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## Inaugural Issue: Reconciliation

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## From the Editor

By [Laurie D. Bailey](#)

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Reconciliation has been a popular topic in recent years, as well it should be; Reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel. But how often is it at the heart of the church? Is your congregation known in your community as an agent of reconciliation? Did the last conflict within your church result in reconciliation? Is there a broken relationship in your life that needs to be restored?

I know in my own life there is still work to be done, both in understanding the full meaning of the word and in incorporating it as a habit of life. Reconciliation as an idea is quite straight forward—broken relationships are restored. Reconciliation as a practice is much more complex. The deeper one ventures into real life situations, the more questions unfold: Is reconciliation necessary? Is it possible? What will I lose? What will be gained? How do I forgive? Can we survive the process?

Our world is filled with conflict and violence. None of us is untouched. We are both

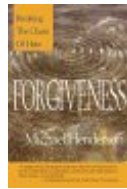
victims and perpetrators of attitudes and actions that lead to estrangement, alienation, and exclusion. As communities of faith we really have no choice but to pursue a path of peace and reconciliation.

In this issue we explore reconciliation in a variety of cultural contexts and from a range of theological perspectives. Karl Dortzbach presents a holistic model of healing conflict drawn from the experiences of African churches. Daniel Schipani examines the story of Jesus' encounter with the Syro-Phoenician/Canaanite woman and the insights it offers for moving beyond conventional boundaries to embrace strangers and outsiders. Perry Downs develops a theology of forgiveness which is rooted in the character of God and lived out in the messiness of everyday life. Brenda Salter McNeil recounts how an invitation to lecture in Oxford, England opened her eyes to the unique qualifications that African Americans possess to be reconcilers around the world.

As we explore this multi-faceted issues of reconciliation, the guiding question for the church is, "What would it look like if we became a reconciling community?"

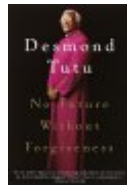
### Editors's Picks

In addition to the articles here, I recommend these thought-provoking books:



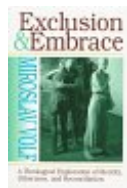
Henderson, Michael. 2002. *Forgiveness: Breaking the Chain of Hate*. Bookpartners, Inc. ISBN: 1581510500.

[Buy from Amazon.com](#)



Tutu, Desmond. 2000. *No Future Without Forgiveness*. Doubleday. ISBN: 0385496907.

[Buy from Amazon.com](#)



Volf, Miroslav. 1996. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Abingdon Press. ISBN: 0687002826.

[Buy from Amazon.com](#)

### About the Editor



Laurie D. Bailey, Ph.D. is editor of *Common Ground Journal*. She has 20 years experience as a Christian educator in two Illinois churches, and enjoys acting as a bridge between the academic community and the church through consulting and freelance editing. She lives in Park Ridge, Illinois and has three grown children.



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## Congregational Healing: Lessons from Africa

By [Karl Dortzbach](#)

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When Jesus prayed that we might be one, He surely knew that we would fight like children in a family. The trouble is that our fights are far more devastating than we would want to admit. Today the church in Africa is torn by the worst kind of conflict. The list is long: Rwanda, Burundi, The Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, South Africa and many other countries in recent years. Conflict in these places has resulted in people disappearing, being betrayed, hunted down, and sometimes intentionally killed. By comparison it would seem that congregational conflict in northern countries amounts to mere child's play.

Confrontational mediation is often the model of conflict management offered by common western interventions. It assumes that when two parties are brought to a negotiation table and ground rules are laid down that each will be able to "take the log out of their own eye" and better see and forgive each other.

Africa's lessons tell a different story that follows the Luke 10 model of mediating shalom. From these we learn that in order for there to be shalom, there must first be reconciliation. In order for reconciliation to take place, there must be some healing. Healing comes by intentional steps in five aspects of humanity; volitional, emotional, physical, mental and social. Interventions in these five areas not only demonstrate God's love for humankind and humankind's love for God, but also the love of one person for another. True spirituality is seen in this kind of demonstrated love.

Many have wondered whether there is any hope for the entrenched conflicts in Africa. The easy Christian answer is to say that the gospel simply needs to be preached. But when one reviews the list of countries, it is apparent that the problem is not outside the influence of the church but within that influence. Before 1990 Christians numbered 90% in Congo, 86% in Burundi, 76% in Rwanda, and the list continues. In the thirteen years since 1990 Africa has experienced an explosion of church growth. The gospel has been preached.

With some sense of self-righteousness the northern church prays the Pharisees' prayer that they are not like the violent Africans, thank God. Jesus however reminds us that to harbor hatred in our heart is the same as murder. In Africa the church conflicts often start over injustice and deprivation. In the U.S. a church dispute may

be about the redecoration of the sanctuary, the pastor's preaching, or worst of all the kind of worship experience that is practiced. Whether the heart's hatred comes from injustice or dull preaching, it is clear that reconciliation will only be accomplished through the healing of deep divisions. In order to understand that healing, it will be helpful to reflect upon a story from Africa.

### **A Story of African Care**

Sometime in 1994 the world became aware of a rising decimation in Rwanda as it watched news pictures of bodies floating down a river. What was told was a story of ethnic hatred between Hutu and Tutsi Rwandese that engulfed even church leaders and pastors as they attempted to protect their own families at the expense of the minority groups within their congregations and communities. While this story was true, there were also other stories of those who loved boldly.

Nyirarukundo was a Hutu Presbyterian pastor in his 70s. He was known in his community as a man of God who loved his flock. But the love was severely tested one day when six Tutsis came knocking on his door seeking his protection from the savage militias who were hunting them. Acting fast, he put them in a tiny kitchen/bath room that served a one-room guestroom off the main house. He moved his own few clothes into the wardrobe of the room and slid the wardrobe in front of the only door that served the closet-sized room. For the next six weeks he lived in the bedroom, inviting the often-present militiamen to search his house again while he remained in his room. He provided food to those in the secret hiding place. His songs and prayers encouraged their hearts through the closed door. He loved them as he would his own daughter, who had herself fled the advancing militia with her husband and children. Healing conflict requires a bold love that is more about actions than words.

### **The Samaritan Model**

Most of our conflict resolution strategies are more about words than actions. In fact it may seem that Jesus' command in Matthew 18:15ff, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault . . ." would direct us to words of confrontation. We listen to peace treaty negotiations and we hear words. We consider the mediation efforts that happen in a counselor's office and it is about words. There is no doubt that the words "I am sorry" and "I forgive" are powerful words of healing and they need to be spoken. There is however a more complete model of conflict healing which the Bible describes, and it is about action.

In Luke 9 we read that Jesus was passing through a Samaritan town and the people refused to receive him. The disciples found the abuse worthy of death ("shall we call down fire from heaven and destroy them?"). At the heart of the matter was the bitterness between the Jew and the Samaritan--a type of ethnic conflict.

In Luke 10 we listen to the question of a rabbi who asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responds with a question and a story. The teacher answered the question with a text from Deuteronomy 6, "love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, all your mind and your neighbor as yourself." His answer is commended and Jesus proceeded to tell the story of the Good Samaritan. His story

leaves us with a model of conflict healing that often we simply view as a nice moralistic story.

The parable makes it clear that eternity is secured by loving a redemptive God enough to transmit that love to a neighbor redemptively. It reveals a model of the church's role in reconciliation and healing of conflict that would bring about shalom. The Greek behind our English translations identifies different ways in which we are to love God. "Heart" means the desires and choices or the volitional aspect of mankind. "Soul" reflects the emotional aspect of man. "Mind" speaks of the mental aspect. "Strength" refers to the physical aspect, and "neighbor" to the social aspect. These five words identify the five facets of wholeness that scripture calls shalom. Reconciliation is nothing other than a restoration of shalom. The church's task in reconciliation is identified through these five lenses of wholeness. The five lenses are five ways in which healing can be brought about so that wholeness might be restored.

Let us reflect again on the African story. When the pastor heard the need of his parishioners, he immediately made the choice to act, just as the Good Samaritan did. He recognized that even though there was a difference in ethnicity, there was a common humanity and a common spiritual redemption. That was the social dimension. The pastor provided food and shelter meeting physical needs. He sang and prayed words of hope into the minds of those hiding in darkness. He loved enough to live and maintain shalom, and his emotive actions preserved the lives of his people.

Healing conflict--especially conflict that has resulted in bitterness and hatred between people--only comes when shalom is lived in fullness. The Samaritan recognized a fellow human in need. He provided physical care. He carried the wounded man to a place of security and hope. He knew that he was unable to provide the healing, so he left what was needed for the inn-keeper to assist. The point of Jesus' parable was to show us what kind of healing brings about shalom. While focusing responses on the five aspects of humanity will not guarantee reconciliation, it does provide a wider pathway toward reconciliation than a confrontational mediation model.

## Roots of Conflict

Healing the wounds of conflict requires first understanding the deep roots of the conflict. Every conflict has history, but nearly every history can be told in different ways depending upon the perspective of the teller. The paradigm given in Deuteronomy 6, and repeated in the New Testament is one that enables the roots of a conflict to be more clearly understood. While Jesus did not ask the following questions in the story of the Good Samaritan, He clearly demonstrated understanding of the root issues. For us to proceed with healing actions, we need to reflect on a conflict. A list of the questions we should ask ourselves (and others) should reflect each of the five aspects of humanity:

1. What are the **social** dynamics of the conflict? Are there economic, educational, racial, relational, or power factors?
2. What are the **choices** that each party in the conflict has made? How

have the choices changed over time? Why did they change?

