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*THE BOOK OF ACTS AS A CASE STUDY EXAMINING
THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION
BY GLEN KINOSHITA*

Abstract

This literature review identifies ethnic diversity and reconciliation as a consistent theme throughout the book of Acts and explores some of the sociological, educational, and theological factors that help identify reconciliation as a ministry of the early church. This meta-analysis explores foundational concepts that develop an understanding of biblical reconciliation, examines the concept of “ethnicity” as it arises out of the biblical text, and describes the historical context and backdrop of the time of Jesus and the early church. After having established these concepts, the author will walk through the book of Acts, processing the various narratives with these concepts, in the mix of biblical exegesis, considering how reconciliation, inclusiveness, and social justice are part of the Spirit’s work in each of our lives as we influence our homes, churches, schools, and communities.

Keywords: social justice, reconciliation, inclusiveness, equity

Introduction

Despite assertions that we live in a post-racial society, religious organizations remain some of the most segregated in the United States (Christerson, Edwards, & Emerson, 2005). Our reality as a church continues to be that 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning remains for many Christians the most segregated hour of the week. The society around us also faces challenges regarding diversity. Many remain isolated from one another and live separate lives along class and racial divides. Using Southern California as a focal point, Myers and Colwell (2012) painted a picture of a socially divided society:

Southern California today is one of the most multicultural metropolises in the world. Latinos are now (again!) a majority, according to the most recent census. But the diversity of this place is as old as it is contemporary. Prior to European colonization, this land was populated by widely heterogeneous peoples. The various indigenous tribes used different linguistic systems, and while there was rich cultural and economic interaction between them, no one tribe exercised hegemony. This is important because in the United States today we are still socialized to believe that cultural diversity is a dubious modern development to be feared, not a deep past to be learned from. Yet our local demographic trends represent the future of the United States as a whole; we are *already* being trans-formed, regardless of whether or not we wish to be a multicultural society. (pp. 17-18)

The history of Southern California and the Americas is not the only “deep past to be learned from.” Our experience with diversity as Christians goes back to biblical times where people in the Mediterranean world struggled to relate across ethnic and cultural divides to live and mirror a “one new humanity” community as Paul noted in Ephesians 2:14. Focusing on the writings of Luke, specifically on the book of Acts, we get a glimpse of how the early church engaged in the ministry of racial reconciliation, both as a historical precedent as well as a catalyst for our future.

Perkins and Rice (2000) connected the ministry of racial reconciliation described in the early church to their own life narrative. “One motivator in my reconciliation pilgrimage as a white person has been discovering comrades from the pages of the New Testament who wrestled with the racial separations of their day” (p. 151). Perkins and Rice emphasized, “Like the Serbs and Croats or Palestinians and Jews or Tutsis and Hutus who separate and struggle today, the life of the early church recorded in the book of Acts was made up of distinct ethnic and cultural groups with histories of animosity and distrust” and “To Peter and Paul, destroying the ‘dividing wall’ was more than good theology—it became practical as it was hammered out on the anvil of their own lives” (p. 151).

Perkins and Rice (2000) framed the book of Acts as a text for how to address racial tensions in our day by studying how the early church dealt with similar issues in biblical times. During the days of the early church, themes of salvation for Gentiles, becoming an inclusive church, and establishing the Kingdom of God were taking center stage. These biblical themes are timeless truths for us to embrace today. This literature review explores the various narratives as they unfold in Acts and identifies the challenges that Jews and Gentiles faced as they encountered one another in entering the New Covenant.

Foundational Concepts for Reconciliation

To begin a discussion on the role of reconciliation in the book of Acts, it would benefit us to explore the definition and meaning of reconciliation. Two of the foremost scholars in evangelical circles on reconciliation unpacked the meaning of “reconciliation” in its biblical context:

The word translates several related Greek words: the verbs *katallasso* and *apokatallasso* and the noun *katallage*. These words were utilized by Greek writers to discuss interpersonal relationships. In particular, they were used in peace treaties between nations and groups. So, in common Greek usage, there were very often political dimensions to the meaning of reconciliation. When Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek they used these words to translate the Hebrew words related to atonement—that is, to God being reconciled with humanity. In this usage of *katallasso*, they did not retain the political dimension found in the Greek understanding of reconciliation. On the other hand, when Greek writers used the words, they never implied a spiritual connotation to reconciliation. In Paul’s use of *katallasso* and related terms, we find both the spiritual and political meanings. (Boesak & DeYoung, 2012, pp. 11-12)

The consistent thread that weaves the many issues and subject matter together is how the Bible, in this case the book of Acts, addresses marginalized people. Throughout history, as well as in contemporary times, there is often a divide between those who are privileged (dominant) and those underprivileged (subordinate) in a given society. Goodman (2011) addressed societal inequality to further clarify, “Systems of oppression are characterized by dominant-subordinate relations. There are unequal power relationships that allow one group to benefit at the expense of another group” (p. 5). Goodman pointed out, “The various ways people name the two sides of this dynamic reflect these qualities: oppressor and oppressed; advantaged and disadvantaged; dominant and subordinated; agent and target; privileged and marginalized; dominator and dominated; majority and minority” (p. 5).

