

A Preliminary Biblical-Theological Understanding of Reconciliation in the Covenant

Reconciliation in the Old Testament

Are there Covenantal obligations and teachings of the Old Testament that speak directly to our responsibility to be reconciled?

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

The Call for Reconciliation in the Genesis Account

On the most basic level, Adam's fall into sin brought a kind of death that is defined by separation, or for the purpose of emphasis here, segregation (Gen 3). Many theologians have pointed out the clear implications of death entering the human race through Adam as man's separation from God, from each other, from himself and from creation. If God's agenda in salvation is the complete reconciliation of all things in Christ (Eph 1:9), it would seem that must include not only a profound reconciliation to God but also a profound reconciliation to one another.

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

The whole book of Genesis functioned as a Divine history lesson for the Hebrew people, just as it does for us. God's revelation in Genesis unfolds his original purposes for all creation and especially for his crowning achievement: mankind, made in his image. The disastrous sin of

Adam and the near destruction of the world in Noah's day reveal the glorious story of God's astounding love and covenant faithfulness to redeem and save, despite the evil intentions of men. **Genesis 1-11 functions as a preamble to Israel's specific role as the "least of the nations" chosen by God, through the promises to Abraham, to bring his salvation to the whole earth. The reconciliation purposes of God are revealed in this narrative in the most basic descriptions of God's overarching plans for mankind, and for Israel as his chosen people**

The Unity of Mankind in the Covenant with Adam

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

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

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

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

² *ibid*

Seeds of Reconciliation in the Covenant with Noah

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

God's specific, detailed discussion of the table of nations in Genesis 10 is more than simply background material to the real story- the story of Israel. It is in fact, the main point for their (and our) story- that these are the nations they are to bless and ultimately help give spiritual birth to (Gen 12:1-3, Isa 26:17,18). As many others have pointed out, the story of the tower of Babel is reversed on the day of Pentecost when Jesus Christ, the real "second Adam" (Romans 5) began a reconciliation process that would extend to all the nations of the earth.

The Budding of Reconciliation in the Covenant with Abraham

When we turn to the Covenant with Abraham, God's commitment to reconciliation starts to rise to more and more prominence. There is a traditional theological approach to Genesis that wants to emphasize a "narrowing" of God's focus to the descendants of Abraham, in an exclusionary way, as the true people of God. This theological mindset can mistakenly feed our own ethnocentric Christianity even as it fed the pride and ethnocentricity of many Jews. There is a narrowing of focus in the narrative. But **the focus on Abraham is never meant to be an ethnic exclusion of other nations from Israel's thinking; instead it is meant to heighten their understanding of God's grace that called them into existence as a nation for the purpose of achieving God's global salvation.**

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

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

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

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

God’s Call to Reconciliation Practices Expanded in the Covenant with Moses

When we come to the establishment of Israel as a nation-state who would uniquely reflect the righteousness of God and be the conduit of his blessing to the nations, the demand for practicing reconciliation is more pronounced. In particular, the place of the alien (stranger or foreigner) takes on a prominent position in God’s detailed commands for his people to practice reconciliation. Nine (9) times in the Exodus to Canaan narrative (Ex-Deut) God talks about Israel’s personal experience as aliens and the things they suffered, and uses that as a moral reminder of their need to show compassion and not mistreat, in general, any alien in their midst (Ex 23:21, 23:9; Lev 19:34; Deut 10:19). In sixty (60) additional references in the books of Exodus-Deuteronomy, God addresses the treatment of the alien or foreigner, who are described as “living among you” or “within your gates” (Ex 20:10; Lev 16:19; Deut 1:16, 5:14). Just in Deuteronomy, in their final preparation before entering the land of Canaan, the Lord addresses the people of Israel and their response to the alien/foreigner twenty-six (26) times.

