

Position Paper: Reconciliation

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INTRODUCTION

From the beginning, God created people in His image (Genesis 1:26-31). All people share His likeness, although our ethnicity, gender, cultural background, health, sociology, class and economic levels directly impact the way we experience life and view others in the world.

Our individual and cultural differences reflect God's creative diversity that continues into eternity where every tribe, nation, and tongue will be represented by men and women worshiping around His Throne (Revelation 7:9). In this present time, Christians must intentionally pursue this heavenly reality of God's kingdom on earth so the world might know God and glorify Him (Matthew 6:10; John 17:21, 23; Ephesians 2:19-22; and 2 Corinthians 3:16-18). Just as the Trinity is one God in three persons, we inherit a holy call to be of one mind and Spirit in the midst of this diversity (John 13:34-35, 17:20-23; Ephesians 4:3; and 1 Corinthians 12).

This call to reconciliation means that we rejoice when our brothers and sisters rejoice, and weep when our brothers and sisters weep (Rom. 12:15-16). In community, we move from selfish ambition and vain conceit to the humble posture of Christ, considering the needs of others above our own needs (Philippians 2:1-11, Luke 14:11). As reconcilers, we are motivated by Christ's love. Therefore, we serve one another in love and adopt a counter-cultural stance knowing that any division in the body of Christ is a scheme of our common enemy, Satan, against whom we take a spiritual stand (2 Corinthians 10:3-5 and Romans 12:1-8).

In light of scripture and our commitment to obey God's Word, we—the body of Christ at Grace Community Church—seek to live our mission:

To build the kingdom of God by calling a diverse and unified community of believers to authentic love relationships with God and each other, and by proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus and reflecting His character through relationships with the poor and lost everywhere.

The idea of "race" is a human structure that is defined and categorized for the sole purpose of dividing people, determining hierarchy, and determining who has the right or power to exercise dominion on this earth. The original biblical languages do not share this motivation of categorization. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, we have elected to elevate our terminology and understanding by using the word "ethnicity" (*ethnē*) to reflect our cultural distinctions when referring to different people groups. This is our biblical commitment to live as reconciled people of God.

RECONCILIATION AND THE *IMAGO DEI*

In the discussion of reconciliation and the gospel, we must first answer the question, “**Who is reconciled and to whom?**” Answering this question takes us to the first book of the Bible, Genesis, and its account of the creation and The Fall. Genesis 1:26-27 reads: *Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness.”...so God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.* This scripture highlights several important factors when considering the creation of humankind.

First, humans—both men and women—are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). This truth is indicated when God says “let *us* make mankind in *our* image (Gen 1:26).” We are created to bear the image of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In recognizing that God exists as one God in three persons, we live as individuals created in His image to reflect the same harmony of common mission and purpose that God has with himself in the Trinity. Acknowledging our first identity as image-bearers, we understand that *all* people are meant to reflect the characteristics, attributes, and purposes of God as they exercise dominion on earth. In order to bear a true image, one must always be connected to the image source, establishing our need for constant connectedness with the Father.

Secondly, the creation account gives a framework for our relationships with other people. The only thing that displeased God in creation was that man was alone. “It is not good for man to be alone. I will make an *ezer* suitable for him (Gen 2:18).” (*Ezer* is the original Hebrew and military term that more accurately refers to Eve as a strong power or suitable source of military aid or rescue. It appears 21 times in the Old Testament, and 16 of those refer to God himself as the “helper” of Israel.) Eve was created so that Adam would not be alone on this earth. God designed humans to need each other, and He made it possible for us to have companions for this life journey that are like ourselves, yet also different. Only after Adam and Eve were together, both understanding their responsibilities as imager bearers, does the creation story conclude: “God saw all that He had made, and it was very good (Gen 1:31).”

