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# Chapter 1

## BROKEN LIBERTY

**T**he racial problem is an unresolved dilemma of America. Racial problems have gone on since America's inception because their root has not been addressed by the people who are most qualified to address it: the church. When we can only bring people together in a limited way, without canceling who they have been created to be, under an umbrella that is bigger than the color that they claim, then how can we expect much more from the world?

The goal of the church should be to glorify God by reflecting the values of God among the people of God through letting the truth of God be the standard by which we measure right and wrong and the way we accept skin color, class, and culture. Until we can embrace how we were born and raised, we will never be able to manifest the values of God in history so that people can understand and fully see that God is a God of multi-coloredness. God loves the variety in His garden called earth, and each one of us has equal value; after all, He died for each one.

## The Contradiction of Liberty

During my college summers, I lived and worked in Philadelphia as an associate evangelist with the Grand Old Gospel Fellowship, regularly setting up tent, church, or outdoor crusades. Frequently, I was able to participate in more than the logistics of the event, but also had the opportunity to do what I am passionate about doing, and that is to posit the truth of God through preaching.

I have always been drawn to the truth. Truth, at its core, is God's view of a matter. It is a powerful entity able to transform lives both in history and for eternity. While truth includes information and facts, it also includes original intent, making it the absolute, objective standard by which reality is measured. The presence of truth brings clarity and understanding. Its absence leads to confusion and the presence of cognitive dissonance—holding contradictory ideas simultaneously.

Located in this same city of Philadelphia where I once preached as a young man is a perfect example of such a contradiction rising out of the abyss of the absence of truth. Hung in the heart of the City of Brotherly Love is the Liberty Bell. Originally cast to commemorate the fifty-year anniversary of William Penn's Charter of Privileges, the quotation, "Proclaim Liberty throughout all the land unto *all* the inhabitants thereof," was especially suited to the circumstances surrounding the intent of the charter and its anniversary. That quotation from Leviticus 25:10 came immediately after the command, "Consecrate the fiftieth year." It was followed by the statement, "It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan."

At this time in biblical history, according to this passage, all Jews who had been sold into slavery were set free (Leviticus 25:40–41). Not only was liberty a possibility in light of the Jubilee, but it was guaranteed. Liberty and the end of slavery were simultaneous realities, mutually dependent upon each other in relationship to the call for jubilee.

Yet at the time in America when the jubilee was inscribed on the side of the great bell, the liberty it announced had been aborted for many. Slavery continued with no foreseeable end, sanctioned not only by society but also by the church. Fifty years after William Penn's

famous charter, our nation's bell proclaimed its own contradictory fifty-year jubilee, ringing out the bittersweet sounds of an emasculated freedom across the hilltops and prairies of our vast land.

### The Breaking of the Bell

My friend Ray McMillan introduced me to the Liberty Bell as a perfect object lesson for America's racial divide. In addressing why "the bell won't ring," Ray describes the crack as a perfect illustration for how our distortion of the Christian history of our nation has helped to maintain the racial divide.

The Liberty Bell rang in celebration of momentous civic achievements or to summon people together for a special announcement. One of these achievements, according to tradition, was the first public reading of the Declaration of Independence on July 8, 1776. It is said that the sound of the Liberty Bell called out to citizens both far and near to join in this heraldic event. Rich and poor, well dressed and disheveled came together as a community to hear the words,

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that *all* men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

The Declaration's truth rang deeply within those who heard it, echoing the resonant tones of the bell. For a moment in time, both the Declaration and the bell proclaimed liberty together. Yet fissures, or cracks, in the bell, a reflection of fissures in the conscience of our land, raised the concern of those most closely working with it. Attempts were made to bore out the cracks before they developed into something more severe.

In 1846, in honor of George Washington's birthday, the bell rang faithfully for hours until ultimately succumbing to the pressure put on the cracks. The *Philadelphia Public Ledger* reported that just after noon, the bell split widely on one side, rendering it unringable:

The old Independence Bell rang its last clear note on Monday last in honor of the birthday of Washington and now hangs in the

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great city steeple irreparably cracked and dumb. . . . It gave out clear notes and loud, and appeared to be in excellent condition until noon, when it received a sort of compound fracture in a zigzag direction through one of its sides which put it completely out of tune and left it a mere wreck of what it was.

