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THE CHURCH SHOULD LOOK LIKE THAT

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." —REVELATION 7:9-10

A short time ago we worshiped with the Bridgeway Community Church in Columbia, Maryland. I got a foretaste of this Revelation 7 vision. It felt like a prelude to heaven! It was a picture of the oneness and the diversity of the body of Christ . . . a physical representation of, as the King James Version puts it, “all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues,” and it was glorious! The melting of the cultures was beautiful; the blend of ethnicities was evident across the ranks of the leadership and the membership. And the music carried me away. I saw echoes of that great congregation that will stand around the throne shouting “Holy, Holy, Holy! Worthy is the Lamb!”

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I was struck by their wonderful application of biblical truth. They had been intentional in making sure that their church looked like what the church is supposed to look like. From the Lobby Crew who wore purple T-shirts that ask people in different languages “got questions?” to the warm welcome, “We’re so glad you’re here today,” we saw and felt the heart of this community of believers. What is happening at Bridgeway Community Church and many other multicultural churches across the country is a reflection of God’s grand vision for His church. This is a picture of true biblical reconciliation—*the removal of tension between parties and the restoration of loving relationship*. These are glimpses of heaven in our midst.

GOOD NEWS FOR ALL

This vision for unity is borne on the wings of the good news of the gospel. It’s good news and it’s for all the people. It’s the good news that Luke proclaimed, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10–11). This supernatural announcement is one of the most compelling signs that God intends for His gospel to reach all nations and cultures.

That the angel would appear to make this announcement of Jesus’ birth is big news by itself, but that this angel would choose shepherds in the fields as his target audience is even more noteworthy. This is significant for at least a couple of reasons. First, some say the shepherds in this culture would have been considered “outcasts of society,” occupying a lower rung on the class ladder of the day. Some suggest that these

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shepherds would have been separated from others in the Jewish community because of their inability to follow the Mosaic laws of cleanliness due to their dirty jobs. This would be right in line with the arrival of a Messiah who later would clearly identify with the “least of these” in society.

And there are still other ideas about why God chose these shepherds to receive the good news of Jesus’ coming. According to one scholar, the flocks of sheep at the location where these shepherds worked were likely reserved for sacrifice at the temple. So these shepherds had to keep their flocks safe from blemish or harm since their sheep would be used for temple sacrifice. If this was the case, then these were no ordinary shepherds. They were people who understood the importance of a sacrificial lamb in a very intimate and direct way.

Then the angel said, “I bring you good news of great joy.” This was something the world had been waiting for since Adam and Eve sinned in the garden of Eden. Death, violent crime, and wickedness had entered into the world. Mankind’s nature had moved from constant communion with God to the practice of greed and self-preservation. Satan had done a job on us with the fall. We knew we were messed up, but we couldn’t stop ourselves from doing wrong. Only God could do that. And so we began to anticipate a time when God would make things right and return us to a state of harmony with Him.

The angel brought “good news.” This had been the greatest longing in human history. And this was going to be the answer to man’s long dilemma. “Behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people.”

Now, hold on for a moment and ponder those last four words: “for all the people.”

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This was not going to be an exclusive club that continued the then (as now) very common injustice of the “haves” and the “have-nots.” This wasn’t a message for some and not for others. This was good news for *everyone*—for every man, woman, and child of every nation and culture. There was no room for racism or bigotry. God’s plan was too tight.

It’s a justice statement: “Behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people. For today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

And it’s not just a message for a select few. It’s a word of hope and reconciliation “for all the people.”

AMERICA’S BROKEN GOSPEL

The angel’s message was good news for the world, but it’s especially good news for those of us in America—not because we’re better than anyone else, but because our founding documents were in line with the angel’s inclusive message.

I believe the Declaration of Independence makes the greatest affirmative statement about reconciliation in human history. There has not been a statement before or since that was more comprehensive than our great Declaration of Independence, our creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”¹

“We hold these truths to be self-evident . . . all men are created equal . . .” You can’t be any more truthful than that. That’s one of the greatest statements in human history, because we were created in the image of God.

