerful demonstration of the

truth of the Gospel. *Such an approach might not seem efficient but it would be effective in attaining the goal of demonstrating a Gospel that unites people across the dividing lines of race.*" (Committee on Mission to North America - PASTORAL LETTER ON RACISM Approved at the March 2004 MNA Committee Meeting as the Committee's Recommendation to the Thirty-Second General Assembly, p.12)

- **Colossians 3:9-11 and Galatians 3:26 - 28 also make clear that we are one in Christ!**
 - "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus"

- **Jesus prays for our unity in His prayer to the Father near the end of His earthly life**
 - **John 17:20-23** – "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those who also believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they may also be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me."

 - "In John 17 Jesus prays for his followers, "that they may all be perfectly one." Think about it. Jesus is about to suffer the misery of hell itself. He has the cup of wrath already pressed up against his lips. Of all possible things, what is on his mind? Our unity! Of all possible things, what was Jesus' intercessory and missional priority? that we might be *one*." (Duke Kwon, *Denominational Diversity and Multicultural Normativity* talk, June 22, 2016)
<https://www.raanetwork.org/denominational-diversity-cultural-normativity/>

- Psalm 133 is a beautiful picture of the blessings and fruit of unity. In John 17 Jesus shows that the fruit is the world knowing that He has come as our redeemer.
 - **Psalm 133:1-3** – "Behold how good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity! It is like precious oil upon the head, coming down upon the beard, coming down upon the edge of his robes. It is like the dew of Hermon coming down upon the mountain of Zion; for there the Lord commanded the blessing – life forever. "

 - "Psalm 133 not only reminds us of the beauty, goodness and sweetness of unity in the Body of Christ, it informs us of its miraculous blessing of growth. *It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.* (Ps 133:3) John Calvin comments on this miraculous grace of unity where the drenching moisture of Hermon

somehow finds its way to fall upon the arid, dry Zion. “The dew distilling upon Mount Zion and Hermon, denotes, that a holy unity has not only a sweet savor before God, but is productive of good effects, as the dew moistens the earth and supplies it with sap and freshness.” Jesus gets more exacting in the application and promised fruitfulness of this call to holy unity when He focuses His prayer on how the world would know that He has come as our only redeemer: “I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (Jn 17:23)

- *Letters from Devoted PCA Pastors Regarding Reconciliation, November 2015, Craig Garriott, p.19*

Jesus is the great Reconciler and calls us to a ministry of Reconciliation

- **Ephesians 2:14 – 16** – “For he himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross...”
- **“Katallassō (reconciliation) means literally, “to change, or exchange; to effect a change.”** As John de Gruchy draws out the implication, when we are “reconciled,” we exchange places “with ‘the other,’ and (are) in solidarity with rather than against ‘the other.’” Reconciliation is a process that causes us to overcome “alienation through identification and in solidarity with ‘the other,’ thus making peace and restoring relationships.” Biblical scholar James Earl Massey writes, “The image in the word shows something having been set aside or put down [kata]: an attitude, a grievance, a position, a deed, a distance, a result, in order to induce or bring about a change for the better. A new disposition is exhibited, a new stance is assumed, a new framework is established granting a rich togetherness where enmity and distance previously were the order.” Reconciliation can be understood as exchanging places with “the other,” overcoming alienation through identification, solidarity, restoring relationships, positive change, new frameworks, and a rich togetherness.” (*Curtis Paul DeYoung, “Practicing Biblical Reconciliation in Multicultural Congregations”, p 62*)
<http://www.judsonpress.com/img/cms/pdf/PRACTICING%20BIBLICAL%20RECONCILIATION%20IN.pdf>
- **2 Corinthians 5:18-21** – “Now all *these* things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Jesus calls us to make disciples of all the nations

- **Communion of Saints and Making Disciples of all Nations**

“The Bible and our Westminster Confession of Faith ground our treatment of fellow Christians as brothers and sisters, joint heirs, as blood-bought family in **the doctrine of the communion of the saints**. Jesus commissioned his church to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). The language of “all nations” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη [panta ta ethnē]) highlights the connection of Jesus’ great commission to the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4) and the Gentile mission of the church. The command to make disciples from “all nations” indicates that Jesus intended us to go to all the peoples of earth with the Gospel, and that he intended his church to include disciples from all peoples. “Don’t just go to the Jewish people, but to all the Gentile peoples,” Jesus is saying. He reiterates this in Acts 1:8 when he tells his disciples that they will be his witnesses “to the end of the earth.” (*Example Pastoral Letter Used by the Mississippi Valley Presbytery Referred to in the Penultimate Resolutions in Overture 43*, p. 4)

- The focus of our Lord’s teaching were for his initial closest followers to enter into relationships with others for the purpose of seeing them too become his active followers. The very process of making a disciple means entering into a close and long term relationship with the ones you are discipling.

