

# EXPLORING COMMUNION AS A MEANS TO RECONCILIATION

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Apartheid is a form of racial segregation that affected South Africa for decades. Most effective during the period of 1948 and 1982, the Nationalist party's aim was to divide the country into separate states based on race. Undeniably, these actions led to many fiscal and economic disparities in the black parts of the country.<sup>1</sup> Places of the country that white South Africans would have never considered taking over were seized and blacks were forced into poor townships that possessed little to no resources. The educational system for nonwhites during this time period was greatly inferior to that of the white students, and essentially prepared black and colored students to do nothing more than serve their white oppressors. Miscongenation was something that was strongly discouraged so as to achieve national purity and make apartheid most effective. Such efforts toward a complete and total apartheid, however, were never completely realized. Much of the lesser governing rules of social apartheid were abolished in the 1980s.<sup>2</sup>

The core of the corrupt system, however, was political apartheid. Although South Africa's approach to governing was democratic, democratic rights such as free franchise rights were only awarded to white citizens. By denying blacks, coloreds, and Indians the right to vote, such persons were not able to elect to overturn apartheid neither could such persons obtain a political office that would threaten apartheid's ideology. This action was what allowed apartheid to persist as long as it did, and also encouraged the voice of liberation to occur outside of the ordained political arena.

However, this evil form of oppression and exploitation does not find its roots in the South African secular society, but in the Christian Church. At the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in 1857, leaders debated over whether or not white settlers had to partake in communion with the indigenous black people. The Synod decided that it was scriptural for the African people, referred to as Heathen, to be absorbed into the white congregations whenever possible. Yet, it was preferable for them to practice their faith in a separate building.<sup>3</sup>

Resulting from this decision, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church for Colored People formed in 1881. Soon thereafter, the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa was established for black people, and the Reformed Church in Africa for Indian people.<sup>4</sup> This theology of apartheid naturally began to create a racial caste system that greatly benefitted white people, at the expense of those who were Colored, Indian and Black. For decades, these non-whites were oppressed, impoverished, exploited, beaten, killed and completely wasted away, while whites increased in power and wealth, and failed to see a connection between their faith and their actions.

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<sup>1</sup> Wittenberg, Martin. Decentralization and Local Governance in Developing Countries. Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2006

<sup>2</sup> Seekings, Jeremy and Nicoli Nattrass. Class, Race, and Inequality in South Africa. New Haven and London: Yale University Press © 2005

<sup>3</sup> Nelson, John. Web. <<http://newchurchrising.com/2009/10/28/an-unholy-pilgrimage-contenting-with-tradition-in-south-africa/>>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Unfortunately South Africa's history is not unique. In America, the Church has also participated in a similar separatist theology, forbidding those who do not represent the majority culture to come. Motivated by ethnocentrism and perhaps even fear, the Church or at least those who represent the Church has pushed away the poor, people of color, GLBT persons, immigrants, and Muslims. In some cases, communities who are excluded have formed their own congregations and faith communities. However, in many more instances, these communities and persons remain lost and unconnected.

In studying the model of communion as established by Christ and practiced in the early church, it appears evident that this was never God's intent. In fact, it seems like the purpose of communion is to draw a united group of believers to Himself to corporately share in the sacrifice of Jesus for their sins.<sup>5</sup> In this sharing, all who trust in Jesus for salvation are invited to participate as in Him "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female, for...all are one in Christ" (Galatians 3.28, NASB). And this is important, because if there exists no division of believers in Christ, those divisions have no place in the Church or in society at large. However, it is because the Church allows and even at times perpetuates these divisions and injustices, that it is missing entire classes of people coming to the table of the Lord for not only fellowship, but for the salvation of their souls.

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### History of Passover

Before further examining the meaning and requirements of Communion, it is expedient to unpack the theological significance of Passover and its relation to this New Testament equivalent. In Deuteronomy 16, after nearly a generation in the wilderness, God calls the people of Israel to remember how He delivered them out of Egypt. In this deliverance, all of the firstborn among the Egyptians, whether they were sons, daughters, cattle, or other animals were killed, however, the lives of all of the Israelites were preserved. Each household among the Israelites were instructed to sacrifice a male lamb without spot or blemish, and "take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses in which they eat it" (Exodus 12.7, NASB). God said that the blood of the lambs would serve as sign as deliverance for them, in that wherever He saw the blood, He would pass over them and they would not succumb to the same fate of the Egyptians.<sup>6</sup>

This was what God was calling the Israelites to remember, to celebrate every year. He wanted them to remember that they were once slaves in Egypt, kept in captivity until they were delivered by the mercy and sovereignty of God. He wanted them to remember how He rescued them as opposed to how He destroyed the Egyptians, not because they deserved it but because He chose to love them and set them apart for Himself.<sup>7</sup>

However, the people of Israel were the only ones who were invited to celebrate the Passover. In Exodus 12.43-49, God makes it explicitly clear that no foreigner, slave, or any other person is even allowed to partake of the Passover meal unless they first became like an Israelite and were circumcised. In prescribing such, God makes a clear distinction between those who are His people and those who are not His people.