3. How do each of the conflicting parties **understand** the causes and consequences of the present conflict? What connects the causes and the consequences in the escalation of conflict? (These may be the starting points for healing interventions.)
4. What **physical** factors are involved in the conflict? These may be very different kinds of factors that range from physical distance (possibly affecting communication) to infidelity (a key factor in marital conflict). Other physical factors might be economic, or physical abuse.
5. What have been the **emotional** dynamics? Is there an emotional bruise, or has the bruise grown to hatred?

These questions are answered differently by each party in a conflict. The roots of the conflict cannot be healed until each has felt the weight of the other's story. Understanding the roots requires a lot of speaking and listening. But if there are only words spoken and heard, then the step toward healing has not been accomplished. It is rightly said that listening is the greatest form of loving. Loving is a necessary prerequisite to healing. Again, consider the African story.

Suppose the pastor had been unable to protect his parishioners because he had no hiding place, or because the militia was thorough enough to find it, or just because he didn't think fast enough. His story would have been about how he tried, how he grieved, how he understood the need, but how he was unable to provide physical safety. Others would have told the story about his indifference, or possibly his betrayal because of his fear or even because he really wanted to be rid of his Tutsi parishioners.

In a simpler church conflict--say about the style of music in worship--older Christians need to hear the perspective of the youth who have a different musical idiom. Or perhaps the "clappers" in a congregation need to feel and appreciate the different emotional needs and responses of the "standers" rather than just saying their Christianity is cold. A worship conflict will not be solved without both sides understanding and choosing to appreciate the other. That appreciation is most likely to come not in a debate about church music, but through a ministry of care and involvement in each other's lives. When we give care to another, we place ourselves in a position to listen more than to speak. In this sense then our actions are both the opportunity for our listening, and they become our words to the one in pain.

## Roots of Healing

When people in conflict begin to understand and feel the pain of their counterpart, they are in a position to choose healing rather than continual wounding. Hear now the story of the Samaritan. Ethnic conflict turned into shalom when a Samaritan saw a Jew in need and understood the humanness shared with the wounded man. He felt compassion, and out of compassion he chose to do the little he could with the oil and water he carried to cleanse the wounds and to bundle the man onto his donkey for the continued trip to the nearest inn.

Apply now the answer of the Rabbi, “Love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.” Healing the wounds of conflict began with understanding a common identity. But that common identity was felt as well as understood. It evoked intentional actions that involved physical touch and provision.

In our African story when a Hutu pastor hears the cry of his Tutsi parishioners, he knows and feels that they belong to him. By contrast, diminishing or distancing someone makes them somehow less human. Nyirarukundu shared not only a sense common humanness but a spiritual heritage as well as actual social experiences. Choosing to shelter and to put one’s own life in danger for the sake of another is the mark of true Christianity. Providing both the bread of life as well as the encouragement of Christ is the chord that binds ethnicity and difference.

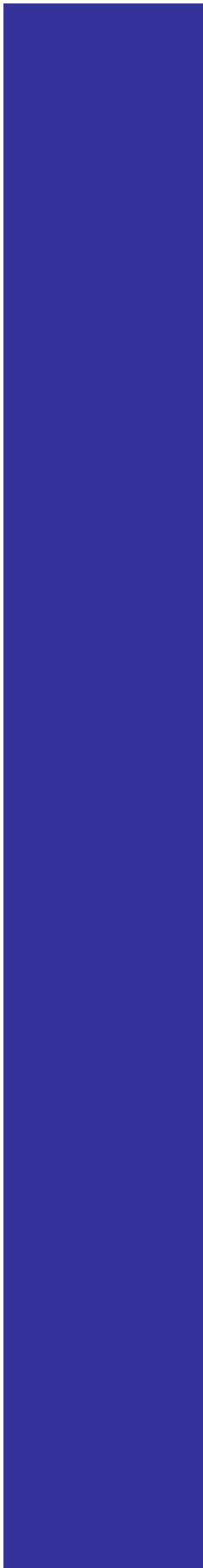
In a local congregation anywhere, healing conflict must begin with the very roots of our humanity as God created us. Empathetic listening that helps people understand their commonality is a first step. The choice to act upon a deep root of commonality may take many different forms. It may move someone to make a visit, send a gift, attend a common function. It could provide a meal, or speak a word of encouragement. It could compliment, shake a hand, share a child’s picture or embrace. In real life shalom is made up of many elements and reconciliation is never complete when we simply agree to disagree.

### Lessons from the African Church

Many people today only think of tragedy when the word “Africa” is mentioned: famine, disease, war, corruption or any other news-worthy degradation. It is all the opposite of shalom. In the midst of much pain however, Africa has much to show for how healing may take place. The appended chart gives an abbreviated listing of the different opportunities that were taken in nine situations of violent conflict in communities (Dortzbach 2003). They show not only what has happened to begin a healing process within a congregation, but what can happen when a congregation takes seriously its role to bring shalom to its community. Of course in most of the interventions there is still room for conflict. The question we must ask ourselves is “How are we using a holistic intervention to bring healing rather than further a conflict?” ([Figure 1](#))

**Figure 1. Healing Interventions of the Church.**

Emotional Support	Social Support	Volitional Change	Physical Support	Mental Growth
The content of this table is mostly blank in the image				



Mourning Hospitality Presence Scripture reading and Bible stories Counseling Establish monuments and memorials Group discussion Blessing Prayer Story Telling Empathetic listening Support groups Teaching and preaching Faith celebrations Promotion of articulated forgiveness Promotion of articulated confession Rebuking Worship Singing Service Compassion Trust building Encouragement Counseling	Networking and training Discipleship groups Creation and use of Liturgy Give community recognition Theological education that prepares for reconciliation Provide special worship/celebration programs Create Church coalitions and cooperative efforts Create support groups Provide hospitality Encourage and honor a vocation of healing Create Memorials Promotion of personal conflict resolution Make suffering redemptive Promote social reconciliation Speak and give public platforms for truth telling Actively seek justice and work against injustices Identify and create covenants of peace	Celebrate gains in relationships Create and use teaching opportunities to help focus on reconciliation Encourage people to embrace differences Encourage Christians to live in conscious awareness of their reconciliation with God Look for individual and community needs that might be met Promote public and private opportunities to speak truth about situations of conflict Encourage public and private articulation of forgiveness Discipleship must include listening and speaking to those in conflict with us Provide opportunity and encourage people to publicly confess corporate failure Teach and make clear the choices which people have and are making In receiving confessions, require that personal responsibility is accepted Forgiveness Confession Reconciliation Opportunity to be involved Representational repentance	Use physical symbols to be reminders of commitments made Identify the correct time and kind of reparation to be made Use art and beauty to restore a sense of humanity Provide hospitality Encourage humor, laughter and joy Organize and encourage acts of kindness Encourage appropriate touch in healing Encourage and structure story-telling opportunities Restitution Project done together Micro-enterprise Job placement Medical clinic Maternity clinic Agriculture project Street children project Orphanage Feeding program House building project Clothing distribution Community meals, celebrations	Teach truth about health and wholeness Teach and counsel people to understand the redemptiveness of hurt Use the Biblical narrative to frame life's stories and show their place in God's greater story Use a national event to grow a broad base to support, education and mobilization activities Create a multi-faceted education and awareness campaign Use conflict as a teaching moment Sponsor community memorial events Confession followed by appropriate restitution Use Scripture to give God's thoughts about conflict, evil, and pain Symbolic acts Reflection (personal) Public lectures Workshops Training for church leaders
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Inform the Christian community of suffering Integrate fellowship and worship Visitation Worship Counseling Prayer Care Mobilization Family Talking together Marches Drama Work with other churches			
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The African church historically knows that conflict is not healed by words alone. Traditionally a gift would be shared between offended parties, or a tree planted, or a meal eaten. During the meal or the sharing of the gift was when words were spoken. This building of shalom through multi-layered responses is not just Africa's heritage, it is a biblical heritage.

Often just getting through church conflict is seen as success. However the real measurement of success is not when our personal conflicts are made better, but when the conflicts of our society are made better. The church's role is not just to heal her own wounds, but to be a healing to the nations--which certainly begins within the communities that surround our congregations.

The experience of St. James Episcopal Church in Cape Town would be one example. As apartheid was ending in South Africa in 1993, a small band of gunmen entered their church service one evening, lobbing grenades and spraying the congregation with machine-gun fire, leaving many dead and wounded. Over the following months the congregation ministered to itself--through teaching, counseling, accompaniment, visitation, small groups, special services, assistance with medical costs and care and many other intentional interventions. In 2001 the congregation was still having an annual memorial service--not simply to remember the tragedy, but to celebrate God's goodness through it. In the ten years since the traumatic intrusion, some have moved to begin ministries in the townships from which the offenders had come. Others have gone and met with the offenders. The community around the church has increasingly been drawn into the church and the racial balance is healthier than it had been in 1993. Knitting the congregation together with the community came through multiple holistic interventions that touched the choices, the emotions, the minds, the physical needs and the social connections.