In a city known for brotherly love, a compound fracture proclaimed otherwise. The jagged divide up the side of the symbol for equality and liberty could not be any more profound in its revelation of dualistic realities. There is a gap in the Liberty Bell, a missing point of connection preventing it from ringing clearly with the smooth tones of a complete union—of oneness.

Something is also missing in our nation today. The election of our first African-American president, and all that led up to it, reignited the discussion in our land on race relations and equality. What many thought would be racial healing in our land has only brought to light how deep the racial divide really is. Whether it is reflected in racially motivated acts of violence in the community or workplace or in political accusations between and within parties, racism has been reintroduced as an issue that simply hasn't been resolved. Issues of race smolder beneath the news headlines of today in the areas of immigration reform, racial profiling, zoning issues, and educational disparity.

Yet beyond that, and what concerns me personally even more, is that something is missing in the church.

Like the problem with the bell, a compound fracture has zig-zagged through the body of Christ, keeping us largely divided along racial and class lines. This division has existed for some time, and while attempts have been made to bore out the fissures through seminars, racial-reconciliation events, and well-intentioned efforts at creating experiences of oneness, we have a long way to go toward strengthening the areas that have cracks or filling in the gaps that loom between us.

### Why This? Why Now?

In light of all that has been done and how far we have come, you may be asking, "Tony, why write this book? And why now?"

A battle is going on right now in our nation about the meaning of freedom. This battle concerns the role of the church. Often we are

divided over politics. A battle between socialism and capitalism is seeking to divide our nation even further than it already is. The emergence of the New Black Panther Party as well as the rallying efforts of the Tea Party are heating up public debate today.

We, the church, have allowed these battles to divide people of faith even more deeply than before. We cannot afford this. Our nation cannot afford this. Our sons and daughters—whether black, white, or any other color—cannot afford this. We can no longer afford to sit idly by representing the body of Christ as a “mere wreck” of its divine design. The solutions to the issues we face today are found only by applying a biblical and divine standard as answers to the questions before us. The church should be a model, at such a time as this, to reveal to the world what true oneness, equality, and freedom can produce. Hell advances on the church’s doorsteps with fervent speed, and as long as we remain divided, it will continue to do so.

We can resist hell’s advances and take back our nation for Christ if we are willing to come together by first filling in our own gaps—gaps in our understanding, our knowledge of our unique histories, and our relationships—while simultaneously repairing our own fissures that lead to even greater divides.

Our songs ring mournfully flat when the bells on our churches remain cracked. Even so, we continue to belt out our songs with tremendous passion at times, perhaps in hopes that by singing them loudly enough we can somehow cover the silence between us. We sing emotion-filled lyrics designed to draw us together by reminding us that “we all bleed red” until we are blue in the face. But the truth is that when the song is over, we go our separate ways.

We go our separate ways because we have discovered that it takes more than a hug or a friendly “hello” to bridge the gap. While some of us have, many of us have not taken the necessary effort to get to know each other on a level of an authentic exchange. Without a basis of shared knowledge, purposes, and mutual respect, we cannot come together for any meaningful impact.

I read an interesting quote in a book the other day that highlighted the reality that many of us often don’t realize—authentic oneness comes as an outgrowth of shared lives, not simply through a cross-cultural experience here or there. The author’s words originally

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caught my attention as I stumbled across my own name, but then I saw that the point he was making summarized a common theme in American Christian culture today. He said, “I know many of my white friends and colleagues, both past and present, have at times grown irritated by the black community’s incessant blabbering about race and racism and racial reconciliation. They don’t understand what’s left for them to do or say. ‘We have African Americans and other people of color on our staff. We listen to Tony Evans’s broadcast every day. We even send our youth group into the city to do urban ministry. Can we get on with it already? Haven’t we done enough?’”<sup>1</sup>

With the racial divide still stretching wide for miles, we obviously haven’t done enough. Much of what has gone on under the designation of racial reconciliation and oneness in Christianity is nothing more than tolerance. To be certain, we have come a long way from slavery, Jim Crow laws of segregation, and other overt expressions of racial hatred. But tolerating each other does not mean we have reconciled. The two are not the same, as demonstrated by the fact that we remain relationally separated most of the time, only coming together for a scheduled event as opposed to living out a desire for ongoing mutual edification and implementation of a shared vision.

