

## Reconciliation: The Message of the Gospel

The history of humanity is a story of tremendous diversity. It is equally a history of tremendous tensions that pull nations, people groups within those nations and even small tribal clans in opposing directions of trying to protect their uniqueness on the one hand, and seeking some level of unity for accomplishing greater purposes either by joining together with other groups or imposing their uniqueness on others. “Empire” building is one of the historical realities that have long contributed to bringing different people groups together. From ancient Assyria, Babylon, Greece, Rome and on into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, ethnic diversity has often been a forced reality of life. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Americans not only brought African slaves to help build their country, but business owners imported cheap Chinese labor at such alarming rates that the Federal Government passed “The Chinese Exclusion Act” on May 6, 1882, restricting Chinese immigration from fear of a slumping economy and loss of “American” identity.<sup>1</sup> After the official end of British slavery in 1834, the English turned to a system of indentured servitude for the masses of cheap Indian labor available in their colony and imported thousands of workers to various European interests throughout Africa and other colonized regions until 1920, when the practice was banned. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Communist Joseph Tito forced hostile groups like the Serbs, the Croats and the Bosnians to live together as one country, Yugoslavia, under harsh dictatorial rule.<sup>2</sup> In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Arab states continue a system of functional indentured servitude by importing workers from India, Pakistan, the Philippines and North Africa. In Dubai, the multi-national work force is estimated to be close to 80% of the city’s population.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to Empire building, the mixing of ethnic groups through migration as a result of civil war, poverty, famine and the hope for a better life has always been a significant part of human history. Jacob and his family of sixty-six (Gen 46:26) migrated to Egypt because of famine, along with a large number of other ethnic groups in that part of the world (Gen 41:57). As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century we have been in the midst of one of the largest migrations of human beings the world has ever seen. In 2008, estimates put the number of worldwide legal and illegal immigrants somewhere around 200 million+ people.<sup>4</sup> That means roughly one in every thirty-five human beings are immigrants living in countries not their own. The diversity in many of the western countries is staggering. There are 192 official countries recognized by the United Nations and 179 of them have an Embassy in the U.S. In St. Louis, Missouri, in the center of the United States, their local “International Institute” recognizes 100 different ethnic groups living in the greater St Louis area, most of them arriving after the 1960’s and the greatest diversity coming in the 1990’s and following.<sup>5</sup> Larger U.S. cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia and New York City have long had a great diversity of ethnic groups, where virtually every country in the world is represented, often in large scale numbers. During the 1990’s more immigrants moved to the United States than at any other time in its history, with estimates reaching 14 million new immigrants.<sup>6</sup> By 1996, all fifteen nations comprising Western Europe

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<sup>1</sup> Text and article available at [www.ourdocuments.gov](http://www.ourdocuments.gov)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/yugoslavia\\_03.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/yugoslavia_03.shtml)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ae.html#People>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/about-migration/facts-and-figures/global-estimates-and-trends>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.iistl.org/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.urban.org/publications/900417.html>

had non-Anglo, immigrant populations of at least 3 – 10%. Refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi live in places like Pakistan, Iran, the United States, Syria and Germany.<sup>7</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

“For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body-- whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free-- and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body.... If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.... The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable....” 1 Cor 12:13ff.

These words of Jesus and the Apostle Paul are clear, unmistakable and explicit in their implications. Jesus prays for us to become one in the same way he and the Father are one, and he tells us he has amply equipped us for the task. Paul tells us the great overarching purpose of

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<sup>7</sup> <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/display.article?id=7243>

God in redemption is not only our personal reconciliation to God, but also our reconciliation to one another and the ultimate reconciliation of all things in Christ. He also explains that we simply cannot fully function as the body of Christ without embracing one another as mutually interdependent parts of one body. Furthermore, a close examination of the history and narrative of both the Old and New Testament Scriptures reveal substantial evidence that an intentional commitment to reconciliation was a vital part of community life both for Israel and the early church. The depth of reconciliation called for by God, even in the Old Testament, required the full, participatory inclusion in the community life of Israel of all ethnic and socio-economic groups who covenantally bound themselves to God through circumcision. When we come to the New Testament and look at the ministry of Jesus as he prepares his people for the great global expansion of God's kingdom, there is a foundation laid for a theological calling and practical implementation of reconciliation in the life of the early church that became staggering in its scope as the history of the early church unfolded. Timeless hostilities between sworn enemies and the barriers of social and economic oppression were overcome to bring people together as equal members of the family of God.

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

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

As a starting point for making the case that reconciliation is in fact essential to the life of the church and meant to be a normal expression of our community life, we can return to the three major New Testament texts cited above and find a rich teaching about reconciliation that

provides the kind of clear, moral, foundational instruction and promise we need in order to embrace such a wonderful and daunting task.