How many other ethnic groups actually lived with the people of Israel? No one knows for sure. **There is a hint of the diversity in the Exodus narrative when we are told, “many other people (Hebrew: “a mixture of peoples” Greek LXX: “a swarm of foreigners”) went up with them” (Ex 12:38).³ What is clear is that their relationship with other ethnic groups was a vital part of their life as the people of God. As we will see, every single historic event in the history of Israel includes direct commands and instructions on how they were to treat non-ethnic Jews.**

As we look at these passages of Scripture dealing with the place of foreigners in the life of Israel, **we need to address an important distinction. Some of the passages in Exodus-Deuteronomy address the responsibility of Israel, in general, to the resident alien. God called his people to practice a kind of compassion and justice for the foreigner among them that was unlike the normally oppressive practices of other Near Eastern Cultures towards different**

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

ethnic groups. Even household slaves were to be given a Sabbath day of rest (Ex 20:8-11). General laws of justice were to be equally applied to all (Deut 1:16,17). Israel was to keep in mind their own experience as aliens in Egypt as a practical reminder of what injustice felt like (Ex 23:9), and they were also called to image the moral nature of God, who “loves the alien” (Deut 10:19). The Law called the people of Israel to practice a type of kindness and compassion for the foreigner, the stranger and the slave that had nothing to do with their covenantal status. The call to compassion for foreigners is an expression of the nature of God, who shows kindness to all without prejudice (Mt 5:43ff) being reflected in his people. This type of command is found in Leviticus 19:33, 34

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

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

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

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

As noted, when Israel left Egypt “many other people (Hebrew: “a mixture of peoples” LXX: “a swarm of foreigners”) went up with them” (Ex 12:38). Apparently other oppressed nations saw the deliverance of God on behalf of the Israelites and decided to cast their lot with the Hebrews. The Israelites needed instruction on how to treat non-Hebrews. The significance of issuing this command on the very day of the Exodus can hardly be overstated. **The difference between the status of the foreigner in the community of God's people and the practice of the**

other Ancient Near Eastern cultures provided a stark contrast. The Hebrews had seen the ills of ethnic superiority demonstrated in the Egyptian culture, not just against themselves, but against all non-Egyptians. That superiority / exclusion was clearly expressed in the refusal to fellowship at the meal table. Genesis 43:32, "...Egyptians could not eat with Hebrews, for that is detestable to Egyptians." This is the corollary issue Paul addresses in Galatians 2 when Peter refused to eat with the Gentiles. He was acting like a "pagan", not in line with the Gospel. The practical exclusion of other ethnic groups from intimate "meal" fellowship with us is a denial of God's equal acceptance of all of us as members of his family through adoption.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

An example of this equality in the community is found in the story of Ruth, the Moabitess, who announces to her mother-in-law Naomi, "your people will be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). Ruth is not only received as a member of the community, all the rights of the kinsman-redeemer are applied to her through Boaz. God's ultimate evidence of her status in the community is the privilege she is given of being David's great grandmother and part of the ancestral line of Jesus (Ruth 4:13ff, Mt 1:5). As an added twist of God's clear commitment to reconciliation in the Old Testament narrative, Boaz, the husband of Ruth, was also the son of Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute who helped Joshua and the Israelite army overthrow Jericho (Mt 1:5). This kind of "community embracing" of someone from a different, and even despised ethnic group is a practical demonstration of reconciliation that goes beyond what most contemporary churches practice. We need to remember that these Old Testament laws and historical examples were only a shadow of the full light of God's glory that is meant to shine through the church.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Part of the great revelation of God’s moral character is that he is not like the tyrant-gods of Egypt or Canaan or Babylon, but the One, True, Holy God, who is set apart from evil and full of righteousness, goodness and compassion. As the one true God it is his very character to give special care to those who are the most vulnerable- the widow, the orphan, the poor, and tellingly, the foreigner. The Old Testament Scriptures often link these groups of people together- Lev 19:10, 23;22; Deut 10:18, 24:17-21, 26:12,13, 27:19. By grouping the alien with the widow, the orphan and the poor he is recognizing them as part of a category of people who could be easily disenfranchised from the benefits of the Covenant. These are people who can be taken advantage of or simply ignored because they lack normal access to social status and power. To be the “people of God,” who know God and reflect His character, means being a people who will demonstrate the opposite of oppression or neglect. It means his people will demonstrate an active caring and a compassionate sensitivity to the needs of the excluded and neglected. The church is to be a community of people who reflect the glory of God in caring for all the disenfranchised, counteracting the normal abuses of the dominant culture.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