The proof that we still have a long way to go in the church today is that a collective cross-cultural presence is not having a restoring effect in our society. We are more concerned about achieving the American dream than we are about letting the rule of God remake segregated churches and denominations. In so doing, we have limited the degree to which the healing balm of God’s grace flows freely from us into our communities, and ultimately throughout our land. If what we call racial reconciliation is not transforming individuals, families, churches, and communities, then it is merely sociology with a little Jesus sprinkled on top.

Biblical racial reconciliation may be defined as *addressing the sin that caused the divide for the purpose of bonding together across racial lines based on a shared commitment to Jesus Christ with the goal of service to others.*

In a nation whose middle name is “Me” and where “time is money,” being intentional about relationships is required even when connecting with others in our own culture. The very structure of our society



impedes many of us in our pursuit of making authentic connections. This is even more so when it comes to developing relationships with others in a different culture than our own. But oneness, as we will see through a careful study of Scripture, is worth the effort. This is because oneness is the preeminent vehicle through which God displays not only His power and His presence, but also His glory.

This book at this time is set forth not only as a biblical call to oneness, but also as an invitation to an extended handshake. It is my hand reaching out to my white brothers and sisters to say, "Hi, my name is Tony Evans. Let me introduce myself, and the history of my people, in a way that you may not have yet heard." It is also my hand reaching out to my black brothers and sisters to say, "There is a lot more about you, and us, than you may have realized. And it is good."

More than a discipleship book on reconciliation, the kingdom, and justice, this book serves as a much-needed compilation of the spiritual history and development of the black church and black evangelicalism, stories too long shelved in the attics of our collective minds. This history is shared in order to introduce truth to those in the African-American community who may not know the richness of our own heritage in a nation and in churches that have often turned a blind eye. It is also done to introduce this same truth to my white brothers and sisters so that their vision may be clear, and through seeing, they may realize the benefits that can be found when embracing what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called our "inescapable network of mutuality . . . [our] single garment of destiny."

While many books have chronicled the history of blacks in America and black spirituality, and many other books have laid the foundation for oneness in the body of Christ, this book presents a holistic story proffering not only a bid for oneness, but also providing the necessary elements to begin to do so by filling in the gaps of black church history. The merging of a biblical foundation for oneness along with a sequential summary of Christianity within the African Diaspora combines to present a broader kingdom perspective on God's view on race.

This perspective flows uniquely out of my personal situation of having been doubly influenced first by black culture through my intimate ties with black individual, family, church, and community life combined with the influence of white evangelicalism, having studied

in its institutions and worked alongside its leaders. Weaving these two worlds together and placing them underneath the truth of Scripture has framed a distinctive lens through which to view racial oneness and biblical justice within the body of Christ.

If the truth is supposed to set us free and yet we are still not free from enormously destructive racial and class divisions in the church, then the truth is missing.

The result of this missing truth in our history and culture has kept segments of the black community looking to governmental systems for assistance rather than taking personal initiative. This lack of initiative often comes cradled in a victim mentality where racism is blamed for many more things than it should be.

This missing truth has also kept segments of the white community in bondage to a relational style based on stereotypical presumptions as well as a paternalistic expectation birthed in a spirit of entitlement. This prohibits many white Christians from adopting and benefiting from a learning posture underneath black Christians.

The effect is a stronghold on both groups, keeping pockets of society chained within a prescribed framework, creating pathologies that continue and are reinforced generationally.

This is why I have chosen to broaden the scope of this book beyond a discussion on race relations or oneness in our modern church, and have sought to return, as well, to the realm of what has brought us to where we are now by exploring our historical accounts. When a gap so wide exists in liberty, it is indicative that something is missing. That something, in this case, is the whole truth.

### *Gaps in Our Accounts*

Secular history has often excluded the whole truth from its record of accounts. It has rewritten the annals of our foundation to offer a one-sided and limited view of the founding of our nation. Even though African-Americans were involved and present, as freed men and not only as slaves, in the critical junctures of the birthing of our land, our history books, mainstream movies, and often even our artistic renditions show little or no racial diversity. African-American heroes of such important battles such as the Battle of Bunker Hill are not only completely absent from mainstream historical accounts, but

also, more recently, explained away out of paintings made by those who witnessed the battle firsthand.<sup>2</sup>

What this has done in the American psyche is elevate one group of people, white Americans, above all others. Not only does it disconnect African-Americans from any personal heritage to our nation, but it also offers an incomplete and inaccurate view of ourselves. An erroneous view of oneself, or a misguided view of another as is the case when whites are taught an anemic view of black achievement and involvement in our land and churches, leads to actions that perpetuate the illusion, on both sides.