It is clear that Jesus and his life, death, and resurrection (the gospel) are all about His Love and His Redemptive Unity. He does not do this by keeping us apart but by bringing us together in relationship. We are his chosen instruments to love and bring the gospel to all people. In the New Testament, Jesus lived this, and the early church modeled it.

The early church modeled multi-ethnic relationships and multi-ethnic church in the book of Acts. The early church took to heart Jesus’ teachings and lifestyle of unity by bringing Jews and Gentiles together in the church.

I like Paul Hiebert’s definition of the **multi-ethnic church**:

"A multiethnic church is a church in which there is 1) an attitude and practice of accepting people of all ethnic, class and national origins as equal and fully participating members and ministers in the fellowship of the church; and 2) the manifestation of this attitude and practice by the involvement of people from different ethnic, social and national communities as members in the church" (*Hiebert quoted in “One New People: Models for Developing a Multiethnic Church” by Manuel Ortiz, 1996, Appendix p.1*)

For the purpose of this paper a multi-ethnic church is one which represents ethnic as well as class diversity.

Acts 2 - Day of Pentecost

- Holy Spirit falls on men from every nation under heaven and they each hear the message of the disciples in their own language.
- Verses 6-11 - Luke lists every ethnicity - why? God sees color and race and we are to celebrate it! Caution - we should not say we are colorblind.
- God in His time and in a manner consistent with His eternal decree, reverses the curse of Babel and forms a body of multi-ethnic believers at Pentecost.
- At Babel God used languages to create confusion and division. At Pentecost God used language once again this time to bring clarity and unity as each heard in their own language and understood. The ultimate consummation of Pentecost will be realized in the new heavens and new earth.

Acts 6 – The Hellenistic Jews’ widows were overlooked for the native Jews’ widows in daily distribution of food. Authority and responsibility to lead the effort to correct this was given to men who were all Hellenist’s, the minority!

- These Hellenists raised a complaint that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of the food. This could have easily been exploited by the evil one and created a division early in the life of this fledgling new church’s existence, if not for the wisdom and discernment of the Apostles.
- What happened was that the apostles called the church together and told them to “choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom” (6:3). These would be responsible for the distribution. The men they chose had names like Stephen and Philip—names that identified them as Hellenists! The misunderstanding was resolved as the Apostles had the wisdom to assign the Hellenists, the minority, to oversee the distribution to all! And “so the Word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly” (v. 7).¹
 - *Simmons, W. A. (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015). Stephen. In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), The Lexham Bible Dictionary. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.*
 - ¹ *Richards, L., & Richards, L. O. (1987). The teacher’s commentary (p. 772). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.*

Acts 10

- Peter has vision of all kinds of animals on a sheet that he is told to kill and eat but unholy and unclean, Lord says what He has cleansed is no longer unclean - Cornelius, the centurion of Italian cohort is led to Peter - Peter goes to Caesarea and shares the gospel - "God does not show partiality" - as he speaks, the Holy Spirit falls upon all those listening (Gentiles) and the circumcised believers are surprised.
- Gentile believers were suddenly welcomed into the church, with the same rights and privileges and blessings as the Jewish believers in Christ! And again at this turning point,

the central figure is the Apostle Peter.¹ (¹ Richards, L., & Richards, L. O. (1987). *The teacher's commentary* (p. 774). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.)

- To understand the need for Peter's preparation and the angry reaction of the Jewish believers when they heard later that Peter had actually entered a Gentile's home, we need to realize the attitude of the Jew toward all foreigners.