These related sets of commands get to the heart of Gods prohibition against the practice of racism, tribalism or exclusion of someone who is either ethnically or socially “marginal”: it is the abuse of status and power. Those who are dominant members of any society are always in a position of power. Reconciliation in its most basic, practical expression includes a commitment to use positions of power and privilege for the good of the naturally excluded. The great contrast between the people of God and all the other peoples of the earth is that

we are image-bearers of God and are called to use whatever power we have to be servant-kings, servant-leaders, servant-men and women; a servant-community which actively works for the good of those who are at a place of disadvantage. This is the great statement of Jesus on the difference between God's view of authority/leadership, and the view of non-believing gentiles (Luke 22:24ff). To oppress the alien is to violate the covenant with God. To exclude someone from the full blessings of the Covenant based on ethnic origin is to break faith with the very character of God - the compassionate Savior of all mankind.

Can we imagine the practical significance this type of theological understanding and commitment would have had on the church in the newly developing United States if all foreigners, including slaves, who heard and responded to the Gospel, were given the full status of community rights and blessing within the church? The question however is not simply an historical curiosity. What would be the effect today if, in the United States, the culturally dominant white church repented and began to live out her true calling to the African-American believers, as well as embracing the immigrant and refugee groups who are entering their cities and communities? And not only in the States, but in every region of the world where tribalism and socio-economic exclusion is too much the norm in the church?

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

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

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

The Prophets not only reminded the people of God of their Covenant obligations to the non-Hebrew believers, they also emphasized God's great global and cosmic saving purposes. Anointed by the Spirit of God, they gave expanded understanding to God's intention to save and reconcile a people to himself and to one another from among all the nations of the earth through the work of the coming Messiah, fulfilling the promise to Abraham.

At the heart of this salvation is an inclusion of all ethnic groups as the one worshipping, fellowshiping, faithful and righteous people of God. The detailed promises of the fullness of

God's salvation in the last days and the descriptions of the work of the Messiah all contain repeated emphasis on this reconciliation of former enemies both to God and to one another.

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

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

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

Isaiah, which contains the most extensive promises of the work of the Messiah, also contains the most extensive promises of the reconciliation of the nations to God and each other. The heart of the message is like a rising tide throughout Isaiah. The Messiah will fulfill God's call on behalf of his people to be the Servant who lives out the justice, mercy and compassion the Covenant required and as a result of his obedience,

the “alien” who attaches himself to Israel will become a countless multitude of men, women and children from every nation on earth who will be cherished and embraced by God in the midst of his Covenant people. They will ultimately become the full expression of the people of God who are empowered by His Spirit to bring God’s justice to the nations of the earth as the kingdom of priests, which he intended all along.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Isaiah 56:3-7 “Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say, ‘The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.’ And let not any eunuch complain, ‘I am only a dry tree.’ ...to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off.

And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to serve him...these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Zechariah 7:8-10 “And the word of the Lord came again to Zechariah: ‘This is what the Lord Almighty says: Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one

another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of one another.”

Seventy plus years after Haggai and Zechariah, Malachi addressed the people of God about their continued unfaithfulness in light of his continued love and grace. They are not destroyed because He does not change (3:6). A core part of their disobedience lies in their refusal to tithe. Why is that so important? God says, “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house” 3:10. Food for whom? For the widow, the poor, the fatherless and the alien – Deuteronomy 14:28,29. And what will the result be? “Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land” Mal 3:12. The nations will see how the people of God care for all those immigrants and widows and fatherless who come to them, and they will bless God.