We see the undermining of God’s good creation in Genesis 3. The first departure occurs when Adam and Eve partake of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Gen 3:6). As a result of their sin, they no longer reflected the true image of God, and their communion with God and one another was broken (Gen 3:7-8). Broken image and broken community led to enmity between Adam and Eve (Gen 3:12). Because they insisted on their own way, instead of pursuing the will of God, the core component of a very good creation began to crumble. This original sin has impacted all humankind, including dysfunction between the genders (Gen 3:7-16). Our need for reconciliation is rooted in the garden. Christ makes it possible for us to live as God originally intended before the curse. Reconciliation is the hope of the gospel that affirms the human identity and dignity of *every* person, and restores our broken relationships with God and with each other.

RECONCILIATION AND THE CROSS

Because of The Fall, we were all separated from God (Romans 5:12-21). **What is the solution for the separation between fallen sinners and God?** The solution is the cross of Jesus Christ. It is through the perfect sacrifice of Christ that we are justified before God and put back into right relationship with our Heavenly Father (Romans 3:22-24). With his sacrifice, Christ tore down the wall of hate that separated us from God and each other (Ephesians 2:14-21). He surrendered Himself in order to release us from the bondage of sin into real freedom (Rom. 6:15-23).

In Ephesians 2:11-22, Paul shows how God won this reconciliation for us. He describes a distinction that was drawn between God's chosen people—those born Jewish—and those the Jews referred to as "uncircumcised". We see throughout the Old Testament that uncircumcised people were not included in the covenant God made with the Jews. Yet from the beginning of the Abrahamic Covenant, God's plan was to bless the nations through Abraham (Genesis 12:2-3). Paul points out that through the blood of Christ, those far away (uncircumcised Gentiles) *and* those near to God (Jews) were brought into right relationship with God through Christ (Eph. 2:13), thereby fulfilling His covenant. Through the cross of Jesus Christ, two distinct groups became one people with equal and full access to the Father (Eph. 2:14-18, Gal. 3:29). With this reconciliation, Christ created one new reconciled people thereby fulfilling the purposes of the cross, reconciliation of God to humanity, and humanity to one another (Eph. 2:14-16).

The same is true for those in the Church today. The diversity represented within the Church serves to highlight the creativity, complexity, and fulfillment of God's covenant to Abraham (Gal. 3:26-29). Where there was once division and hatred, Christ's death on the cross brought unity. Hope and peace are the outflow of Jesus' sacrifice that all people can claim through faith in Him (Eph. 2:11-14). Therefore, one group is no longer foreign or strange to the other. When we accept Christ, we *all* become members of God's holy Kingdom and His holy family (Eph. 2:19). Those who hope in Christ are uniquely positioned to embrace other believers and renounce division. We are one church, one body, and one family (Ephesians 4:4-6).

RECONCILIATION AND THE COMMUNITY

Through the work of the cross, God has called His people to be a part of a peculiar community, (1 Peter 2:9). We see this new reality expressed in the church in Antioch, which was founded by men who began to speak the gospel not only to Jews but also to Gentiles, taking the message of Jesus across cultures (Acts 11:20-21). This community of Jews and Gentiles was so unusual that a new name was given to them. The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch (Acts 11:26).

In order for us to live as a reconciled community, we must cultivate humility in our relationships with one another. In Philippians 2:1-11 we are instructed in how to love one another. Paul calls Believers to apply the love, encouragement, and comfort we have received from Christ in our relationships with others so that we might be like-minded for the sake of unity (2:1-2). This means that we set aside selfish preferences, consider others as having great value, esteem them highly, and look to their interests over our own (2:3-4).

“What does it look like to embody this virtue of humility?” Paul shows us using the template of Jesus' life. First, we must be willing to relinquish power and rights. Jesus did not consider His equality with his Father something to be used to His human advantage (Phil. 2:6). In the same way those in power must be willing to empower others, even at cost to themselves. Secondly, our posture moves from being a consumer to being a servant, being willing to meet the needs of others before our own, just as Christ became a servant (slave, *doulos*) on our behalf (Phil. 2:7). Thirdly, as we grow in relationship with those different from us we begin to identify with their hurts, fears, and joys, just as Christ became man to fully identify with us (Phil. 2:7b-8a, Hebrews 4:15). And lastly, just as Christ was obedient to the point of death, we too prioritize obedience to God and service to His kingdom mission over our own comforts, individual rights, preferences, and lives (John 15:10, 12-14 and Luke 14:24-33). We must be willing to die to what is normal, comfortable, and “usual” in order to make room for others (Phil. 2:8).