God calls His people to be salt and light to the world, to bear and to be His shalom. *Shalom occurs when people who are in a right relationship with God and each*

*other, enjoy and share together the resources of the earth in ways that show Christ is Lord of all creation.* Redemption in Christ is a call to be a part of the restoration of shalom. What action steps might you take to be God's shalom? If there are no actions that you recognize would be helping actions, then begin by the act of listening. Let words of pain reveal the roots in a conflict. When you have felt the roots, you will know what additional actions will promote shalom.

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## About the Author



Karl Dortzbach, Ph.D. is the director of the Institute for the Study of African Realities, an institute of the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology in Nairobi, Kenya. He has lived and worked in Africa since 1973. Since 1994 he has worked intensively in the area of trauma healing and conflict resolution in the eastern region of Africa. He is co-author of *Kidnapped*, an account of the kidnapping and subsequent release of his wife in Eritrea in 1974.



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## Transformation in the Borderlands: A Study of Matthew 15:21-28

By [Daniel Shipani](#)

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Throughout the centuries Christians have interpreted and used the story of Jesus' encounter with the Syrophoenician/Canaanite woman in many ways. In recent years writings from a variety of perspectives reflect renewed interest in this fascinating story.<sup>[1]</sup> This essay reports my own work with this Gospel narrative in Bible study and in conversation and collaboration with others. My objective is to respond practically to the pertinent question my friend and colleague Mary Schertz often poses: How does this text minister to us, so that we can minister with the text? In other words, I will address the question: How may this biblical text become foundational for faith and ministry?<sup>[2]</sup>

I will follow the familiar movements of an inductive study process, in popularized Latin American terms: seeing, judging, and acting. I assume that study of any biblical text should happen within the context of a Spirit-led faith community that prayerfully seeks to become wiser in the light of God in formative and transformative ways. And I also assume that one always brings perspectives, agendas, biases, and other sensitivities to any Bible study, while needing to welcome others' readings and contributions critically as well as creatively.[3]

First, we will take a close look at the biblical passage, trying to grasp its meaning afresh. Second, we will ponder its significance, keeping in mind the social and cultural context. Finally, we will draw implications for our embodiment of the message in truthful and fruitful ways.

### On the Meaning of the Text: Seeing

This story appears only in the Gospels according to Mark and Matthew, and we note some significant differences between the two accounts.[4] These dissimilarities suggest that Matthew has an interest in underscoring and intensifying some features of the story. For this reason, I have chosen to focus on its narrative.

*Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly. (Matthew 15:21-28, NRSV)*

*From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. (Mark 7:24-30, NRSV)*

I will succinctly highlight four variations in the two accounts. We recognize first a puzzling ambiguity about the location of the encounter, especially in Matthew's account: Had Jesus entered the region of Sidon and Tyre, or simply approached it—as suggested in many scholarly interpretations? Had the woman left that area for Jewish territory and only then encountered Jesus?[5]

Second, while Mark identifies the woman as a Gentile (a Greek), in Matthew the woman is “a Canaanite woman from that region.” The latter account implies that she is unclean and pagan, and possibly poor, perhaps a peasant. According to Matthew’s version, a demon possessed and tormented the woman’s daughter; this characterization suggests great evil and danger. Further, “Canaanite” evokes an adversarial relationship, dating from the divinely sanctioned conquest of the Canaanites’ land by the Israelites, who were taught to view themselves as “chosen... out of the treasured possession” (Deut. 7:1-6).

Third, Matthew’s account includes not just Tyre but Sidon. “Tyre and Sidon,” cities located on the Mediterranean coast, traditionally designated the Gentile/pagan region northwest of Jewish territory. Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus characterized Tyre and Sidon as more open to the gospel than the Galilean cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida: “If the deed of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago” (11:20-21).

Fourth, in Matthew’s version of the story, the conversation is more involved and the disciples take part. In verse 23, they ambiguously advise Jesus to “dismiss her.” Surprisingly, the woman addresses Jesus in the language of Israel’s faith, “Lord, Son of David,” and lays her need at his feet. In Matthew, not only does she address Jesus directly, but she is the first woman to speak in the Gospel. Correspondingly, in the end Jesus praises the Canaanite woman for her faith, and the whole incident thus becomes a special instance of “praying faith.”

A plain reading of the story presents a clear and unique instance in which Jesus yields. One could argue that here he is bested in an argument! The most striking and problematic part of the story is, of course, Jesus’ initial response to the request of the woman: First a deafening silence, then an uncharacteristic affirmation of boundaries, followed by parabolic refusal. At that moment he appears to regard the woman’s request as inappropriate, even as outrageously *out of place!* Only in this gospel story does Jesus clearly ignore a supplicant, place the barrier of ethnicity before a plea for help, and then use offensive language to reiterate the barrier. Without question, “dog” is a disdainful metaphor, though Jesus uses a diminutive form (“puppy,” “little bitch”). The implication, of course, is that the Gentiles/dogs have no place at the table. The woman, however, appears to play along with that harsh image and simply urges Jesus to take it one step further. She appeals to him as “Lord,” asserts her claim, and demonstrates her faith by arguing that at the very least both children (Jews) and dogs (Gentiles) are under the same caring, compassionate authority.

One need not infer that the woman agrees with the Gentile/dog analogy. Nor do we need to conclude that she considers herself unworthy and less than human, or that she identifies herself as a dog. On the contrary, we assume that she is requesting that she and her daughter be included, that she hopes for a place at the table and challenges Israel’s excluding ideology. When she says, “Yes, Lord...,” she agrees with Jesus that it would be wrong to throw the children’s bread to the dogs. But she also reminds Jesus that if even dogs may eat what their masters waste, she and her daughter should received bread too. The Canaanite woman understands the grave meaning and implications of Jesus’ initial response, but she proceeds wisely and daringly to reframe and recast it. Jesus’ original challenge to the woman merely restates the status quo of gender, ethnic, cultural, religious and political divisions. Her counter-challenge calls him to look to the place of new possibilities across and

beyond the established boundaries. Instead of accepting the dichotomy of children (insiders/receive food) versus dogs (outsiders/no food), she imagines that both the children and the dogs can be graciously fed inside, within the same household and from the same table.<sup>[6]</sup>

The dramatic import of this encounter in the borderlands is heightened as we recall its historical and textual background. “Show them no mercy,” Moses had said to the people of Israel (Deut. 7:2). “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David,” the Canaanite woman implores the New Moses of Israel. This Canaanite woman thus shatters the lingering image of wicked Canaanites, who presumably offer their children in sacrifice to their gods; she pleads on behalf of her daughter, who cannot speak for herself.<sup>[7]</sup> Well aware of his people’s position and privilege as “chosen,” Jesus initially asserts the exclusiveness of his mission. But in the end, he welcomes the woman, and she receives what she sought with passion, courage, and determination.

Finally, this story parallels that of the Roman centurion, in Matt. 8:5-13. These are the only two healings in this Gospel explicitly involving Gentiles and accomplished from a distance. In both cases Jesus deems the people worthy of the gift of healing. In fascinating reversals, both Gentiles even become exemplar figures. Most commentators indicate that although Matthew’s final word on mission to the Gentiles does not come until the last chapter of the Gospel (28:16-20), in these and related episodes the theme emerges that ethnicity does not define the people of God. Intertextual comparative studies indicate that Matthew’s positive portrait of Jesus’ response to the Gentiles constitutes a partial reversal of the Exodus tradition by focusing on the missional goal of bringing outsiders to the knowledge of the God of Israel.<sup>[8]</sup> God’s purposes include Gentiles, and Jesus the Jew is the agent of divine grace on their behalf.<sup>[9]</sup> Transformation is happening in the borderlands!

### **On the Significance of the Text: Judging**

The text before us suggests and calls for several kinds of stretching. Geographic, ethnic, gender, religious, theological, socio-cultural, moral, and political dimensions are involved. No wonder, then, that the intrusion of the woman into his life and sense of vocation and ministry stunned Jesus. Because this narrative has much spatial and contextual import, it is fitting that our interpretation underscores that this marginal Canaanite woman emerges as the center of the story! In fact, the story is primarily her story. We observe a surprising, transforming reversal: Jesus comes to acknowledge that she has great faith. This Gospel uses that adjective to describe faith only once. The woman’s faith encompasses her persistent demand for inclusion in the face of Jesus’ resistance; her challenge to the gender, ethnic, religious, political, and economic barriers; her recognition of Jesus’ authority over demons; and her reliance on his power.<sup>[10]</sup> Perhaps Jesus’ praise includes a realization we can appreciate today as well: In that encounter in the borderlands, the Canaanite woman became a prophetic and wise teacher. Out of her desire for healing for her daughter, she acted and spoke counter-culturally and counter-politically as she reminded Jesus of the larger vision of the reign of God. And she did so in a way consistent with the converging prophetic and wisdom traditions with which Jesus/Wisdom (Sophia) is interpreted in the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>[11]</sup>

The most vexing question for us is, of course, why Jesus would act as he did in this

encounter. An answer requires that we maintain the tension between two historical realities. On the one hand, we must assume that Jesus had been socialized into the conventional wisdom of his time and dominant culture. According to such socialization, prudence involved keeping clear boundaries; adhering to certain criteria of what is proper, clean, normal, and appropriate; and holding to right categories and patterns of perception, thought, relationships. This socialization was undoubtedly part of Jesus' identity as a first-century Jew. From a human science perspective, we do not expect that Jesus would have been exempt from dealing with prejudice. Neither do we expect that he would have spontaneously developed the kind of understanding enabling him to readily appreciate and communicate with the woman across vast social and cultural differences. On the other hand, we must also recognize that Jesus of Nazareth was himself a marginal person.<sup>[12]</sup> He was rejected by the dominant groups and became a friend of marginalized people—tax-collectors, outcasts, women, the poor and oppressed, “sinners,” and Gentiles. In other words, Jesus related abnormally well to those people, and was accepted by them, because he was himself and outsider, a homeless person (Matt. 8:20) living in two worlds without fully belonging to either.<sup>[13]</sup> In sum, from a theological perspective, whenever we look at Jesus the Christ we should see that the historical and existential reality of the incarnation is not only about “body” (*soma*), but is also about “soul” (*psyche*) and “spirit” (*pneuma*).