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

In John 17 Jesus shares his final prayer for the church just before he accomplishes our salvation and shortly after, returns to the Father. Although Luke tells us in Acts 1:3 that Jesus taught his disciples about the kingdom of God for a period of forty days after his resurrection, virtually none of that teaching is recorded for us. We are told some anecdotal information in the Gospels that is invaluable to us as the Word of God, but there is no systematic teaching like that recorded in the main Gospel narrative. This prayer then, is the last major, written instruction of the mind and heart of Christ we possess, where he bares his soul to the Father and communicates his deepest desires for us. It is a prayer for complete unity and a promise of the means to attain it.

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

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

Instead, we have lots of division. Why do we have a “Southern” Baptist Church? Because in 1845 there was a disagreement between Southerners who were Baptist with the antislavery

sentiment of northern Baptists, so they started their own denomination.<sup>8</sup> Where did the “Free” Methodists come from? The mainline Methodist Church in the 1860’s would not denounce slavery, and they charged pew fees that forced the poor to the backbenches of the church. So the “free” Methodists organized.<sup>9</sup> Why do we have an Assemblies of God Church and a Church of God in Christ, both out of the same Pentecostal revival movement? Because one is white (AOG) and the other is black (COGIC).<sup>10</sup> Why is there an African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME)?

“The AMEC grew out of the Free African Society (FAS) which Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and others established in Philadelphia in 1787. When officials at St. George’s MEC pulled blacks off their knees while praying, FAS members discovered just how far American Methodists would go to enforce racial discrimination against African Americans. Hence, these members of St. George’s made plans to transform their mutual aid society into an African congregation.”<sup>11</sup>

Thankfully, many denominations have repented of their support of slavery and have officially asked forgiveness. Unfortunately, that has not been followed up with much real commitment to genuine reconciliation. The more acceptable alternative is to approve “diversity” without reconciliation. The Presbyterian Church in America (of which I am a member, who loves and respects the other members of the denomination) trumpets its commitment to diversity and has done a great deal in the last 15 years to actually embrace a real diversity of people groups.<sup>12</sup> But on a practical level there is very little reconciliation. The largest minority in the denomination is Korean, and yet there is little to no Presbytery or General Assembly level communication between the Korean and Anglo churches, let alone congregation members learning how to embrace one another and work together with their diversity of gifts to advance the kingdom of God. The reality that we are an interdependent body is ignored. Instead we have established what we call minority “movement leaders” with official denominational positions for the various constituencies of the church: African-American, Haitian, Portuguese, Hispanic and Korean.<sup>13</sup> In the end, this is a functional “separate but equal” approach.

Does God truly call us to, and expect us to achieve in some meaningful measure, the level of unity and reconciliation described in this prayer? I would answer the question with a question: how can we believe or strive for anything less? By way of comparison, how do we describe the biblical mandate for marriage? How many marriage ceremonies or seminars have we listened to where pastors describe God’s desire for husbands and wives in Genesis 2 to become one flesh, or in Ephesians 5 that our marriages are meant to image the relationship of Christ and the church? Patiently, faithfully, but consistently we are also reminded of the grace of God in Christ as the only foundation for building such a marriage. What is critical here, is that we never tone down the message no matter how many divorces there are, and no matter how difficult the task in holding a marriage together. Would we want pastors to preach anything less? So we repent, we

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<sup>8</sup> <http://christianity.about.com/od/denominations/a/baptisthistory.htm>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.freemethodistchurch.org/Sections/About%20Us/Basic%20Info/FAQs/What's%20A%20Free%20Metho dist.htm](http://www.freemethodistchurch.org/Sections/About%20Us/Basic%20Info/FAQs/What's%20A%20Free%20Metho%20dist.htm)

<sup>10</sup> [https://beardocs.baylor.edu/bitstream/2104/5062/1/erik\\_hjalmeby\\_masters.pdf](https://beardocs.baylor.edu/bitstream/2104/5062/1/erik_hjalmeby_masters.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.ame-church.com/about-us/history.php>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.pca-mna.org/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.pca-mna.org/>

seek forgiveness, we learn, we grow, we re-commit in marriage over and over again, because we know this is what God lovingly demands of us. At many key points along the way in the practical expression of becoming “one flesh”, couples can stand back and say, “yes” and “amen” to the process. As hard as it can be, it is so worth the blood, sweat and tears. Do we have this same sense of commitment to reconciliation in the body of Christ?

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

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

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

of God as “God’s delight.”<sup>14</sup> The members of the Trinity delight in each other (which is the essence of God’s glory) and in turn God delights in us (manifests his glory) and wants us to delight in him (to glorify him). It is that “delighting in God” that is our highest end, versus the destructiveness of pursuing a self-centered, self-focused delight. And this is surely wonderful and true.

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

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

Here, God himself wraps the definition of his glory in the context of his goodness. Where the NIV English text reads, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you,” the Hebrew carries the sense of “the complete expression of my goodness”.<sup>15</sup> In context, it is a goodness that is free to show mercy and compassion to absolutely anyone, including a group of ungrateful people who turned to idolatry after experiencing the greatest deliverance from sin and oppression ever witnessed at that point in human history.