For hundreds of years the Jews, full of a sense of their own destiny as God's chosen people, had been politically subject to a series of foreign rulers. Vicious wars, filled with unspeakable atrocities, had been waged by and against the foreigners. Yet the Jews remained in bondage. The fact that this bondage was to men who had no standing or covenant relationship with God made the situation even more galling. Israel was forced to submit to a race they considered unholy and with whom they would never choose to associate. **The Gentile was viewed with far greater loathing, and with less respect, than the slave of colonial days.** In fact, no pious Jew would ever enter a Gentile's home. He would be contaminated if he did, unable to worship God until he had been ceremonially cleansed.

Thus in the earliest days of the church, the believers were astounded to find God extending His Spirit to the Gentiles! This called for a radical reorientation of their conception of God, and of themselves as the chosen people. (¹ Richards, L., & Richards, L. O. (1987). *The teacher's commentary* (p. 774). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.)

Acts 11 - The church at Antioch is first place where followers of Christ are called Christians (Jews and Gentiles together). This church also had multicultural leadership.

- Some disciples only spoke to Jews but some of the men from Cyprus and Cyrene spoke to the Greeks also, and the hand of the Lord was with them and a large number turned to the Lord (Acts 11:20-21)
- The Book of Acts emphasizes the cultural diversity of the Antioch church, because it was here that the disciples were first called Christians (11:26). The newly coined term, meaning "Those of Christ," was invented to describe these believers in their unprecedented mix. Pagan Antiochians knew about Jews worshiping in their synagogues. They also had heard of Gentiles who had become proselytes to Judaism, and they likely were familiar with the "God-fearers," Gentiles who revered Israel's God but who stopped short of full conversion. They could not account, however, for the strange equality that transcended the multi-ethnicity of these Antioch followers of Christ.
- "In Acts 13:1-2, Luke takes special care to point out that the leadership of the Antioch church was multi-cultural. Paul was a Hellenistic Jew from Tarsus, in Asia Minor. Barnabas was Jewish as well, but hailed from the Mediterranean island of Cyprus. Manaen was from Herod's household, indicating a privileged upbringing. Simeon had the nickname "Niger" (which literally meant "black"), because he was from the region of Sub-Saharan Africa that the modern nation of Niger

sits. And Lucius was from Cyrene, modern-day Libya. Of the five leaders mentioned, then, one is from the Middle East, one from Asia, one from the Mediterranean, and two from Africa. And all of this in a predominantly Jewish context!” (Curtis Paul DeYoung, *“Reconciliation in Diverse Congregations, Restoring the Beloved Community”*, *Radical Reconciliation book Chapter 5*)

- “The Antioch congregation lived out an inclusive table fellowship that emulated the social practices of Jesus. Each person who joined the fellowship felt affirmed for the culture of his or her background. Yet each also adopted a higher calling through allegiance to Jesus Christ. Jews and Gentiles continued to embrace their culture of origin but broke with certain cultural rules that inhibited their ability to live as one in Christ. For example, they ate and socialized together. While this was not permitted or approved of in society, in “the many house-congregations of Antioch . . . Jews and Gentiles, living together in crowded city quarters, freely mixed.” (Curtis Paul DeYoung, *“Reconciliation in Diverse Congregations, Restoring the Beloved Community”*, *Radical Reconciliation book Chapter 5*)
- “Sociologist of religion, Rodney Stark notes that the city of Antioch, during days of Roman rule, was divided into 18 different and intensely antagonistic ethnic groups with almost no social integration (*The Rise of Christianity*, 157-158). It was followers of Christ in the multi-ethnic church of Antioch (Jews, Africans, Arabs, Greeks, Romans, Syrians, Asians) who were first called Christians (Acts 11:19-26) and who took the gospel of Jesus Christ around the world (Acts 13:1-3). The gospel advanced as the Greco-Roman world stood in awe of the people who formerly hated each other because of ethnic distinctions, who now loved each other as family and worshiped and served together in the name of Jesus.” (David Prince post, *“Jesus is not Colorblind”*, *Between the Times Blog*, March 5, 2014) <http://www.davidprince.com/2014/02/10/jesus-colorblind-celebrating-racial-ethnic-diversity-church/>
- “The strategy of Paul and his associates was to first develop a community of Jews who were ethnic minority oppressed subjects of the empire and had embraced faith in Jesus Christ. Once a core community was established, they invited Romans and Greeks from the dominant culture to join. The primary biblical model of congregations was one where members of an oppressed minority community welcomed people from the privileged dominant culture into the local church. These early followers of a crucified and resurrected Jesus went first into oppressed Jewish communities preaching the gospel. What makes the first-century church truly amazing is what happened next. These early Jewish followers of Jesus then invited in persons of power and privilege to be reconciled. Biblical scholar Ched Myers writes, “Given the fact that Jews were a hard-pressed minority culture within the Roman empire, this was a remarkable strategy of inclusion” (Curtis Paul DeYoung, *“Reconciliation in Diverse Congregations, Restoring the Beloved Community”*, *Radical Reconciliation book Chapter 5*)

