

**Reconciliation for Africa
(Resources for Ethnic Reconciliation from the Bible and History)**

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Table of Contents

1. Early Church History and the Need for Reconciliation

- a. The Demise of Eastern Christendom
- b. Division among North African Christians

2. Examples in More Recent History

- a. Some Examples in the West
- b. Some Examples in Africa
- c. Examples from the Authors
- d. Divisions Today
- e. The Higher Loyalty

3. Ethnic Reconciliation in the Old Testament and Gospels

- a. Models of Ethnic Reconciliation in the Old Testament
 - i. God's care for Gentiles
 - ii. Welcoming Gentiles
 - iii. Marriages involving Gentiles
- b. Matthew's Gospel: Israel's King rules Gentiles
 - i. Jesus' Royal Ancestry
 - ii. Canaanites and Romans
 - iii. The Magi
 - iv. Other Examples
- c. John: The Samaritan Woman

4. The Church's Mission

- i. Jesus' Ministry
- ii. The Theme of Acts
- iii. Fellowship with Gentiles

5. A New Temple

- a. The Shattered Barrier
 - i. Tempting Tempers in the Temple
 - ii. Cleansing Jerusalem's Temple
- b. Salvation by Grace or by Race?
 - i. The Problem
 - ii. One Way of Salvation
 - iii. Implications for reconciliation

6. Conclusion

Chapter 1: Early Church History and the Need for Reconciliation

The heart of this book is what the Bible teaches about ethnic reconciliation, but we open first by talking about what history and some recent events show us about the relevance and importance of this subject today.

“Ethnic” comes from the Greek word for “peoples,” which appears frequently in the New Testament. Today’s world is full of ethnic conflicts and hatreds, that is, strife between peoples; the majority of nations have ethnic minorities and tensions. Selfishness drives much of human sin, and when that selfishness goes beyond individuals to groups, it can yield prejudice, discrimination, and even genocide. Yet the Bible offers us both a chance and a demand for ethnic reconciliation.

The Christian teaching of ethnic reconciliation is not just a doctrine to be placed on a theological shelf like too many doctrines theological students are content merely to study. Christian history demonstrates that it is a matter of life and death, both for individuals and for Christ’s church. At critical points in Christian history, churches in various parts of the world invited their own eventual weakening or destruction by failing to stand united.

The Demise of Eastern Christendom

Because most church history in Africa has been taught by those who learned the discipline from western Europeans or North Americans, it has often naturally stressed the western European elements of church history, to the neglect of the church in other regions.

When Christians in Africa today think about Christians in the Medieval world, we often think of western Europe or perhaps the flourishing church in East Africa. But the powerful east African empire of Axum, in what is today Ethiopia, converted to Christianity in the early fourth century, about the same time that the Roman empire was converting. Christianity was spreading in Nubia, south of Egypt in what is now the Sudan, throughout the next century, until finally the kingdoms there were converted in the sixth century, and remained Christian, strong and prosperous mostly until their final conquest in the sixteenth century.

We often miss the great history of the church in Egypt, in western Asia and the Middle East; we are especially ignorant of the strong church in lands that are now Turkey and Syria. Through most of the Middle Ages, many historians believe that more Christians lived in these lands than in western Europe, where the population was thinner. Christianity had spread first, fastest, and with the least severe persecution in the eastern part of the Roman empire, including Egypt and the heavily populated and prosperous regions of Asia Minor (Turkey) and Syria. It persisted there in strength for well over a millennium.

Many historians argue that until recent centuries, Christians remained a majority of the population in much of the Middle East, especially in the eastern Mediterranean world. This remained true for many centuries even under Islamic governments. Christians’ numbers dwindled over time through various means of economic and civil pressure (some regimes were more tolerant than others), but a large Christian presence remained, albeit as a minority, even until the twentieth century. It was the Turkish genocide of

Armenians in the early twentieth century and massive emigration of Christians from the Islamic East in the remaining decades of that century that produced the much smaller minority Christian populations of the Middle East today. The discomfort and emigration of Christians was caused in part by the culturally insensitive interference of western policies in the Middle East.

Earlier, parts of even Turkey remained under control of Christian governments until the fall of Constantinople, the final remnant of the eastern Roman Empire's ancient glory. What finally destroyed Constantinople in 1453, however, is instructive for us. Shortly before its conquest, leaders in Constantinople and in Rome worked out a plan for an alliance that could stave off the invaders; by uniting the Eastern and Western churches, they hoped that Constantinople might be rescued. The majority of people in Constantinople, however, rejected western help. "We would rather fall into the hands of the Muslims than look to Latin Christians," they noted. And so it happened.

Why were most of the citizens of Constantinople so hostile to the Christians led by the western church? Much of the answer lies in the terrible era of the Crusades. Western Europe at the time was disunited, following a pre-Christian feudal system borrowed from the rural Roman Empire. Different regions were often at war with other regions, until some church leaders found a new, common direction for their hostilities.

For centuries, Christians in the East had lived peacefully under Muslim rulers, from Syria to Iraq, except for sporadic troubles under more repressive dynasties. Western Christians had been able to make pilgrimage to the holy land, a practice which many western Christians in the Middle Ages came to view as their necessary religious duty. The problem arose when the Seljuk Turks, relatively recent converts to Islam, swept to power and replaced the more tolerant Islamic regimes that had preceded them. These Seljuk Turks proved harsher toward local Christians, and cut off western Christians from making pilgrimage. Whether western diplomatic means might have resolved the crisis we may never know; some western preachers resolved on a plan to "liberate" the Holy Land from Islamic rule. The Crusaders did nothing the Seljuk Turks had not done in terms of conquest and violence—but in contrast to Christians, the Seljuks never claimed to be a model of Christian charity.

These western Christians included a mixture of genuinely pious Christians on one hand and adventurers seeking plunder on the other. The vast majority had little understanding of Christian traditions not part of the West. Although they often regarded local Christians as natural allies rather than enemies, they were eager to establish the supremacy of western Christian practices. The eastern and western churches had already broken over some doctrinal questions, and the eastern churches, while respecting the bishop of Rome, had never accepted his supreme authority over their own realms.

The most egregious act against eastern Christendom, however, came when the Fourth Crusade (1198-1204) got out of control and detoured at Constantinople, to the horror of Rome. A Crusade supposedly meant to attack a dynasty in Egypt instead sacked the capital of eastern Christendom, complete with three days of slaughter. Constantinople

did eventually recover, but it never fully regained its strength. As a result of its now weakened state, Constantinople finally collapsed in 1453 to Islamic invaders. These invaders included Janissaries, Islamic warriors originally taken from Christian families as children; because most of the Ottoman Turks' subjects were still Christians, the Turks needed to recruit their armies from among them. They removed one-fifth of their Christian subjects' children for their armies, forbidding them marriage, except for the Muslim-trained officers. The army also included Christian mercenaries, and used cannons that a German engineer had designed for them.

Constantinople finally fell, invaders slaughtered the priests at the altar of Christendom's most spectacular church, and almost immediately most of the city's churches were turned into mosques. A thousand years of Christian power in the east, where Christianity had been numerically strongest, came suddenly to an end.

Division among North African Christians

It was not Islam by itself that destroyed the Byzantine Christian empire headquartered in Constantinople. Christians devastated their own cause, and Muslims simply finished the job.

Christians should have known the risks of their division, because history already offered eloquent testimony to the danger of disunity. The church in western North Africa had been divided between local (allied especially with the Donatist movement) and Latin elements. The North African church produced some of the first and greatest theology of the western church, with scholars and leaders like Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine; but they wrote and argued especially in the Empire's Latin, emphasizing this more than local Berber culture. Later the church endured terrible suffering at the hands of barbarian invaders from northern Europe, barbarians who held to a seriously deficient version of Christian teaching (Arianism, which denied Jesus' full deity, something like Jehovah's Witnesses today). As a consequence, the church offered no united response to Muslim Arab invasions, and some local Christians cared little who controlled the area so long as they were left in relative peace.

The powerful church of Egypt, meanwhile, had provided the early church's greatest theologians (like the black African bishop Athanasius), yet struggled in time with the imperialism of the Byzantine empire (run by Constantinople). Alexandria in Egypt had vied with Antioch in Syria as the east's leading centers of theology and church leadership; conflicts with Antioch and especially the government in Constantinople now divided the church. Most of the church in Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia held to a doctrine which differed slightly from that held in Constantinople. Whereas most theologians today regard the disagreement as insignificant and a matter of semantics, the political repercussions proved serious.

When Muslim Arab invaders entered Egypt in the 600s, Egyptian Christians mostly welcomed them as deliverers from Byzantine repression. (Such deliverance may in fact have been the initial effect under tolerant Islamic regimes. But some later generations

were less tolerant, and over centuries the church's position as the majority of society was seriously weakened to its present minority status.)

Nubia, to the south of Egypt, remained a strongly Christian civilization for roughly a thousand years. Yet they depended on theological centers in Alexandria and Ethiopia to send them trained clergy. When Egypt and Ethiopia no longer could spare additional clergy, Nubia's ability to teach its people about the Christian faith declined over the next few generations. The civilization that finally succumbed to northern invaders had grown weak not only politically but theologically. Is it possible that God sometimes uses invaders to judge regions that claim to be Christian when we disobey Him, as He once judged Israel?