The essence of God’s glory is in the moral goodness of God’s character; his glory is his ethical nature. The term glory and goodness in this sense is not a limited definition but meant to be taken as a full expression of everything that is good about God- his righteousness, mercy, compassion, judgments, kindness, grace and love. As we will see in the following texts, that goodness is expressed in everything God is and in everything he does: even in the use of his strength, power and Sovereign dominion over all things. If we look at the revelation of God’s glory throughout Scripture and keep this Exodus 33:19 theme of the “complete expression of God’s goodness” in mind, it will help us understand the narratives more fully, and in turn, will help us understand why Jesus was so confident the gift of God’s glory in us is sufficient to produce reconciliation and unity.

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<sup>14</sup> Timothy Keller, “The Reason for God” (Dutton 2008) chapter 14 The Dance of God

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Keil-Delitzsch, “Commentary on the Old Testament” (Eerdmans1978) Vol 1 The Pentateuch, p. 238

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

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

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

God to be “over all the earth” (Ps 57:5, 11), he is asking for the evidence of God’s goodness to be made known everywhere as it was revealed in saving him (and his people) from the hostility of the nations (57:1-4), and fully manifesting his love and faithfulness (57:7-10). When Solomon prays, “may the whole earth be filled with his glory” (Ps 72:19) he is asking for God’s goodness to be expressed in delivering the needy and the afflicted of the earth who have no one to help (72:12ff). Asking for the kindness, mercy and compassion of deliverance and forgiveness is asking God to demonstrate the glory of his name (Ps 79:9, Ps 85).

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

“In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD.” Isa 2:2-5

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

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

“Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.” (Isa 9:7)

“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him-- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the

Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD-- and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.” (Isa 11:1-5)

When the Messiah comes, his ministry is “the complete expression of God’s goodness” (Ex 33:19) made visible. John tells us, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (1:14). What did they see? The goodness of God revealed in Jesus blessing a wedding celebration (Jn 2), cleansing the court of the Gentiles at the Temple so it could function as a place of prayer (Jn 2, cf Mt 21:13), discipling religious leaders in God’s love for the world (Jn 3), forgiving and restoring a Samaritan woman who was oppressed in sin (Jn 4), healing the sick (Jn 4, 5), feeding the hungry (Jn 6) and doing so many good deeds and miracles of compassion and kindness that, “If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.” (Jn 21:25)

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

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

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

The Apostle Paul picks up the theme of God’s glory as moral goodness and it becomes a recurring theme throughout the book of Romans. He tells us the great downward spiral of men is tied to “exchanging the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles” (Rom 1:23), which in turn leads to a deeper descent into evil (Rom 1:24ff). It is only “to those who by persistence in doing good, seek glory, honor and immortality, [that] he will give eternal life” (Rom 2:7). The great problem is that no one actually seeks God or seeks good (Rom 3:11, 12). “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”

an expression for failure to achieve the level of God's moral goodness (Rom 3:23). Amazingly, righteousness and the glory that comes with it can only be received as a gift through faith in Christ (Rom 3:21ff). Once received, this glory is so weighty and so profound that despite sin and suffering in this world we are free to "rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" (Rom 5:2). We can expect to see "the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living" (Ps 27:13). Because of our union with Christ, "the glory of the Father" that raised him from the dead, guarantees us freedom to live a new life of righteousness (Rom 6:4), even embracing the sufferings of Christ and sharing "in his glory" (Rom 8:17, 18). The glory/goodness of God is so profoundly at work in the world, that even the hardness of Israel's unbelieving heart is Sovereignly used by God to bring salvation to the nations (Rom 9-11). Paul concludes,

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

With this understanding of God's glory filling our hearts and minds, the depth of Jesus' promise, "I have given them the glory that you gave me that they may be one as we are one" takes on a far greater force for genuine hope in reconciliation. What is able to break down all the barriers and divisions of men and create real reconciliation and unity? The deep, profound, practical expression of the goodness of God, his glory, manifest in and through us to one another and to the world.

When we look at the early church in the book of Acts, we should be amazed at the level of unity and reconciliation they enjoyed, despite the natural divisions and animosities that existed. Rich and poor, slave and free, Jews and all the other nations (Gentiles) living and worshipping together as one body, within an amazingly short span of time. Not an absolute, perfect unity. But still a far greater, practical demonstration of reconciliation than we enjoy today. One central dynamic in their life as a church that promoted this unity was the manifestation of God's glory/goodness to each other in their practical needs.

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." Acts 2:42-47.

These verses have been quoted or referred to countless times over the generations to help define and defend the practices of the church. They are the paradigm, the model expression for all churches in all cultures and all ages of what the people of God ought to look like and how we ought to function as the body of Christ. There will certainly be variables and contextualization, but the fundamental principles revealed are timeless. And in the center of the paradigm, along with teaching and fellowship and prayer, is this equally foundational description, "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they

gave to anyone as he had need.” They did good to one another. They manifested the glory Christ had given them, now unleashed through the power of the Holy Spirit. This expression of glory is repeated almost immediately in Acts 4, after a second powerful proclamation of the Gospel:

“All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.” Acts 4:32-35.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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