Educator Beverly Tatum commented on the “dominant and subordinate” dynamics and its relevance in contemporary society. “Dominant groups, by definition, set the parameters within

which the subordinates operate. The dominant group holds the power and authority in society relative to the subordinates and determines how that power and authority may be acceptably used” (Adams, Blumenfeld, Castaneda, Hackman, Peters, & Zuniga, 2013, pp. 7-8).

There is relevance for both students and educators in this challenge of identity in the midst of dominant and subordinate status. As was the case for Israel in the midst of being dominated, those in a subordinate position will feel a need to define themselves. As was the case for subordinate groups in biblical times, internalization of a subordinate status has its emotional and social damage. Those in society who are in a subordinate position may internalize the messages that they are an inferior people. For the educator, students who have internalized a subordinate status may not feel they are capable of excelling in the classroom and thus under-perform. Other students may have come to a place in their thinking where they understand the injustice of being subordinate in society and engage in resistance to those who are dominant. The educator faces many challenges in navigating social identity development and ultimately to create a climate in the classroom that is inclusive.

These issues of inequality and dominance become very relevant as we focus on the historical context of Roman domination during the days when the Gospel of Luke and Acts took place.

Luke and Acts in Historical Context

In 63 B.C.E., Roman General Pompey conquered Jerusalem and from that time Israel again experienced domination from an imperial power (Kraybill, 2003). After the death of Herod the Great, Israel was divided into three major sections and was ruled by different leaders. Kraybill summarized, “Thus as Jesus began his ministry about 25 C.E., Palestine was a churning cauldron of revolution. Philip, Herod the Great’s son, ruled the northeast region as a quasi-Jewish king. Herod Antipas, another son, ruled the Galilee area in similar fashion” and, “A Roman ruler (procurator), from the seacoast port of Caesarea, directed the Judean affairs including Jerusalem, in the southern region” (p. 48).

Linthicum (2005) asserted that the Jewish religious system was also a governing system along with the Roman government and worked alongside the Roman procurator in Judea and with the Herodian nobility in Galilee. This may give some insight as to the tension that occurred regularly between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day. Linthicum also commented on the socio-economic situation of Palestine during this time. The religious leaders, Herodian nobility, and landowners consisted of only 2% of the population yet controlled up to 70% of the region’s wealth, often leading to tension and unrest throughout the land. Linthicum emphasized the larger percent of people were peasants who “perennially lived on the edge of economic disaster” (p. 34), stating further that after subtracting taxes paid to the government, Jewish authorities, and the landowners, a typical farmer realized “only about 12 percent of his harvest as his family’s annual income and the monies to purchase next year’s seed” (p. 35).

Many biblical narratives involve peasants who interacted with Jesus and were amongst his closest followers. However, Linthicum (2005) introduced another social class referred to as the “expendables” that were a major focus of Jesus, commenting, “Every peasant family lived in fear that one day they would slip over the edge into economic disaster and become one of the ‘expendables.’ The expendables of Israelite society included the beggars, the excess children of peasant farmers, the widows and orphans, the unclean, and the shepherds” (p. 34). Linthicum explained, “Most of the people Jesus healed were expendables” (p. 35).

Under the dominance of Rome, the vast majority of people lived in strained socio-economic conditions; they were either peasants or expendables. The poverty in the land of Israel paints a sobering reality that is a significant factor for Israel and its economic instability. This historical context of the Roman Empire, the strained economic situation for most of those who lived in Palestine, along with the plethora of people groups (*ethne*) residing in the land, leads us to some interesting challenges in building a holistic understanding of the ministry of reconciliation in the book of Acts.

DeYoung, Emerson, Yancey, and Kim (2003) also addressed the issue of inequality in time when Jesus lived in Galilee, as follows:

The world in which Jesus and members of the church lived did have distinction that brought division and hierarchies that produced discrimination rooted in personal and societal understandings of ethnicity and culture. These differentiations often contained the same emotional and structural power to divide as race does today. This was particularly true of the divide between Jews and Gentiles (people from other nations). Biblical scholar Joachim Jeremias notes that the attitude of many Jews toward Gentiles in Jesus’ time “was largely determined by the oppression which they had undergone at the hands of foreign nations, and by their fear of the increasing prevalence of mixed marriages” (p. 11).