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

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

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

Reconciliation in the New Testament

At this point it is valuable to remember the progressive, unfolding nature of God’s revelation and work among his people. The biblical story makes it clear that God teaches his people in stages the full measure of his plans and purposes. Theologians and Bible scholars have long acknowledged this pattern and talk about theology in developmental terms. What was true but only partially revealed about the “seed of the woman” in Genesis 3, and the “seed of Abraham” in Genesis 12, does not come fully to light and understanding until the birth of Christ, and even

then it isn't until Paul states the relationship in such clear terms in his letters to the churches that the full light of understanding dawns (Gal 3). This is true for the doctrine of the Trinity, the work of the Holy Spirit and many, many other truths of Scripture. When we look back from the light of the New Testament we can see the seed of all these truths more clearly in the Old Testament, though in less developed form. This is also true for issues of reconciliation. Even though the Old Testament laid out demands for reconciliation, the true depth of that plan and purpose of God does not come to light until the New Testament. In the ministry of Jesus, the fullness of the plan is given birth, but it does not come of age, so to speak, until God brings it to full expression through the church in the book of Acts.

The Ministry of Jesus

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

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

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

If we remember the Old Testament categories of the poor and the oppressed, they included the orphan, the widow and the foreigner. As Harvey Conn points out, it seems that Jesus expands that category to include all the disenfranchised, including the morally excluded- the tax collectors and the other "sinners" (Matt 11:19).⁴ **What we want to note as critical in the proclamation of the kingdom is that the invitation to follow Jesus is also a call to pursue reconciliation between men. As we list some of the Gospel narratives that support this conclusion it is going to be hard not to see the stories simply as a call to the universal spread of the Gospel – for individuals, without reference to being part of a reconciled community- the way we are accustomed to viewing them. The contention here is that the message of reconciliation with God has also, always been an invitation into a covenantal relationship that involved reconciliation and inclusion in the covenant community.** So much so, that by the time we get to the Acts narrative, the predominantly Gentile churches are asked to provide physical

⁴ Harvey Conn *The New Testament and the Poor* Lecture 1 Westminster Media

relief for their poor brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. The appeal is based on Old Testament covenantal community obligation right out of the Exodus narrative,

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

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

When we read the historical record of the ministry of Christ with the Old Testament covenantal purpose of God’s commitment to the poor and the foreigner in mind, we can see reconciliation all over the Gospel narrative. **The vast majority of Jesus’ ministry was not conducted in the more Jewish, ethnocentric center of Jerusalem, but in “Galilee of the Gentiles”, a reference to the racial variety and mixture in and around the region where Jesus grew up and did most of his work. During the six centuries prior to Christ’s ministry this territory was ruled successively by Babylon, Persia, Macedonia, Egypt and Syria, while constantly experiencing infiltration and migration. The Jewish population was a minority among the dominant Gentile groups.⁵ The extent to which Jesus did most of his ministry in this ethnically diverse community is a profound stamp on the nature of the finally inaugurated kingdom rule and reign of God. The ethnocentric power base in Jerusalem is being challenged in a significant way by the reality that the long-awaited Messiah is announcing the coming of the kingdom, and his work is not focused on Jerusalem (though she is clearly not excluded). Something new is happening. And that new, full, final expression of the promise to Abraham is being lived out among the diverse peoples of Galilee of the Gentiles.**

This is not to deny the extremely important reality that Jesus clearly came to his own Jewish people with a priority commitment to bring them the message of salvation first (Matt 10:5). But at the same time his ministry involved leading his followers into contact with Syrians (Mt 4:23) rich Romans (Mt 8), poor Samaritans (John 4) and even a Syrophenician, Greek woman (Mark 7). The point here is that Jesus not only brings personal salvation to individuals, he calls them to become a part of the reconciled community of God’s people who practice justice, mercy and compassion and who also learn to call one another “family” (Luke 8:21). The rich are invited to take care of the poor (Zaccheus, Luke 19:1ff) and even the poor are urged to forsake worrying about themselves (Matt 6) and pursue God’s kingdom agenda of giving to everyone

⁵ *Galilee* The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible pp.344,345 Abingdon Press 1962

who asks, including enemies (Luke 6:27ff.). The twelve disciples, though all Jewish, are a clear picture of reconciliation in process as the socio-economic and political differences between a tax collector (Matthew), a political zealot (Simon) and local fishermen (Peter, et al) would have required a whole new view of one another as followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