History offers a series of painful lessons to a divided church.

Chapter 2: Examples in More Recent History

Examples of the vital importance of ethnic reconciliation, especially among Christians, appear not only in earlier church history, but in more recent history as well. On the negative side, one thinks of the nationalism among various European countries with large Christian populations, which eventually led to the decline of Christian faith in Europe. But there are encouraging stories as well. Below we recount samples of just a few of these.

Some Examples in the West

Although the Bible has much to say about ethnic reconciliation, western Christians often taught little about it, because it was a cultural blind spot for many of them. Some Christians in the United States (where one of the authors of this book is from) thought too little about ethnic reconciliation in their homeland to consider it anywhere else. Nevertheless, many of them did learn about reconciliation. One could provide far more samples of Christians working for ethnic reconciliation, both with fellow-Christians and as peacemakers among others, than we take space to note below.

Although most Africans are aware that Africans participated in the slave trade, warring against members of rival tribes, western and Arab slave-traders introduced the most brutal conditions into the slave trade. Arabs had used slaves from the beginning, and by the ninth century developed many negative stereotypes of Africans. Although the first Africans they confronted were Christian Nubians who repelled their assaults for centuries, by the ninth century many Arabs associated Africans, especially in western Africa, with the slave trade.

These negative stereotypes were passed on to the Spanish and Portuguese, and from them to the British and Americans, who entered the slave trade much later but on a more massive scale than their predecessors. As a result of the Wesleyan revival in Great Britain, however, some Christians began working for the abolition of the African slave trade. The Methodists had denounced slavery from close to the start of their movement,

and strongly influenced William Wilberforce and his allies, among them a converted slave trader named John Newton, author of “Amazing Grace.” These Christians lobbied against slavery until finally, when Wilberforce was on his deathbed, slavery was abolished in the British Empire.

But while slavery was abolished in all British colonies, the United States was no longer a British colony. Despite the young nation’s ideals of freedom from British rule, the southern States refused to grant freedom to their African slaves. Still, many Christians worked to cross racial lines, some even in the south. In the early period, many black pastors led interracial churches, despite the persecution such ministry invited from racists. Slave-born African-American David George (1743-1810), who faced persecution for baptizing a white woman, later established the first Baptist church in West Africa.

Many black and white Christians denounced slavery, from Anglican bishop William Fleetwood in 1710, to Quakers, Methodists, and others in the same century. In the 1830s, Charles Finney and other revivalists led hundreds of thousands into a new commitment to Christ, then enlisted their converts for the antislavery cause. Although most Christians who opposed slavery did so peacefully, some engaged in slave revolts. Most of those who led these revolts were slaves themselves, but even some white Christians, like John Brown and George Boxley, led slave revolts.

Unfortunately, many Americans in the 1800s considered abolitionism (the movement to abolish slavery) too radical, especially when the extreme left of the abolitionist movement began calling for abolishing all authority and government. Already marginalized as “extreme” for their views on abolition, many abolitionists feared to take a public stand for “amalgamation,” the mixing of Whites and Blacks in public meetings. Most male abolitionists therefore counseled the Philadelphia Women's Antislavery Convention in 1838 not to provoke trouble by meeting together as a racially mixed group. The public outcry against such “amalgamation” was so severe that Philadelphians burned to the ground the place in which the women had met. (And Philadelphia was one of the safest places for African-Americans at that time!)

Nevertheless, the black and white women met again the next day and courageously issued a resolution declaring that “prejudice against color is the very spirit of slavery,” that it was “sinful,” and that they would continue to meet together in homes, churches, and everywhere else. Other examples could be multiplied, far more in the twentieth than in the nineteenth century, but these instances illustrate how Christian convictions could lead members of one ethnic group to work for justice for or unity with another ethnic group.

Some Examples in Africa

One could offer many examples in Africa, but as in the west, we offer here only samples. For example, Josephine Munyeli fled her village in Rwanda when the genocide came there, also helping some neighbors to escape. Working with World Vision Rwanda, she now helps to bring together perpetrators and their victims for reconciliation. Many others

are working now for healing in Rwanda. The only way to present and future healing is to address the injustice of the past and work for restoration of what remains.

Church of Uganda Bishop Macleord Ochola spent many years in exile from his homeland. His wife died from a landmine in 1997; his daughter died after being gang-raped by rebels. He speaks of the pain of his experiences, yet concludes, “God gave me the power of love to forgive.”

Oyuro Jacob of the Sudan Evangelical Alliance endured torture and the killing of his two sons. Nevertheless, he continues to work for reconciliation in his homeland, despite facing opposition for it. These stories are merely some samples (the last three from the 2006 report of the Great Lakes Reconciliation Gathering); examples could be multiplied from nearly all church movements and from most countries (some of you reading this book have your own stories).

Our friend Dr. Katho Bungishabaku, Principal of the Bunia Theological Seminary in Congo-Kinshasa, experienced ethnic strife. Because he belonged to a smaller, despised people group, a Christian from another tribe told him, “You would have to cut off my hand before I would give you a recommendation” for seminary. Most pastors he knew sent sons to participate in the war that devastated his country, a war that has left an estimated 4 million or more dead, many women raped and mutilated, and massive numbers homeless.

When he was working on his doctorate in 2001, he sometimes visited home to find over a hundred refugees staying around his home. A massacre later that year killed over a thousand people at a nearby hospital—among them a brother and sister of his. He knew some of the killers, who claimed to be Christians.

Talk about Christ’s love and forgiveness does not come cheaply. Sometimes it is very painful, but if Christ is truly Lord, we must be more loyal to him than to tribe, even if many others refuse to heed. Brother Katho insists that the church must play the primary role in converting people to think in new ways, to build a new society based on the love of Christ.

Examples from the Authors

We pause here to offer some firsthand examples that illustrate events that contribute to our own commitment to reconciliation. Black and white Americans often lived in separate neighborhoods even when Craig was growing up. When Craig was converted from atheism through an encounter with Christ, he and another recent convert to Christianity, who was African-American, became close friends. Together they began sharing the gospel with others. Sometimes black Americans mistrusted whites and vice-versa, but by teaming up Craig and his friend were able to share Christ with everyone they met in their town.

Just before beginning his Ph.D., when Craig was facing the most difficult tragedy he had ever experienced, some African-American Christians unofficially adopted him into their family. Because their churches had had to deal with slavery and discrimination, they knew how to deal with pain, and they lovingly nurtured him back to wholeness. Although Craig was from the northern United States, it was in the south where he met these Christians and attended their church. Reconciliation is not learned from a book, but from genuine friendships with people of other groups, and from these brothers in sisters in Christ whom Craig loved he learned about what they had suffered.

After that, he began to read and learn more about their culture, and was shocked to discover what people who looked like him had done to people who looked like his friends. He realized what it cost his friends to love him by Christ's love, and determined to join them in working for justice on their behalf. Although he had previously pastored a multicultural congregation, he was now ordained in an African-American church, and for most of the years since then has served as an associate minister in black American churches under African-American pastors. He lived for about five years as the only white person in black neighborhoods, and taught for four years in an African-American seminary. During this time, he and an African-American pastor co-wrote two books meant to serve especially the African-American church.

When he began teaching at a multiethnic seminary elsewhere, his closest friend, Emmanuel Itapson, was a Nigerian pastor studying in the United States. Through Emmanuel's urging, Craig spent three summers teaching in Nigeria. From his students he learned much about Nigeria, including the rivalry and prejudice that sometimes existed among different ethnic groups. He learned that "racism" was not only a problem of "black" and "white," and that it did not exist only in the United States.

During all these years Craig had remained in contact with a committed Christian friend that he met during his doctoral work, an exchange student from Congo-Brazzaville. In both France and the U.S., his friend Médine knew racist whites, but she also knew white Christians like Craig who genuinely cared about her. A more difficult ethnic problem for her personally was the conflict among different regions in her country, where she returned after finishing her Ph.D.

Those conflicts eventually exploded into full-scale war, forcing her to flee into the forest with her family, pushing their disabled father in a wheelbarrow. Before she fled she entrusted a letter for Craig to a cousin who was leaving the country. She knew that once Craig received it he would not stop praying for her.

By the time Craig received the letter, Médine's house and town had been burned to the ground. Daily he pleaded with God for his friend's safety, daily checking his mail in hopes that she might have escaped. There was little reason to hope for her survival, except for an assurance Craig sometimes felt in his heart when he prayed, that God had a plan for him and Médine.

Meanwhile, even when the family was not fleeing, Médine and her sisters often walked twenty kilometers a day to procure food for her family, often through snake-infested swamps and fields of army ants. Everyone in the family was close to death at one time or another. In fact, they had accidentally left behind the father's diabetes and high blood pressure medicine. When the mother wanted to go back for it, he insisted that he would rather die than let anyone else risk their life for them. But miraculously, each of them survived, from the father to the young children.

