

The dream: One multiethnic church

A sermon on Colossians 1:21–27

Steve Heinrichs

Before a crowd of two hundred thousand longing for liberation, before governmental and spiritual powers bent toward segregation, Martin Luther King Jr. set out one of the most famous visions the world has seen or heard. On that August day in 1967, from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, King told the assembled mass, “I have a dream today”—a dream that one day his children would “live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” “I have a dream,” he said, “that one day every valley

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shall be exalted, every hill and mountain be made low, the rough places shall be made plain . . . and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.”¹

Although King’s speech about the reconciliation of the races is more than forty years old, this dream of a beloved community where all nations and peoples are respected and accepted still rings true. It resonates with something deep inside us. And why is that?

Why is it so powerful? It’s because the dream wasn’t a dream King concocted one evening down in Birmingham. And it wasn’t a dream some friends had passed on to him. No, this was a dream that had come down from the heavens, an eternal dream—God’s dream.

God’s dream? Yes. Martin King got this dream of a racially reconciled society straight from the sacred page. Do you remember when the prophet Isaiah once said (Is. 2:2–4), I have a dream that one day all the peoples of the world will come up to the Lord’s mountain? They will get rid of their hostility, and together they’ll live in God’s peace, learning God’s ways and walking God’s paths. Do you remember when our Savior Jesus once said (Mk. 11:14),

I have a dream—that the house of God shall be a house not just for Jews but for all the nations, for black men and white men, for red women and brown children? Do you remember when the apostle John once said (Rev. 7:9), I have a dream that in heaven there will be people from every nation, from every tribe, from every language, standing before the throne and worshipping the Lamb? And do you remember when the apostle Paul once said (Col. 3:11), I have a dream that not only in heaven *but right now*, right here on earth, here in the church, there will be no Jew or Gentile, no Barbarian or Scythian, for Christ is all and in all?

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But get this. This dream is not just one dream among many. It is not a nice dream that we can file next to many other pleasant utopian dreams. This dream of a new society, of a new church united in faith and mixed in ethnicity, is exceptionally important. In fact, it might be *the dream of all dreams*, a dream that is so important to God that without it we don't have the gospel at all!

What? Racial reconciliation is the dream, and without it we have no gospel of Christ? Exactly. Check out Colossians 1:21–27 (NIV):

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. To them

God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

As you may know, Paul is writing this epistle to a predominantly Gentile congregation. The word *Gentile* means “not Jewish”; Gentiles were of many different ethnic groups. Paul says to these folks—in verse 21—that they were once a people who were alienated and enemies. And whom were they alienated from and enemies of?

Paul doesn’t say. If you’re thinking the answer is “God,” you might be right, but only half right, for the text doesn’t actually say that the Colossians were estranged from God. There is no object to those verbs, *alienated* and *enemies*. It could be God. And yet, if we search through the rest of Paul’s writings, we discover something else, something radical. Paul thought the Gentiles were separated—segregated—not only from God but also from the Jews.

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Where do I get that idea? I’ll show you where in Colossians, but first let’s look at Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, because in that text the apostle’s speech is much more direct. He writes: You Gentiles were at one time without Christ, being alienated from the community of Israel, having no hope and without God in the world. But now, in Christ Jesus, God has broken down the dividing wall and the hostility between us—the Gentiles

and the Jews. He has made both groups one (Eph. 2:12–14). This is a stunning passage. Paul tells us that the gospel is not only about the reconciliation of individuals to God but also about the reconciliation of nations to nations and tribes to tribes.

John Howard Yoder explains the significance of this text:

The hostility brought to an end in Christ is first and foremost in this passage not the hostility between a righteous God and the creature who has trespassed against his rules, but the hostility between Jew and Greek. . . . The work of Christ is not only that he saves the soul of individuals and henceforth they can love each

*other better; the work of Christ, the making of peace, the breaking down of the wall, is itself the constituting of a new community made up of two kinds of people.*²

Paul says that in Christ God has reconciled all things on earth and in heaven. Then he turns to the Colossians and says, See! You are the proof of this cosmic reconciliation.