The theme of God's global salvation and call for reconciliation is woven throughout the narratives of the first three Gospels and comes to light strongly in the Gospel of John. Bible scholars and teachers have long acknowledged John's book is addressed in language and terms Greek and other Gentile readers would be able to relate to. I would suggest the book also serves as a strong polemic to Jews on the scope of God's commitment to reconciliation. There is, I freely acknowledge, a presupposition at work here in reading the Scriptures with a reconciliation point of view in mind. Part of the presupposition is that the universal offer of the Gospel without reconciliation as part of the ultimate goal and purpose of salvation seems to be, on face value, a diminished presentation of the Gospel. It allows, on a very practical level, a type of individualism that permits neglect and indifference towards other members of the Covenant family that God himself disallows in the rest of Scripture. Unless there is, in the offer of the Gospel itself, an offer of entrance into the community of God's people, with full acceptance and a commitment to love and care for one another, the door is open for an individualistic expression of Christianity that ultimately justifies the kind of ethnic and socio-economic division that men have always been tempted by and exists in so much of the church today.

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

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

With a biblical, Holy Spirit revealed reconciliation point of view in mind, we can go back and re-read the Gospel of John and look for the ways Jesus laid this groundwork for what would become the full, mature call for the New Testament church to practice reconciliation. In addition, if we look at this book through the eyes of first century Gentile and Jewish readers, the message of Christ to reconcile and include the nations in God's salvation purposes, and thus fulfill the promises to Abraham, stand out in astounding ways. To restate the proposition and

offer a brief introductory summary, I am suggesting that **John's Gospel was not written exclusively with Gentile readers in mind and addressing Greek dualistic and early Gnostic thoughts (though it certainly has application there), but at the center of John's Gospel there is a message of reconciliation; of acceptance of Gentiles in the Jewish covenant community; of the great fulfillment of the promises to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through the Messiah; and if we stand back and take a careful look, a very profound message that everything the Jewish community experienced in her history as the chosen vessel-people of God, was now being climactically re-lived and fulfilled through the life of Jesus- the faithful Israelite- both on behalf of the Jews and also climactically on behalf of the Gentiles through the fullness-of-salvation/reconciliation work of the Jesus the Messiah.**

When we take the forest view of John's book we find that **every major, community defining event of the history of Israel is not only re-lived and addressed in the ministry of Jesus as described by John, but explicitly, at every single point those defining redemptive acts for Israel are offered and applied to the gentiles.** The effect is that the very things historically that make Israel the community of God's people are –in the Messiah- given their fullest expression by being offered to the gentiles through him. The gentiles are simply and profoundly offered complete community status as part of the Covenant people of God and are to be treated, so to speak, “as one born in the land.”

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.² He was with God in the beginning.³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of men.⁵ The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.⁶ There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John.⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe.⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.⁹ The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.¹² Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God--¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.” Jn 1:1-13

This is almost like reading the Genesis / Abraham narrative all over again, only this time the focus is on the fulfillment of the promise in Jesus, the Son of God. John may be giving the Gentile reader, who may have known nothing of the Genesis account, a primer on God's saving, reconciling purposes for the nations since the beginning of creation. God, and Jesus as the second Person of the Godhead, created everything (Jn 1:1-3, Gen 1:1ff); he is the light of all men (Jn 1:4, Gen 1:27); he has been rejected as the light (Jn 1:5,10, Gen 3:1ff); but has still graciously and Sovereignly come to bring light (salvation) to all men (Jn 1:9, Gen 3:15, 12:3), and he offers the status of being children of God, not on the basis of ethnic heritage, but solely on the basis of receiving this as a gift of faith (Jn 1:12, 13; Gen 12:1-3). The whole book starts

with a foundational message of reconciliation: a Jewish author telling the nations of the earth that God has set his love on all of them since the very beginning of time.