An outsider, a multiply marginal person, challenged Jesus to relate and minister across and beyond those boundaries. She gave him an opportunity to respond in tune with God's alternative wisdom expressed in an ethic and politics of compassion and radical inclusiveness. It is fitting to conclude that Jesus faced a major conflict and temptation, indeed a temptation from within, and that eventually he chose wisely. This conclusion need not compromise our Christological conviction about the nature and work of Jesus Christ. As Heb. 4:15 puts it, “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.” If we accept this interpretation, we must reject three other interpretations: (a) that Jesus was testing (playing games with) the woman while knowing all along what he should and would do, (b) that he wanted to teach the disciples a dramatic lesson about loving enemies, or (c) that he had to be converted (repent from sin). The biblical text supports none of these interpretations.

The story as it unfolds makes clear that both the woman and Jesus became boundary walkers and boundary breakers. By eventually choosing to relate and to minister “out of place,” Jesus and the woman pointed the way to God's utopia. “Utopia” means literally “no place,” not in the sense of never-never land, illusion, or fantasy, but as the stuff of prophetic dreams. From a biblical perspective, utopias are places that are not yet, not because they are mere ideals beyond reach, but because evil and sinful structures and behaviors resist and contradict God's will for ethnic and racial justice and reconciliation.

Finally, as we judge this text, we must realize its significance in light of the social and existential realities of the Matthean community. On the one hand, we recognize that the Gospel according to Matthew was written from the perspective of the chosen people of Israel, beginning with “Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1). The author writes from the center of the tradition, and from a typically “centralist” point of view.<sup>[14]</sup> Within this framework Jesus instructs the disciples, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles...., but go rather to the lost sheep of

the house of Israel” (Matt. 10:5-6). The latter expression is unique to Matthew and repeated in our text. The author leaves no doubt about Israel’s priority in salvation history. On the other hand, the story of the Canaanite woman can help undermine and even dismantle chosenness as ideology, as justification for excluding and discriminating against the other, the stranger, the foreigner. A powerful paradox is at work here!

We surmise that the early readers of Matthew were Jewish Christians separated from the synagogue and relating both to a largely Gentile Christian movement and to the Jewish community. The story must have aided them to understand their new place and role in God’s plan and reign. This story may also have helped free them from the ideology of chosenness so they could be transformed into a more liberating and inclusive faith community. Perhaps they were already beginning to experience such a community, but were unsure about how to cope with, legitimate, and reflect on it.<sup>[15]</sup> This transition and transformation of the Matthean community would have been crucial for their sense of identity as well as for the mission to the Gentiles. The new community—where there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, for all are one in Christ (Gal. 3:28)—is thus called to celebrate, embody, and be an agent of the coming reign of God, the future in which God is making all things new. Transformation is indeed happening in the borderlands!

### **On Embodying the Text: Acting**

We may realize the creative and liberating potential of this story in many ways on personal and communal levels. The following interrelated guidelines illustrate how this text has become foundational for me and other Bible study partners, how the text has ministered to us so that we can minister to others. Without trivializing the import of this wonderful story, one can think of ways our text foundationally illumines specific principles—dependable guides to practice—for faith and ministry. For example, much could be said about multicultural communication and hermeneutics, evangelization and mission, education for peace and justice, care and counseling, among others.<sup>[16]</sup> I have chosen to highlight just three general guidelines in the following paragraphs.

First, contrary to what dominant cultures hold, the borderlands can become privileged places for the blessings of transformative learning, and for personal and communal growth and creativity. Conventional and pragmatic wisdom favors the safe havens of familiar territory, the shrewd and sensible stance of “playing it safe.” The story of the Canaanite woman who confronts Jesus helps us realize that we can see reality better at places of marginality and vulnerability, and from the vantage point available to us at the borders. Our vision may thus be transformed. Hence, we are called to creative “willful contextual dislocations.” This story asks us to move deliberately beyond our comfort zones, either by going out or by welcoming into our midst the stranger, the alien, or the different other.<sup>[17]</sup> By moving from the center to the margins, we will find our perspectives significantly changed: we will become aware of the lenses through which we view the world, and our cultural and ideological captivities will be unveiled. We will be open to see better how God wants us to live and act in creative, redeeming, and empowering ways wherever we are.

A second guideline suggested by our study is that situations of conflict and suffering can become opportunities for transformation, for renewal and healing, and for

witnessing God's amazing grace. People who hunger and thirst for wholeness, justice, freedom, and peace are especially close to the heart of God, because their desire reflects God's own longing for all people. For this reason they are blessed (Matt. 5:3-11). For this reason the Canaanite woman was blessed. That is the meaning of the claim of liberation theologies, that God has a preferential option for the poor and oppressed, for the victim and the weak. Jesus not only taught about this preference, he also showed concretely what it involves. In our story, the demonstration happened in a context of conflict and against his human inclinations! The church is sent to continue his ministry and to embrace the suffering neighbor seeking healing and hope. As we respond, our hearts will be nurtured and transformed. Places of pain become places of grace as we are led and empowered to practice the virtues essential for caring as representatives of Christ: humility, hospitality, love, compassion, patience, hope, generosity, and courage.

Third, as Jesus himself may have experienced, ministry at its best is a two-way street, a mutual practice and process. For us in North America, the center of the center in the ongoing globalization process, this kind of ministry poses special challenges. To become missional churches our faith communities will need to undergo a conversion to the margins. Many of us Mennonites need to shed our own ideology of chosenness to better attend to our deepest yearnings, limitations, and needs, as well as to the potential of others. We bless and we are in turn blessed, sometimes the hard way, in spite of our blinders and shortcomings. Often we will unexpectedly find ourselves being ministered to. In fact, we cannot truly participate in other people's liberation and healing without allowing them to participate in our own liberation and healing. In this process our common human vocation in the light of God is reconfirmed and sustained. And for us today, this blessing includes an additional realization: Serving and being served in the borderlands, across and against boundaries, again and again becomes the sacred experience of encountering Christ and loving him anew. In due time, it will be revealed to us, as in the eschatological parable of Matt. 25:31-46:<sup>[18]</sup> "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

## End Notes

[1] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza took the title of her book, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), from the story of the Syrophenician-Canaanite woman. In her view, the story, "represents the biblical-theological voice of women, which has been excluded, repressed, or marginalized in Christian discourse" (11).

[2] As a practical theologian, I use the term "foundational" deliberately and precisely. For me, the Bible is foundational in at least four interrelated ways: (a) It informs my normative framework and perspective for practice and reflection, especially regarding wisdom (knowing how to live in the light of God); (b) it offers key content disclosed in the teachings, narratives, and other materials (poetic, prophetic, apocalyptic, etc.) which express the written Word in ways that illumine and address our human condition; (c) it calls for engagement in an interpretive process for the sake of discernment and wise living; and (d) it grounds my own spirituality as a man of faith and as a ministering person (teacher and pastoral counselor), theological educator, and theologian.



[3] My personal story includes growing up in Argentina right before Vatican II, when the Roman Catholic Church was the official state church and discrimination against Protestants was widespread. My parents were active members of the local Mennonite church, so I developed a strong separate religious identity. I learned to read the Bible and to live out and reflect on the Christian faith as a member of a marginal community. As an immigrant in the United States I find myself not fully belonging in this country and being reminded frequently of my “otherness” because of my accent, appearance, and certain social and cultural characteristics. I now feel that I no longer fully belong in Argentina either, though I keep close contact and collaborative ties in my country as well as in other parts of Latin America and the Caribbean. In sum, I have become one of the millions of “hybrid” people living in the United States, and my unique way of being Latin American conditions the way I read the Bible today. Finally, I am blessed with opportunities to teach and work in several contexts, including Europe. I increasingly appreciate perspectives and contributions of countless others with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds and from a variety of Christian traditions—especially Reformed and Roman Catholic—even as my own Anabaptist convictions have been shared, tested, and enriched.

[4] One is inclined to think that the narrative would also fit well in Luke’s Gospel, given what we know about Luke, a Gentile writing to Gentiles, who gives women a significant place in his telling of the gospel (see Reta Halteman Finger, “How Jesus Learned about Ethnic Discrimination,” *The Mennonite* [26 December 2000]: 6-7). According to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, however, Luke does not include the story because he puts Paul and Peter at the center of the debate about the mission to the Gentiles: “This Lukan historical model has no room for a story about an educated Greek woman, who as a religious and ethnic outsider argues with Jesus for the Gentiles’ share in the power of well-being” (Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 97).