Just over a year before the Liberty Bell rang out calling all to come hear the Declaration of Independence, a young Paul Revere took his well-known Midnight Ride. Few of us who have been raised under the tutelage of our country are unaware of this ride. Yet how many of us know that on the very same night, a black man, Wentworth Cheswell, the freed grandson of a slave, also rode a Midnight Ride?<sup>3</sup> Cheswell was the first black judge elected, in 1768, a devoted husband, church member, father of thirteen children, and for forty-nine years he served our nation in some form of public office such as auditor, assessor, moderator, and “town father.”

Cheswell’s commission as messenger, given to him by the Committee of Safety, was the same as that given to Revere. Wentworth Cheswell rode north. Paul Revere rode west. Both had a part to play in the fight for the American Revolution. Cheswell’s alerting those in the north to make haste and organize themselves to head south for the imminent conflict with the British served our country just as well. Yet Wentworth Cheswell is virtually nowhere to be found in our historical accounts.

Likewise, as the Liberty Bell cracked, creating a gap on the day honoring George Washington, another gap exists in the retelling of the historic accomplishments of the general. This gap belongs to a man named James Armistead. The ending of the American Revolution with the victory at Yorktown and the capture of British general Charles Cornwallis, from a historical perspective, is attributed to General Washington and his troops.

Yet what has been often left out of the retelling of this event is that Washington was able to do what he did with as minimal loss in

soldiers' lives that he had—less than a miniscule 1 percent casualty rate—due to information supplied to him that had been acquired by James Armistead, a black man. At great personal risk, Armistead had posed as a runaway slave and pretended to be a British spy, all the while gaining the confidence of General Benedict Arnold and General Charles Cornwallis. The officers spoke freely in front of Armistead concerning their strategies. Armistead's reports documented the movements of the British, giving General Washington all that he needed to bring about a swift end to the war, saving scores of American lives not only in the battle at Yorktown, but in future battles that did not have to be fought.

Similarly, the contributions of the black church have often been neglected or marginalized, thus hindering the oneness of the collective American church. Because much has been ignored, the oneness of the church has missed the opportunity to present a model of highest functionality that the world needs to see.

### *Social and Spiritual Realities*

Although some have historical gaps of understanding that need to be filled, others simply have difficulties in reconciling their spiritual beliefs with social realities. My story reflects this difficulty. Yet, what is important to note is that while my story is my own, it is not mine alone. It is not unique to me. My story mirrors countless others still being written on the pages of African-American lives. Whether there exist generational, class, educational, denominational, or even theological differences between us, one unifying theme that binds the African-American story together is that we all wrestle with reconciling the social and spiritual contradictions prevalent in American Christianity.

Growing up in urban America in a Christian context during a time of racism, segregation, and an incomplete historical education, as referenced briefly just now, not only in the society but also in the church, served to remind me in many ways that I was a second-class citizen. It was frustrating, painful, and confusing. There were places that I couldn't go and people with whom I couldn't associate simply because of the color of my skin. In fact, I was even told that I could expect to only go so far in my life because that was the nature of my created being.

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These experiences ripped a social and spiritual schism in my understanding that demanded to be resolved. Much like the gaping crack in the Liberty Bell representing a contradiction within realities—that of freedom for *all* in the midst of racism and segregation for *some*—I struggled to connect the social reality presented to me as that of being less than someone else with the spiritual reality of hearing that Jesus loved me so much that He died for me. I wrestled in an attempt to come to grips with whether or not I was required to accept this second-class rendering that I was hearing in so many different directions about *who* I was and *why* I was.

What I witnessed in the church only reinforced this conundrum concerning truth. Some of my professors in college and in seminary would either attend or pastor a segregated church while at the same time teach a theology on the oneness of the body of Christ. It forced me, and many others, to seek out an authentic understanding of biblical theology rooted and grounded in absolute truth. It forced me to dig deeply to discover what God had to say about the situation, rather than passively accept the contradiction.

Did God want me to give up my culture, background, and history in order to make it in a society that would not embrace me as I was? Or did He want me to see myself as He sees me—a child intentionally designed by His creative abilities whom He has positioned within two cultures?