Here the parallels are drawn to show how much of the challenges we face today regarding inequality were also present in biblical times. The people groups, location and historical context may be different, but power and dominance were challenges faced then as they are now.

Boesak and DeYoung (2012) painted a picture of Roman occupation in Palestine when Jesus was born:

Residents in Bethlehem in the first century lived under the colonial occupation of Rome. Their circumstances were not tranquil. Jews in Palestine were oppressed. The olive wood nativity scenes do not display this reality. The Gospel writers though did not hide this reality when narrative the birth of Jesus. Luke’s story began, “In those days a

decree went out from Emperor Augustus” (2:1). Matthew’s story began, “In the time of King Herod” (2:1). Luke identified the colonial contest of Jewish oppression under the Roman Empire. Matthew identified the daily reality of occupation by citing the name of King Herod, Rome’s appointed overseer of Palestine. While Matthew and Luke told the story differently, they both shared the perspective that the birth of Jesus foreshadowed a confrontation with the empire. (pp. 43-44)

The power dynamics in a land that is occupied would lead to much conflict both economically, as well as racially. Building an understanding of the oppression Jews lived under can give readers a richer understanding of not only the Gospels and Acts, but the whole of the New Testament. With an understanding of the colonization by Rome in Palestine and the Jews being an oppressed people, one can put in context the discussions that often took place with Jesus and the religious leaders of the day, as well as with his disciples. One such question comes up as we read the opening verses in Acts chapter 1:6, “So when they had come together, they asked him, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” Here is a question that sounds like the disciples, still bearing the burden of being an oppressed people in their homeland, as they were still looking for Jesus to be the political Messiah that was going to free them from the bondage of colonialism and be their King in their earthly home.

Lutheran pastor Barndt (1991) described oppressed people as those who when “pushed to the bottom refuse to stay there, from the time when Moses led the uprising of the Hebrews, through the rebellion of oppressed people all over the world in our own day, those who are stripped of dignity and their basic human rights will rise in strength, demanding that which God has promised to all people” (p. 25). People who are oppressed or colonized rarely passively accept being at the bottom of society’s social class.

As we ponder the themes of injustice and marginalization present during the time of the Gospels and the book of Acts, the relevance for the Christian educator in today’s world is the challenge of incorporating social justice into our teaching and practice as a witness for our Lord. Educators Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007) defined social justice education as that which “focuses on understanding the social power dynamics and social inequality that result in some social groups having privilege, status, and access,” adding, “*Social power* can be defined as access to resources that enhance one’s chances of getting what one needs or influencing others in order to lead a safe, productive, fulfilling life” (p. 58).

Adams et al. (2007) continued to frame social justice education as a means to empower people in our society to be agents of change and “to develop the critical analytical tools necessary to understand oppression and their own socialization with oppressive systems,” as well as “to develop a sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns

and behaviors in themselves and in the institutions and community of which they are a part” (p. 2).

To summarize, the situation in the Middle East during Roman occupation was oppressive. The majority of people in Mediterranean society struggled with living in poverty; they no doubt yearned for social justice in their land. Our challenge is to learn about the historical context of the injustice in the land and how the gospel brought healing to those who encountered injustice.

Diversity and the Ministry of Reconciliation in the Book of Acts

In the beginning of Acts, Jesus directed his disciples’ attention to the power of the Holy Spirit that will come upon them, enabling them to build a kingdom that God rules, not just in Israel, but worldwide. As mentioned earlier, Acts 1:8 lays foundations for the rest of the book of Acts regarding how the disciples will be witnesses in “Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria and to the end of the earth.”

As we proceed to Acts 2, we see the global scope of God’s plan begin to unfold. Writing on the diversity of the local church today, Milne (2007) revealed, “Thus the dawn of the new age of the kingdom at Pentecost exhibits a significant muting of nationalistic vision (Acts 2:8-11) and presses irresistibly forward to the explicit inclusion of Gentiles (Acts 8-13)” (p. 27). Acts 2:1-5 describes the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, after which the people began to speak in tongues “as the Spirit gave them utterance,” further explaining that “there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven.” De La Torre (2002) remarked,

