

# The reconciled Church

## The Antioch model



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### Context and introduction

Reconciled churches are not simply churches with diverse congregations. Diversity can be found in many groups or organisations in cities, towns and villages across the UK. I have been part of a badminton group for the past decade, and it is as diverse as my church (maybe more so). Sport, in particular football, is often seen as a great unifier and to a degree it is. The England football team during the Euro 2020 Championship, demonstrated some of the progress made around racial diversity in the UK, in that they united many ethnic groups across the country.<sup>1</sup> However, this model of diversity is flawed, since players continue to face racism on the pitch and on social media. It is not enough to simply have a diverse group of people brought together around a common goal, we need to go much deeper. Football demonstrates both the progress and the problem. In truth, so does the Church

In contrast, the biblical picture of diversity we see is a gracious act of a sovereign God. Its purpose is to ultimately bring glory to God through reconciling and unifying peoples from every tribe, tongue, people and nation. This act is a sign that Jesus was indeed sent from God (John 17.21) and he becomes the great unifier for all those who believe. The Church needs to actively and intentionally embrace this vision and remember that the world has no equivalent means to bring such unity.

Diversity and racial reconciliation are not purely modern inventions of secular society to deal with

global migration and respond to changing social and cultural demographics. It is not just the latest thing the Church and society have to deal with. It is the unveiling and revealing of something that was and is at the very heart of God's purpose for the world and has been on his heart from the beginning.

Ephesians 3 encapsulates this point:

To make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. (Ephesians 3.9–10, NIV)

In other words, God always intended (it was his purpose) one day to display his wisdom through the multicoloured, multi-layered, multicultural diverse Church. It was a mystery hidden that was revealed. Seeing it certainly requires both revelation and eyes of faith. Without such a perspective, it can appear like an annoying or irritating distraction from the 'real work' of preaching the gospel. Such revelation helps us see that it is a clear demonstration of the power of the gospel.

### Reconciled relationships

Acts 11.19–30 is the culmination of several encounters where the gospel crossed divides and, brought healing, reconciliation and hope. This final encounter in which we read 'they began to speak to Greeks' (Acts 11.20), is in some ways the most significant, whilst also being the most innocuous.

## NOTES

1. Nazia Parveen makes this point powerfully in her article about the England football team during the Euro 2020 Championships. See N Parveen, 'Southgate's Team represents real England', available online at [www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/09/southgates-team-represents-real-england-three-lions-unites-country](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/09/southgates-team-represents-real-england-three-lions-unites-country)

2. J Daniel Hays, *From every people and nation: A biblical theology of race* (NSBT; Leicester: IVP, 2003), p. 165.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

4. J Hastings, *Dictionary of the Bible* (seventh impression; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1929), p. 128.

5. I explore this concept more in my book, *Crossing the Divide: A Call to Embrace Diversity* (Nottingham: IVP, 2009), pp. 138–43.

6. HC Kwiyani, *Multicultural kingdom: Ethnic diversity, mission and the Church* (London: SCM Press, 2020), pp 68–9.

Jesus promised that the gospel will cross divides and cultural barriers when he said to his disciples, 'you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1.8). The story of Pentecost (Acts 2) paints a picture of promises fulfilled. The gathering of Jews from every nation under heaven, the supernatural ability to understand different languages in that moment, is seen by an increasing number of commentators as the reversal of the scattering of the nations of the earth and the confusing of their languages in the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11.1–9).<sup>2</sup>

In Acts 6 we read about the Grecian widows being discriminated against in the distribution of food (an example of the long-standing issues of inequality between Hebraic and Greek Jews found in the society of the time being played out in the church context). However, a full understanding of the gospel resolved the issue, as the Apostles acted with wisdom, compassion and integrity in the way they addressed the injustice.

In Acts 8, we see the gospel spread to Samaria, home to sworn enemies of the Jews, and the reaching of the Ethiopian Eunuch, who some say represented the ends of the earth.<sup>3</sup> In Acts 10 and 11 we read about Peter's encounter with Cornelius, the Roman Centurion. The supernatural nature of this encounter is illustrative of the fact that the Jewish believers were not quite ready to take the gospel beyond their own nation. This again is evidenced by Acts 11.19, which states that while they were sharing the gospel, it was until this moment a mission to Jews only. However, this encounter was somewhat different because 'they began to speak to Greeks' (Acts 11.20). There was no obvious supernatural element to this. It was not focused on an individual and it was a departure from the Jewish-focused mission. God blessed the bold move of those disciples.

A couple of other unique aspects to this encounter are worthy of a mention. Barnabas called what he saw as 'evidence of the grace of God' (Acts 11.23). It was this pivotal moment where the disciples were first called Christians. Jews and Gentiles alike were part of this new, universal religion.<sup>4</sup> It was another departure from cultural laws and expectations that were still present among the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. In his letter to the church in Ephesus Paul describes the depth of the full implications of what happened. Christ had reconciled Jew and Gentile in himself at the cross and brought peace, which was not the obvious outcome when people from different ethnicities, races and cultures were brought together.

#### Application today

1. Like the Hebraic and Greek widows, Jews and Samaritans and Jews and Gentiles, there are historic divisions and divides that need healing today. Many of these divisions are as prevalent in the Church as they are in the communities outside.

2. We need to look again at the Scriptures to examine how we might bring about reconciliation in our own contexts. Doing so is a work of the gospel and is a missional act, which requires us to develop a much stronger and robust theology of race and reconciliation.

3. A pastoral response, invoking the power of lament and coming to an agreed understanding of history, will certainly help those hurting and suffering from racial oppression and injustice.