[5] See, for instance, Daniel J. Harrington: “It is possible to envision the Matthean episode as having taken place on Jewish soil, with the pagan woman coming forth from her own land to meet Jesus who was traveling in the direction of Tyre and Sidon. This scenario involves translating *eis* in Matt. 15:21 as ‘to’ or ‘toward,’ not ‘into,’ and subordinating the prepositional phrase ‘from those regions’ (15:22) to the participle ‘came forth.’ The scenario would be consistent with Jesus’ directive to his disciples to confine their mission to the lost sheep of Israel (see Matt. 10:5-6)” (Daniel J. Harrington: *The Gospel of Matthew*, *Sacra Pagina Series*, vol. 1. [Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991], 235).

[6] Elaine M. Wainwright lucidly argues this point in *Shall We Look for Another? A Feminist Rereading of the Matthean Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 86-92.

[7] For this way of restating the meaning of the encounter, I am indebted to my former student Leticia A. Guardiola-Sáenz, who shared with me a paper written during her doctoral work at Vanderbilt University (summer 1998), “Jesus’ Encounter with the Canaanite Woman: The ‘Hybrid Moment’ of the Matthean Community.”

[8] Willard M. Swartley makes this point in *Israel’s Scripture Traditions and the Synoptic Gospels: Story Shaping Story* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), 70.

[9] See, for instance, the fine new commentary by Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000),

320ff. Other recent biblical studies done with a “decolonizing” interest and perspective present a different picture as they attempt to unveil and deconstruct certain perceived biases in the biblical text. See, for example, Musa W. Dube, “A Postcolonial Feminist Reading of Matthew 15:21-28,” pt. 3 of *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000). For this African scholar, “the divergent receptions accorded to the centurion and the Canaanite woman reflect the imperial and patriarchal currents at work in Matthew.... No doubt, the implied author, writing in the post-70 C.E. period, wishes to present the Matthean community as a nonsubversive community” (132-3). Dube’s work includes serious critiques of the work of several white, western, middle-class feminist writers on this text (169-84). Her thesis and overall discussion are provocative; nevertheless, my appraisal is that she and other authors with similar perspectives often neglect to acknowledge inherent tensions and dialectical import within biblical texts, and thus fail to appreciate one key aspect of their liberating and transformative potential.

[10] Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 324-5.

[11] Wainwright, *Shall We Look for Another?*, 88.

[12] For a scholarly treatment of the marginality of Jesus, see John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

[13] Jung Young Lee has insightfully discussed the question of Jesus and marginality in *Marginality: The Key to a Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). Writing from an Asian (Korean) American perspective, Lee proposes “a new theology based on marginality, which serves not only as a hermeneutical paradigm but as a key to the substance of the Christian faith” (1).

[14] Lee, *Marginality*, 116.

[15] See Leticia A. Guardiola-Sáenz’s helpful discussion of this question in “Borderless Women and Borderless Texts: A Cultural Reading of Matthew 15:21-28,” *Semeia* 78 (1997): 69-81.

[16] For instance, in multicultural and anti-racism education we might focus on the reality of our perspectives, ideological captivities, and incomplete personal visions; dynamics of openness to the stranger and hospitality; embracing and dealing creatively with conflict on different levels; affirmation and transformation of identities; reconciliation and community building.

[17] I have described the notion of willful (or voluntary) dislocation in several places; see, for instance, Daniel S. Schipani, “Liberation Theology and Religious Education,” in *Theologies of Religious Education*, ed. Randolph Crump Miller (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, Inc., 1995), 308-10; and “Educating for Social Transformation,” in *Mapping Christian Education: Approaches to Congregational Learning*, ed. Jack L. Seymour (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 37-8.

[18] Matthew’s judgment scene in 25:31-46 is the culmination of a two-chapter eschatological discourse, and it has been interpreted in diverse ways. In any event, two things should be kept in mind. First, for Matthew, Jesus is identified with the (marginalized) community of disciples, and he is present with them as they engage

in mission to communicate the gospel (18:20, 28:20). Second, in this text Jesus praises the actions of the righteous from “all the nations” (presumably Gentiles as well as Jews and Christians) because they have lived out the gospel by caring for the poor, oppressed, and marginalized; the actions of these “sheep” blessed by the Father are the practices of service expected of gospel bearers, followers of Jesus Christ.

## About the Author



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## Forgiveness

By [Perry G. Downs](#)

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As followers of Jesus, we know that we are called to be forgiving people. Just as God offers forgiveness to those who have sinned against him, so we are to offer forgiveness to those who have sinned against us. This teaching is clear and rather easy on the surface to understand. However, delving just a bit deeper exposes more complex issues of theology, as well as the emotional difficulties of offering forgiveness.

In the recent film *Antwon Fisher*, issues of forgiveness play a central role in the plot. The film is based on the true story of Antwon Fisher, who as a child was abandoned by his mother and placed in an abusive foster home. The film tells the story of the healing he experienced while serving in the United States Army. Filled with a rage kindled by his past, he was regularly getting into fights with other soldiers. The Army sent him to a psychiatrist for counseling. During his sessions in therapy, the doctor uncovered the reasons for his anger. Antwon carried immense rage within him toward his mother for abandoning him and never seeking to find him. Fueling that anger was harsh reality that she did not seem to love him. The doctor concludes that Antwon must be willing to forgive his absent mother and abusive foster mother if he is ever to be healed from his anger. Yet how was he ever to find the strength and will to forgive?

Forgiveness can be very difficult stuff because it demands a willingness to overlook an injustice. If there was no wrong committed, there would be nothing to forgive. But it is precisely because we have been wronged that we need to forgive. Our sense of justice calls for retribution and recrimination, but forgiveness calls us to set those concerns aside. Several times in the film, the doctor quotes (a modified) Webster's definition of forgiveness, *viz.* to stop feeling resentment towards an offender. According to this definition, forgiveness is essentially an emotional issue. The Scripture teaches that forgiveness also includes issues of justice.

## A Theology of Forgiveness

Our Lord called his followers to be forgiving people, teaching them to "be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). As with all of Jesus' ethical imperatives, the call to forgiveness (mercy) is rooted in the character of God. For us to understand the nature of the forgiveness to which we are called, it is necessary for us to consider first the forgiveness of God and the aspects within God's character that inform his willingness to forgive.

God is described in the Old Testament as merciful. For example, Exodus 34:6-7 reads in part: "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin." As God reveals himself to Moses, his self-description focuses on his mercy and compassion that are expressed in his willingness to forgive.

Some people believe that God as depicted in the Old Testament is harsh, angry, and unforgiving. It is not unusual to hear people say, "I prefer the God of the New Testament," as if there were two different Gods in the Bible. Apart from the sheer naivete of such thinking, it is also simply inaccurate. The Old Testament is a monument to God's willingness to forgive. Over and over the people of God rebelled against God's law and God's rule, living in blatant disobedience to his commands. Over and over again God forgave their sins, restoring them to fellowship and giving them another chance. Even a cursory reading of the Old Testament reveals God's amazing patience and willingness to forgive. The historical record of Israel gives eloquent testimony to the truth that God is abounding in love and mercy. God is lenient toward his people, not treating them as their sin deserves.

After their return from captivity, Ezra confessed the Nation's sins to God in prayer. In the midst of this prayer he says, "What has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt, and yet, our God, you have punished us less than our sins have deserved and have given us a remnant like this" (Ezra 9:13). Ezra is pleading for more mercy from God regarding their tendency to intermarry with surrounding nations, predicating his request on God's practice of forgiveness.

The Psalmist also extols the mercy of God, reminding the people of how God has treated them. The *maskil* of Asaph proclaims:

They remembered that God was their Rock,  
that God Most High was their Redeemer.  
But then they would flatter him with their mouths,  
lying to him with their tongues;  
their hearts were not loyal to him,

they were not faithful to his covenant.  
Yet he was merciful;  
he atoned for their iniquities  
and did not destroy them.  
Time after time he restrained his anger  
and did not stir up his full wrath. (Psalm 78:35-38)

It would be rather easy to develop a theology of forgiveness if this description was the totality of the biblical portrait of God's character. But juxtaposed to the characterization of God as merciful is the warning that God is a righteous judge who will not ignore sin nor leave it unpunished. Indeed, there are more references in Scripture to God's fury, anger, and wrath than there are to his mercy, love, and forgiveness. There is a certain tension within the character of God as revealed in Scripture that must be maintained. While God's predisposition is to be merciful, he is also a jealous God (Exodus 20:5). God's jealousy is an expression of his covenant love for his people, and it causes him to punish both his enemies and the unfaithful of his own people. The passage quoted above (Exodus 34:7) goes on to state regarding God, "Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation."

God warns his people, "Be careful not to forget the covenant of the LORD your God that he made with you; do not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything the LORD your God has forbidden. For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God" (Deuteronomy 4:23-4). Imbedded in the prohibition of idolatry in the Ten Commandments is the warning "I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me. . ." (Exodus 20:5).

Not only does God's jealousy cause him to punish his own people, but it also causes him to punish their enemies. In his oracle against Nineveh Nahum declares, "The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD takes vengeance on his foes and maintains wrath against his enemies. The LORD is slow to anger and great in power; he will not leave the guilty unpunished" (Nahum 1:2-3a). God's righteousness requires that he be a God of justice, not ignoring sin and rebellion against him. His righteousness demands that justice be maintained. Previously, when Jonah preached against Nineveh, they repented and God forgave their sin. But when they returned to their rebellious ways, God's justice was proclaimed again by Nahum and finally enacted against this sinful city. God withdrew his forgiveness.