America was unique, because it was directly drawing on

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this divine right of humanity, over and above any kind of class system set up by man against man. All people are created equal! (The irony that this great vision for equality was put forth by a group of men who owned other human beings as property was an obvious flaw in the plan—but just go along with me for now.)

America was different from the start. We were going to be a nation that reflected the divine values of God's kingdom, one nation from all nations under heaven, under God. We'd live together. We'd work together. We'd govern as a united people, each with an equally valid voice.

But then we got sidetracked. Our personal interests took priority over the equality of other human beings. We decided we valued individualism more than community. We determined that, despite the God-honoring ideals of our founding statement, we each needed to get ours first. And then it all fell apart.

We've been longing for the fulfillment of that founding vision ever since. We've had a few fleeting gestures to try to go there. We had the Civil War. We had the Civil Rights movement. We passed laws and launched programs. But we haven't been able to pull it together.

The angel told the shepherds, "Behold, I bring you good news."

That was a message for the world, but it was a message entrusted to *God's people*.

I tell you, the church has got to do it. The people of God have got to do it.

THE MANDATE FOR UNITY

But for the message of the gospel to truly have power, the people of God must deliver the news as one united body. This good news was to be delivered to the world by a *multicultural, united* body of believers—the Church. The Church has been given a divine mandate for reconciliation. Our Lord Jesus Christ before He went to Calvary prayed a prayer that helps us see and know how important this vision of oneness, of reconciliation, is to God. After praying that the Father would glorify Him and praying for His disciples, He prayed for “those who [will] believe in Me through their word” (John 17:20; also see 2 Cor. 5:18–21). That’s you and me. He prayed

“that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them, even as You have loved Me.”
(John 17:21–23)

For too long, many in the Church have argued that unity in the body of Christ across ethnic and class lines is a separate issue from the gospel. There has been the suggestion that we can be reconciled to God without being reconciled to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Scripture doesn’t bear that out. We only need to examine what happened when the Church was birthed to see exactly how God intends for this issue of reconciliation within the body of Christ to fall out. In the book of Acts we begin to see what happens when God’s radical vision for the

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Church collides with the culture. Man is sinful and does not easily give up his prejudices and dislikes. But again and again the Holy Spirit had His way and wrestled the people of God to submission on this issue of reconciliation.

The apostle Peter struggled with the vision of reconciliation. He was steeped in Jewish culture, which had taught him to see non-Jews as unclean. But God opened his eyes to a new truth when Peter fell into a trance. In this trance, he saw the heavens open and something like a great sheet being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. These were clean and unclean animals, according to Jewish law! All mixed up together. And suddenly a voice spoke to him saying, “Get up, Peter, kill and eat” (Acts 10:13).

You can just imagine how insulted Peter was to hear these words! He understood that it was the Lord speaking, yet he said, “No, Lord.” Somewhere along the way, I’ve heard it said that you can’t say, “No” and “Lord” in the same sentence. They just don’t go together. If He is Lord, then He is Ruler and Commander. So the Lord tells Peter once again not to call what He has made unclean or common. This happened three times, but Peter was still confused about the vision.

I can identify with Peter. It’s taken a long time for me to really understand how crucial it is for the Church to be united. I’ve worked at the issue of reconciliation from the outside and I’ve worked with black churches and white churches. And I’m just now seeing clearly that the black church can’t fix this. And the white church can’t fix this. It must be the reconciled Church, black and white Christians together imaging Christ to the world.

It wasn’t until messengers from Cornelius’s house came to

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find him and take him to see Cornelius that Peter began to see the vision for true biblical reconciliation opening up before his very eyes. He found himself in the home of a Gentile.

Some of his first words to Cornelius were, “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean” (Acts 10:28). Remember these words. We will revisit them later.

Yes, Peter was finally beginning to understand that loving God meant loving even our enemies—loving those we have previously hated. Can you hear the passion in his voice when he proclaimed, “I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him” (vv. 34–35)?

I imagine that not even Peter had any idea of just how far God was going to go to demonstrate that He is not a respecter of persons. He was not going to have a Jewish church and a separate Gentile church of second-class believers. Because when Peter preached the good news to Cornelius and his family, the Holy Spirit fell on all of them. The Gentiles began speaking in tongues and praising God! It was a repeat of Pentecost!