When John the Baptist introduces Jesus he is declared to be the “lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (**John 1:29**). **This is clearly a reference to the Passover lamb in Exodus 12**, whose blood was put on the doorposts so the angel of death would “pass over” the members of the Covenant community as they feasted on the lamb in a fellowship celebration of their deliverance. Now, John the Baptist says, The Passover Lamb, Jesus, has come and he is given to take away the sin of the whole world- all the ethnic groups of the earth. **The Jews and Gentiles who read this story in John’s account, after some reflection and a little explanation, should have seen the implication that these new believers from the whole world were meant to be welcomed into the new community of God’s people as full fledged members because they had the same “exodus/deliverance” experience as the Jews, now fulfilled in Christ.**

In chapter 2, John tells us about the first interaction Jesus had with the established Jewish, religious leaders in Jerusalem. The place is the Temple and the encounter is in the “court of the Gentiles.” The Jewish leaders had perverted Temple worship and made it a source of corrupt political power. The end of the Temple-era is coming. The Messiah has come to pronounce judgment. It is not insignificant that the judgment revolves around this specific issue that the Gentiles were not welcome at the Temple. Their space was crowded out by permitting their court to be overrun by moneychangers who would assist in the buying and selling of animals for the daily offerings. **By overturning the tables and confronting the leaders, Jesus was signaling that a new day had come. This signaled the end of the Temple worship as it was known. Ultimately, his resurrected body would replace the limited symbolism of the earthly Temple (Jn 2:19). Peter and Paul would pick this theme up later, and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, reveal the full implication of Christ’s work in making Jew and Gentile the new “holy temple,” united in Christ (Eph 2:19ff; 1 Pet 2:4ff). The foundation for this full reconciliation theology and application in the life of the church is laid out here in the ministry of Jesus in John 2.**

In John 3 one of the teachers of Israel, Nicodemus, comes to Christ because he is amazed at what he is seeing and hearing. **To this Jewish leader, and to the Gentile readers who are listening in, Jesus points out that God has sent him to be lifted up on a tree, just like the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness for the free healing of any who looked at it (Num 21:8,9). The offer of free grace to Israel as she rebelled during her wanderings in the desert, is now held out to “anyone who believes” (Jn 3:15).** Then, Jesus makes one of the most amazing, clearest statements of God’s commitment to save and reconcile people from every nation and tongue in these six words, “For God so loved the world” (Jn 3:16). If we look at this through the eyes of the first Gentile readers, the breadth and inclusion of God’s invitation to salvation is simply astounding.

In chapter 4, John takes his Gentile readers to further proof of the universal message of Christ’s salvation and reveals important truths about reconciliation in worship. When Jesus meets the Samaritan woman, there are two inter-related issues he addresses. One issue relates

to her personal sin and misery and her deep need for having her heart satisfied with the love of Christ. **The second issue relates to division between the Jews and Samaritans over worship. This part of the passage has often been interpreted as the woman's attempt to "change the subject." While that may have an element of truth in it, the time Jesus took to respond to her questions and the amazing revelation he made about God seeking worshippers who would worship in Spirit and truth, seems to suggest Jesus was dealing with something more substantial than simply her evasion of his piercing questions.**

Perhaps we can understand the issues of worship as just one more area of severe brokenness and division in the life of this woman. She was certainly a sinner. And also, certainly sinned against. She was at this well in the middle of the day, by herself, most likely because of her reputation. She was an outcast. Division was a major theme in her life. And it was not only in her personal life, but also in her religious-social life. Here was a Jew talking to her about healing and salvation, and she immediately, as it were, jumps from the area of personal brokenness to the larger area of the division between Jew and Samaritan. **If real healing is coming, it must somehow address these broader questions as well. Real quenching of her thirst would address both the close inter-personal brokenness as well as the broader social-religious brokenness. Jesus tells her the time has come when worship will no longer be defined by Jewish Jerusalem, but by worshipers *everywhere* who worship in Spirit and in truth (Jn 4:23, 24).** This message, at one the same time, opens the Gentile readers' understanding to the universal, reconciling nature of the work of Christ and invites the Jewish reader to embrace reconciliation on a broad scale in worship.