One day, after a year and a half, Craig found another letter from the Congo in his mailbox. "I'm alive!" it began. "I, Médine Moussounga, am alive!" After a cease-fire, the family finally emerged from the forest, now homeless and weak from malnutrition and sickness. Soon afterward, Craig and Médine became engaged and, after a long delay caused by visa regulations, were married.

Médine and her family had been refugees in the forest for 18 months. Yet even there, Médine showed kindness not only to people from her own tribe, but to needy people from the region that was at war with them. Likewise, when members of her tribe captured and beat a mercenary from another country fighting against them, Médine's family fed him and showed him kindness. The love of Christ, they believed, required them to care for everyone.

It is not always safe to trust everyone initially; Joseph tested his brothers before he trusted that they would genuinely treat Benjamin well and bring his father once he revealed himself to them. But even before we trust, we are obligated to love.

Divisions Today

Ethnic divisions remain among Christians in many parts of today's world. Such divisions are not, of course, distinctively Christian problems. Tribalism existed in Africa before Christians came; it was often exacerbated by colonial authorities, but the church opposed rather than supported it. Muslim tribes war in Somalia; Shiite and Sunni Muslims have tensions in Iraq. India's society has long been divided by castes.

Many Christians, in fact, have worked hard to break down barriers. Everyone knows, for example, the divisions fostered by the white South African apartheid regime, and the work that Christians (such as Anglican archbishop Desmond Tutu) have done to bring justice and reconciliation.

Yet we have not always been successful. In India, conversion to the Christian faith breaks and leaves behind the Hindu caste system; yet in some circles Indian Christians of lower caste still face prejudice from Christians of higher caste. In the Congo, where Craig's wife Médine is from, Christians from different tribes and regions often do not trust each other because of what they have suffered at other regions' hands. Happily, she has also seen those divisions surmounted by committed Christians who recognized the commitment of Christians of other ethnicities.

Those who work for reconciliation are themselves often at risk from both sides in a larger conflict which do not want to be reconciled. In Rwanda, the work of evangelical campus staff workers for GBU (Groupes Bibliques Universitaires; the Francophone equivalent of International Fellowship of Evangelical Students; or NIFES in Nigeria; GBEEC in Cameroon; and so forth) crossed ethnic lines. It is said that in the terrible genocide of 1994-95, all sixty of their Bible study leaders were killed. In the former Yugoslavia, many Christian leaders have spoken out against the nationalist ethnic hatred among peoples, but they do so against the dictates of their cultures. In Sri Lanka, Sinhalese and Tamil Christians seek to work together, but this often breeds anger toward Christians from Buddhist Sinhalese and Hindu Tamils who have a long history of strife.

An earlier war in Médine's country, in 1993, involved the Ninjas (from the Pool region) and the Nibolek (from the Niari, Bouenza, and Lekoumou regions). Many people from Nibolek regions lived in Bakongo, part of Brazzaville, the nation's capital, but most of the people there were from the Pool region. When war came, Niboleks had to flee Bakongo to save their lives (as Ninjas had to flee from Nibolek districts). During this time a Ninja Christian woman in Bakongo met a young Nibolek man who had not had a chance to escape. Niboleks were being killed, and she felt in her heart that Christ wanted her to help him; if she left him there, he would be killed. She instructed the young man to pretend that he was sick, then put this man on her back. She had to pass different barricades, and the guards at each stop asked who the young man on her back was. At each stop, she claimed that the man was an ailing relative she was taking to the hospital. Finally, she got him to safety; she had saved his life. Many peoples in many nations have stories of such acts of sacrificial courage for the sake of Christ.

In many conflicts, some who claimed to love Christ loved their ethnicity more than they loved Christ, and participated in violence. But Jesus warned us that we cannot love something else more than we love Him and truly be his disciples (Matt 10:37). Those truly submitted to Christ as Lord have defended others and worked for peace.

The Higher Loyalty

Both today and earlier in history, Christians in various cultures have sometimes been divided by region or ethnicity. Yet if Jesus Christ is our Lord, our loyalty to others who share our common faith in Him must transcend our loyalty to groups based on kin or tribe or language. In heaven, people from every kindred, tribe, people and language will gather before God's throne (Rev 5:9; 7:9); if heaven is a place we want to be, we should learn to value what heaven will be like, and genuinely work for God's will to "be done on earth, as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10).

If we have a loyalty higher than the bond of faith in Christ, then we may treat Christ as one authority among many, but we do not speak the truth when we call Him our Lord. This is not to deny that we may have suspicions of groups of people who have previously done us wrong (cf. Gen 42:9). It is to say that as Christians we have a higher loyalty than our tribe, caste, region or nation; a higher loyalty than gender or even our common humanity. Our highest loyalty is to our Lord and King, Jesus Christ, and He commands

us to love one another as He loved us (Jn 13:34-35). Since He loved us to the point of death on the cross, we must also risk everything to love one another. If we cannot love our brother or sister whom we see, we cannot honestly claim to love God whom we have not seen (1 Jn 4:20).

We must begin to build relationships with people of other ethnic groups—even though this puts us in the most painful position. For bridges of reconciliation, conflicts present danger; misunderstandings between rival groups put us at risk of rejection from people we love on both sides. Listening to others until we work past our stereotypes of their groups, we may also learn the uncomfortable stereotypes they have of our own groups. If we humble ourselves to listen, learn, and love, we will suffer. But does Jesus' cross demand anything less from us? And as the resurrection followed the cross, so our hardships and labors for the sake of Christ's way will not be in vain.

Whether we call the problem tribalism (as often in Africa), nationalism, or racism, the problem remains ethnic strife. What does God's Word have to say to challenge this endemic problem? It is to that question we must now turn.

Chapter 3: Ethnic Reconciliation in the Old Testament and Gospels

Is the gospel genuinely relevant to contemporary ethnic conflicts? After all, the New Testament addressed a world quite different from ours, where physical features were noticed but rarely understood in a prejudicial manner. Nevertheless, many cultures saw themselves as superior to other cultures. Greeks considered non-Greeks to be "barbarians" and Jewish people correctly regarded the vast majority of non-Jews as idol-worshippers.

The most prominent ethnic division among early Christians was the division between Jew and Gentile, one of the central issues addressed in the New Testament. Subsequent barriers created by some peoples' sins against others differ from the ancient barrier between Jew and Gentile, a barrier that God Himself established in history. Yet if Christ's gospel transcends a barrier that God Himself established, then how much more must it transcend all other human barriers erected instead by human sins? Seeing how God confronted this barrier in the days of the first apostles provides us a model for understanding how important it is for us to cross barriers today.

After surveying some hints of ethnic reconciliation in the Old Testament, we will sample some passages in the Gospels, the Book of Acts, and Paul's letters.

Models of Ethnic Reconciliation in the Old Testament

God chose a specific culture to carry His name and prepare for the coming of the Messiah; once Jesus had come, however, the gospel began to spread among all peoples. Although ethnic reconciliation is especially a New Testament emphasis, it is already present in the Old Testament. We will briefly survey God's concern for all peoples; then

examine Gentiles being welcomed among God's people; and finally note the presence of some Gentiles in the most intimate of Israelite relationships.

God's care for Gentiles. Did God care only for Israel, or for all peoples? If His ultimate plan was for all peoples, then we, too, should care about all peoples. Since all of us who are not Jewish are ethnically Gentiles, we can be very happy that His plan encompasses all peoples—and should consider how we can best serve His plan.

From the very beginning, God chose Abram not only for the sake of his immediate descendants, but so that all nations might bless themselves in him (Gen 12:3). Thus when God gave Abram a great victory, Melchizedek, priest of "God Most High," praised God and ate a covenant meal together with Abram (Gen 14:18-20). When God later gave Israel another victory, freeing them from slavery, Jethro, priest of Midian, praised God and ate a covenant meal with Moses and the leaders of Israel (Ex 18:8-12). Likewise, the Queen of Sheba praised God for the wonders of God's grace she recognized through Solomon (1 Kgs 10:9).

God chose Israel as a special vehicle for glorifying Him, but all along He cared for all peoples (Amos 3:1-2; 9:7). God used Joseph to bless not only his brothers but all Egypt and many other nations (Gen 50:20). Later, God raised up a wicked Pharaoh so that He might judge the "gods" of Egypt (Ex 12:12). Thus the Egyptians might learn that He alone was God (Ex 7:5, 17; 8:10, 22; 9:29; 10:2; 14:4, 18)—just as the Israelites also needed to learn (Ex 6:7; 16:6, 12; 29:46). Later, when God judged Israel for their sins against Him, He nevertheless also chastened the Philistines to prevent them from thinking that their gods were stronger. He wanted the Philistines to know that He was God, whether or not the Israelites cared about them knowing (1 Sam 4—6). God continues to care that the nations understand that He is God (Ezek 39:21-24).

God's compassion for other peoples, even oppressive, militaristic peoples, is a special emphasis in the Book of Jonah. God commanded Jonah to announce Nineveh's judgment; Jonah did not want to go because he knew that God was gracious and would forgive them if they repented. The book closes with Jonah sulking because God forgave the repentant Ninevites, and God posing a question to Jonah: "Should I not care for Nineveh," where so many people and animals live (Jonah 4:10-11)?