Breathtaking, isn't it?! The work of Christ is precisely, primarily (!) the creation of a new, interethnic people—the beloved community Martin King described. And this is exactly what we find Paul declaring with passion in Colossians 1. Paul says that in Christ God has reconciled all things on earth and in heaven (Col. 1:20). Then, in verse 21, he turns to the Colossians and says, See! *You* are the *proof* of this cosmic reconciliation, for you—*Gentiles*—were once alienated, but now you are at peace.

At peace with whom? In chapter 3 Paul tells us specifically: they are at peace with the Jews, and also with one another—Gentile Scythians, Gentile barbarians, and so on. *Every nation and ethnic group is one in Christ*, for “Christ is all and in all!” (Col. 3:11).

Now you may be saying to yourself: Okay, Steve, the nations are all one in Christ. I'm fine with that. But you still haven't proved to me that this dream is the dream of the gospel and that it's fundamental to the very existence of the church.

If that's the case, consider verses 26 and 27 of Colossians 1, where Paul talks about this great mystery that's been revealed to him and the church. Now by *mystery* Paul does not mean some spooky secret known only to a select few.³ Here mystery refers to a strategic purpose of God that only becomes known at the point of its being carried out. In other words, when God's heavenly decisions come into play on earth, then they are anything but secret. They are public knowledge.

So what's this great mystery that has been revealed? Listen carefully to what Paul says: The mystery that has been hidden for ages and generations has now been revealed to the saints. The mystery is *Christ in you* (Col. 1:26–27).

Christ is in you? That's the mystery? What does that mean, and how does that relate to racial reconciliation? The key to understanding what Paul is saying here is knowing who the “you” is in “Christ in you.” The you is the Gentiles! Paul writes in verse 27,

“God has chosen to make known among *the Gentiles* the glorious riches of this mystery.” And so that’s the great secret, that God has reached out in Christ beyond the Jews to all the nations and is reconciling them all to one another.

Again, Paul puts this more clearly in the letter to the Ephesians, where he pens the following: The mystery has now been revealed to humanity: that “the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (3:6; NRSV).

Now if Paul saw the reconciliation of Gentile and Jew as an act of cosmic significance, and as God’s strategic and climactic plan for peace, what might that mean for us as today’s people of God?

Here’s what one leading New Testament scholar, James Dunn, thinks:

Breaking down of barriers of nation and race, often so impenetrable to human resources, must . . . be one of the primary goals of the gospel. Indeed, we might even say that such reconciliation between the diversity of nationalities and races was one of the main tests for the church, one of the most crucial signs of the effectiveness of the gospel. Without the reconciliation of nation to nation and of race to race . . . the reconciliation of all things ‘to [Christ]’ has not even begun.⁴

Did you catch that last bit? Without the reconciliation of the nations and races in the church, the good news of the reconciliation of all things to Christ *has not even begun*. Wow! Yet that’s what Paul says. The question for us then is whether we believe it to be true. And if we do believe it, how will this truth shape the way we do church and the way we live as Christians in this place?

I believe this dream. And I believe God is saying to us today, Come, Church of the Way, and grab hold of my good dream. Become a community that takes up the mystery of the gospel—that in Christ, Jew and Gentile, white and First Nation, are one new people. Flesh out that peaceable dream by becoming a multiethnic fellowship of radical Christian love that breaks down all those hellish barriers. Experience life together as it was truly intended to be! Experience the gospel that Christ died for! Experience it and the fullness of my salvation, maybe for the first time!

If that were God's Word to us, what might we do? Let me rephrase that. Far too many weasel words. This is God's Word to us. This is the gospel. So what shall we—the people of the Word—do?

I don't know. I have lots of ideas. And I'm sure you've got some stirring within you. So let's do the usual stuff: let's pray, on our own and together, and let's talk and encourage one another. If

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we want to hear God's heart on this, we will hear, because this is God's dream. Then, let's do the strange, remarkable thing. Let's *act*.

