

God's Love Story and Redemptive Unity – Executive Summary **Chip Sweney**

If there is one word that describes God and His story and the response He desires from us, the Body of Christ, I would have to say it is **Love!** There are many Scriptures that reveal God's love. For instance, from Genesis to Revelation, we see the unfolding story of God pursuing His rebellious creation (Romans 5:8), and His love is on full display through the life, death and resurrection of Christ. We also see that God is love (1 John 4:8), and it is within this context of God being love and loving us that God calls us to love others. 1 John 4:7-11 reveals His love and His desire for us to love.

The Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-39) says that we are to love God with everything and to love our neighbor as ourself. Our "neighbors" have changed significantly over the last 5,10,15 years. From an ethnic standpoint many of our neighborhoods in north Atlanta were predominantly white not long ago. Currently, in Johns Creek, the demographics are 58% white, 23% Asian, 11% Black, and 5% Hispanic. The world has moved to Atlanta and to our neighborhoods and our workplaces. From the beginning Perimeter Church has been on mission to love others and make and deploy mature and equipped followers. In order to effectively do this today and moving forward, we must love and share the gospel in word and deed to those who are like us and those who are not like us. God's passion is for **Redemptive Unity** that shows the world that God loves them through Jesus (John 17:21-23). He has a desire for oneness, unity, and reconciliation that will draw people to Christ. This paper highlights that unity and reconciliation are based on God's word and the gospel, not politics and the government. We love and have a desire to reach our neighbors because this is God's desire, and He has brought the world to us.

In order to see our part in God's story of Redemptive Unity, we need to be reminded of where we are eventually going in the new heavens and new earth! This is our vision of our future reality! If we know where we are going, then we can look at the steps necessary for us to connect our story with God's story. We also need to back up and see where it all started (Creation), what happened (the Fall) and Jesus as the one who fulfills Love and Redemptive Unity (Redemption). Before we do that, here is a brief glimpse of what is to come!

Restoration – Two important aspects of the new heavens and new earth are:

- 1) A place of complete Unity, Reconciliation, and Restoration – Isaiah 11:6-9 and Revelation 21:3-4
- 2) A place where people from every nation, tribe, people and language will together Celebrate the Lamb – Revelation 5:9 and 7:9

If this is where we are going, then it seems important that we begin to live in a manner that is consistent with what we will no doubt experience in this new heaven and new earth, relationships with people of every tribe and nation (people not like us).

Let's now consider God's love story and redemptive unity that began with creation and is fulfilled through Christ.

Creation - Where we started – God created man in His own image (*imago dei*) and He made from one *man* every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth. He looked at all He created and it was good! (Gen 1:26-31; Acts 17:24-26).

- Every human being is to be treated with equal dignity as made in the image of God
- Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus", makes it clear that our unity in Christ and the fact that we are made in His image transcend any divisions of race, class, and gender

The Fall – Where it went wrong

- The sin of Adam and Eve broke the relationship and the intimacy that man had with God as He sent them out of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:23-24). It also broke the relationship that man had with each other (see Genesis 4 and the rest of the Bible!)
- The Scriptures consistently show man's bias to favoritism and oppression including that which is based on ethnicity, class, and gender. (Leviticus 19:13-16, Psalms 72:4, Psalms 146:7, Zechariah 7:9 – 10, Amos 2:6-7, John 4:7-26, Matthew 23:25-27)

God chooses a people for Himself, Israel! Throughout the OT, God's people are called to be a blessing to others and to love and act justly!

- God's people are blessed to be a blessing to the other nations - God sets apart a people, a nation for Himself through Abraham and his family to be a blessing to all the nations and families of the earth – Genesis 12:1-3
- Paul in Galatians connects the gospel to the Abrahamic Covenant – Galatians 3:8-9
- As part of His Love, God has a passion for Justice and Compassion! Loving others and acting justly are connected throughout Scripture. He consistently shows particular concern and compassion for those that are poor, mistreated, left out, suffer injustices, and do not have the structural support that they need. It is not acceptable that all are not treated fairly and equally and that some are oppressed and pushed down whether intentional or not. God is all about making right what is not right. We cannot separate Justice from His Love! (Leviticus 19:9-13; Psalm 72:4, 89:14, 103:6, 146:7-9; Micah 6:8, Zechariah 7:9 – 10, Amos 2:6, 5:11; Micah 2:1-3; Nahum 3:1)
- If we are members of the majority culture (those people who are typically the holders of power, possibly numerically dominant and/or key influencers in the development of societal mores and norms) we cannot afford to turn a blind eye to anyone who fails to experience Biblical justice.