According to Acts 2:4-11, Peter full of the Holy Spirit, addressed the crowd that had gathered ‘from every nation’ outside the house where the disciples met. Amazingly, each person heard the message in his or her own language. The miracle of Pentecost is not that the crowd representing various nations understood the language spoken by Peter but, rather, that they heard the message in their own tongue. The Genesis story concerning the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) is reversed. In the Genesis story, diverse languages are used to separate people. Now the ushering in of God’s Spirit unifies God’s people, transcending the earlier separation. As a result, three thousand were converted, representing Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Judeans, Cappadocians, Pontusians, Asians, Phrygians, Pamphylans, Egyptians, Libyans, Cyrenes, Romans, Cretans, and Arabs, all of whom represented the first Christian church, a very multicultural church. (pp. 57-58)

Despite the common tendency towards a *colorblind* approach to reading scripture, the biblical text is rich in giving insight to ethnic diversity revolving around the concept of *ethnos* or *ethne* (plural). Yamada and Guardiola-Saenz (2009) commented on ethnic diversity and its role in scripture, explaining, “Historically, ‘ethnicity’ tends to refer to issues of identity that are

related to the identity of a people or a nation. In biblical terminology, the Greek word *ethnos*, from which we derive the word *ethnicity*, refers to a people or a nation,” adding parenthetically, “(although in the New Testament the NRSV consistently translates the plural *ethne* as ‘Gentiles’)” (p. 35). The gathering on the day of Pentecost was a very diverse group of people as Acts 2:7-11 emphasizes the ethnic and regional diversity. Luke lists either the ethnicity of the people, or the region from which they came when describing those present at Pentecost.

Diversity in the New Testament world, however, encompasses more than just ethnicity. For example, Acts chapter 2 references gender and generational diversity. In his sermon Peter quotes from Joel 2:28-32, by stating, “in the last days it shall be as God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on *all flesh*, and *your sons and daughters* shall prophesy, and *your young men* shall see visions, and *your old men* shall dream dreams; even on my *male servants* and *female servants*.” Commenting on these verses, Milne (2007) maintained, “The coming of the Spirit awakened a whole new sense of ‘belonging together,’ a communal experience in which everybody was important and everyone had a contribution to offer” (p. 45). The diversity of God’s people thus encompasses ethnicity, region, national origin, gender, class, and languages.

Moving forward in the book of Acts, we come to what many have often referred to as the first ethnic, or cultural conflict found in Acts 6:1-6 pertaining to how the Hellenists, or Hellenistic Jews, complained against the Hebraic Jews, due to their widows being neglected in the daily distribution. The beginning chapters of Acts established the church in Jerusalem as a diverse group, yet this did not preclude certain groups from being marginalized. As DeYoung et al. (2003) point out:

Yet many in Jerusalem regarded the individuals in the culturally and linguistically diverse Jerusalem congregation as marginal persons. Second-class Galilean Jews and migrant Hellenized Jews made up the membership of this first church. Not until chapter six of Acts does the author mention anyone from the mainstream of Jerusalem’s life joining the congregation: ‘and a great many priests became obedient to the faith’ (6:7). Many of the Jews who migrated to Jerusalem from the Diaspora spoke Greek. They worshiped in synagogues for Greek speakers and read from a Greek translation of the Scriptures called the Septuagint. So the Jerusalem congregation bridged a divide found in the first-century Judaism culture and language specific synagogues. (pp. 22-23)

Perkins and Rice (2002) commented on what they refer to as the Jewish caste system where there were “three rungs on the racial ladder: Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles” (p. 52), further explaining that the Jews were on the top of this ladder; however, “pure” Jews, or Hebraic Jews, were better than “foreign-born Jews” (p. 52). Perkins and Rice observed, “Jews of Greek descent were looked down on by Jews of Hebrew descent, and the two groups even worshiped in segregated synagogues” (p. 53).

As we see from these references, those who address the biblical basis for diversity and reconciliation are prone to expound on the ethnic diversity and social status present in the culture of New Testament times. Hebraic Jews and Hellenistic Jews spoke different languages and had different cultural backgrounds, which gives historical and cultural context as to why they worshiped in different locations or synagogues. As a result, the oversight of neglecting the Hellenistic widows occurs despite the fact that it may not have been intentional. Perkins and Rice (2000) go on to comment, “Like other Americans, we Christians do not interact closely with people of other races in everyday spheres of life, the end result is that the needs and concerns of the minority are often overlooked as the majority pursues its priorities” (p. 155).