In other words, God cared about other nations, even when those nations were terrible oppressors of God's people. He would punish them as needed, but He would forgive them if they turned from their sins. Jesus later used the repentance of the Ninevites as an example of how peoples outside Israel could hear and respond to the gospel (Matt 12:41; Lk 11:32).

Welcoming Gentiles. God's law welcomed foreigners in the land so long as they would obey the covenant that He gave Israel (Lev 19:33-34; 23:22; 24:22; 25:35; Zech 7:10; Mal 3:5). David's bodyguard included Cherethites and Pelethites (2 Sam 8:18; 15:18; 20:7, 23; 1 Kgs 1:38, 44), who were Gentiles (1 Sam 30:14; Ezek 25:16; Zeph 2:5). Many foreigners who had joined God's people and the worship of Israel's God, ranked

high in his service. These included Uriah the Hittite (2 Sam 23:39); Ittai from Gath (2 Sam 15:19, 22; 18:2); and loyal local inhabitants of the area, such as Obed-Edom from Gath (2 Sam 6:10-11) and Araunah the Jebusite (2 Sam 24:16-18; pronounced slightly differently in 1 Chron 21:15-18, 28). Later the royal household included Cushites, i.e., Africans from south of Egypt (Jer 36:14; Zeph 1:1); other Africans also worked for David and his descendants (2 Sam 18:21-23), including one of the few supporters of the prophet Jeremiah (Jer 38—39).

The Psalmist envisioned a day when those who obeyed Israel's God and king would include distant lands like Africa (Ps 68:31); the prophets proclaimed that the nations would learn about the true God (e.g., Is 49:6; Zech 14:16). Indeed, God wanted Egypt and Assyria to join Israel as His people (Is 19:23-25; cf. Zech 2:11); it should not surprise us that Egypt, Syria and parts of the East were mostly Christian for many centuries, even after their surrender to Muslim Arabs. In contrast to those who thought that God would bless only Israelites, God promised that he would welcome foreigners who obeyed his covenant (Is 56:1-8).

Marriages involving Gentiles. Successful interethnic marriages demonstrate a high level of commitment to crossing cultural barriers. Granted, interethnic marriages were not wise under all circumstances: faithfulness to God is the highest demand in marriage. Because Israel was a unique bearer of the message of the one God in the Old Testament, most ethnic Gentiles were spiritually incompatible with God's people. Thus God often warned His people against intermarriage with worshipers of other gods (e.g., Deut 7:3-4; Josh 23:12-13; Ezra 9:13-15). Because Solomon married many women who worshiped other gods, his heart turned away from the Lord (1 Kgs 11:1-8; cf. Deut 17:17). Ezra and Nehemiah were angry when God's people, and even some priests, married wives who worshiped false gods and produced children who compromised with ungodly customs (Ezra 9:2; 10:3; Neh 13:23-24).

The problem, however, was religious rather than ethnic. The Book of Esther shows us that even when an Israelite was forced into an interreligious interethnic marriage, God could use that Israelite to help His people. Sometimes, too, God allowed such marriages where no others were available. It is no coincidence that Joseph and Moses both married foreign women. Each one, rejected by his own people and living in a foreign land, married the daughter of a local priest and named one of his first sons for his sojourn in a foreign land. Yet it is clear in the case of Moses (and likely in the case of Joseph) that God's blessing gave them great influence for God in the family into which they married. Moses' father-in-law came to acknowledge Israel's God as the greatest one (Ex 18:9-12).

Other examples, however, are much clearer. When Moses' sister complained because he had married an African woman, God vindicated him (Num 12:1-15). In fact Miriam, who had complained about a woman of darker complexion, was temporarily struck white in punishment (Num 12:1, 10)! The story of Ruth is even more significant. Because the Moabites opposed Israel, God forbade Moabites to become part of Israel (Deut 23:3). But when Ruth, a Moabitess, determined to serve the Lord through her relationship with Naomi (Ruth 1:16), God accepted her. She married into Israel and became the great-

grandmother of King David (Ruth 4:21-22). The Gospel of Matthew notes some other interethnic marriages.

Matthew's Gospel: Israel's King rules Gentiles

Matthew probably wrote his Gospel to Jewish Christians who had suffered much from the Romans. He wrote, however, partly to challenge their prejudices. He begins his Gospel with four ethnically mixed marriages in Jesus' genealogy (1:3, 5-6) and concludes with Jesus' concern for all nations (28:19).

Jesus' Royal Ancestry. Matthew develops much more fully the hints of God's concern for Gentiles in the Old Testament. These hints include the interethnic marriages we have already discussed. Matthew, in fact, uses the account of Ruth as just one of four interethnic marriages in Jesus' genealogy. Although ancient Jewish genealogies normally mentioned only men, Matthew includes four women in the list. One might expect that Matthew would have included the four famous matriarchs of Israel—Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel (or at least the four mothers of Israel's twelve tribes, i.e., Jacob's wives and concubines). Instead, he surprises us by mentioning Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Uriah's widow (Matt 1:3, 5-6). Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites; Ruth a Moabitess; and Bathsheba was either a Hittite by birth or (more likely) had married into Uriah's Hittite family before marrying King David.

Some of these unions were less morally pure than Ruth's, but the one factor that all of them had in common was the woman's Gentile background. By naming them and them only among Jesus' female ancestors, Matthew highlights the fact that God's involvement with Gentiles and Jesus' line went far back in history. Three ancestors of King David and the mother of King Solomon had Gentile associations! To be sure, they may not have been technically Jesus' birth ancestors through Mary; but even more importantly by ancient standards, they were part of His royal line as the adoptive son of Joseph. (In the ancient world, it was legal sons, not genetic ones, that were reckoned royal heirs.)

Whereas most Jewish genealogies sought to emphasize the purity of their subjects' Jewish lineage, Matthew specifically highlights Jesus' heritage among the nations. This allows Matthew to open his Gospel with an emphasis that it will articulate until the end (28:19): Israel's Messiah is the rightful Lord of not only of Jewish people, but of all people.

Canaanites and Romans. Matthew's interest in Canaanite women like Tamar reappears later in his Gospel, when he mentions a Canaanite woman who came to Jesus for her daughter's healing. In Mark, the woman is described as a Greek "Syrophenician" (Mk 7:26). Greeks were the ruling citizen class who lived in Syrophenician cities like Tyre and Sidon. They exploited the poorer Jewish and Syrian farmers who worked in the countryside, taking a significant amount of the grain they raised for their own bread. This woman is from an elite class that has been taking bread from other people's children. Now Jesus forces this woman from an elite class to recognize that the situation

is turned: she must humble herself before Israel's king and take what is left from the table of his people. She humbles herself and Jesus grants her request (Mk 7:25-30).

But whereas Mark emphasizes the class issue, Matthew emphasizes the geographic issue. She lives in a region where many worshipers of other gods descended from the Canaanites, Israel's ancient enemies. Some of Matthew's first Jewish readers may have even been offended that Jesus answered the prayer of a Canaanite. But Matthew challenged the prejudices of his people.

There was one group of people that Jewish people in Matthew's day hated more than Canaanites. That was Romans, especially Roman soldiers. Roman soldiers had long oppressed Judea and Galilee, had violently suppressed a revolt a few years after Jesus was born, and eventually destroyed Jerusalem's temple. Some of Matthew's Jewish-Christian audience may have had relatives who had been killed or enslaved by the Romans. If it were right for Christians from any people to hate other peoples, it would have been right for Jewish Christians to hate Romans!

Yet Matthew tells of a Roman centurion whose faith Jesus praised and whose prayer He granted. Matthew even presents him to his readers as a special example of faith (Matt 8:10-12)! Far from hating such Romans, Jewish Christians were compelled to love them—even when non-Christian Romans and non-Christian Jews ridiculed such love! And if some Romans had trusted Jesus, it was possible that other Romans could become Christians, too—a future that Matthew wanted Christians to work for (28:19).

Perhaps some of Matthew's audience would have protested that the case must be different with Roman soldiers who had oppressed their people more directly than this centurion had. Countering such a notion, Matthew reminds them that the first people after the crucifixion to recognize Jesus as God's Son were the very Roman soldiers who had executed Him (Matt 27:54).

Prejudice stereotypes people as unreachable. The cross shatters our right to hold such prejudices, because it reminds us that the sins of every one of us nailed our Lord to the Cross. The one who forgave us can forgive others. The one who spread the gospel first in the Middle East and north Africa, then in Europe and eastern Africa, later in America, western Africa, South Korea, and so forth, is not bound to only one ethnic group. His people is the church, and our loyalty to Him summons us to love and reach all peoples with the gospel, and to love and serve our brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Magi. These references to Gentiles are not haphazard in Matthew's Gospel, but fit a consistent pattern. People would worship Jesus from east and west (Matt 8:11)—from the west like the Romans, and from the east like the Magi (Matt 2:1).

Magi were Gentile astrologers, and the Bible prohibits all forms of divination, including astrology, on penalty of death (Deut 13:5; 18:10-12; 2 Kgs 17:17; 21:6; Is 47:13). The term used for "Magi" in Matthew was used in Greek translations of the Book of Daniel for Daniel's persecutors. One would expect them to be Jesus' enemies, but instead

Matthew emphasizes that they came to worship the rightful king of the Jews (2:2, 11). Although Scripture shows that God did not approve of astrology, He chose this one moment in history to speak through it and draw these Gentiles to His Son. They act like the king's rightful subjects!

