

A Biblical Theological Foundation of Racial Reconciliation¹

Trinity International University exists “to educate men and women to engage in God’s redemptive work in the world.”² At the center of God’s redemptive work in a broken and divided world is the reconciliation of all things back to himself through Christ. The intersection between God’s ministry of reconciliation and TIU’s own values of community focus and cultural engagement, and its mission, compels us to consider intentionally how TIU might become a learning community that embodies gospel-centered reconciliation, which in turn, can effectively form and educate students who think biblically and act Christianly as agents of the ongoing work of reconciliation, especially in our world of racial conflict and tension.

A biblical theological foundation of racial reconciliation must be understood in light of who God is and his ultimate mission and goal, both of which are revealed in his Word. Although Scripture does not address questions of race or racial conflict directly, since these social concepts were introduced later,³ Yet Scripture does address the interpersonal and intergroup conflicts that characterize a broken world in need of healing and restoration. In this regard, Scripture provides rich and extensive discourse about the need for humans to be reconciled to God and his complete provision for that vertical reconciliation through Christ as well the need for horizontal reconciliation among people groups and the supernatural work of the Spirit to make this ongoing journey toward reconciliation possible.

Biblical reconciliation presupposes a relationship, which is grounded in God’s personal and relational attribute of love, which is further informed by the totality of who God is. This attribute is

¹ The terms *race* and *racial*, although giving the appearance of being scientific, are not biologically based and instead represent human, social constructs; *biologically*, all human beings are the same species, although *culturally* humans evince great diversity. Thus, *race* confuses biological and cultural categories. The terms *race* and *racial*, however, have tangible consequences for how “others” are viewed and treated. To avoid discussion of these terms is thus to overlook the powerful and often damaging consequences the use of these terms has caused.

² Excerpted from the Trinity International University Mission Statement.

first and foremost expressed in the regard for the other that each member of the Trinity community has for each other, and is then reflected in the regard for the other that the Triune God has for his creation, especially human beings created in his own image. Reconciliation, however, also presupposes a *previous* relationship that has been ruptured, but which is being restored. In a biblical understanding, this is the relationship that the first humans enjoyed with God when they walked in his presence in Eden, but which was ruptured by their rebellion—a rebellion that had cosmic repercussions. The restoration of this relationship, flowing from God’s divine attributes of love and justice, is at the heart of a biblical understanding of reconciliation, when the Father sent his Son into the world (John 3:16) so that through the Son’s death and resurrection all things might be reconciled back to God (Col 1:20). This supreme demonstration of God’s love reveals the depth as well as the costly nature of divine love. This act of love demonstrated in the sacrifice of Christ also reveals God’s holiness and righteousness, which demanded divine justice for humanity’s transgression, but also divine mercy, which provided the means by which reconciliation was achieved. Thus, a biblical understanding of reconciliation is both relational and restorative, grounded in God’s love, which further manifests his holiness, righteousness, justice, and mercy, as the biblical narrative reveals.³

Genesis 1-2 presents God’s creation of the universe out of nothing, and the assessment of that work as “good,” underscoring the essential goodness of God. The apex of God’s creation, humanity, is deemed “very good.” Unlike the rest of creation, however, Adam and Eve are created in God’s own image. Perhaps the most relevant aspect of this image is its relational nature. Just as the Triune God is fundamentally relational—three persons, one God, in eternal relationship, so also humanity is created relationally—male and female, distinct from one another, yet one humanity, who in

³ We recognize that the “justice of God” is a complex matter. A fundamental aspect of divine justice is that it is an attribute of God: “Justice is one of God’s own attributes...Even God’s exercise of the role as judge of all the earth characterizes divine judging not by sheer power and authority but by a concern for fairness and equity governed by other divine attributes” (Bruce C. Birch, “Justice,” in *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, 435-36).

relationship together image God. Just as the Triune God reveals diversity in eternal unity, so also humanity images diversity in unity.

Genesis 1-2 also presents the perfect shalom that resulted from God's work of creation—shalom expressed in flourishing human relationships in every dimension: between creature and Creator, between male and female, and between humanity and the rest of creation. In the context of this shalom, God intended that his image-bearers, as they were fruitful and multiplied, would reveal both God's loving design and intent for holistic relationships and the interrelatedness that is at the heart of the Triune God. Genesis 3, however, records Adam and Eve's rejection of God's goodness and perfect provision, which ruptured this original shalom and distorted every dimension of the divine design for human flourishing. Rather than gratefully receiving God's created order as a gift and enjoying diversity in unity, Adam and Eve rejected it. Yet before they were expelled from his presence, God promised that evil would not ultimately prevail (Gen 3.15).