The response of the Apostles in Acts 6 is noteworthy. Upon realizing their neglect, they urged those of the Hellenistic community to choose seven men from among themselves who they would appoint to this service (the names of the seven that were appointed were Greek names, members of the Hellenistic Jewish community). The twelve appointed members of the Greek Jewish community to leadership and thus sought to address the needs from which the murmuring or complaints arose. Here we see an act of justice and empowerment as those who may have been in the numerical minority, and certainly those whose needs were being neglected, were appointed to positions of leadership to serve their people. The Hellenists were well aware of the needs and could best serve their own community knowing the culture and background.

Regarding the adversity that sometimes arose along ethnic lines during biblical times, Hays commented on how some historical animosity existed between Jews and Samaritans. “It is clear that the majority of Jews in Judea and Galilee hated them. For several hundred years animosity between the two groups had been growing, but this animosity exploded into serious violence in the first century AD” (p. 166). Hays purported that the mention of Samaria in Acts 1:8 pertains to more than just the spread of the Gospel. “Indeed, Jesus’ model for the gospel expansion as he proclaimed it in Acts 1:8 required the early Jewish Christians first to take the gospel to the hated Samaritans” (Hays, 2003, p. 166). Hays expanded on this notion of the attitude many Jews had regarding the Samaritans:

Yet the expansion of the gospel into Samaria as described in Acts takes place within a few years of Jesus’ homily on the Good Samaritan, and the prejudices between the groups had hardly abated during that time. Therefore the phrase “in all Judea and Samaria” can hardly be relegated to a mere geographical description. If Jesus had said, “in all Judea and *Galilee*,” then the emphasis would be geographical. But when Jesus mentioned Samaria, he was, no doubt, making a statement with strong ethnic connotations. Furthermore, if Acts 1:8 is read within the context of the gospel of Luke and there references to the Samaritans within this gospel of Luke and their references to the Samaritans within this gospel, then the ethnic animosities permeating the Jew-

Samaritan relationships cannot be ignored, and Jesus' words must be understood within that context. (pp. 167-168)

In Acts 8:5, Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ. As the gospel is preached and a revival breaks out in Samaria, the Apostles send Peter and John. Hays (2003) offered his commentary on how the proclamation of the gospel to the Samaritans was also requiring reconciliation and overcoming years of animosity: "Thus the proclamation of the gospel by Philip, Peter, and John to the Samaritans was, no doubt, an extremely difficult cross-cultural step for them to take. Throughout all of their lives they had been taught by their own culture to hate and despise the Samaritans," clarifying, "Yet, in Acts 8, by the power of the Spirit, these early Christian preachers crossed over one of the central and most fixed ethnic boundaries of Judaism" (p. 168)

Acts chapter 8 is often referred to as the "Samaritan Pentecost;" as we move to chapter 10, we come to what is often referred to as the "Gentile Pentecost." Here we can see how the challenge for Peter was to minister to a Gentile, Cornelius, who was a Roman soldier, a centurion of the Italian Cohort. Given the context of Roman domination, this may have caused tension for a Jew like Peter, but the Lord had revealed that he should not call anyone "common or unclean." Hines and DeYoung (2000) commented on the challenge Peter faced as he was called to minister to Cornelius:

After the vision, the Holy Spirit prompted him to go to the house of a Roman centurion named Cornelius living in Caesarea. This request was not easy for Peter to obey, because when Peter entered the home of a Gentile, he would lose his ritual purity. Further, this was the home of a Roman Gentile, and the Jews were under the oppressive colonial rule of Rome. Even the name of the city where Cornelius resided—Caesarea—served as a reminder of Caesar's reign. As a Roman military officer, Cornelius enforced the oppression mandated by Rome. Thus, Peter required a vision from God to enter Cornelius' house. (pp. 61-62)

The historical backdrop can give insight as to the depths of the Jew-Gentile hostility that had gone on for centuries prior. Understanding this history gives context as to how significant building bridges through this historical divide was. A key passage in Acts 10 is verse 34 where Peter declares that he now knows God shows "no partiality." Cornelius was a God fearing man who was seeking after the Lord, yet the reaction from Jews in Acts 11:1-3 was confrontational against Peter because he went to "uncircumcised men and ate with them." Here the concept of "table fellowship" may give some insight as to why there was so much negative reaction on the part of Jews to Peter eating with a Gentile. Eating with people in the days of the New Testament signified acceptance and close identification with those with whom you ate. DeYoung (2009) explained "table fellowship" using the example of Jesus from the Gospels:

Jesus intentionally shattered the boundaries instituted by society and fashioned a new understanding of community rooted in the grace of God. He boldly reached out to those who were shunned by society and brought them to his table. Jesus publicly ate meals with individuals like Zacchaeus, “a chief tax collector” (Luke 19:2-10), and others who had been ostracized and isolated by society and religion. The personal implications for the people around the table were significant. As Marcus J. Borg writes, “It must have been an extraordinary experience for an outcast to be invited to share a meal with a man who was rumored to be a prophet . . . and therefore his acceptance of them would have been perceived as a claim that they were accepted by God.” The table of God’s community was open to everyone. (p. 159)

As we reflect back on the many instances in the Gospels where Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners, it is evident that Jesus offended the religious leaders of his day and was also communicating a strong message of *inclusiveness* in the Kingdom of God. As we see in Acts 10, the gospel is for all people. It was, however, a struggle to preach across the Jew-Gentile divide. So again we see, as the gospel is being preached, so also is the ministry of reconciliation.

The attention then shifts to Antioch of Syria in Acts 11:19, where Luke continues to describe those who were scattered from the persecution after Stephen’s death went preaching in Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, “speaking the word to no one but the Jews” (Acts 11:19). The next verse declares that men from Cyprus and Cyrene, as they traveled to Antioch, preached to the Hellenists and many came to the Lord. Hines and DeYoung (2000) called attention to the diversity of peoples in these verses:

According to the depiction of the early church in the book of Acts, the influence of the church in Jerusalem waned as the church in Antioch took center stage. Samuel Hines wrote: “Notice what happened at Antioch: When the evangelists began preaching to everyone, all kinds of people entered the life of that church—all kinds of races and nationalities, all kinds of vocations and social classes. God chose the church at Antioch, therefore, to be the beginning of the missionary movement.” As the church in Antioch sent forth Saul, Barnabas, and others (13:2ff.), they took the Antioch model of church with them. They added to the powerful model developed in Jerusalem a broader multicultural vision. The Holy Spirit who empowers our efforts today is the same Holy Spirit that visited Jerusalem, Samaria, an Ethiopian official, a Roman house, and Antioch in the first century. (p. 63)

Acts 13 reveals greater insights on the diversity in the church at Antioch. In Acts 13:1 we read of prophets and teachers in the church of Antioch, and Luke gives a list of five men from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds that made up the leadership of the church. Conde-Frazier, Kang, and Parrett (2004) described the leadership team in Antioch:

After a season of critical preparation for ministry, Saul of Tarsus becomes one of the five key leaders of the church at Antioch. The others are Barnabas from Jerusalem; Simeon, called Niger, meaning “black” or “dark-complexioned”; Lucius of Cyrene, the capital city of Libya in northern Africa; and Manaean, who had been brought up with Herod Antipas. It is significant that this group of leaders is a diverse one in terms of both national origins and cultural and ethnic identities. (p. 59)

The significance here is that diversity was represented in the leadership of the church in Antioch. In these verses we see how the leadership team in Antioch reflected the diverse population of the city as well as the church. We can only wonder, in a setting like Antioch, *how did the leadership make decisions amongst such diversity? How were differences addressed? What did the worship look and feel like? How did the sermons address justice and diversity in the New Covenant?* What we do know, as recorded in Acts 11:23, is that when those in Jerusalem heard what was happening in Antioch, they sent Barnabas, who described what he saw as the “grace of God.”

As the biblical text reveals in Acts 11:26, the name to describe this new reality in Antioch was “Christian.” With the divisions of humanity that existed in biblical times, it was the grace of God at work being reconciled in regular gatherings to worship where the main focus was on the Lord Jesus Christ. Milne (2007) continued, “It was a new thing and required a new name, but one which identified it with its primary focus—the Lord Jesus Christ—and with its most obvious feature; its welcoming of every race and every type—hence ‘Christ-ones,’ Christians.” (pp. 46-47)

A crucial point in the history of the early church comes to us in Acts 15, where the narratives unfold of how some, probably Judaizers, were making the assertion that Gentiles needed to be circumcised in order to be saved. After much discussion, the Council at Jerusalem determined that Gentiles would not have to be circumcised but could come to the faith as they are. The shifts occurring as the New Covenant became a reality is that Jews and Gentiles were to be one in the Body of Christ. Barndt (1991) commented on this passage by making a contrast to Acts 10 and Peter’s struggle to embrace Cornelius, a Gentile brother, asserting that God shows “no partiality.” Barndt’s commentary on Acts 15 follows:

Our mothers and fathers in the early church resolved this second issue with the same indisputable clarity as they did the first. After lengthy discussion and debate, it was ruled that Gentiles need not first become Jews in order to be Christians. This decision was made at the second meeting of the church council in Jerusalem. The theological basis for the first decision had been the radical, unconditional acceptance by God of all humankind. No one was to be excluded from the church because of race, culture, gender, or nationality. The second decision added a crucial corollary: Within the church,

no race, culture, gender, or nationality was to have superiority or dominance, nor could one group determine the behavior for any other group. (p. 129)