That's the kicker. To act. We Christians—especially we white Christians—are good at talking the game, preaching fancy sermons, nodding an approving Amen, underlining our Bible's sacred imperatives. Christian ethicist David Gushee laments: "The problem is that when white [Christians] speak of forgiveness and reconciliation they normally do not do so out of the experience of solidarity with

[people of color] in suffering for justice [and reconciliation and true community] but instead as a *substitute* for that work."⁵

Talk is no substitute for the intentional, concrete walk of reconciliation. I've got to do something. You've got to do something. And together, by God's grace, we can do something to reverse the old and still-present evil that in North America the most segregated time in our week is Sunday morning. What a damnable fact that is!

But we can do this. Jesus did it by reaching out to those backward Samaritans and spending time with those hated Syrophoenicians. The early church did it by intentionally choosing a racially diverse leadership (that's evident in Acts 13:1, where Palestinian Jews serve alongside folks from Cyrene and Niger—the latter probably a black African—in the Antioch congregation).

Of course, if we do act, let's be fully aware: the pursuit of the dream will entail persecution. Some persecution will come from outside the church, and some will likely come from within. Addressing racial reconciliation is like talking about money or war or sex. It's taboo; it's forbidden, and it'll get you into trouble.

Look at what happened to Jesus. When our Lord delivered his first sermon in Nazareth (Luke 4:16–30), the congregation loved every word he spoke. He was quite the preacher—a golden boy in their eyes. But then, just when everything was going so well, he brought up the issue of race. At the end of his sermon, Jesus told his fellow Jews that one could find many God-fearing people outside Israel—in Sidon, for example, or Syria. And when the synagogue heard what he said about those damned strangers (read “Natives,” “Arabs,” “Palestinians,” and so on), they exploded! They rushed at Jesus and tried to lynch him. That congregation, like many congregations, just didn’t want to hear anything about those other people, living over there.

To talk about and live for racial reconciliation is to be a prophet. And prophets, as Jesus says time and again, aren’t honored in their own country and house. Their words and actions are constantly challenged. They are mistreated and beaten—and yes, even murdered—all because they have faithfully discharged their duties as those who are sent out, all because they have faithfully lived out the dream.

That was the experience of Jesus—executed for his inclusive love. And that was the experience of Martin Luther King—shot down for speaking and living out gospel reconciliation. And where was Paul when he wrote this letter celebrating God’s reconciliation of Jew and Gentile? In prison! In chains—and not because he preached a gospel of individual salvation, of individual souls being rescued from earth by a heavenly savior. Like Martin King, he was put in jail because he was living out a dream in which the sacred social boundaries between Jew and Greek, the ancient and eternally decreed divisions between upper-class Greek and lower-class barbarian, were being overturned in Christ and (please hold on to this!) in the church. These walls of hostility were being broken down in God’s new human community.

So—like Jesus, like Martin, and like Paul—we must be ready to live and suffer for the gospel dream. I doubt that any of us will get killed, or even tossed into prison. That’s not likely. But we will encounter resistance, and we will have to endure some hardships.

Yet here is the good news in all this. Not only does Jesus toss a loving Beatitude our way—“Blessed are the persecuted”—but he also promises he will not leave us to suffer alone. God willing, we

will suffer in a community that will actually understand the value (the joy, as Paul puts it in Colossians 1:24) of such affliction, because that community believes the dream, seeks the dream, and lives the dream in a context comprising those many different peoples, especially those estranged peoples who experience exclusion by the powers and the dominant church of the day.

God's dream of a racially reconciled people demands hard work, patience, and suffering. There's no denying it. But it is well worth it, precisely because it comes from God and is so just and true, right and beautiful. The dream is a sign, promise, and realization of the reconciliation of all things in Christ. Check that. It is *the* sign and *the* promise.

Isaiah took hold of the dream and lived it. Jesus took hold of the dream and lived it. Paul and Martin King grasped the dream and lived it. What about you and me? Do we have the dream? Does the dream have us? And will we live it?

Notes

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 219.

² John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 218–19. My emphasis.

³ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 122.

⁵ David P. Gushee and Glen H. Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 407.

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