<sup>5</sup> Duncan, David A. "Why Is the Lord's Supper Called Communion?" *South Bumby Church of Christ*. 2001. Web. 01 Oct. 2011. <[http://www.bumby.org/faq/why\\_called\\_communion.html](http://www.bumby.org/faq/why_called_communion.html)>.

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 12.13. NASB

<sup>7</sup> Deuteronomy 7.7-9, NASB

Yet this nationalism was for a specific purpose: to create a lineage that would introduce the Messiah to the world. God was set on solidifying the nation of Israel for the purpose of bringing Jesus forth. In His advent, the praxis of Passover changes which is clear as Jesus celebrates it with His disciples prior to his death. The focus shifts from what God did for Israel to what He has done for all humankind in offering Jesus as a onetime sacrifice to atone for the sins of the entire world. Now God is inviting people from all nations to come and partake not only in the communion meal, but he is inviting all to come into relationship with Christ as specified in Luke 24.46, 47: “Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in his name to all the nations beginning from Jerusalem”

At the council of in Jerusalem in Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas, and then James, give further credence to the fact that all are invited to be a part of this new relationship with Christ. Not only do they establish the fact that with God there is no distinction between the Jew and the Gentile, but that in fact, there is no need for Gentile converts to Christianity to undergo circumcision. In this, not only do they remove a cultural barrier which prevented people from becoming full Jews in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, but they also emphasize that God has reestablished or more so, redefined who His people are.

### **Purpose in Communion**

As aforementioned, communion not only serves as a reminder of what Jesus has done on behalf of humankind in reconciling humanity back to God but it serves as a model for how humanity can experience reconciliation and unity within its interpersonal relationships. In his article, *The Reconciliatory Role of Holy Communion in the Methodist Tradition*, University of South Africa Lecturer William Bentley proposes that communion is in fact a place where those who are divided are able to be united, because all regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status are invited to participate.<sup>8</sup> Such does not mean that these differences do not exist, however, it enables people to realize that in spite of those differences, that they are under the same grace.<sup>9</sup>

Because believers are all under the same grace, there is no room for division or dissension at the Lord's Table. This is what Paul is getting at in his letter to the Corinthian Church. He had learned that in the midst of communion that not only were there divisions among the people, but that there were abuses present that prevented people from actually coming to the table. The rich shamed the poor by not sharing their meals, some went away hungry and others went away drunk. This type of class division is not what God had in mind, and Paul shows that by emphasizing what Communion is supposed to mean: a solemn ordinance of the Lord to remember his sacrifice and commemorate the new covenant, a covenant where this unconditional promise originally made to the Jewish people extends to all and brings all who would trust in Christ into this covenant relationship where they would receive the forgiveness of their sins and life in Christ forever.<sup>10</sup>

There is a method to the purpose of God here! As communion draws people closer to God and united to each other, these attitudes toward one another spill out into the society beyond the church. As rich and poor, slave and free, share in the communion meal with one another on Sunday, the way that they treat one another Monday through Saturday begins to change. Class distinctions begin to dissipate and gender roles become obsolete. Racism and ethnocentrism disappears because a way has been made for the reconciliation of all who were afar off, in order for them to draw near to God, and near to one another.

Such does not take place organically. In fact, the reverse is true. Left to its own devices, humanity would not take up the initiative on its own accord to become reconciled to one another. Ever since the fall of humankind, the world has emphasized the fact that it is incapable of such a task. However, in Christ, the dividing wall that was

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<sup>8</sup> Bentley, W., 2011, 'The reconciliatory role of Holy Communion in the Methodist tradition', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 32(2), Art. #501, 6 pages.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> MacDonald, William. *Believer's Bible Commentary a Complete Bible Commentary in One Volume!* Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995. Print.

between us has been torn apart, according to Ephesians 2, and has made two opposing groups come together in unity.