The Gospel is being established for all people from all walks of life. This was obviously a struggle for many Jews who were accustomed to being the chosen people and who often separated themselves from Gentiles (as well as Samaritans). The issue with the charge of Gentiles needing to be circumcised is that they would have to become Jewish first in order to become Christians. The additional issue here is one of control, or power over people having to do with the Christian faith. As we have covered in the topics of the colonization of Palestine by Rome and that Jews were a conquered people, here it was a struggle of power with Judaizers asserting that Gentiles would have to be circumcised.

Acts 17 describe Paul in Athens and before the Areopagus Council, where he addresses the Epicureans and Stoics with quotes from their own poets to connect with his audience prior to delivering the message of the Gospel. The relevance of this passage for reconciliation and for educators is Paul's ability to connect to his audience based on his knowledge of their cultural context.

Doing cross-cultural ministry and educating for justice is not just something we do, it must start with who we are. The people that we are, and that we are becoming, is of crucial importance in this reconciliation journey that we read of in the book of Acts, and it is key to effective service in the church, in our schools, and in the world around us. Moreau and Snodderly (2011) commented on the multicultural identity of Paul as one whose upbringing and identity embraced many of the cultures and languages of his day, making this multi-faceted dimension of Paul's identity uniquely qualified to carry the Gospel message to a plethora of diverse people, when considering his Greek citizenship and linguistic abilities in Greek, Latin, Hebraic, and Aramaic. Moreau and Snodderly indicated that Paul the Apostle is a prime example of being able to cross cultures and effectively contextualize his message as an evangelist and teacher because of the person he was.

Nieto (1992) addressed the importance of how multicultural education connects the teacher or educator as key in achieving transformation in our schools stating, "Becoming a multicultural teacher, therefore, first means becoming a multicultural person. Without this transformation of ourselves, any attempts at developing a multicultural perspective will be shallow and superficial" (p. 275). Nieto continued to emphasize that being a multicultural person is one who can embrace adaptability and personal growth, by further pointed out: "We need to learn to approach reality from a variety of perspectives. Re-orienting ourselves in this way can be exhausting and difficult because it means a dramatic shift in our worldview" (p. 279). Nieto explained that after shifting our worldview, "we can turn with renewed vigor to make our schools and classrooms to remake them into multicultural environments" (p. 279). Since Paul

the Apostle was one who is so prominent in the New Testament as an example of a multicultural person, it is a powerful challenge for us to pursue this path of being a person who embraces transformational growth for ourselves, always in process of becoming educators who can function in a wide variety of cultures and with people of diverse cultures.

As Paul progressed in his message to the Stoics and Epicureans on Mars Hill, he moves to the message of the inclusiveness of the Gospel. Piper (2011) commented on this particular passage with a focus on Acts 17:26:

Paul says, “He made *from one* man every *ethnos*.” This has a special wallop when you ponder why he chose to say just this to these Athenians on the Areopagus. The Athenians were fond of boasting that they were *autochthones*, which means that they sprang from their native soil and were not immigrants from some other place or people group. Paul chooses to confront this ethnic pride head-on. God made all the ethnic groups-Athenians *and* barbarians-and he made them out of one common stock. So you Athenians are cut from the same cloth as those despised barbarians. When you put this teaching of Acts 17:26 together with Genesis 1:27 (“God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them”) what emerges is that all members of all ethnic groups are made in the image of God. (p. 153)

This concept of inclusiveness also has significant relevance for educators. Our teaching practices and scholarship can be a means of tremendous influence on our society. Ginsberg and Wlodkowski (2009) addressed the issues of diversity and educational practices:

From an educational perspective, achieving a pluralistic democratic society that meets its ideal of equity and social justice is inextricably linked to the pedagogical practices of its educational institutions. An approach to teaching that meets the challenge of cultural pluralism and can contribute to the fulfillment of the purpose of higher education has to respect diversity; engage the motivation of all learners; create a safe, inclusive, and respectful learning environment; derive teaching practices from principles that cross disciplines and cultures; and promote justice and equity in society. (p. 23)

As Acts continues the focus moves to the missionary journeys of Paul and the churches he planted. Throughout Asia Minor and Europe, Paul crossed cultures and preached the gospel, resulting in new congregations and leaders to whom he would later write. Milne (2007) described Paul’s ministry to Philippi (Acts 16:11-40), Corinth (Acts 18:1-18), and Rome (Acts 28:11-31). Milne clarified the various content of the letters, or epistles, of Paul and the themes of reconciliation. In Corinth, many of the congregation came from the lower strata of society and thus the mandate for unity was to work out differences having to do with social status. There were conflicts between Jews and Gentiles in the church at Rome. Toward the end of the

epistle, Paul sends greeting to the church in Rome and in so doing compiles a list of members encompassing ethnic, gender and class diversity (Milne, 2007).