After Jesus feeds the five thousand in John 5, he has a follow-up dialogue with the crowd in John 6 and uses the miracle of multiplying the bread to tell them that his ministry is one that will multiply and bring life "to the world" (Jn 6:33). The universal call is repeated when he tells them, "everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life" (Jn 6:40). He makes a direct comparison with the giving of his life as bread from heaven to the manna the Jews received in the wilderness wandering. And the promise again is, "whoever eats this bread will live forever" (Jn 6:58). Reading this both from the perspective of the original Greek and Gentile readers, and in light of what we know about the whole Old Testament narrative, there is an unfolding emphasis on the message of reconciliation. For the Jewish reader, and for those who were present at the event, the reconciliation of the Gentiles as part of God's people should have been increasingly dawning on them, because every event of the history of Israel, from the Creation narrative (Jn 1), to the promise to Abraham as a blessing to the nations (Jn 1,3), to the Exodus Passover Lamb (Jn 2), to the Temple (Jn 2, 4), to the desert experience of the snakes (Jn 3), to the manna in the wilderness here in John 6, was being "fulfilled." They were given the fullest, richest expression in the ministry of Christ, and there was a constant drumbeat that it was for the whole world. All the nations were being included in the Covenant family with the same type of identical, but richer experiences of redemption, lived out on their behalf by the Second Adam who was appointed as their representative (Rom 5:12ff).

In **John 7, Jesus appears at the Feast of Tabernacles** and announces himself as the source of life and satisfaction for all who thirst (Jn 7:37-39). This Feast, instituted by God at the inauguration of Israel as a nation, had a specific reconciliation message built into it. The “tabernacles” were tents the Israelites were meant to live in for seven days as they remembered their “tent” experience in the wilderness (Deut 16:13ff) and re-committed themselves to being a people who would not trust in human resources for their deliverance, but in the Lord their God. This feast followed immediately on the heels of the Feast of Weeks, a celebration of the final harvest of the year (Deut 16:9-12).

The Jews had a long tradition of recognizing the ingathering of the food harvest as a promise pointing to the ingathering of all the nations as servants of God.⁶ The universal offer of the Gospel, as well as the implication for reconciliation could not be more pointed than when Jesus stood **on the last and greatest day of the Tabernacle Feast and announced, “If any one is thirsty let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him” (Jn 7:37-38).** Why is there a reconciliation theme here? Precisely because this was the feast established at the inauguration of Israel as a nation. It was not a feast simply about individual salvation, though it clearly implies and includes that and is there in the offer when Jesus says, “if any one thirsts – let him come.” This was also a feast celebrating their collective deliverance from Egypt and establishment as the community of God’s people. The tents were a reminder of their corporate experience. The “anyones” who would respond were being invited into the community of the redeemed. What Jesus was offering was more than a personal relationship with God. It was also a place at the table with the sons of Abraham (Luke 13:28-30). No wonder the response of the Jewish leaders was to try and seize Jesus (Jn 7:30-32, 44ff.). He was completely undermining their ethnocentric control of God’s people.

The rest of the narrative of John’s Gospel is constantly interwoven with themes of God’s universal, all-ethnic embracing message of salvation. In **John 8:12 he starts a long theological discussion with the Pharisees by stating, “I am the light of the world” (Jn 8:12) and tells them when they claim they are “Abraham’s offspring”, that the ones Jesus sets free will be “sons” who belong “to the family” forever (Jn 8:35).** In John 9 as he heals a man born blind he announces, “I am the light of the world” (Jn 9:5) and the collapse of the Jewish, ethnocentric misinterpretation of the kingdom is threatened yet again (Jn 9:22, 28-29). In John 10 Jesus describes his role as the great Shepherd of God’s people (Ezekiel 34:23) and uses some of the clearest reconciliation language to this point in the narrative, “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen, I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice and there shall be one flock and one shepherd” (Jn 10:16). By the time Jesus enters Jerusalem to complete his ministry, there is such a crowd following him that the Pharisees protest to one another, “Look how the whole world has gone after him” (Jn 12:19). This could be a reference to the size of the crowd, but is more likely a reflection on the fact that a diverse group of people from many ethnic backgrounds had gathered around Jesus. The next verses tell us specifically, “there were some Greeks who went up to worship at the feast” (Jn 12:20). Finally, after four chapters of telling the disciples in multiple ways they must concretely, practically love and