By contrast, Herod, who claimed to be king of the Jews, slaughtered the baby boys in Bethlehem to protect his own throne (2:16-18). He acted just like Pharaoh, who slew Israel's baby boys in the time of Moses' infancy (Ex 1:22)! So we read in this narrative about Gentile sages who acted like the true king's rightful subjects, and about a Jewish king who acted like a Gentile oppressor of Israel. Ethnicity does not guarantee trustworthiness.

Other Examples. Matthew provides other examples as well. Ethnic descent from Abraham is not enough for salvation (3:9). Jesus settled in a region Isaiah had called a land of "Gentiles" (4:15). Jesus delivers people from demon-possession in the Gentile region of the Decapolis, where pigs were raised (8:28). God would judge Galilee as strictly as He judged Sodom and Gomorrah, and use the faith of Nineveh and the Queen of Sheba to testify against them (10:15; 11:23-24; 12:40-42). Jesus first invites his disciples to acknowledge His Messiahship at Caesarea Philippi, a Gentile city known for its practice of witchcraft and pagan religion (16:13). The nations will be judged by how they have treated Jesus' brothers and sisters (25:32), once the good news has been preached to them (24:14).

The climax of Matthew's Gospel is His commission to disciple the nations for Him (28:19). This ending hardly comes as a surprise, given the rest of Matthew's Gospel! The context gives us a positive and negative example for how we proclaim Jesus' message. Although neither Jewish nor Roman law valued highly the testimony of women, Jesus first sends the faithful women who have come to the tomb to announce His resurrection (28:1-10). By contrast, the guards at the tomb prefer money and safety to truth, and circulate a false report (28:11-15). Like the women at the tomb, all of us as Jesus' disciples must help others to be His disciples. To fulfill this final commission of Jesus fully, we must cross barriers to reach all peoples with the gospel.

Jesus was Israel's rightful king, but like his ancestor King David, He welcomed willing Gentiles into His kingdom. As His disciples proclaimed His kingdom, they would cross cultural barriers until all peoples had heard the good news of God's reign (Matt 24:14).

John: The Samaritan Woman

In John's Gospel, Jesus prays especially that all His followers may be one (Jn 17:20-23), and demands especially that they show their faithfulness to Him by loving one another (13:34-35). This includes people who will later believe (17:20), who probably include Gentiles (10:16). But they also probably include Samaritans like those who received Jesus in John 4, who recognized Him as the "savior of the world" (4:41-42).

Because Jesus only rarely encountered Gentiles, sometimes the Gospel writers addressed the issue of reconciliation in terms of His encounters with Samaritans (e.g., Lk 10:29-37; 17:16). This is true in John's Gospel, where Jesus meets a Samaritan woman.

John shows Jesus crossing three barriers with the Samaritan woman. Much to His disciples' astonishment (Jn 4:27), Jesus crossed a gender barrier: in His culture, men were not supposed to be talking with women outside the home, especially in an ambiguous social setting like a well. He also crossed a moral respectability barrier (like when he ate with sinners): in view of her culture's customs, that she came to the well alone (4:7) probably suggests that she was not welcome to accompany the other women—presumably because of her marital history (4:18). For that reason, most religious people, Jewish or Samaritan, would have shunned her. Yet Jesus knew people's hearts, and the Father had sent Him there to find true worshipers for God (4:23).

But most importantly for our purposes, Jesus clearly crossed a cultural barrier by talking with a Samaritan, as she herself recognized (4:9). Because strict Jewish men considered Samaritan women continually unclean, drinking from her vessel would also (by their standards) make Jesus ritually impure, yet He requests a drink (4:7). This overture at reconciliation did not come lightly, for Jews and Samaritans had a tragic history of conflict, to which Jesus' discussion with the woman alludes. She reminds Jesus that Jacob was the Samaritans' father—as if to counter the Jewish notion that he was their own (4:12). Later she speaks of her people's worship on Mount Gerizim in the past tense—presumably an allusion to its destruction by a Jewish ruler about two centuries earlier (4:20).

But while Jesus affirms Israel's priority in salvation history (4:22), He quickly transcends the ethnic issue and identifies her as someone the Father is seeking to worship Him in the Spirit (4:23-24). She then proclaims Him to her own people and brings them to Jesus, undoubtedly to the dismay of Jesus' own disciples (4:28-30, 37-38)! That John invites his audience to apply these principles to their own crosscultural Christian relationships may be implicit in Jesus' prayer for unity among all who would believe through the apostolic witness (Jn 17:20-23).

Chapter 4: The Church's Mission

We often think of the Book of Acts as the story of the earliest church. Yet Acts gives us only a sample of that history, and focuses almost exclusively on a single theme: the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). For Luke's audience, living in the Roman empire, he is able to finish narrating the story once the gospel reaches Rome, but Rome was only a foretaste of what was to come.

Luke narrates, however, not only conversions, but the dilemmas faced by the first Christians crossing cultural barriers. Once Jewish Christians began reaching Gentiles with the gospel, they had another problem. Because Christians are one body in Christ, Jewish Christians could not evangelize Gentiles and then separate from them. In the past some European missionaries, following secular European prejudices based on the faulty

“science” of their era, held aloof from their own converts. (Admittedly they generally did it less than other Europeans did, and many of the most effective missionaries, like David Livingstone and Mary Slessor, identified more closely with the culture.) But such separation disobeyed the very gospel the missionaries were preaching.

Jesus’ Ministry. Luke wrote his account in two volumes, the Gospel of Luke (which recounts Jesus’ ministry) and the Book of Acts (which recounts the ministry of some of his leading servants). The first volume introduces some themes that become prominent in the second volume. Jesus is rejected in His hometown partly because He identifies with the ministry of Elijah and Elisha to Gentiles (Lk 4:26-28). Luke thereby warns us that the mission to the Gentiles will be controversial—even among those who claim the closest relation to Jesus.

In Luke’s Gospel, he tells of Jesus welcoming outsiders, people normally despised by Jews of higher standing. His disciples included women (Lk 8:1-3; 10:38-42), in contrast to the normal practice of His contemporaries. He refused judgment against Samaritans (Lk 9:54-55) and told a controversial story about a “good” Samaritan when a Jew asked what kind of neighbor he must love (Lk 10:27-37). He also healed a Samaritan leper, who proved more grateful than the other lepers (Lk 17:11-19). Many centuries earlier, an earlier prophet had healed a Gentile leper (2 Kgs 5:10-14; Lk 4:27) but not Israelite lepers living in Samaria (2 Kgs 7:3). Now a Samaritan leper was considered an outsider from Israel, and Jesus healed him, too.

Perhaps most controversially, Jesus ate dinners with the morally marginalized. In ancient Jewish culture, eating a meal with someone meant that one entered a covenant relationship with that person; most religious people in Jesus’ day therefore avoided eating with known sinners. Jesus, however, ate with sinners, including tax-gatherers, bringing them to repentance (Lk 5:29; 15:1). Tax-gatherers were known for oppressing the poor and working either for the Romans or for the Jewish rulers supported by the Romans. The Bible teachers and religious elite therefore complained about Jesus’ behavior (Lk 5:30; 15:2), so that Jesus had to teach them that God rejoices when those estranged from Him come home (Lk 5:31-32; 15:3-32).

The Theme of Acts. Jesus leaves the church with a mission of reaching all nations with the good news about His conquest of sin and death (Lk 24:46-49; Acts 1:8). Yet as late as Acts 7, no one has gone out to the nations, and as late as Acts 15 most of the apostles remain in Jerusalem. Why did the apostles not begin their mission to the Gentiles sooner?

Despite Jesus’ ministry to the marginalized, the disciples were not ready to carry out, and perhaps not ready to understand, the mission He had given them. Most of them probably had little contact with Gentiles, excluding perhaps some business contacts through their earlier work. Their ministry did, however, begin to reach foreign Jews who had settled in Jerusalem, Jews who knew Greek culture (Acts 6:1). One of these Greek-speaking Jews began to lay out the theological groundwork for reaching the Gentiles. Stephen argued that God was not localized in Jerusalem; the God who appeared to Abram in

Mesopotamia (7:2), who exalted Joseph in Egypt (7:10), and who appeared to Moses in the wilderness outside Egypt (7:30, 33), did not need human temples (7:48-49). Such theology hastened Stephen's execution, so that he followed the example of Jesus (7:57-60).

One of Stephen's fellow Greek-speaking Jews, already conversant with other cultures, begins to carry out the mission. Philip evangelizes Samaria (8:5-13); most Jews considered the Samaritans halfway between Jew and Gentile. But after this preparation, God sends Philip to reach someone who was fully Gentile. The African court official in 8:27 was from the ancient kingdom of Meroë, some of whose queens bore the title "Candace." The official already believed in Israel's God, but he had not converted to Judaism, because he was not able to do so. Israel's law forbade Israel from accepting "eunuchs" into their people (Deut 23:1). Now, however, a new era had come; God had promised that He would welcome foreigners and eunuchs fully (Is 56:3-5). This African court official became the first Gentile Christian (Acts 8:36-39).