RECONCILIATION AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

This is a great and difficult calling, only made possible by abiding in Christ (Galatians 2:20 and John 15:1-12) through the power of the Holy Spirit. In fact, the Bible is clear that we cannot follow Jesus without the power of His Spirit. **Why is the power of the Holy Spirit necessary?**

When commissioning His disciples to take the gospel across geographical and cultural lines, Jesus tells them that they will receive power from the Holy Spirit to fulfill that calling (Matt. 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8). After his teaching on the reconciliation of Believers in Ephesians 2, the Apostle Paul prays for the church in Ephesus that God might strengthen them with power *through the Holy Spirit*, that they will be rooted and grounded in love, and that Christ might dwell in their hearts through faith (Eph. 3:14-19). He prays that they would have power to grasp the depth, height, and width of the Lord's love in order to see that this love included all people. Paul reminds them that God is able to do more than we ask or imagine by His power (Eph. 3:20).

In Colossians 1:29, Paul speaks of strenuously contending for the faith with Christ's energy which is powerfully working in Him. In Colossians 2:2-3, Paul makes clear that the outward result of the power at work in the church in Colosse, and the purpose of his pastoral and missionary calling, is to encourage the church so they may be united in love.

As we obey this call to love one another, God is glorified (Phil. 2:9-11). We do not follow Jesus in the pattern of downward mobility or the holy standard of reconciliation in order to exalt ourselves or Grace Community Church, but rather to bring glory to the Father.

RECONCILIATION AND KINGDOM PROCLAMATION

As we live in humble, self-giving, reconciling relationships, God is glorified and the Gospel advances. This is why the issue of reconciliation is of critical importance for the Church. In John 17:20-26, Jesus prays to God, the Father for "oneness." **"Why does Jesus pray for oneness for all believers in his final hours of freedom?"** His desire is that each believer is one with each other just as He is one with the Father. This prayer acknowledges God's original intent for creation and all human beings from the beginning in that it honors the unity, harmony, and shared kingdom vision and purpose Jesus has with his Father. Jesus prays that we may be in them (the Father and Son through the Holy Spirit), so that the world will believe that the Father has sent the Son (v. 23). This prayer teaches us that the way believers interact with each other is a testament to the faith we proclaim and the God we serve. The interactions among Believers should be so intimate and radically different that the watching world will take notice and marvel at the goodness of God. Our unity and oneness make us credible witnesses of the gospel that transcends the divisive ways of this world. Our faith in God and commitment to Jesus leads to unity in the body of Christ, which draws others into this saving faith by acknowledging the transforming power of Jesus for themselves.

We are able to pursue this oneness because of our love for God, our desire for his glory and reign on earth, and because of the powerful work of the Holy Spirit. The unity and oneness that Jesus prays for reflects the unity and oneness that exists eternally between Him and His Father. It reflects what God originally intended when He gave the first woman to the first man as a companion. Because the work of Christ has reversed the curse of The Fall, we now can live together in oneness as a redeemed people. This echoes Jesus' teaching on prayer: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." (Matt. 6:9-10)

RECONCILIATION ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

What was broken in The Fall and redeemed through the cross is made perfect in heaven, and perhaps one of the most important and relevant questions in regards to reconciliation is, **"Who will be in heaven, and where are they from?"** We look to the book of Revelation to answer these questions. Revelation 5: 9-10 says, "And they sang a new song, saying: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.'" First, one will notice the prerequisite for a person to be in heaven is, one has to be purchased

by the blood of the Lamb (Jesus), which answers the question of who will be in heaven (Romans 3:22-25 reinforces this belief).

The second part of the question, "Where are the people in heaven from?" is answered in Revelations 7:9-10. Revelations 7:9 describes an uncountable amount of people standing in front of the Lamb, and this verse states that those purchased by the blood of the Lamb represent every people group, tribe, nation (*ethnos*), and language. Their resurrection gave them new glorious bodies where the distinctions between their languages, cultures, and ethnicities were still evident. These visions lay to rest any doubt that different people groups will be represented in heaven with their redemptive ethnicities, cultures, and languages intact, and these people will all be present together worshiping the Lamb.