The Social Dimension of the Early Church

As we move historically beyond the book of Acts and as the church continued to grow in number and influence, we can read of the impact that the gospel and the ministry of reconciliation had on the society around them. Maynard-Reid (1997) commented that as one reads the history of Christianity, one discovers, “renewal movements engaging in missions and evangelistic outreach never failed to include the social transformation of the individual and society as part of their task. The biblical records portray the post-resurrection Christian community as a socially aware body” (p. 17). Both the history of the church as well as the scriptural account of the early church reveals that Christians were active in society as they spread the gospel. Maynard-Reid goes on to quote the Roman Aristides as he described the early Christians to the emperor Hadrian:

They love one another. They never fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something, they give freely to the man who has nothing; if they see a stranger, they take him home, and are happy, as though he were a real brother. They don't consider themselves brothers in the usual sense, but brothers instead through the Spirit in God (from Miles: 125). (p. 17)

Milne (2007) comments on the impact the early Christians made on their society, “The new humanity which emerged through the New Testament period evinced a new, inclusive form of human society, an all-embracing love, in which the old polarities-Jew/Gentile, male/female, slave/free, elder/youth, powerful/powerless, rich/poor, cultured/uncultured-came under increasing pressure,” adding, “precisely here lay a large part of its manifest attractiveness” (p. 52).

For the early church or early Christians who lived under Roman domination, the proclamation of the Gospel went hand in hand with a commitment to love one another, to breaking down social barriers and to meeting the needs of the poor and under-class. No doubt when proclamation of the Gospel is in the midst of a church that lives out its mandate do justice, to live a life of unity and reconciliation with a diverse congregation, the message of the gospel is compelling. This made for a powerful testimony and impression on the non-Christian world around them.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the various authors who address reconciliation from the book of Acts, we see that many are prone to highlight much of the historical context that reveals issues of systemic or institutionalized dominance. We can see throughout scripture many instances of nations

dominating and being dominated. Understanding the captivity and colonization that were present in scriptural times can give greater meaning and context for much of the reconciliation messages that arise from Scripture. As a Gentile and a physician, Luke is especially sensitive to the outcast and marginalized of Israel in the time of Jesus and the Book of Acts. Thus many aspects of human oppression are mentioned throughout the writings of Luke.

Understanding the history of hostility of the various people groups about whom we read in Scripture also yields deeper insight to the ministry of reconciliation, whether at home, school, church, or in your community. As the Gospel was being proclaimed, so also was the ministry of reconciliation active alongside. From the multi-ethnic gathering at Pentecost, the Hellenistic Jews, the Ethiopian Eunuch, the Samaritans, Cornelius the Roman Centurion, people from Cyprus and Cyrene who took the Gospel to Antioch, the multi-ethnic leadership team at the church at Antioch, to the many converts throughout the Roman empire resulting from Paul's three missionary journeys, the book of Acts describes what was formerly separate peoples, now forming a united family under the New Covenant.

Hays (2003) challenged us with some concluding thoughts on the Christians' responsibility on the witness of the Gospel and reconciliation:

As a pattern of true discipleship, Luke reminds the Church today that the gospel demands that we forsake our inherited, culturally driven racial prejudices and accept all people – especially those different from us – as integral parts of the Church. The demolishing of racial barriers within the Church is a task in which the Spirit leads us. I would also suggest that the inverse is true; flourishing racial prejudice within a church is probably indicative of the Spirit's absence. The gospel therefore challenges each of us to do some serious Spirit-led soul-searching on this issue. Do our attitudes and actions toward those who are ethnically different reflect the prejudiced culture that we inherited, or do they reflect the new worldview of racial acceptance that the gospel proclaims and the Spirit empowered? (p. 179).

May we heed the exhortation to examine ourselves, to consider the example of the early church, in all its historical hostility between various people groups throughout the years, and how they brought the gospel and the ministry of reconciliation to the ends of the Earth. With the racial unrest and tension that we see in our world today, the church and school must embrace the challenge to examine our legacy from the book of Acts to be a spirit-filled people and break down barriers, in word and deed, reconciling people to our Lord and to one another.

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