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

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

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

For the sake of time, I will begin this chapter by referring readers to the work entitled "Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision" by N.T. Wright⁷, the Anglican Bishop and New Testament scholar whose recent writings have stirred a great deal of productive and sometimes provocative thought in the worldwide church. There simply is not room in this paper to restate or engage in an extensive hermeneutical explanation for everything about to be said about reconciliation as a core part of the doctrine of justification. That would require a whole book- which Wright has amply supplied, and others need to expand upon. The main point I wish to seize upon is that Wright and others have made a very biblically rooted case that Paul's discussion of justification includes a direct and inescapable contextual application to inclusion in the community of God's people; that the doctrine of justification is not only about our personal restoration to God, but also about our restoration to one another. Paul's contention with Peter in Galatians 2, indeed the whole force of his argument throughout the book of Galatians against those trying to persuade gentiles to be circumcised and follow special Sabbaths and feast days as a true sign of inclusion in the family (and therefore, people that Peter and Barnabus could actually eat with), was that membership in the community of God's people- being called "sons of God" and "Abraham's seed" and "heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:26-29), and therefore, in fact, accepted members of the household of faith- was based on justification by faith in Christ.

Since the Reformation, and certainly in the extreme individualism of the West since then (particularly in the past 50 years), almost everything about the glorious doctrine of justification in the reformed and evangelical church has come to be viewed almost exclusively in terms of the status of acceptance this provides for the individual believer in their relationship with God. While this is undeniably glorious and incredibly liberating for the individual believer to understand the assurance of their salvation and all that it brings in the expression of the kingdom of God is based exclusively on the finished work of Christ as a

⁷ "Justification", N.T. Wright IVP 2009

gift, most wonderfully this is not all there is to this doctrine. The full truth of this doctrine is that it provides us both reconciliation to God as a gift through Christ, and reconciliation to one another. These are the two pillars of the Law- to love God and our neighbors as ourselves- and the work of Christ provides both of them to us as a gift, by faith. We are declared righteous and therefore accepted before God and granted the rights of sons, AND we are declared righteous and therefore accepted with one another and granted all the rights of being in the covenant family.

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

Perhaps the most important book to re-read and grapple with again on the connection between justification and reconciliation is the book of Galatians. The reason this is so critical is twofold. First, because this is the very first place Paul introduces this word and teaching about justification. And second, because since the days of Martin Luther and the Reformation, Galatians has been looked almost exclusively as an answer to the question: “how do I know I am individually and personally saved?” And the answer has been- “by faith in the work of Christ, and not through the keeping of the Law,” (Galatians 3:10-14). Which of course is wonderfully true; it just does not happen to be the actual, main question in Galatians. The real issue that Paul is addressing throughout the entire letter is one of practical reconciliation. It is not, “how do I know I am accepted?” but, “how do I know if others are to be accepted as true members of the community?”

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

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

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

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

John says this:

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

These passages need to be read in light of the reality of New Testament church life; congregations where former enemies, both Jew and gentile and slave and free, were being brought into binding covenant relationship with one another and who now had the privilege and obligation to carry out God’s commands to carry each other’s burdens, take care of each other’s physical needs and embrace one another as equal family members in the household of God. This is the doctrine of justification (without the term being used) spelled out in the plainest language possible. Much of the evangelical and reformed church of the 21st Century stands guilty of the kind of lying John warns against (which is simply another way of stating Paul’s accusation against Peter of denying the truth of the Gospel). There are far too many corporate confessions of sin at a variety of church gatherings that take place in a context of racial exclusion which never come near the truth of how great the sin of segregation and racism in the church really is. There have been hundreds and thousands of calls for a spiritual renewal and spiritual re-awakening in the church with absolutely no acknowledgment that part of the core change that needs to take place is not simply some slightly newer or deeper understanding

of the atonement or the love of Christ or the power of the Holy Spirit on a personal level, but instead, a deepened awakening and understanding of how all of those things enable us to be reconciled and deeply love our brothers and sisters across the current racial and economic divisions. May we have another reformation and re-discover justification by faith, but now in all its dimensions, including the restoration and reconciliation to one another that God himself reveals to us as our standing and calling in this great doctrine.