In her book, *Evangelical Does Not Equal*, Lisa Sharon Harper explains that the dividing wall that Ephesians 2 speaks of is an actual wall of the temple that divided the Jews from the Gentiles. Gentiles were only permitted to worship in the outer court of the temple, and were actually forbidden entrance beyond this point. To do so meant death. Yet, the sacrifice of Christ has made the temple obsolete and has in fact, torn down the dividing walls, giving Gentiles equal access to communion and enabling them to actually unite with Jews to partake in it.<sup>11</sup>

The reality is that even though these socio-economic and cultural barriers that were once prominent have been washed away in Christ, the Church continues to perpetuate and even engage in these divisive measures. Speaking specifically of the Church in America, the individualistic and isolated culture has caused the church to not care about the wellbeing of others, or at least the wellbeing of people who are not like them, the other. Harper suggests that the Church's apathy here paralyzes it from being able to do anything and to change so as to begin to deal with the injustices like racism that enable to injustices to persist.<sup>12</sup>

*The deeper issue, according to Bentley, is that we find it difficult to love people who do not think and operate like us.*

It is extremely important to consider Harper's thoughts here and what they mean in the context of salvation and communion. Though there is no distinction between anyone, regardless of sex, race or nationality, the Church seems to care very little about the salvation of those who do not look, think, and operate like them, which means that it fails to care about others coming into the kingdom. This apathy in turn has led to a largely unchurched nation, full of people who care very little about a God who seems to allow such disparities to exist.

There is a solution, and that solution lies in coming back to the communion table and what God intends for His Church. If the Church is serious about souls, serious about advancing the Kingdom of God, it has to embrace what Bentley calls an Open Table Theology, where all are welcome without

distinction. As Bentley states:

...it is not conditional upon the profession of theological tenets, or dependent upon traditional authority or ecclesiological ritual. It is based upon the personal experience of the Lord Jesus Christ, brought about by the Spirit, ranging from the earliest signs of Divine Grace in the soul to its crowning blessedness in the joy of 'perfect love,' and upon the sharing of such gifts of grace with others seeking or enjoying a similar experience' (Bentley, 2).

Such an approach to the communion table focuses not on who is excluded but who is invited. Since its inception, the Church has unfortunately been a part of excluding people from salvation, based on race, ethnicity, gender and creed. The most famous example of this in the early church is the issue of circumcision, as Jews thought that it was necessary for converts to Christianity to first become circumcised in order to be saved. In this day, circumcision was a barrier for Gentiles who wanted to convert to Judaism as it was not culturally acceptable in the Greek dominated empire, and so instead of fully converting, they became God-fearers and did not enjoy the full benefits of being a Jew. Had it been mandatory for these Gentiles to also become circumcised in order to experience the fullness of salvation, it would have prevented many from coming into the Kingdom of God. Recognizing this issue, the Apostle James ruled against mandating circumcision as a prerequisite for salvation at the Council of Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Harper, Lisa Sharon. *Evangelical Does Not Equal Republican ... or Democrat*. New York: New, 2008. Print.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Acts 15, NASB

The deeper issue, according to Bentley, is that we find it difficult to love people who do not think and operate like us.<sup>14</sup> As those who represent the Church look at those coming to the table, they begin to think that they are somehow unworthy and less valuable, and so it puts up artificial barriers to either keep them from coming or at least to distract them from the main point. For the early church, the issue of circumcision got people off of the main thing, which was this amazing grace provided through the sacrifice of Christ, leading to salvation.

Like the Jews in the early Church, the Church in this present day century also seems to have a problem with other people's supposed sin, or at least, what it views as sin. They pose a threat to who the Church appears to be, and in fact, exposes its deep vulnerabilities and insecurities. Nelson writes:

In South Africa and North America, in particular, the black rejection of the Christian message by white missionaries, pastors and slaveholders was linked to the doctrine of election. Because they were anxious about the status of their own salvation, they began to look for signs of assurance. Recognizing the wealth and land they had acquired, and the advances they continued to make in technology in contrast to the poverty, enslavement and recalcitrance of the black population provided the clarity they were looking for. Suddenly skin color was invested with soteriological significance. Whiteness came to signify salvation, wholeness, and purity, while blackness became a marker of damnation, poverty, and contamination. Of course, in between these poles were degrees of approximating whiteness and, therefore, salvation.<sup>15</sup>

Over the years, the Church has excluded those of contrary religious views, gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation, for the purpose of preserving its identity. This has done a disservice to the kingdom of God, in that in the Church's exclusionary actions, it has kept people from coming to the Lord which in turn cuts them off from an eternity with Christ. Diversity is not something that the Church should be afraid of, as God has created and welcomes this diversity, and in fact, demonstrates his grace as people of diverse backgrounds, nationalities, and creeds, are able to come together at the table of the Lord and find common ground in the sacrifice of Christ.<sup>16</sup>

### **Coming Back to the Table**

The question, or point of consideration now at hand is how. Given the Church's history and even its present reality, how does it begin to bring people to the Communion table, and therefore salvation? How do it put its preconceived notions and biases based on race, gender, socio-economic status or any other barrier aside and invite those who represent these diverse backgrounds in? According to Jesus, the Church starts doing this with love. John 13:34, 35 declares this:

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (NASB).