RECONCILIATION AND LOVE

The foundation for love and reconciliation is steeped in John 3:16. It is an all-inclusive statement that makes every culture, ethnicity and economic status eligible to partake in the gift of everlasting life. Those who believe have become a part of God's family (1 John 3:9-10, 1 John 1:2-13). Therefore, Jesus commands us to love one another as He loves us because brotherly love is indispensable mark of genuine Christianity (John 13:34-35, 1 John 3:14-15).

What is involved in brotherly love? That is a question we must answer, because as disciples, we are not a homogenous people. In typical John fashion, he shows us what brotherly love and relationship looks like in the body of Christ by first demonstrating what it should not look like. John uses the example of Cain in 1 John 3:12, telling us not to be like Cain. Genesis 4 makes it clear God looked favorably upon Abel's sacrifice and not Cain's. John is not focused on why Cain's sacrifice was not acceptable. Instead, the larger issue as it relates to brotherly love is the response. Cain is angry, indignant, sad and depressed, opening the door to jealousy and envy which eventually unlocked hate. His openness to hate gave way to murder. "Everyone who hates his brothers is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him (1 John 3:15)." Jesus said that murder is not only committed in a physical act, but our words, thoughts and the motivation of our heart can be weaponized when hate is present (Matthew 5:28).

Cain represents the world (1 John 3:13). The world delights in what divides and finds comfort in separation. We as a body of believers must resist these areas of division and comfort and be the salt and light in a world dying around us. The church must live in a radically different way from the world, bridging the divide between cultural, ethnic and economic backgrounds with a Christ-centered purpose. The church must live righteous lives in the midst of unrighteousness hate perpetrated by the world.

Love is an all-encompassing notion that man can fill with any concept he wants if the church sits in silence. However, to complete the answer of what is involved in brotherly love, John

brings us the contrast to Cain in 1 John 3:16. Cain took a life because he hated, and Christ gave his life because he loved.

We understand love is the evidence of, not the basis for, our life in Christ (1 John 4:9-11). It is by loving our brother that our new life is displayed, not created. We bring emphasis to this because certainly it can be argued that the pagan has the ability to love as well as the heretic. After all, they too are made in God's image and despite man's depravity, people do have the ability to do good things for people. However, "we know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love each other. Anyone that does not love remains in death (1 John 3:14)."

Belief in Christ comes first and then the love. For Jesus Christ did not die merely as an example of love. His death on the Cross is more significant, because He died as our sin-bearer. John is not writing about love in terms of a hug, a kiss or sweet sentiment, but as an obligation of the believer. If Christ laid down his life for us then we must die to our selfish desires and interest. Opportunities to lay down our lives may not occur on a routine basis, but the giving of our time, care, labors and prayers can be daily occurrences. Our life and comfortable associations ought not to be dearer to us than God's own Son (1 John 4:10-11; 1 John 3:17).

SUMMARY

In summary, as Covenanters of Grace Community Church, our focus is ***to make disciples who live out the gospel crossing racial and economic lines***. This focus is a biblical call to reconciliation. God calls us to both the ministry and the message of reconciliation as an essential part of our gospel witness. The two-fold purpose of the cross was to reconcile God to humankind, and having dealt with sin that divides us, and to reconcile people to one another. **We commit to this call to: Rightly Bear God's Image, Embrace the Purpose of the Cross, Commit to Community, Yield to the Power of the Holy Spirit, Proclaim that God's Kingdom is Come, Look Forward with Great Hope and Anticipation of Heaven, and Love Others as God Loves Us.** As we live in the reality of the cross, we become a unified body where Christ dwells by His Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22), which brings glory to God (Philippians 2:9-11), and witnesses to His power before a watching world (John 17:23).

Our prayer for the body of believers at Grace Community Church is: "5 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, 6 so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." (Romans 15:5-7)

We trust that this witness will result in many more women and men worshiping around the throne of God, celebrating His Kingdom and His reign (Revelation 7:9-10). To the glory of God, Amen.