Experiencing urban America at the height of the civil rights movement and the formation and implementation of black power and black theology has afforded me a perspective on race distinct to my own culture. However, studying theology for nine years in a white evangelical institution, as well as being the first African-American to be graduated with a Th.D. from there, has afforded me a keen view into the theological thinking of white Christians. Through both realms, I learned how to hone and apply exegetical skills in order to analyze the theology I was being taught.

My perspective for this book, then, and my perspective for all I do with regard to a kingdom agenda philosophy for ministry, flows out of this diverse locus. It is my attempt to tie reality to Scripture in such a way so as to emphasize the paradigm for how the Bible reveals that the church and society should address matters of race and social justice. In

doing so, I speak not only to others in the church and society, but also to myself and those like me who have had to wrestle with reconciling the schisms between America's social and spiritual actualities.

### *Seeing Clearly*

As an evangelical, I am tightly tethered to Scripture as my final authority on all matters to which it speaks. And it speaks on all matters. I am committed to the thesis that there are two answers to every question—God's answer and everyone else's. And when they contradict each other, everyone else is wrong.

As an African-American, my vision was formed in the pragmatic reality of racial disparity that caused me to focus on questions about race, oneness, and justice in church history that many of my white counterparts did not have to address. This dualism forced me to read Scripture to shed light on these issues, leading me to the conclusions that are being put forward in this book. I had to look not only to the theology but also the practical application of that theology within the *sitz im leben*—or situation in life—for how that theology fleshes out.

White evangelicalism believed the right things concerning the oneness of the body of Christ, but throughout history it did not consistently apply this belief system in either the church or the culture. While there have always been individuals—a remnant such as the Quakers, the abolitionists, and the white freedom marchers, among others—in white culture who wanted to apply the right practice of this belief, they did not always have a paradigm through which to express it, nor do they always have that today. There has existed a dichotomy, making it difficult to implement the applicational truth of not only oneness, but also biblical justice. As Dr. Warren Wiersbe, renowned white Bible teacher and father to many in the ministry, acknowledged, this roadblock often led to an ignoring of these and like issues in the white church. He wrote,

We are handicapped in the white church. If I preached Jesus' first sermon (Luke 4:14–30) and gave it the social emphasis that He gave, our church has no vehicle for doing anything about the problem. People would respond in one of two ways: 1) "This

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preacher is off-base, so let's get rid of him," or 2) "I've never seen it quite that way, but what do I do next?" For the most part, our white churches don't have the instruments, the organizational structure, to get involved in social action. Our usual solution is to put some inner-city organization into the budget or maybe to collect and distribute used clothing. . . . When it comes to racial issues, many white churches will participate in any number of symbolic activities, but they're hesitant when you ask them to get involved in sacrificial services in the trenches.<sup>4</sup>

Although difficulties and challenges exist, their presence should never be the criteria for whether we give up or keep trying. Views of theology formulated through the lens of any culture will not only produce a myopic view, but also the resultant effects of an inability to carry out the true teaching in Scripture. This inability not only affects those who would be the recipients of the ministry outreaches, but it also affects those doing the ministry because it limits God's involvement in what is being done. Only when truth is the absolute standard by which thoughts and actions are aligned will we experience the full manifestation of God's glory, purposes, and plans in the body of Christ. Maintaining an informational view of theology while neglecting a holistic view of God's kingdom aborts any real opportunity for application.

I will talk more about him later in the book, but my father had an early impact on me in my teenage years to point me to the truth. I grew up just a few hours away from our nation's Liberty Bell that so proudly proclaimed "Liberty . . . unto *all*." Yet, when I would go to a fast-food restaurant, I was denied the freedom to eat in a public dining room because I was black. The restaurant was pleased to take my money at the take-out window, but eating in was definitely out.

Though I didn't fully understand it at the time, the contradiction between proclaiming liberty while simultaneously denying it sought to shape my mind. Thank God for my father who knew what I was facing and who made a polemic effort to counteract the lie. "Son," he would say, "you're a child of the King. If they don't want royal blood in their restaurant, then don't go in there."

My earthly father pointed me to the truth of my heavenly Father.

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As I grew older and looked more closely at the Bible and at Jesus, the Christ, who had come, I discovered something awesome. I discovered that His love for me repositioned me above the class that I had been given by other men. Embracing this truth all of a sudden made what men thought and how men felt about me irrelevant because now I was seated with Christ in a very high place. He gave me recognition, significance, and value, causing me to be fully proud of His creation in me so as not to allow others to denigrate me by how they defined me—or even to make me think more highly of myself than I ought to think—because now I had truth as my reference point.