But while Philip had already begun evangelizing Gentiles, the idea was more difficult for the apostles to accept. Witnessing Philip's success in Samaria, they approved it and joined this mission (8:15-17, 25). But welcoming uncircumcised Gentiles was another matter! They were calling Israel to turn to God and accept Jesus as their rightful king and lord; surely God did not want them to be distracted now with recent idol-worshippers!

What changed the heart of their leader, Peter? Acts emphasizes that it was a direct revelation from God (10:9-20). Luke wishes to emphasize this point so fully that he narrates this one story, in different ways, three times (10:1-48; 11:4-17; 15:7-9, 14)! God forces the Jerusalem church to recognize that He is welcoming the Gentiles, too (11:18). Once God had blessed Gentiles with the Holy Spirit, it was obvious that He had accepted them. Thus Peter points out that if God has accepted Gentiles, who was anyone else to reject them (10:47; 11:17)?

Fellowship with Gentiles. All Jews allowed most Gentiles to convert, so long as they agreed first to be circumcised and accept Jewish customs. The problem the Jerusalem church had with Peter was not that he preached to some Gentiles but that he did not require circumcision, and then ate with these uncircumcised Gentiles (11:3). Peter himself had a cultural problem with sharing fellowship with Gentiles (10:28), and had overcome his reservations only at God's command (10:13-15; 11:8-12, 15-17).

Although convinced that God had accepted the Roman centurion Cornelius, the Jerusalem church may have thought of this as merely an exception. Meanwhile, Greek-speaking Jews who had fled Jerusalem earlier (8:1, 4) began evangelizing Gentiles in other areas (11:19-21). The church in cosmopolitan Antioch, where people from many cultures lived, began making this a deliberate matter of mission. The church's leadership team may have included two North Africans (Simeon Niger and Lucius of Cyrene), as well as at least two other Jews not born in Judea (Saul and Barnabas; 13:1). It was this church that sent Paul and Barnabas out to begin the mission to which God called them (13:2-4), to be a light to the nations (13:47; Is 49:6). Paul's ministry eventually included

even living in predominantly Gentile cities and working in markets frequented by Gentiles (Acts 18:3; 20:34).

Conservative members of the Jerusalem church, however, could not accept Gentiles into God's people without circumcision and obedience to Israel's customs (15:5). Jerusalemite visitors in Antioch were uncomfortable with Jews and uncircumcised Gentiles eating together there, causing even Peter to back down temporarily (Gal 2:12-14). At the Jerusalem council, Peter and Paul had to remind the church of God's own works among the Gentiles proving that God himself accepted them (Acts 15:7-12). Jewish Christians were free to maintain culturally Jewish customs and Gentile Christians to maintain culturally Gentile customs, so long as both faithfully obeyed God's teachings (21:25; 1 Cor 9:19-23). If God accepts some people as His children, how can we as His children refuse to treat them as our brothers and sisters?

Paul later brought an offering from the Gentile churches to help the impoverished believers in Jerusalem, thereby working toward reconciliation (Acts 24:17; Rom 15:25-27). Numerically, the biggest, most successful church of Paul's day was the church of Jerusalem. The Jerusalem believers knew how to identify with and effectively reach their culture. But because their culture was increasingly alienated from Gentiles (who had mistreated them), the believers were not talking much about ethnic reconciliation or about reaching other peoples. They explained Jesus to their own culture and drew thousands of followers (Acts 21:20), but as far as we can tell they did not directly teach about the danger of their society's anti-Gentile mentality (perhaps they did not feel they dared to do so).

Paul, by contrast, was starting small Bible study groups across the Roman Empire and trusting God to cause them to grow. Paul emphasized that Jesus was for all peoples. Paul did not have the biggest church, but he had God's vision for the future. After Jerusalem was destroyed, it was not the big Jerusalem church, but the often mixed, Jewish-Gentile churches of the Diaspora that carried forward most of the Lord's work. The Jerusalem church did a great work for God, but the investment in reaching other peoples turned out to be an investment in the future. Similarly, when Turkey fell to Islam, the torch of the Eastern Orthodox church passed to Russia, which had recently been evangelized. Before atheism and other ideologies swept through much of Europe and Russia, the torch had passed to Africa and other regions. God's work is not just about the big numbers now (nice as they are), but about laying foundations for the church of the future. That means that we must begin to build bridges for the gospel for all peoples.

By connecting his account of the early Christian mission with his account of Jesus' mission, Luke shows us how wrong the Jerusalem church's fear was. When Jesus ate with outsiders, the Pharisees criticized him. When Peter or Paul ate with Gentiles, some Jerusalem Christians criticized them, hence opposed God's work no less than the Pharisees had in Luke's Gospel. Jesus gave the Spirit to empower us to cross cultural barriers (Acts 1:8). God's Spirit keeps pushing Christians to cross those barriers (8:29; 10:19, 45; 11:12, 15-16; 13:2, 4; 15:8, 28; 28:25). Those who resist crossing those

barriers resist the Holy Spirit, valuing their culture or tradition more than the gospel. It matters not whether they are Pharisees, conservative Jerusalem Christians, or Christians from our own people groups who reject fellowship with Christians from other peoples.

The Power of Pentecost. It was not the natural tendency of the disciples, but instead the power of God's Spirit, that moved the church to cross cultural barriers. Different parts of the Bible emphasize different ministries of the Spirit, but a major focus of Acts is the Spirit's power to testify about Christ to the ends of the earth (1:8)—that is, crossculturally. Soon after Jesus tells his disciples to wait for this promise, it begins to be fulfilled on the day of Pentecost.

One dramatic sign on the day of Pentecost involved the Spirit-filled disciples worshipping God in languages they did not know (2:4). On two occasions in Acts after this event, Luke reports believers speaking in tongues when they are filled with the Spirit (although Luke does not mention this occurrence on every occasion). Given all the events that Luke could report from the history of the early church, why does Luke devote space to emphasizing this sign three times? Remember his focus on the Spirit's power for crosscultural missions. What better illustration of the Spirit's power to speak for God crossculturally could Luke present than inspiration for disciples from different backgrounds to worship God in languages that are not their own?

This sign becomes especially important on the day of Pentecost, where Jewish people from many different nations are gathered (2:5-11). These Jewish people are familiar with a variety of local languages, and recognize some of the languages being spoken. This passage recalls a similar passage in Genesis: after listing many nations in Genesis 10 (just as Luke does in Acts 2:9-11), Genesis reports that God came down and scattered the languages, dividing the people (Gen 11:1-9). Here, by contrast, God comes down and scatters the languages for the people's benefit, uniting them. Peter then preaches the gospel and announces that the same Spirit is available to all who turn to Christ (Acts 2:38-39). God equips not only the first apostles, but the church, to cross barriers in evangelism and to become one, with all our diverse cultures and languages.

Whereas the Gospel of Luke begins and ends in Jerusalem, emphasizing the gospel's heritage in history, the Book of Acts begins in Jerusalem but ends in Rome, emphasizing that heritage must give way to mission. Acts opens where the Gospel of Luke closes, with a commission to evangelize the nations (Lk 24:47; Acts 1:8). It concludes with Paul in the heart of the Roman Empire, emphasizing the Gentile mission (Acts 28:28). Luke also tells us that where there is successful mission, the church will represent different cultures—and that Christians of all peoples and cultures must learn to welcome one another, even when we must stand against the nationalism of our own ethnic people to do so.

Chapter 5: A New Temple

For Jewish people in the first century, the temple was a symbol of their national and ethnic unity, even if they lived in distant countries. Yet long before that temple was

destroyed in A.D. 70, Christians had begun talking about a new temple. Jesus told the Samaritan woman that the true location for worship would no longer be Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim, but “in Spirit and truth” (Jn 4:20-24).

Paul explained that this new temple would not be a symbol of ethnic unity, at least not in the traditional sense of “ethnic.” It would symbolize instead the unity of all those in covenant relationship with the one God of Israel—the followers of the true king, Jesus. This new temple, he said, would consist of both Jew and Gentile as fellow-citizens in God’s kingdom (Eph 2:11-13, 19). This reality, achieved by Christ’s own sacrifice, demands that all Christians work to preserve the unity Christ has created (Eph 4:3-6).

The Shattered Barrier

In Ephesians, Paul seeks to bring unity to a church divided in part along Jewish-Gentile lines. He begins by assuring Gentile Christians that God has grafted them into His people, applying to the whole church many Old Testament designations concerning Israel (Eph 1:3-14: e.g., chosenness; inheritance; possession).

As he prepares to discuss the new Temple comprised of both Jew and Gentile in 2:20-22, he declares that Christ made both Jew and Gentile one (2:14). Especially when we consider what was happening in Paul’s day, such a claim is extraordinary: not long after Paul dictated these words, riots broke out in Caesarea, the city where Paul had recently been imprisoned, with Jews and Syrians slaughtering one another in the streets. Who could believe in ethnic reconciliation in a world like that? The gospel sometimes demands saying what most of one’s contemporaries do not wish to hear.