This was the vision! *All people, all kindred, all nations, all tongues.* One blood. But it was the vision realized when Peter accepted the mandate to love those he had been taught to hate. This was true biblical reconciliation and the demonstration of this biblical truth:

For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of

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commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.
(Eph. 2:14–16)

The first church in Acts got it right too. They learned that God's love required them to widen the net and embrace those who were considered outsiders before. How could they not? When the fire of Pentecost ushered in the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, they all heard the gospel in their own tongue: "Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs" (Acts 2:9–11a). It was clear that God intended for His church to be made up of many different people groups, not just those of the Jewish faith.

The church in Acts saw the urgent need to deal with any hint of ethnic superiority. When the Greek-speaking Jewish widows complained that they were not receiving the same kind of care that the Hebrew-speaking Jewish widows were receiving, the disciples quickly assembled a group of men (the first deacons) to tend to the problem. And in this church with different ethnicities there was a beautiful picture of how the church is to live out this idea of unity in the body. It was a picture of the vision *almost* realized—here on earth. They met from house to house, ate together, and met each other's needs, and God added to the church daily. They embraced the vision. They broke down the walls of resistance to loving those who were different.

This pattern of reconciliation with God and then with our

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Christian brothers and sisters was echoed in my life when I came to faith. When I was twenty-seven years old, I was a young husband and father living in Monrovia, California. We had moved to Southern California to escape the racism and segregation that was smothering us in Mississippi. At that time, most of the people in my family were not attending church regularly. My son Spencer, however, had started attending a neighborhood Good News Club, where kids learned about the Bible while playing games and having fun.



I had learned to hate the white people of Mississippi. And if I had not met Jesus I would have died carrying that heavy burden of hate to the grave.



It was connected to a local church. One day, Spencer came home and began to share with me what he had been learning about Jesus. He learned that Jesus was God's Son, who had come to earth to die in our place so we could be forgiven of sins. Before that, I had never heard the good news of God's love in such a clear way. So, when he asked me to go to Sunday school with him at that local church, I agreed.

And in that Sunday school, I finally met Jesus. I discovered that joy is the fulfillment of longing. I was longing for love. I was seeing it in Spencer, but I had never really had it myself. And I heard a verse that sealed the deal: Galatians 2:20. Paul, who had once been a murderer, had been touched by the love of God. He had once hated Christians, but now he was one of them. He explained that the love of God was the reason he was behaving the way he was. He said, "I have been crucified

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with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”

When I heard that verse, I said to myself that if there’s a God in heaven who loved me enough to send His only Son into the world to die for me, I want to know that God. I want to *know* Him. And I came to know Him. I believe the purpose of man is to know *that* God, the God of the universe who made everything and holds everything together. That *big* God. That *all-encompassing* God. The God who makes Himself known to humanity. I came to know that God. And I believe the purpose of us knowing that God is to love Him back and make Him known to others.

Almost immediately God began to do something radical in my heart. He began to challenge my prejudices and my hatred toward others. I had learned to hate the white people in Mississippi. I hated their control over our lives. I hated them for what they had done to my brother, Clyde. I hated them for refusing to see me as a person deserving of respect just because I was a human being. I had so much hate! And if I had not met Jesus I would have died carrying that heavy burden of hate to my grave. But He began to strip it away, layer by layer. He reminded me again and again that I could not hoard His love. And I could not be selective about who I would share it with. The love He had shed abroad in my heart was meant to be shared with others regardless of their color.

My good friend Judah Smith says, “You cannot exaggerate God’s love. Just try it!” I agree with him. God intends for us to be extravagant and free in our love for one another.

I never imagined when I left Mississippi at the age of sixteen that God would bring me back with a changed heart

toward white people. I left Mississippi with hate in my heart. God brought me back with a heart that was overflowing with His love. I had been reconciled to Christ, and He prepared me to return to Mississippi to be reconciled to my white brothers and sisters. Even today when I think back on this, I am overwhelmed at the transforming power of God. God is the ultimate reconciler.