Redemption - JESUS is the fulfillment of Love and of Redemptive Unity

- Jesus chose very different disciples and reached out and loved those that were not like Him and those considered outcasts. (Mark 2:15)
- Jesus showed the greatest act of love with His sacrifice and calls us to Love our neighbor as ourselves and to Love one another (Romans 5:8, Matthew 27:37-40, John 13:34-35)
 - The Biblical word, hospitality, has the meaning of brotherly love for the stranger and foreigner! Hospitality is not simply entertaining guests but showing love to those different than us as we would our own brother. (1 Timothy 3:2)
- God's love for justice/hatred of injustice continues to be seen through the life of Christ. (Matthew 8:1-3, 23:27-28)
- Jesus death and resurrection created the Unity of the Body of Christ and He calls us to live out this unity. (Ephesians 2:14-15, Colossians 3:9-11, Galatians 3:26 – 28, John 17:20-23)
 - He crushed the barrier between people of different ethnicities, classes, and genders. He brought together Jews and Gentiles and made them one in Christ (Ephesians 2:11-21).
 - Jesus prays for our unity in His prayer to the Father near the end of His earthly life (John 17:20-23)
- Jesus is the great Reconciler and calls us to a ministry of Reconciliation. (Ephesians 2:14 – 16, 2 Corinthians 5:18-21)
 - “Katallassō (reconciliation) means literally, “to change, or exchange; to effect a change.” As John de Gruchy draws out the implication, when we are “reconciled,” we exchange places “with ‘the other,’ and (are) in solidarity with rather than against ‘the other.’”
- Jesus calls us to make disciples of all the nations. (Matthew 28:18-20)

It is clear that Jesus and his life, death, and resurrection (the gospel) are all about His Love and His Redemptive Unity. He does not do this by keeping us apart but by bringing us together in relationship. We are his chosen instruments to love and bring the gospel to all people. In the New Testament, Jesus lived this, and the early church modeled it.

The early church modeled multi-ethnic relationships and multi-ethnic church in the book of Acts.

- The early church took to heart Jesus' teachings and lifestyle of unity by bringing Jews and Gentiles together in the church.
- Acts 2, 6, 10, 11, 15, 17, 18
- Acts 11 - The church at Antioch is first place where followers of Christ are called Christians (Jews and Gentiles together). This church also had multicultural leadership.
 - The Book of Acts emphasizes the cultural diversity of the Antioch church, because it was here that the disciples were first called Christians (11:26). The newly coined term, meaning "Those of Christ," was invented to describe these believers in their unprecedented mix of Jews and Gentiles together.

- Sociologist Rodney Starkes says, “The gospel advanced as the Greco-Roman world stood in awe of the people who formerly hated each other because of ethnic distinctions, who now loved each other as family and worshiped and served together in the name of Jesus.”

1 Peter 2:9 says that we are a “chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, a people for God’s own possession”. We are a new “race” and “nation” that takes precedence and priority over our born ethnicity and culture. As the Body of Christ in a local church setting we are called to build relationships with those of other ethnicities and classes and those different than us in order to share the gospel and minister to those from all the nations and classes of people around us as well as model and live out this “new” identity. This is seen very clearly in the mandates to love our neighbor and make disciples of all the nations.

If the leadership and people of our church are doing this then our church will not only become much more reflective of the community around us, but we would be loving others in word and deed and living out the unity of the Body of Christ that Christ desired when he “made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall.....reconciling them both in one body to God through the cross.” (Ephesians 2:14,16) By God’s grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, may we do this!

May we take initiative and go to others and not wait for them to come to us. My personal experience is that through my deep friendship with Bryan as well as other leaders “of another color”, I am a better person because of our relationship. I have a fuller and richer life and understanding of the gospel. I need them in my life so that I can begin to “see and understand” the world from other vantage points. I really believe that if every follower of Christ had at least one deep friendship with a person of another color (learn from and walk with each other) then we would see amazing transformation in the body of Christ as well as our communities. We would walk together and stand up together to address injustices that some still face. Our churches would better reflect the communities around them, and the watching world would know that the Lord loved them. (John 17) Who knows? We might just see His kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven in a much greater way!