This book is my attempt to put on paper this reference point, detailing how it applies to both blacks and whites with regard to oneness in the body of Christ. Our unity can then serve as a template for bringing about comprehensive unity for other racial groups in our land. Because until we see ourselves, and each other, as God sees us, and respond with an intentional embracing of His mandate of oneness, we will forever ring flat in a world that longs to hear the liberating cadence of truth.

### Notes

1. Edward Gilbreath, *Reconciliation Blues* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2006), 80.
2. David Barton, *Setting the Record Straight: American History in Black & White* (Aledo, Tex.: WallBuilders, 2004), 5.
3. <http://www.wallbuilders.com/LIBissuesArticles.asp?id=20990>.
4. E. K. Bailey and Warren W. Wiersbe, *Preaching in Black and White: What We Can Learn from Each Other* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003), 105.



## Chapter 2

# BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

Every two years nations around the globe send their strongest, most elite athletes to compete against others at what is known as the Olympics. Individual athletes, who are at the top of their game in their particular skill or event, go head to head with the world's best. On display for the world to see are their individual prowess, their individual determination, their individual commitment, and their individual abilities.

Yet when the gold medalist stands on the platform, he or she is not asked, "What is your favorite song?" The winning athlete does not get to choose which song will be played as the flag is raised. Instead, the national anthem for whatever nation the individual represents plays loudly. This is done because it is understood that while the individual was the one who sacrificed, practiced, and competed, he or she represents something much larger. The athlete is just one of many who make up a nation that operates underneath the covering of the same song.

Growing up in America, we were regularly reminded to whom we

belonged each time we said the Pledge of Allegiance or participated in the singing of our national anthem in school or before sporting or civic events. It was clear that our country did not want us to forget that we are Americans. We recited the pledge day in and day out, allowing it to sink in, enabling each one of us to fully understand that no matter who we were, or what our background was, our history, gender, culture, or color, we belonged to this kingdom called the United States of America.

Even though the pledge had nothing directly to do with what was going on at that particular event or in the classroom, America wanted us to know that it was only going on, and we were only able to participate in it, because we belonged to its kingdom.

### The Kingdom Agenda

The foundational philosophy behind all I do, write, teach, or preach is the kingdom agenda. The kingdom agenda is *the visible manifestation of the comprehensive rule of God over every area of life*.<sup>1</sup> It is a reminder that we, as followers of Jesus Christ, belong to another realm, our allegiance is in another order, and no matter where we live, work, or travel, we are citizens of God's kingdom.

A story is told about a man who needed to get his shoe repaired. He rushed to the shoe repair shop only to arrive there at exactly 5:00 p.m. Scanning the parking lot, he noticed that it was empty, indicating that, apparently, there was no one around. Knowing he wouldn't have another opportunity to go to the shop for some time, he headed to the door to see if, by chance, it was still open.

To his surprise, the shoe repairman was there.

"I didn't think anyone was here," the man said, relieved.

"You came just in time," the shoe repairman replied. "I was almost ready to go home."

Remembering the empty parking lot, the man asked, "How are you going to go home? I didn't see any cars."

"Oh, that's easy," the repairman said. "Do you see those stairs over there?"

He pointed to the corner of the shop. The man looked and noticed the stairs. He nodded.

"I live up there," the shoe repairman said. "I just work down here."

*We Live Up There*

You and I, as brothers and sisters in Christ, live up there too. “Our citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20a). That’s our home. That’s the kingdom to which we belong. We just work down here. Understanding this key spiritual truth is fundamental to all we do on earth.

The kingdoms of this world would have us forget where our home is and lead us to believe that where we work is also where we live. But we, as members of the body of Christ, get our instructions and directions from another realm—from another King who is heading up another kingdom. And as is the case in every kingdom, the King rules.

Briefly, before we dive into our look at oneness, let’s touch on the kingdom and its relationship to earth as seen through the Lord’s Prayer. I’ll go deeper into an examination of the kingdom in the last section of this book, but let’s set the table now with Jesus’ prayer, a portion of which says:

Your kingdom come  
Your will be done,  
On earth as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6:10)

In the words of Jesus, an understanding of God’s will as it appears in heaven is the criterion for having God’s will done on earth through the establishing of the Messianic kingdom. We know this because the Lord’s Prayer has been given to us in Scripture as a pattern for prayer rather than as one designed for recitation. The original Greek term used in the book of Matthew encourages all believers to literally pray “in a similar manner.”