Evidence of the cosmic brokenness resulting from Adam and Eve's rebellion emerges immediately in the biblical narrative, beginning with strife and discord between Adam and Eve (Gen 3:15-16) and deadly enmity between their offspring (Gen 4:1-16). The multiplication and expansion of humanity further exposes the cosmic impact of the original rupture. Rather than demonstrating God's glorious design for his image-bearers—human flourishing rooted in the holistic interrelatedness among diverse image-bearers—the emergence of cities and kingdoms enshrined social expressions of injustice and oppression in a variety of ways. Unjust and oppressive economic and political structures arose (Isa 10:1-2) as well as ethnic conflict. The intercessory prayers offered on behalf of nations by their leaders, such as Moses (Exod 33) and Nehemiah (Neh 1) give additional evidence of the corporate nature of sin.

The promise given in Gen 3:15 finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ, who is simultaneously the divine Son of God and the perfect human who atones for sin and makes reconciliation possible between fallen humanity and God. Through Christ and his death on the cross,

Adopted by the Board of Regents – October 20, 2017

God is now creating a new, redeemed and reconciled humanity (Eph 2:14-15), who images Christ. Just as the Triune God reveals diversity in unity—three persons, one God, and just as those created in the image of God reveals diversity in unity—male and female, yet one humanity, so also these who are being recreated in the image of Christ reveal diversity in unity—Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, Greek and barbarian, every nation, tribe, people, language—yet one Body of Christ, one new redeemed humanity (Gal 3:27-28). Rather than eliminate human distinctiveness, Christ's horizontal work of reconciliation—flowing from his vertical reconciliation of individual believers—heals humanity's fractures by revealing the diverse other to be fellow image-bearers who are equal members of the new humanity being formed in Christ. Revelation culminates the biblical narrative by presenting the ultimate restoration of all things in the final working of God's justice through Christ, resulting in the new creation, wherein redeemed, reconciled humanity participates in God's glory. Revelation 7 depicts the goal of God's work of reconciliation: the great multitude comprising every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne of God united in worship of the Lamb. Yet between the reconciliation effected by Christ's death and resurrection and the final restoration of all things that will occur when he returns, the need for God's ministry of reconciliation and the church calling as God's agents in that work (2 Cor 5:16-21) is ongoing. This was evident as the early church faced issues of injustice or rejection stemming from diversity, whether inadvertent (Acts 6:1-7) or overt (Acts 11:1-18), and it continues in the church today.

Three key implications emerge from the biblical narrative. First, the reconciliation of all things back to God through Christ is the ultimate outcome to which the Bible points (Eph 1:10). This reconciliation is at the core of the gospel—the core of God's love expressed through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the forgiveness of sin that his work achieved. This reconciliation includes not only the vertical reconciliation of individuals to God but also the horizontal reconciliation of one to another—the latter flows necessarily from the former. These two aspects of reconciliation are inextricably linked and cannot be separated without distorting the biblical witness.

These two axes of reconciliation are grounded in love, as inferred from Jesus’s words: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matt 22:37-39).

Second, divine justice, which flows from divine love, is an essential aspect of biblical reconciliation. Divine justice is the response to human injustice and ultimately leads to divine judgment against all evil (Rev 19-20), so that shalom might be restored (Rev 21-22). Yet divine justice is also inextricably linked to divine mercy. God’s justice demands judgment for sin, yet his mercy has provided forgiveness for that sin at the great cost of his Son. Thus, to speak of biblical reconciliation without also addressing divine justice and divine mercy cannot be supported by the biblical witness. Moreover, divine justice and mercy inform the basis of human justice and mercy, which includes seeking repentance for not loving God and not loving neighbors rightly, as well as forgiveness from God and from others. Drawing upon the indictment of corporate sin and systemic forms of oppression and injustice, love for neighbor must therefore be an essential aspect of human justice.⁴ Thus, biblical reconciliation involves both divine action and human response, but human response must be tempered with humility to acknowledge that God’s ways and timing are not one’s own and to receive perspectives and lived realities of others, which may differ from one’s own.

Third, the biblical narrative affirms the value of the diversity of humanity. The great multitude is united in worship, but it is not homogenous—the emphasis on every nation, tribe, people, and language affirms distinction and diversity. This diverse redeemed multitude together comprise the image of Christ, which reflects the humanly impossible glory of diversity in unity. Thus, Revelation celebrates the supernatural work of God in Christ, where humanity—redeemed and diverse—is united in worship of the One on the throne and the Lamb. To speak of biblical

⁴ Cf. *Evangelical Convictions: A Theological Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the EFCA* (Free Church Press, 2011). In its discussion of “structural forms of evil in society” (197) the authors urge that “we are called to seek justice for the oppressed as an aspect of our love for our neighbor in the world” (200).

reconciliation without also celebrating the diversity and unity of the image of Christ does not align with the biblical witness.