4. Acts 6 is a practical response to avoiding discrimination and showing favouritism within our church contexts.<sup>5</sup>

## Integrated community

In Galatians we read that Peter travelled to Antioch and there was a dispute between him and Paul:

When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, 'You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?' (Galatians 2.11–14, NIV)

A superficial reading of this passage can lead us to assume that the major point of application concerns how we deal with conflict and confrontation, such as the example here between the two Apostles. A more careful study of the passage provides us with deeper insight into the nature of the community in Antioch. It was integrated, people from different backgrounds were involved in fellowship together. Indeed, table fellowship was probably one of the most symbolic signs of the work of the cross. The Jewish law expressly forbade eating with non-Jews, yet here in the church at Antioch, it appears a normalised activity, though clearly not without its challenges for the Jews. Peter enjoyed the freedom of relationship with the Gentiles. Again, we see how deeply rooted cultural values and expectations were in Peter, Barnabas and the other Jews, when they are compelled to withdraw from this newfound act of freedom simply by the presence of other Jewish believers.

#### Application today

1. The gospel frees us from conforming to cultural norms and expectations, especially where they draw us away from cross-cultural fellowship with other believers. Culture is clearly important, but it is not sacred, where the cross and culture meet, culture dies. This may sound like a controversial or difficult statement, but it certainly was the case

for the first-century Jewish believers, who would have attached such a lot of their identity to the very things the gospel pushed them to give up (e.g. circumcision, food laws and ceremonial days). We must ensure that culture does not become our barrier to fellowship.

2. *The seeds of reconciliation were in table fellowship and the integrated community it created. They were also in devotion to the Word, prayer and worship (e.g. Acts 2.42–47). Whatever else churches do, these things should remain foundational in our small groups, prayer meetings and other various gatherings of the Church. We should be creating an expectation that as we gather, the Holy Spirit is doing that work of reconciliation in our hearts towards one another.*

3. *Gravitational pull – we need to acknowledge there remains a gravitational pull towards people like ourselves, as experienced by Peter and the others at Antioch. I have heard on too many occasions to recount, people describing their churches as being diverse, yet people within the Church are drawn primarily to build relationships with people like themselves. Paul confronted Peter for taking such actions and described it as ‘not being in line with the gospel’ (Galatians 2.14). We, too, need to take heed that we build with the freedom that the gospel brings. The crossing of divides is a witness to the power of the gospel to reconcile us and bring peace in our relationships.*

4. *Celebrating Christ – churches have run events to celebrate their cultural differences, usually encompassing a focus on food, dress and language. Perhaps a new and more foundational component could be added to such celebrations. It is Christ Jesus who unifies us and draws us together who is most worthy of our celebration. Certainly, the focus of the celebrations we read in both Revelation 5 and 7 is on giving glory to God and the lamb on the throne, for the work of reconciliation.*

## Diverse leadership team

The account of the leadership team in the church at Antioch (Acts 13.1–3) provides us with another unique insight into the Early Church. The team represented many ethnic, racial and cultural differences: Simeon called Niger was African, Lucius of Cyrene was a Hellenistic Jew, Manaen (brought up with Herod), touched royalty and the upper classes of society, Barnabas was also a Hellenistic and relatively wealthy (he sold a field) whilst Saul was raised a radical Pharisee. If the Early Church had such a diverse leadership team, how much more would this have been reflected in the diversity of the Christian community.

The first-century church in Antioch is an example of reconciliation and integration. This group put aside their natural and cultural differences to come together, pray, fast and hear God. It can be no coincidence that the gospel message went around the world from a church that already represented

the world. The Christian community described in Acts 2.42–47 contained the seeds of reconciliation, which we see glimpses of in Acts 6. By Acts 13 this same community demonstrated the fruit of those seeds of reconciliation.

According to Harvey Kwiyani, 92 per cent of churches in the US are monoethnic. Sixty-five per cent of churches in the UK are monocultural.<sup>6</sup> So, what happened? This becomes a valid question in the light of what we read about in the church in Antioch, which was a multiracial, multi-ethnic and integrated church. Why have churches become more monoethnic and monocultural at a time when so many parts of the world have become more diverse and multicultural? Furthermore, genuinely diverse leadership teams are even more rare than diverse congregations, why is that when the Antioch model shows diversity from the beginning? The words attributed to Martin Luther King Jr, ‘11am on a Sunday morning remains the most segregated hour of the week’, unfortunately seem to remain as true today as they did in 1963.

### Application today

1. *Leadership development needs to be intentional and principled. Leaders often find developing relationships with others who are not like themselves more draining, prone to mistrust and miscommunication. Without realising it, we can lean to unconscious bias towards leaders that look like us or at the very least sound like us. Creating wider and new pathways becomes a key for churches that want to follow the Antioch model.*

2. *How do we avoid tokenism and favouritism? The way to avoid tokenism and favouritism is to create multiple opportunities for multiple people to take on leadership responsibility. Over time this will create more organic pathways for lots of different types of people to lead.*

3. *Discipleship and Bible study groups are great ways for leaders to build relationships with people who are different to them and find strong commonality through the Word and in the gospel. Such groups create the opportunity for relationships and leaders to get to know others, which in turn can build the trust required to trust people not like the leader with leadership responsibility.*

## Conclusion

There are three potential barriers to a reconciled Church: (1) *pragmatism* (by continuing to prioritise what appears to work, over what is right); (2) *traditionalism* (by protecting and preserving our values); and (3) *pride* (by refusing to listen and believe and instead pursuing our own agenda).

God is a God of reconciliation, and he is relentlessly committed to his own purposes and promises. He has made a way through the gospel for the Church to be reconciled and there is hope for us to see it realised this side of eternity as we commit to build, commit to pray and commit to the journey.