Not only did Jesus give this commandment of love to the church, he also prayed for it, knowing all that was at stake if those who claimed to be his did not model love. For Jesus, a true indicator of love was oneness or unity as such that existed within the Godhead:

“The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me” (John 17:22, 23, NASB).

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<sup>14</sup> Bentley

<sup>15</sup> Nelson, John.

<sup>16</sup> Bentley

However, the type of love that God requires here is not based on emotions as emotional love will not entice the Church to invite people to the communion table of the Lord. In the slight chance that it does, it has more to do with whether or not the person conforms and assimilates to its own ideas and expectations of who they should be rather than who God already says they are. Yet the type of love that God requires is the sacrificial type of love that Jesus displayed throughout his ministry and Luke 4.18, 19 illustrates this perfectly saying:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.

*The kind of love that God requires is not only sacrificial but it moves the Church into action*

Jesus realized that it was going to take more than his preaching to bring people into the kingdom of God. He knew that the people that He would minister to had some serious needs and were in need of repair. Without Him touching those people with his actions, He knew that they would be lost. This is why He spent time with those who were social outcasts such as prostitutes, tax collectors, adulterers, and sinners. This is why He ministered to and comforted those who were lepers, those who were blind, and those who could not walk. And this is why He ultimately went to the cross, to undo the profound impact of sin on humankind. In this sacrifice, He truly set free all who were held captive and oppressed!

The kind of love that God requires is not only sacrificial but it moves the Church into action as stated in I John 3. Likewise James 2 encourages believers to allow its actions to tangibly meet the needs of those who are suffering. Such is of utmost importance, especially when it considers that many in the world are suffering not on account of their own decisions, but as a result of the oppression and exploitation of others. Throughout the centuries, people of different tribes and nations have been downtrodden by their own and others, and it has robbed them of essential human rights such as food, water, housing, and safety. As a result, the human race has become extremely polarized and in need of reconciliation.

In his work, *Reconciliation: Our Greatest Challenge, Our Only Hope*, Curtiss DeYoung suggests that the pathway to reconciliation is achieving equality as reconciliation cannot take place among people who are not equal.<sup>17</sup> And although this is true, efforts must go deeper than equality and really start with equity, or the just and fair inclusion of all people. PolicyLink, a national research and action institute argues that income inequality, stagnant wages, a growing wealth gap, deeper poverty and persistent racial disparities have consistently excluded people in this country, and have cut them off from essential resources that enable them to thrive and live healthy lives.<sup>18</sup> The Church has to recognize and admit that this system of injustice has affected communities, both nationally and abroad, a system that favors the rich, the powerful and the white male hegemony, and have left those who are poor, weak, vulnerable, oppressed, women, children, elderly, disabled, and people of color behind. As the church, it can correct this by speaking up to support policies that deliver people from hunger, homelessness, unemployment, and other societal ills and also by lifting up its voices to condemn policies that promote injustice.

People often do not see the connection between actions like these and our faith, but in fact, the Bible admonishes believers to let actions of justice and mercy flow from their very lives. In Proverbs 31, the Church is encouraged to advocate for those who cannot speak up for themselves. Bread for the World, a Christian citizens organization says this:

<sup>17</sup> DeYoung, Curtiss. *Reconciliation: Our Greatest Challenge- Our Only Hope*. Judson Press: Valley Forge, PA © 1982

<sup>18</sup> Treuhart, Sarah, and David Madland. "Prosperity 2050 Is Equity the Superior Growth Model?" *PolicyLink*. Apr. 2011. Web. 14 Nov. 2011. <<http://policylink.com/>>.

In the face of the political, social, and religious institutions of our own time, we are likewise called by the Spirit to pray, open our hearts to God, reach out to others in their need, and confront structures, behavior and policies that impoverish and oppress. We are blessed with a system of government that allows us to have a voice in public policy decision. It is legitimate, even imperative, for us to exercise our prophetic ministry in the public policy arena secure in the belief that this is how the Bible directs us.<sup>19</sup>

As Bread for the World states, the Church does not only have a moral but a spiritual obligation in this regard. And as it engages in this spiritual obligation, it become active participants in proclaiming freedom and giving sight back to those who had lost it. This is key because as a result of prevailing disparities and oppression, many have lost their sight of God which keeps them from the communion table, and ultimately keeps them from having a relationship with God leading to eternal life. Ultimately this is what division and exclusionary practices lead to, which God holds the Church accountable for. It is time, not only to include and invite all persons regardless of gender, race, nationality, sexual orientation or socio-economic status to the communion table, but to eliminate the disparities that exist outside of it which only enable the divisions to persist.

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<sup>19</sup> Web. <<http://www.bread.org/hunger/bible/biblical-basis/biblical-basis-for-advocacy.pdf>>.



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