Amos 7:1-9 presents a vivid picture of God's mercy and justice at work together. In this text Amos used the designation *Sovereign LORD* to stress God's absolute authority. Amos had three visions in succession regarding Israel's rebellion against God. In the first vision, God was preparing to send a swarm of locusts against his people. But when Amos pled for mercy, God relented. Next, God prepared to send unrelenting heat to destroy the land, but again Amos pled for mercy and God again showed mercy. After their third rebellion the mercy of God was exhausted. God gave Amos a vision of a plumb line placed among the people. God proclaimed, "Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer. The high places of Isaac will be destroyed and the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined; with my sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam" (Amos 7:8b-9). God forgave and relented from his plan to punish Israel twice, but when Israel still would not return to faithfulness, God would no longer spare the nation. There is a

certain tension within God's nature that is expressed in his dealings both with individuals and with nations; a tension that balances mercy and justice.

In general, God will relent and show mercy if an individual or a nation repents. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God said, "If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned" (Jeremiah 18:7-8). God's forgiveness of the nation is predicated on its willingness to repent.

Likewise with individuals, God's mercy is also tied, in some measure to repentance. Such is the case even when, according to the Torah, the action should not be forgivable. For the sake of God's own mercy, God acts more leniently than the Torah would allow. David murdered Uriah and then committed adultery with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11). Both of these offenses, according to the Torah, were punishable by death. David should have been executed for his sins. Psalm 51 presents David's cry of repentance. David asked God to forgive him and expressed the belief that a broken spirit and contrite heart were acceptable to God. God forgave David and Bathsheba, but still there were consequences to David's sin (2 Samuel 12).

Clearly repentance is a factor causing God to depart from the standards of the Torah. Ezekiel promises unconditional forgiveness for a violation of the Law punishable by death if there is repentance (Ezekiel 18). The tension between God as merciful and God as righteous can be resolved when there is genuine repentance for the offense committed.

The tension between God's dealings with humankind according to mercy and justice find resolution in the New Testament. The good news of the Gospel is that through the sacrifice of Jesus that atones for our sins, we can find forgiveness. John the Baptist proclaimed the forgiveness of sins based upon repentance. Likewise, Jesus offered the possibility of entrance into the kingdom on the condition of repentance. Included in his offer of the kingdom was the possibility of forgiveness. The story of the healing of the paralytic (Matthew 9, Mark 2, and Luke 5) makes it clear that, in contrast to the Pharisees, Jesus was both willing and able to offer forgiveness of sins.

The death of Jesus brings the righteousness and mercy of God together. In righteousness, the blood of Jesus offers payment for sin; in mercy, it is the just suffering for the unjust so that those who trust in Jesus may have their sins forgiven. The tensions in the Old Testament are resolved in the New as God's eternal plan for satisfying justice and offering mercy is accomplished through the sacrifice of his Son on our behalf.

## **The Ethical Imperative of Forgiveness**

The hallmark of God's people is that they have been forgiven. Paul explains, "Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). Where we were once enemies of God because of our sin, by grace through faith, our sins have been forgiven and the hostility that once separated us from God has been dealt with, and we are now at peace. But with this

peace comes a moral responsibility.

Jesus taught us to pray saying, "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us" (Luke 11:4). Matthew records it in a slightly different form: "Forgive our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). Several important observations can be made regarding this teaching. First, it comes in the context of teaching us how to pray. In the midst of very foundational requests for God's name to be made holy and God's kingdom to come in its fullness, is this request for forgiveness. Clearly our need for forgiveness is as foundational as our need for daily bread. In the midst of daily life, it can be easy to see the faults of others while being blind to our own faults. All people daily must seek God's forgiveness, and most likely, the forgiveness of others. We all injure others and we all need forgiveness.

Life is messy business. At times, without intending to do so, we offend, hurt, or sin against others. We may not even be aware of it when we do this, but sometimes we are very much aware, because it was intentional. While theology is expressed in very precise categories, actual life is much less precise. Sometimes we cannot really tell if we are the offended or the offenders. Because of the complexity of some moral and ethical issues, we are not always sure who is at fault. But we do know that all people are capable of sin, and that constant encounters with others create a certain messiness in which we all must live. Because of the reality of living in this world in the twenty-first century, we all need the constant forgiveness offered by God.

Second, this teaching draws a clear connection between our willingness to forgive and God's willingness to offer forgiveness. The Lord's Prayer is an extremely dangerous prayer to pray, but it contains a principle that the New Testament takes very seriously. The supreme warning from Jesus is that God will judge us according to how we have judged other people. Since we are saved by grace, what better evidence could there be of our salvation than offering others the grace which has been so lavishly bestowed on us? If that grace is not conspicuous in our lives, we may validly question the genuineness of our own alleged conversion.

In Matthew 18:23-35, Jesus tells the story of two men who owed others money. The first owed the equivalent of ten million dollars and the second owed the equivalent of eighteen dollars. Both men went to their creditors asking not for release from the debt, but simply for more time to pay it off. The first man had his debt forgiven by his creditor. But it was this man who also was owed the eighteen dollars. When he was asked for leniency by his debtor, he refused. Instead, he choked the man, had him arrested, and ultimately had him imprisoned. Although he had a great debt forgiven, he refused to show mercy to one who owed him a relatively small amount. The master of these men (representing God) was greatly angered and had this wicked servant thrown into jail. Jesus explained, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive others from your heart."

Our debt to the LORD God omnipotent is like the ten million dollars owed by the first servant. If God has forgiven us, ought we not be willing to forgive the small (in comparison) wrongs others have done against us? The foundational truth that Jesus is teaching is that forgiven people forgive others.

The mandate to forgive others as we have been forgiven also applies to self-

forgiveness. Why do we hang onto guilt after we have confessed our sins to God? Why do we assume that one honest act of repentance is not sufficient? "Let others get by on grace" we say; "I will continue to suffer and pay for my sin." To think and behave in this manner towards ourselves is pure arrogance because we are acting as if we are more righteous than God.

Third, the teaching on forgiveness is based on the assumption of God's willingness to forgive. God's twin concerns for justice and mercy have been resolved in the cross. The ethical implication is that we too must be people of justice and mercy. Micah subsumed all of the requirements of the law into a single sentence. "What does the LORD require of you O mortal, but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). We are to be forgiving people because we are the people of a God who forgives. As with all of Jesus' ethical teachings, he predicates this one on the character of the Father. Our character and our treatment of others are to be a reflection of God's character, and modeled after how God treats others.

### The Living Reality of Forgiveness

Theology works best with fine line distinctions and discrete categories. But life simply is not like that. Life is messy, and sometimes it is difficult to sort out our categories clearly. In the reality of human relationships especially, it is not always easy to determine the right course of action, or decide with certainty who is right and who is wrong. The recent war in Iraq is a good case in point. Some argue that the United States has no right to interfere in the affairs of another nation, and that when we do we are acting like the neighborhood bully. Others argue that Saddam Hussein was clearly a tyrant and a danger to his own people as well as to surrounding nations, and that he had to be eliminated. Some Christians found themselves secretly or even openly happy when it was first thought that he had been killed, even though we are supposed to be people of mercy. It is messy.

In cross-cultural relationships, there is the increased possibility of misunderstandings and hurt feelings. There are times when cultural values and perspectives clash:

"Why can't you ever be on time?" "Why are you so controlled by the clock?"

"Why can't you be quiet during worship?" "How can you stay so quiet during worship?"

"Why can't you be precise in your writing and your footnotes?" "Why are you so uptight about precision?"

"Why won't you look at me when you talk to me?" "Why are you so forward as to look me directly in the eye?"

"Why can't you just say what you mean?" "Why are you so insensitive to appropriate ways of speaking to each other?"

Sometimes these differences can appear humorous, but many times they result in pain, confusion, and alienation. This happens when we begin to generalize about



people and fail to treat them with respect and sensitivity. We can end up dismissing others with distrust and malice. To act in these ways is sin and contrary to the teachings of Jesus. The messiness of human relations can lead us into sin.

In the real life situations in which we all live, the fact is that we will be hurt and will hurt other people. Because we live in increasingly diverse communities, and because the church is made up of every tongue and tribe and nation, we *will* at times offend, hurt, or sin against others. None of us are so good at cultural sensitivity that we will not at some time hurt others. Also, we should not be too surprised when others in the community hurt us. We live in a messy world. This reality means that we all will need, at some time, either to seek forgiveness or offer forgiveness to others. This reality cannot be avoided; it comes with living in a fallen world.

The key is not to harbor the hurt, but be willing to talk to the other person about it. When someone talks to you, be willing to listen. Maintaining good communication is critical, especially in the midst of ethnic diversity and the differences it creates. Jesus teaches that when we have been wronged by another person, we are to go to that person to talk about it. Forgiveness is predicated on awareness that a wrong has been committed, or at least perceived. When the World Trade Center towers in New York were destroyed on September 11, 2001, there was behind it at least the *perception* that an injustice had been committed. Many of our interpersonal conflicts might be avoided through honest and forthright communication. This is our Lord's teaching in Matthew 18.