THE CHURCH SHOULD LOOK LIKE THAT

A report in the February 7, 2017, edition of *The Washington Post* grabbed my attention in the best kind of way. It told the story of two churches in Jacksonville, Florida—one black and urban, one white and suburban. They had done what seemed to be impossible. They had merged two years earlier.

Shiloh Metropolitan Baptist Church was a large, 7,000-member black congregation in the heart of the city. It had grown so large that its leaders decided that a second church should be planted in the suburb of Orange Park. At the same time, the mostly white Ridgewood Baptist Church in Orange Park was losing members and was behind on its bills. A Southern Baptist leader who was aware of both churches had an idea. Was it necessary to plant an entirely new church? What if Shiloh and Ridgewood merged into one church with two locations?

Shiloh's charismatic young pastor, H.B. Charles Jr., reflected on the statement made by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. some fifty years earlier: "Eleven o'clock Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America." Despite obvious progress over the years, why did that statement still seem as convicting as ever?

"The Bible says that from the church, God is making a tribe

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of every nation, people and tongue,” Charles told the *Post*. “I feel like the church should look like that.”² So he did something about it.

Today, Shiloh Metropolitan Baptist looks a lot different than it did in 2014. Located in the city and suburbs, it is now a multiethnic congregation that is made up of both its original Jacksonville congregation and the former Ridgewood Baptist. Some of the Ridgewood families decided not to stick around for the merger, but the congregations moved ahead bravely.



It's going to take intentionally multiethnic and multicultural churches to bust through the chaos and confusion of the present moment and redirect our gaze to the revolutionary gospel of reconciliation.



More than 250 African American members from the downtown congregation volunteered to move to the suburban location for one year to help grease the wheels of the transition. After twelve months all of them decided to stay at Orange Park. And it wasn't just two churches shuffling the same old folks from one location to the other. What they were doing was so compelling that the community could not help but be drawn to it. A year into the radical experiment, more than a thousand new people joined the church, including several interracial couples who felt they had found a church that understood their unique experiences. And the Orange Park location, which had declined to less than three hundred weekly attenders, was now welcoming more than seven hundred people each Sunday.

Against a backdrop of racial unrest, here was a body of believers courageously living out the message of reconciliation for a divided world to see. This wasn't fake news in *The Washington Post*—it was the good news.

“This is cutting edge,” said Ridgewood’s senior pastor, Michael Clifford, who became pastor of Christian education for the combined church. “You could take and place [this] in the middle of the Book of Acts and it would make sense, because it is right in the heart and center of what Jesus wants to do.”³

I’ve been preaching and teaching on justice and reconciliation for nearly six decades. I’ve written more than twelve books and spoken to audiences both massive and small. I’ve experienced firsthand the viciousness of racial hate, but I’ve also seen the power of God’s reconciling love in action. I’m convinced that, more than any speech I’ve given or book I’ve written, it’s going to take congregations like Shiloh Baptist and Ridgewood in Jacksonville to make the message real. It’s going to take intentionally multiethnic and multicultural churches to bust through the chaos and confusion of the present moment and redirect our gaze to the revolutionary gospel of reconciliation.

I really believe that each of our souls yearns for this vision. We want it. We know in our heart of hearts that it is right. As someone once said, “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each man which cannot be satisfied by any created thing but only by God the Creator, made known through Jesus Christ.”⁴ I believe that there is a vision-shaped vacuum in the soul of the church that will not be satisfied by man-made strategies or philosophies, but only by His vision of the church victoriously fulfilling the divine mandate.

I’m asking God to help us be captured by this awesome

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vision . . . one Church that crosses all ethnic, cultural, class lines. And I pray that He opens our eyes to see that we truly are One Blood, for there is only one race: the human race.

PRAYER · Father God, we praise You for the vision of the church—overflowing with Your character, Your purpose, Your love. Please remove the scales from our eyes and help us to see it, to know it, to embrace it, to love it. Then Lord, overshadow the doubts and fears that so easily war against the vision and help us to be Your Church, overflowing with Your glorious character in this world. By Your awesome power, oh God, make us one that Your Name may be glorified and praised in all the earth!