Acts 15 - Jerusalem Council

- Controversy over whether Gentile believers needed to be circumcised; James and others say no, just abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and what is strangled and from blood.
- Acts 15 further shows this Kingdom in-breaking by identifying the taking of the Gospel to the Gentiles as the fulfillment of this mission of uniting under Christ one people gathered from all peoples.
- *The Report of the Committee on Problems of Race, which was approved in 1974 by the General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, summarizes how Acts 15 demonstrates God's mission to bring diverse peoples together under Christ:*
 - 1. Jews and Gentiles ministered to each other and worshipped together because Acts 15:1 says, Jews "came down from Judea and taught the brethren."
 - 2. The apostolic council agreed to admit Gentiles to full fellowship without putting them in bondage to Mosaic ceremonial law. Yet there were certain practices common to Gentile culture to which the Jewish believers could not as yet adjust (15:20). At these tension points the Gentiles were asked to conform to Jewish practice. Yet on the other hand the apostles and elders gave the Gentiles freedom in all other matters (eating pork, etc...). **This represented a tremendous adjustment for the Jewish church. Both groups were therefore asked to make major compromises out of a desire to maintain the unity of the church in love. (From Gospel and Race, A Pastoral Letter 2004)**

Acts 17 - Thessalonica and Berea and Athens

- Thessalonica - For three Sabbaths Paul went to the synagogues and reasoned with them from the Scriptures - some were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas along with a large number of God fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women.
- Berea - they went into the synagogue of the Jews - the Jews received them with eagerness examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. Many of them believed along with a number of prominent Greek women and men.

Acts 18 - Corinth

- Reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks - many Jews resisted so he went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshipper whose house was next to the synagogue
- Crispus the leader of the synagogue believed in Lord with all household and many Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized - also Priscilla, Acquila, and Apollos here

It is clear that the early church was multi-ethnic. It would have been so easy for the different ethnicities to gather together around their shared ethnicity. Instead, against overwhelming odds, people who had just days before despised one another, were gathered together in Christ as one people, one body. To a watching world this had to be a most unlikely occurrence. Jews and Gentiles coming together displaying for all to see, redemptive unity that was possible in Christ. Knowingly or unknowingly this early church, this gathering of Christ followers has provided us with a model of what can be possible in Christ. Do we have the faith to believe that this is possible? Do we believe that God can use us to reach others who are unlike us?"

1 Peter 2:9 says that we are a "chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, a people for God's own possession". We are a new "race" and "nation" that takes precedence and priority over our born ethnicity and culture. As the Body of Christ in a local church setting we are called to build relationships with those of other ethnicities and classes and those different than us in order to share the gospel and minister to those from all the nations and classes of people around us as well as model and live out this "new" identity. This is seen very clearly in the mandates to love our neighbor and make disciples of all the nations.

If the leadership and people of our church are doing this then our church will not only become much more reflective of the community around us, but we would be loving others in word and deed and living out the unity of the Body of Christ that Christ desired when he "made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall.....reconciling them both in one body to God through the cross." (Ephesians 2:14,16) By God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, may we do this!

May we take initiative and go to others and not wait for them to come to us. My personal experience is that through my deep friendship with Bryan as well as other leaders "of another color", I am a better person because of our relationship. I have a fuller and richer life and understanding of the gospel. I need them in my life so that I can begin to "see and understand" the world from other vantage points. I really believe that if every follower of Christ had at least one deep friendship with a person of another color (learn from and walk with each other) then we would see amazing transformation in the body of Christ as well as our communities. We would walk together and stand up together to address injustices that some still face. Our churches would better reflect the communities around them, and the watching world would know that the Lord loved them. (John 17) Who knows? We might just see His kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven in a much greater way!

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