In the messiness of life, we must be willing to forgive others precisely because God has forgiven us. In his last sermon the evening before he died, Spencer Perkins (John Perkins' son) called on the African American community to offer grace to the white community. Especially for the minority community, who will be hurt more often by the majority, it is easy to hang onto the hurt. Forgiveness says, "I relinquish my right to retribution." Put another way, forgiveness says, "I am willing to bear the pain."

Now, it is easy for the majority community to preach grace to the minority community and to ignore the message of repentance to the majority community. As a white male, I can call on all the various groups who have been either hurt or offended by the actions of white males to offer grace and forgiveness. But there must also be a call to white males to face the facts of our oppression of others, and to repent of our sin. Biblical teaching insists that God's forgiveness is predicated on confession and repentance. Sometimes it is too easy to call others to grace while we ignore our own responsibility to repent.

Forgiveness is hard stuff, but we are called to be forgiving people because we serve a forgiving God. We see examples in Scripture where forgiveness is offered freely simply because God is a God of grace. As the people of God, we are to be gracious people.

There is one final matter to be raised as we think about forgiveness, namely that forgiveness is the path to personal freedom. It takes a lot of energy to hold on to pain and hurt. Some people's lives are consumed with keeping track of how often they have been wronged and by whom. Practicing forgiveness allows us to let all of that go and to be free from the anger that injustice causes. As Our Lord was dying, some of his last words were "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are

doing.” Jesus ended his life offering forgiveness to those who were killing him. He offers forgiveness to us also, because we need it. And not only do we need to be forgiven, we need to forgive those who have sinned against us. Hanging on to the pain and anger caused by others is a form of bondage that can cripple us. Forgiveness is our means of release, and is a means of honoring our forgiving God.

## About the Author



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## Reconciliation: The Prophetic Leadership of African Americans in this Strategic Time

By [Brenda Salter-McNeil](#)

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It was in 1986 when I first became aware that the world was changing. I was invited with my husband to go to England as members of a team of seminary students and pastors led by Dr. Bill Pannell from Fuller Theological Seminary. We were asked to come for three weeks to lecture on various aspects of the black church in America. This invitation was extended to us by the Oxford Center for Missiological Studies because of their concern for the Anglican Church. At that time, the Anglican Church was experiencing a serious period of numerical decline. Beautiful, old, gothic churches were closing their doors as places of worship and being used as office spaces, libraries or left vacant because people were not coming to church anymore. Too many people were finding the church irrelevant and when a church ceased to function as a place of worship it was said to be in a state of redundancy.

The concern over the redundant churches in England is what caused the Oxford Center to invite us to come. As a result of their research, which showed that the problem of “redundancy” was due in part to the changes that occurred because of industrialization and urbanization in England, they wanted to learn from churches that thrived in these conditions. According to their studies, the black church in

America excelled at dealing with the challenges of the urban environment and in growing strong, vibrant churches in the midst of the city.

So they invited us to come to teach on everything we knew about the black church in America. The students in that class were made up of people from all around the world. They took copious notes on everything we shared. That was the first time in my life that anyone had ever expressed a sincere interest in understanding my church experience as an African American Christian. Up until that time I had no idea that my life experience as a black, Pentecostal female had any relevance to anyone else. No one had ever asked me before! But now here we were in England lecturing people from all over the world and they were hanging onto our every word. It was absolutely life changing for me and I left that trip convinced that God was getting ready to do something extraordinary in the earth—and that this “new thing” was going to unite people from all over the world who didn't look like each other. I was also convinced that this “new thing” was going to uniquely and strategically include people of color. People who had heretofore been marginalized and minimized would now be used of God to provide prophetic leadership as agents of reconciliation and renewal around the world.

There are strategic times in history when people must accurately recognize what God is doing. These times are not determined or controlled by human beings. This is a time frame over which God alone has the power. It is called “kairos time,” translated from the Greek word in Scripture, which means the right time, the set time, the opportune time, the strategic time or the decisive time. It is the “pregnant” time, if you will allow me to use that analogy. It is like when a man and woman conceive a child. They wait for months in anticipation of their child's birth. Prior to advances in medical technology, most people didn't know the gender of their child and still today they can only guess at what their child will look like. So they wait, hope and pray in eager expectation. There are signs all along the way that something is happening, that they are progressing toward the final culmination of what they have been anticipating. And then one night, usually at some inconvenient time when she least expects it, the woman starts to feel something unusually different in her body. So she turns to her husband, who is fast asleep, and nudges him gently but firmly and simply says to him, “Honey, wake up. It's time!” She doesn't want him to tell her the time on his watch. No! Instead she wants him to get up and spring into action because “kairos time” is a decisive time that demands a response.

I believe that we are poised at a kairos moment in history. The tragic events of September 11, 2001 were sobering reminders that we can no longer live in isolated ignorance to what is going on in the rest of the world. We must wake up and discern the “signs of the times” that suggest that something new and different is occurring in the world. We must begin to recognize those things that indicate the coming of a kairos moment in our generation.

For example, increased globalization and demographic shifts are dramatically changing the landscape of the population in the United States. According to an article published by the Washington Times on October 7, 1999, “The minority share of the U.S. population has more than doubled since 1950, and a new study says minorities will account for more than 90 percent of the nation's population growth in the next half-century” (McCain 1999).

As we enter the twenty-first century, it is likely that racial and ethnic tensions in the United States will increase as a result of these demographic shifts. It is estimated that in the next twenty years white Americans will become a minority in the United States and that most of the population will be Asian and Hispanic, not black.

According to the most recent U.S. population projections, by the year 2020 white Americans will become a statistical minority in the United States. In fact, current trends in both immigration and birth rate show that, by the end of the 20th century, Asian Americans will increase by an estimated 22%, Hispanics by 21%, blacks by almost 12%, and whites by only a little more than 2%. (Ball, Berkowitz and Mzamane 1998, 67)

It is projected that this extreme shift in the demographics of the United States will produce a greater level of suspicion, hostility and distrust between people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. As people from different nationalities, cultures, races and ethnicities are thrust into contact with each other the potential for racial and ethnic tensions will increase. In an interview with David Frost toward the end of his public ministry, the Rev. Dr. Billy Graham was asked what he saw as the most important issue facing the church in the twenty-first century. To this he answered:

Racial and ethnic hostility is the foremost social problem facing our world today. From the systematic horror of 'ethnic cleansing' in Bosnia to the random violence savaging our inner cities, our world seems caught up in a tidal wave of racial and ethnic tension. This hostility threatens the very foundations of modern society. (Frost 1997, 127)

The loss of confidence in the Western, scientific worldview by many is also a sign of a changing shift taking place in our world. Our inability to solve the AIDS epidemic and its horrible toll on human life around the world is an example of the end of an age when we believed in our technological and scientific ability to answer and explain the cause of human problems and physical suffering. In our modern, rational worldview we believed that with enough time, money and research we could discover the cure to all human ailments. We had great confidence in our scientific abilities and were secure in our belief that we could solve almost any problem through our human efforts. However, the AIDS epidemic caused us to face the challenging reality that suggests that with all of our technological, scientific and medical savvy we don't have the answers to all life's problems. The result of this in the general public has been a growing trend toward alternative/holistic medicine and metaphysical healing methods from other cultures. People are no longer as confident in our scientific ability to answer life's questions and to solve life's problems.

Economic instability is another strong, social indicator that suggests that a change is on the horizon in America. There used to be a day when we believed that we got three things promised or guaranteed to us if we graduated from college: 1) a good job, 2) a decent house, and 3) a safe place to live. We felt entitled to these things as rights we'd earned as law-abiding, tax-paying American citizens. One day, at a car rental establishment on my way to a speaking engagement with college students, the young man waiting on me asked what I was planning to speak about. I shared a quick synopsis of what I planned to say and then he said, "Make sure you tell them that when they graduate they're not going to get a job." There was so

much cynicism in his voice. I realized that he was speaking out of his own sense of disappointment and disillusionment. This young man had a degree in computer science that he thought would really secure his future, but instead he was renting cars and was angry about it.

This negative economic climate can be seen in the recent downturns of the Dot Com industry, the increasing numbers of middle managers who are losing their jobs and the future uncertainty of Social Security in America. This economic reality has caused many people to become self-protective, fearful, and ethnocentric. We see people from different races as a threat to our opportunity and economic security. As a result, anti-affirmative action legislation has gained growing support to abolish racial and gender preferences. As more people find it difficult to afford a quality, college education, immigrants and people of color are seen as taking advantage of opportunities that could be awarded to more deserving candidates.

Middle class whites are losing ground economically...People are working harder for less. A great deal of money is being made somewhere, but not by workers and middle management. Is it any accident that the furor over affirmative action has heated up in this climate? In our multiethnic society, this conflict over resources and profits has tended to be "racialized."... Issues that are not racial in and of themselves come to be seen in racial terms because of our tendency to be tribal in allocating opportunity and blame. (Walton 1996, 10)

Is it any wonder, then, that in these economically uncertain times we are also experiencing an increase in hate groups and racially motivated crimes in America? One such example was the tragic murder of Ricky Byrdsong, the former head basketball coach at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois on July 2, 1999. Coach Byrdsong was shot and killed in an affluent community as he walked home with his children from the playground. The gunman was a young, white, male, college student, who was a self-proclaimed white supremacist. He also wounded several Jewish people and killed a young Korean doctoral student during a weekend shooting spree that was motivated by nothing more than racial hatred and fear.