A biblical theological understanding of God's loving and glorious work of reconciliation and divine justice offers a compelling vision of divinely intended human flourishing, the church's high calling as ministers of reconciliation, and the richness and beauty of the new humanity that God is creating in Christ.

In light of the supremacy and authority of Scripture and the theological foundations and principles that flow from it, and in view of TIU's community focus and cultural engagement values, and TIU's mission statement, TIU, as a Christian learning community, makes the following three institutional commitments to live as a reconciled community informed by the following four givens under the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. The following commitments are intended to be consistent with Scripture and interpreted in accordance therewith, providing guidance for TIU as a learning community. The following commitments focus on relationships and racial reconciliation, recognizing that our human tendency to discriminate against those unlike us (whether with respect to race or in other areas) is a universal product of the sin nature.

Given the relational nature of our loving, just Triune God, who is a unity-in-diversity, **given** our dignity and value as creatures made in the image of our God, **given** the divided and broken state of the world, and **given** the reconciling work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and the peacemaking task to which we are called:

1) TIU commits to the biblical practices consistent with peacemaking and racial reconciliation:

God calls his people to love their neighbors, to be agents of reconciliation in today's world of racial conflict and violence. Many TIU students come from racially homogenous communities and

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congregations, with limited opportunities to interact with Christians from other ethnic and racial backgrounds. TIU, as a racially diverse Christian learning community, thus has a unique opportunity to express the Kingdom experience of reconciliation for its students, staff, and faculty. As a university, therefore, we commit to the task of a) continually developing and teaching a robust biblical theology of racial reconciliation, b) intentionally creating spaces in and out of classrooms where members can develop deeply meaningful and transformative relationships across racial and ethnic boundaries, c) regularly modeling the Christian practice of hospitality, repentance, and forgiveness, and d) producing Christian leaders who are able to collaborate effectively with others in the ministry of reconciliation in today's divisive world (2 Cor 5:19).

2) TIU commits to the biblical practice of justice:

A biblical understanding of reconciliation includes justice. This is especially critical to racial reconciliation since racism and racial inequality continue to undermine the goal of racial healing and unity. TIU, as a Christian university, strives to grow in its journey of racial reconciliation and justice by practicing the biblical value of mutuality.⁵ That is to say, TIU seeks to foster true equality among all its members who come from different ethnic, gender, and racial backgrounds, such that image-bearers relate to other image-bearers with genuine honor, fairness, and respect. Rather than engage in the politics of identity that seeks to advance the interest of one's own people group, as a Christian community, we aim to serve the interests of "others" as Christ modeled for us (Phil 2:1-5). As a Christian university, TIU commits to empower all members of its community to fully exercise their gifts, working towards eliminating forms of racial prejudice and systemic racism that can undermine this goal of peacemaking or shalom bringing.

⁵ We recognize that justice can be defined and implemented within the following designations: distributive, restorative, and retributive (see *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, 437-41). For the purpose of this paper, we define justice in terms of mutuality, or mutual empowerment toward *shalom*.

3) TIU commits to the practice of affirming Christ-centered unity-in-diversity:

As our church and society become more diverse and globalized, TIU commits to provide education through which our students will learn how to lead and serve in rich intercultural and international contexts. TIU strives to become a Christ-centered learning community that is racially and ethnically diverse and hospitable, providing opportunities for students to learn from and with those who come from different backgrounds, providing potentially transformational experiences that assist students to become more effective Kingdom citizens and leaders. An essential element of this community is the intentional recognition that we need each other to fulfill God’s mission (what we are called to do) and our own spiritual maturity (who we are called to be), which flows out of our corporate representation of the body of Christ (Rom 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12:12-14). In doing so, TIU will avoid any approach that minimizes the richness of diversity by denying the God-affirmed recognition of diverse peoples (Rev 7:9),⁶ and “assimilationist” approaches that unnecessarily favor a dominant group’s cultural values and practices, or fail to appropriately affirm and incorporate the cultural values and practices of others, to the extent consistent with Scripture.

Given these institutional commitments, we pledge as an institution to engage practices and behavior appropriate to those called “to engage in God’s redemptive work in the world.”

⁶ We recognize that such approaches may be well-intentioned and may be unaware of the effect of diminishing diverse backgrounds and cultures.