Paul goes on in Ephesians 2:14 to announce that Christ has shattered the “dividing wall of partition” between Jew and Gentile. He writes as if his hearers will immediately understand the dividing wall to which he refers. What wall did he and his first audience have in mind?

Tempting Tempers in the Temple. Paul’s audience in the region around Ephesus would have known exactly why Paul was writing to them from Roman detention (Eph 3:1; 4:1; 6:20): some of his people had charged him with violating a “dividing barrier” in the Temple.

God had never established this barrier in the temple. The Old Testament had welcomed Gentiles to the Temple alongside God’s people (1 Kgs 8:41-43), but by the first century, the Temple was a segregated institution. Because of strict purity regulations, the “outer court” had been divided into three courts. The court closest to the priestly sanctuary was the Court of Israel, limited to Jewish men; then, on a lower level and further from the priestly sanctuary, the Court of Women, beyond which Jewish women could not pass. Finally, still further from the sanctuary and on a lower level, was the outermost court, beyond which Gentile seekers of Israel’s God could not pass. Signs posted at appropriate intervals between the outer court and the Court of Women announced to Gentiles that any Gentile passing beyond that point would bear responsibility for his or her own death.

Some Jews who knew of Paul's cross-cultural ministry in Ephesus recognized an Ephesian Gentile with Paul near Jerusalem's Temple, and decided that Paul must have followed to its conclusion his ideal of breaking down ethnic barriers. Paul had actually entered the Temple on an errand of ethnic reconciliation, affirming his Jewish identity for those who thought that he had accommodated the Gentiles too much (Acts 21:21-26). Nevertheless, his opponents were wrongly convinced that Paul had brought a Gentile past the dividing wall into the Temple beyond which Gentiles could not pass. Once word spread, a riot quickly ensued (Acts 21:27-30).

Once the guards standing on top the Fortress Antonia on the Temple Mount recognized that a riot was forming, soldiers from the Roman garrison rushed down the stairs into the outer court and seized Paul from the crowds (Acts 21:31-36). In the ethnically tense situation, the Roman commander assumed that Paul was a notorious Egyptian Jew whom he wrongly associated with a group of "assassins" (21:38). (Under cover of the crowds in the Temple, these "assassins" stabbed Jewish aristocrats, whom they viewed as Rome's lackeys.)

Stephen had earlier offended hearers by arguing that God was not localized in the temple; the charge against Paul (21:28) closely resembles the charge by which Stephen was killed (6:13). But Paul can identify with Jerusalemites in a way that Stephen might not have been able to; in any case, he makes use of all the cultural resources at his disposal. Most Palestinian Jews were probably bilingual, but few were equally proficient in their second language. Thus when Paul's interrogator hears his good Greek and learns that he is a citizen of a prominent city (21:37, 39), he allows Paul to address the crowd—which Paul proceeds to address in Aramaic (21:40). Impressed by his fluency in the nationalistic tongue of their recent ancestors, the crowd decides that the person addressing them deserves their hearing (22:2).

In his speech, Paul emphasizes every possible point of identification with his nationalistic hearers, including having been raised in Jerusalem at the feet of the famous sage Gamaliel and receiving ministry from a law-abiding Jewish Christian (22:3-5, 12). Probably because the Jerusalem church had already identified so effectively with their own culture (21:20-21), no one took offense as Paul narrated his encounter with the risen Christ (22:6-20); in contrast to earlier years (Acts 12:2-3), simply talking about Jesus no longer stirred much violence, just as talking about "salvation" or "Christianity" does not in some of our cultures today.

But then Paul said something that angered his audience, even though he was toward the beginning of his planned speech (speeches normally opened with a narration, which is the part of the speech he is giving). Paul knew how to relate to his hearers, but he would not compromise the heart of his message. He had earlier appealed to Stoic values when he preached to philosophers, finding common ground with his hearers through much of his speech to them (17:22-29). He had offended many members of that audience, however, when he insisted on an essential part of the gospel he could not accommodate to his hearers' worldview, namely Jesus' resurrection (17:30-32).

Now Paul again offends his audience, but the essential part of the gospel on which he insists—probably to the public embarrassment of the local Christians—is that true obedience to Christ includes accepting God’s plan for other peoples (22:21). On hearing this, his nationalistic hearers, who had suffered much from the Romans and were sure that God was on their side, resumed their riot (22:22-23). Paul ended up in custody, first in Caesarea and then in Rome, because he refused to compromise an opportunity to proclaim the full implications of the gospel.

When Paul wrote to Christian congregations around Ephesus about reconciliation between Jew and Gentile, they understood what he meant by a “dividing barrier.” For Paul and for the Jewish and Gentile Christians of western Asia Minor, no greater symbol of the barrier between Jew and Gentile could exist than the dividing barrier in the Temple. Paul declares that in the new Temple of God’s Spirit (2:20-22), the cross of Christ has abolished that barrier (2:14-16)!

Cleansing Jerusalem’s Temple. In challenging the segregated character of the temple, Paul and Stephen simply followed the example of Jesus.

The Gospels show that Jesus not only foreknew His death; He deliberately provoked it. By cleansing the Temple, He challenged the honor of the authorities who claimed to govern the Temple for God. Such provocations always led to punishment. Centuries earlier, some authorities threatened Jeremiah with death for merely prophesying against the Temple (Jer 26:8-9). A few decades after Jesus’ ministry, the Sadducean aristocracy urged the Roman procurator to execute a prophet named Joshua ben Hananiah for prophesying against the Temple. Because Joshua was harmless the governor spared his life, but he nevertheless had him scourged until his bones showed. For Jesus to not only prophesy against the Temple but to march through the outer court overturning tables meant that from that day on He the authorities could regain their honor only by having Him killed.

Scholars have proposed various reasons for Jesus’ act in the Temple, but Jesus provided at least a partial interpretation of His act in the Scriptures He cited. In Mark 11:17, He quotes two texts: Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11. The first text indicates God’s ultimate purpose for the Temple: a house of prayer for all nations. The Temple in Jesus’ day, unlike the Solomon’s Temple, segregated Gentiles from other worshipers. Further, business transactions in the outer court would distract Gentile visitors from multiethnic prayer.

It is thus likely that Jesus was protesting at least in part the ethnic segregation of God’s house. What implications might that have for Christians today, if some are not fully welcome in fellow-Christians’ houses of worship, simply because they belong to a different people group? Of course, this is not meant to claim that we all must be the same; just as Jewish and Gentile Christians worshiped differently in Paul’s day (Acts 21:25; Rom 14:1-6), different peoples’ languages and customs differ today. But we must

still love each other, work together for God's kingdom, and welcome one another with the full hospitality due members of our family, for we together are God's family.

The second text Jesus quotes is from Jeremiah's prophecy against the Temple. God's people believed that the Temple would protect them (Jer 7:4), but Jeremiah warned that if they did not abandon their acts of injustice toward the poor, toward crime victims, toward their spouses and toward immigrants, God was going to destroy His house (Jer 7:5-15). He would no longer allow His Temple to be their "robber's den" (Jer 7:11)—like the places where robbers gathered their loot, assured of safety. He would make His Temple like Shiloh (Jer 7:14), where His ark had once been captured and the Tabernacle was probably destroyed (1 Sam 4:4, 11). Like Jeremiah, Jesus promised swift judgment on God's house where the religious leaders tolerated injustice; some forty years later, the Temple lay in ruins.

Jesus demanded that the temple be a pure house of worship and prayer for all peoples; if it was not, He warned, it would be destroyed, just like the temple of Jeremiah's day. If Jerusalem rejected Jesus' cleansing of their temple, God would build a new temple that would strike at the heart of the very issue the Jerusalem authorities rejected! Today we as Christians are God's temple. But if we are divided among ourselves, we defile God's temple the way Jerusalem's leaders defiled it in Jesus' day. We, too, could invite God's discipline!

Salvation by Grace or by Race?

When Christians today read Paul's letter to the Roman Christians, we usually emphasize that this letter explains how to be reconciled to God. While reconciliation to God is at the heart of the letter, Paul also wrote it to urge us to be reconciled to one another.

The Problem. Paul's closing greetings, which include his friends Priscilla and Aquila (Rom 16:3-5), provide a clue for the situation Paul was addressing. When Paul first met these friends, they had left Rome because the emperor Claudius had commanded Jewish people to leave (Acts 18:2). When he greets them at the end of his letter to the Roman Christians, however, they have returned to Rome (Rom 16:3-4), indicating that Claudius' edict is no longer in effect (presumably because he is dead). This greeting also suggests that what had been for some years an entirely Gentile church in Rome had experienced a fresh and probably sudden influx of Jewish Christians. The rest of Paul's letter suggests that these Jewish and Gentile Christians with their quite different customs were not getting along.

Carrying over the prevalent perspective of their own Roman culture, the Gentile Christians seem to have despised Jewish Christians' food laws and holy days (Rom 14:1-6). Many of the Jewish Christians, conversely, probably questioned the orthodoxy of Gentile Christians who did not observe the laws God had established in the Bible.

One Way of Salvation. Responding to this conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome, Paul argues for the first eleven chapters of his letter that Jew and

Gentile come to God on the same terms, and that God welcomes both equally (Rom 1:16; 2:9-10; 10:12).