One final indicator that a kairos moment is upon us is the rapid growth of information technology and advancements made in this area. The world has become increasingly complex and unmanageable. We are able to download information almost instantly via the Internet from anyplace around the world. Many people are finding this onslaught of information overwhelming. We once had the luxury of claiming ignorance about things happening around the world. However, as a result of the media, information technology, and communication networks we are bombarded with images and information that expose us to realities that are confusing and overwhelming. As a result, we are experiencing a rise in what social scientists call "addictive behaviors." It has been said that we are an addictive society. In our attempt to get back in control we are groping for all kinds of ways to try and cope—both legal and illegal. Such behaviors as workaholicism, drug addiction, sexual addiction, compulsive shopping and gambling are our misguided attempts to get back in control. It is the human response to try and make something manageable again. The world has become so complex that we know we can't control it. So if we can't control it, who or what can?

It is my contention that human beings are searching for the answer to the

fundamental question, "Is there anything that can make me feel safe and significant in this world?" That is why we are seeing an increase in Eastern religious practices, psychic hotlines on television, New Ageism and a fascination with angels. People begin to experience a need for the Transcendent when they can't make sense out of life. Hopefully this human searching for transcendent meaning and purpose in life will provide an opportunity for the Christian church to introduce people to Jesus Christ, who is the truth, the way and the life. However, it will require that we recognize that a kairos moment is upon us.

The social indicators that I have described are realities that must not be ignored and demand a response. In the face of these changes, it is my belief that African Americans and people of color can play a prophetic and strategic role in helping the church to respond effectively to this kairos moment. This will require, however, that as American Christians we come to the conclusion that we are limited in our ability to lead people to the Kingdom of God by ourselves. This will require that we relinquish some of the individualism and isolationism that characterizes most evangelical Christians in America.

As American Christians, we must believe that God has invested some of the image of God in every culture and people group. Historically, we have not believed this. We have not needed each other, which is why we have stayed ethnically and racially segregated in the church, our communities and on our college campuses. We have not needed to learn from people who are ethnically different from us. Rarely did we seek out international students from different countries and ask their perspective or consult with them because we felt self-sufficient and, I dare say, somewhat superior. But as a result of global realities and our limited ability to control our own lives, it is now causing us to recognize that we need the help of other people who hold some of the knowledge of how to address these issues.

In the Western world we are steeped in a natural worldview. We understand the natural world based upon the information we collect through our five senses. Therefore, what we know as true epistemologically is that which we can touch, see, hear, feel, etc. We believe that truth is in our physical reality. Therefore, when faced with problems that are beyond our physical ability to understand we are stymied. However, there are other cultures that understand the supernatural and don't have the dichotomy between the natural and supernatural that we have in the Western world. This kairos moment that is upon us will necessitate that we consult with other people of various cultures who hold different perspectives and worldviews. This is exactly what the Anglican Church understood in 1986 when we, a group of African American seminarians and our professor, were invited to teach for three weeks on the black church in America. They needed us.

I remember one day in particular when we were in England and my husband, Derek, was teaching on the role of the family in the black church. He was going on and on about how the black church has come not to need the white church in America anymore. He was being quite forceful as he explained that after centuries of trying to be included in the white church, black people had developed a vibrant church life and no longer wanted or needed to be accepted by white Christians. As he continued, a Cambridge professor named John Mockford interrupted him and said, "Wait a minute lad. Your church is young and agile. Our church has become old and arthritic. We need you to wait up for us." And then a single tear fell from his eye. He turned to another British man sitting next to him and said, "This is embarrassing, eh?" To which the other man agreed. Everyone was quiet in the

room and Derek said, with a new level of empathy in his voice, "By your asking me to wait up for you, you have just empowered me to be in relationship with you." That day we all experienced an authentic moment of racial reconciliation because one man had the courage to acknowledge his need for someone who was ethnically different from him.

As we recognize that our worldview is not bad, but deficient alone to explain reality and to meet the needs of this kairos moment, we will discover that what Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said is true: "We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly" (King 1986, 254). In other words what affects the people in Japan does affect me. The devaluing of the peso in Mexico has implications for our economy in America. We are a part of a global community, whether we like it or not, and if we are going to seize this kairos moment we will have to do it in partnership with people who don't look like us.

If that is true, we must intentionally seek out people of other ethnicities to help us identify and define the issues that must be addressed. For example, it has been said that black people in America are the litmus paper for our society. As you know, litmus paper is used in chemistry experiments to determine the level of acidity in a solution. Some of the social problems that we marginalized and ignored as inner city or black problems have now become endemic problems in the broader society. Consequently, social ills such as chronic unemployment, marital instability, teenage drug addiction, racial profiling, sexual harassment and corruption in corporate America are problems that could have been foreseen and addressed had we listened and learned from the plight of black people in America. Before the Enron scandal and corporate downsizing, African Americans have long asserted that there are corporate and social realities that adversely affect an individual's chances to have a productive life. If we are to effectively address systemic issues like these we must consult with African Americans, Latin Americans, Asian Americans and Native Americans who hold a more corporate and communal worldview. If we are to seize this kairos moment in history we must ask God to give us strategic partnerships with people who look and think differently than we do.

My trip to England in 1986 profoundly changed my life. It was there that I began to understand that African American people are uniquely poised to be reconcilers all around the world. The tragedy of our past has uniquely qualified us to speak on issues of reconciliation, forgiveness, healing and restoration with the authority that is born of experience.

This is also true of Native American people. In the past year I have had the privilege to share ministry with several Native American Christians who are being invited all over the world to preach and teach on reconciliation. They have been to places like Mongolia, Tibet, South Africa, Australia, Argentina and Rwanda, just to mention a few. There is a global fascination with these people who were forcibly displaced from their land and who have suffered, and continue to suffer, untold atrocities against their humanity and cultural identity. Their sufferings have uniquely positioned them, however, to be used of God worldwide as symbols of hope and healing to other people who are oppressed and disenfranchised around the world.

It is my contention that if African American people ever gained a sense of our global significance we would view the racial and ethnic hostilities around the world as

opportunities for our prophetic leadership. There are people all around the world who are waiting for us to come and share our unique perspective.

I will never forget one of the last places we visited during our trip to England. We went to an impoverished community called Birmingham where many Jamaican people lived. I expected this to be one of our best visits because we were going to be with people who looked like us. Instead, when we arrived we were met with anger and hostility. One young woman acted as the spokesperson for the group and she said, "Where have you been? Didn't you know about the suffering we were experiencing here in England?" Then she went on to explain to us that there had been riots in Birmingham in protest of the poor living conditions and lack of opportunity that faced most black British. We learned that many Jamaicans came to England after the war to help rebuild the country. They hoped to make a better life for themselves and to finally be accepted as full-fledged British citizens. But instead, after their services were no longer needed they were relegated to a lower class existence with no hope of ever being accepted as fully British. This frustration built up and finally spilled over in social unrest because the subsequent generations of Jamaican people born in England felt like foreigners in the land of their birth. They did not fit anywhere. They were now considered foreigners in Jamaica and they were never going to be given full and equal status in Britain.

As those of us from America listened to this story we were totally dumbfounded and caught off guard. Our only response was to apologize and to confess that we really didn't know. We didn't know that there were people waiting for us, who needed us to come and share what we had learned through our struggle with them.

Where there is racial hatred and ethnic cleansing we have earned our right to speak our truth. When Nelson Mandela was released from prison and became president of South Africa someone asked him how did he come to such prominence and power. To this Mr. Mandela simply replied, "I suffered my way into leadership." Although unfairly imprisoned for twenty-seven years, Mr. Mandela understood that his suffering has uniquely qualified and positioned him to lead the way into a new, reconciled South Africa. In fact, President Mandela invited one of his jailers to attend his inauguration as his VIP.

Those of us who have been oppressed cannot afford to be immobilized and marginalized by the racism and unfair treatment of others. Instead, we must recognize that what Bishop Desmond Tutu says is true, "There is no future without forgiveness." We must understand, like Nelson Mandela, that we must not keep ourselves imprisoned through unforgiveness. We have been put on this earth for a greater purpose than hatred—we are the reconcilers who have the potential to play a significant role in the healing of ethnic and racial strife and tensions around the world.

I am excited about the possibilities that face us in this kairos moment. My excitement is not based on idealism or optimism. In fact I agree with Dr. Cornell West who, in a lecture at the University of Chicago in 1994, said "I am no longer optimistic, because optimism implies having hope in what you see. There is very little that I see that gives me reason to hope. Instead, what I am calling us to, my brothers and my sisters, is a massive leap of faith."

I too am calling us as evangelical Christians to a massive leap of faith. If we are to



seize this kairos moment we must recognize it through the eyes of faith and risk responding in a way that challenges our worldview and basic understanding of the Kingdom of God. The Bible declares that the Kingdom is made up of people from “every tribe, every nation, every people and every language” all worshipping together around the throne of the Lamb—Jesus Christ. This kairos moment with all of its demographic and global implications has the potential to move us closer to that reality if we will seize the day. Let us heed the words of Sir Winston Churchill who said, “There comes a time in every person’s life when they are given a unique opportunity to discover the purpose for which they were born. It is their moment of destiny and if they seize it, it is their finest hour.”

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