First, Paul establishes that all humanity is equally under God's judgment. In Romans 1:18-27, Paul proves what probably no one in the church was disputing: non-Christian Gentiles were lost. He focuses on their idolatry and homosexual behavior, which Jewish people considered almost exclusively Gentile sins. Then, however, he quickly turns to a list of vices that includes sins which Jewish people also acknowledged as their own (1:28-32). Romans 1 sets up his audience for Romans 2, in which Paul establishes that his own people are also lost. Thus he concludes in chapter 3 that all humanity is equally lost and in need of Christ (3:23-31).

Second, Paul shows that God has provided salvation for all people on the same terms. Jewish people commonly believed that they would be saved by virtue of their descent from Abraham. By contrast, Paul emphasizes that spiritual rather than merely physical descent from Abraham was what mattered (Rom 4). God had, after all, chosen Abraham when he was still a Gentile (4:10-12), as Paul's contemporaries also acknowledged. But regardless of who claims descent from Abraham, Paul points out that all of us descend from Adam, thus share Adam's sin and sentence of death (5:12-21). This, too, was an argument that would have made perfect sense to Jewish Christians, even if they did not like it.

Nor did the law, Israel's prized possession, necessarily guarantee Jewish people's spiritual superiority to Gentiles (Rom 7). (Of course, God did give the law as a special gift to Israel [3:2], and it was good [7:12, 14]. But the law itself could only teach righteousness, not make a person righteous. The law would help them only if they approached it from the perspective of faith in Christ [3:27; 8:2; 9:30-32; cf. Jer 31:33; Ezek 36:27].) Paul depicts life under the law as a terrible struggle: the law enabled one to *know* what was good, but could not cause the human heart to *be* good. Thus Israel's possession of God's law did not guarantee them salvation more easily than the Gentiles—an argument that would have horrified his Jewish contemporaries.

Third, Paul addresses the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles more directly in chapters 9 through 11. Jewish people believed that God had chosen them in Abraham. Paul establishes, however, that not all descendants of Abraham in the Bible qualified for the promise (Rom 9:6-13). He argues that God is so sovereign that He can choose on any basis He pleases—in this context, not simply on the basis of one's ethnicity, but rather on the basis of one's response to His Christ (Rom 9:24-33). Jewish people could not trust their ethnic Jewishness for salvation.

Neither should Gentile Christians trust their more recently adopted Gentile Christian subculture for salvation, either, just as none of us dare trust our own ethnicity, denomination, or spiritual method instead of trusting Christ Himself. Paul points out that Gentiles were grafted into God's people, but if God could break off unbelieving Jewish branches that fit into that heritage more naturally, He could certainly break off the foreign Gentile branches (Rom 11:17-22). Further, Paul believed that someday God would bring

a great harvest of Jewish branches back to the tree, preparing them for Christ's return (Rom 11:23-27). In other words, Paul admonishes the Gentile Christians not to despise the Jewish Christians, just as he has advised the Jewish Christians not to despise Gentile Christians. We must all be one in Christ (1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:28; Col 3:11).

Implications for reconciliation. Finally, Paul explains the practical implications for the Christians in Rome. They must serve one another like one body with many diverse members (Rom 12). They must recognize that the heart of the law is love (Rom 13:8-10). They must respect one another's customs so long as they are used to glorify God (Rom 14). They must also embrace models of ethnic reconciliation like Christ (Rom 15:8-12) and Paul himself (15:25-27). Paul's closing exhortation is to beware of those who sow division (16:17).

Ethnic reconciliation was at the heart of Paul's gospel. He was always ready to give up merely cultural practices if this would help him communicate Christ more successfully (Acts 16:3; 1 Cor 9:19-23). Yet he was never willing to compromise the gospel itself, which declared that people are saved not by their customs but by Christ (Gal 2:1-14). This removes grounds for looking down on those whose customs differ from ours, because it is Christ who makes us acceptable to God. And if *God* accepts someone, who are we to reject them?

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Through Christ we have been reconciled to God—and to one another. We are Christ's body; if we are divided, it causes our Lord Jesus, who already died for us, great pain. His greatest commandment was to love one another. Will we obey Him? Will we lay aside our pride and our other loyalties to be loyal to Him? Will we begin to listen to each other humbly, to learn ways that we can work together for Christ? Will we build relationships across ethnic lines to show Christ's love to everyone? If we do so, inevitably there will be hurts and misunderstandings. But as Christ did not give up on us, we cannot give up on one another.

What we teach about salvation should directly affect how we think about the church—and therefore how we treat one another. Biblical writers proclaimed ethnic reconciliation based on our common means of salvation in Christ. If ethnic reconciliation is so close to the heart of the gospel, we must labor more effectively to produce the fruits of that reconciliation among the people of Christ today.

Resources for Further Study

Although we have tried to make this an accessible rather than a scholarly book, all its claims can be amply documented. Although we have not provided extensive footnotes here, most of the information (including reference to a much larger range of resources) is available in other works we have written. (I mention especially these because I have used them, but hundreds of other resources exist, including those by more writers, including more of our friends, than we can name here; for just a few random examples we know

from, e.g., North America and South Africa, works by John Dawson, Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Moss Ntlha, Spencer Perkins and Chris Rice, and Alexander Venter.)

- On African and African-American history, see Glenn J. Usry and Craig Keener, *Black Man's Religion: Can Christianity Be Afrocentric?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996); some of this is repeated in *Defending Black Faith* (InterVarsity, 1997).
- For biblical examples of ethnic reconciliation, see Craig S. Keener, "The Gospel and Racial Reconciliation," 117-30 in *The Gospel in Black & White: Theological Resources for Racial Reconciliation*, ed. Dennis L. Ockholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997; the endnotes are pp. 181-90). After omitting the endnotes, we have borrowed or adapted some of that material here, especially on John and Paul, with the permission of InterVarsity Press. Further detail is available in Craig S. Keener, "Some New Testament Invitations to Ethnic Reconciliation," *Evangelical Quarterly* 75 (3, July 2003): 195-213.
- All the Bible background used in this book is available in accessible form in Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), available through Africa Christian Textbooks. More heavily-documented studies on Matthew and John are noted below.
- Those who desire further reading may consult the information below. There are also many other good books; we merely offer a sample of some of the most useful.

Chapter 1: Early Church History and the Need for Reconciliation

- For the early history of the church in Africa, see Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa* (Grand Rapids, Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1995), 13-73; Craig Keener and Glenn Usry, *Defending Black Faith: Answers to Tough Questions About African-American Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 13-18; Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge: University Press, 2000), 7-80.
- For multicultural perspectives on church history, including the church in the Byzantine Empire, see Paul Spickard and Kevin Cragg, *A Global History of Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); Dale Irvin and Scott Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), vol. 1; Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2002), 15-38.
- For the persistence of Christians in much of the Middle East into the twentieth century, and damage done by western interference, see relevant material in Edward R. Kantowicz, *The World in the Twentieth Century*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).
- For ancient Mediterranean perspectives on Africans, see Frank M. Snowden, Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970); idem, *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).
- For Christianity in a global context, see Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); in addition to Philip Jenkins, noted above.

Chapter 2: Examples in More Recent History

- For the examples from the Christian movement to abolish slavery and from U.S. history, see documentation in Usry and Keener, *Black Man's Religion*, 52-54, 98-110, 122-24; Keener, "Gospel and Racial Reconciliation," 125-27; Keener and Usry, *Defending Black Faith*, 33-41.

Chapter 3: Ethnic Reconciliation in the Old Testament and the Gospels

- For interethnic marriages in the Bible, including much more detail and documentation than here, see Craig S. Keener, "The Bible and Interracial Marriage," 2-27 in *Just Don't Marry One: Interracial Dating, Marriage, and Parenting*, ed. George A. Yancey and Sherelyn Whittum Yancey (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2002).
- We provide full documentation on the passages in Matthew, in Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); or in less academic form, idem, *Matthew*, IVP New Testament series (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997).
- We provide full documentation on John 4 in Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 584-628; idem, "Some New Testament Invitations to Ethnic Reconciliation," *Evangelical Quarterly* 75 (3, July 2003): 195-202.

Chapter 4: The Church's Mission

- On the Good Samaritan parable, see Keener, "Some Invitations," 202-7
- On the Gentile mission in Luke-Acts, see e.g., Jacques Dupont, *The Salvation of the Gentiles: Essays on the Acts of the Apostles*, tr. John R. Keating (New York: Paulist Press, 1979)
- On Luke's geographical schema, including interest in Africa, see especially James M. Scott, "Luke's Geographical Horizon," pp. 483-544 in *The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting*, ed. David W. J. Gill and Conrad Gempf, vol. 2 in *The Book of Acts in its First-Century Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994).

Chapter 5: The New Temple

- For documentation on these statements in Romans, see Keener, "Some Invitations," 208-10; idem, "Gospel and Reconciliation," 122-25
- For documentation on these statements about the new temple, see Keener, "Some Invitations," 210-13; idem, "Gospel and Reconciliation," 118-22; we also treated 1 Cor 9:19-23 in more detail in Keener, *1-2 Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2005), 80-81.