Therefore, to pray “in a similar manner” that God’s “will be done on earth as it is in heaven” is to pray that the principles of His heavenly kingdom be reflected in the contemporary rule of God on earth. To reflect God’s principles on earth can only be done when we fully understand and apply these principles. Psalm 89:14 offers insight into the core of God’s kingdom principles: “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne; lovingkindness and truth go before You.”

Since these, and a number of other principles that we will examine later dealing with God’s righteous rule in social spheres, are

underscored with oneness rooted in personal dignity, we ought to pray and seek the same end. This is because knowing, understanding, and applying God's comprehensive rule in our lives are essential to experiencing all that God has in store for us while on earth, as well as when we get to heaven.

Submission to God's kingdom rule opens up the flow of heaven's involvement in our lives on earth. Far too many of us are satisfied with the part of Christianity that takes us to heaven, but not the part that brings a bit of heaven down to earth. But in order to bring to earth what "is in heaven," God's will must be done. Jesus' prayer reflects this as well as reflecting His primary purpose while on earth, which was to be solely about His Father's business (see Luke 2:49). Since Christ is our example, we should be about the same.

### *The Business of Oneness*

One of the elements of God's rule and His "business" is His heart for oneness, also known as unity. Unity can be defined in its simplest of terms as oneness of purpose. It is working together in harmony toward a shared vision and goal.

Unity is not uniformity, nor is it sameness. Just as the Godhead is made up of three distinct Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—each unique in personhood and yet at the same time one in essence, unity reflects a oneness that does not negate individuality. Unity does not mean everyone needs to be like everyone else. God's creative variety is replete displaying itself through a humanity crafted in different shapes, colors, and styles. Each of us, in one form or another, is unique. Unity occurs when we combine our unique differences together as we head toward a common goal. It is the sense that the thing that we are gathered for and moving toward is bigger than our own individual preferences.

Through the establishment of the church along with His overarching rulership above it, God has created a reflection of His kingdom in heaven on earth. He has reconciled racially divided groups into one new man (Ephesians 2:14–15), uniting them into a new body (Ephesians 2:16) so that the church can function in unity (Ephesians 4:13). The church is the place where racial, gender, and class distinctions are no longer to be divisive because of our unity in Christ (Gala-

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tians 3:28). This does not negate differences that remain intact—oneness simply means that those differences are embraced. Joining our unique strengths together, we add strength to strength, making a more complete and balanced whole based on our mutual relationship with and commitment to Christ.

So important is the issue of oneness in the church that we are told to look out for people who seek to undermine it (Romans 16:17). In fact, God promised to judge those who divide His church (1 Corinthians 3:17). This is because the church is to reflect the values of the kingdom of God to a world in desperate need of experiencing Him.

The church is the only authentic cross-racial, cross-cultural, and cross-generational basis for oneness in existence. It is the only institution on earth obligated to live under God's authority while enabled to do so through His Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 12:12–13, Paul wrote:

For even as the body is *one* and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are *one* body, so also is Christ. For by *one* Spirit we were all baptized into *one* body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of *one* Spirit. (italics added)

The baptism of the Spirit at the moment of salvation, the act whereby God places us into the body of Christ, secures the oneness God wants us to have. This inimitable work of the Spirit positions us under the rule of God. The Greek word for baptism used in the Bible means identification. It was used of a cloth maker dipping cloth into dye so that the cloth would take on the color of the dye. The cloth was then said to be baptized, or identified, with the dye.

When we got saved, we were baptized into the body of Christ. We are now identified with a new family, having been placed into a new spiritual environment while still on earth. No matter what our race, gender, or class, when we came to Jesus Christ we entered into God's oneness because we came under His authority.

That is why Ephesians 4:3 says that we are to “preserve the unity of the Spirit.” The Scripture uses the term *preserve*, indicating that we don't create unity. Authentic unity, then, cannot be mandated or manufactured. This is so because God desires that His standards alone

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serve as the basis, criteria, and foundation for oneness. It is also why He thwarts attempts at unity that ignore or exclude Him (Genesis 11:1–9). The Spirit created unity when we were saved. Our job is to find out what the Spirit has already done so that we can live, walk in, and embrace that reality.

The reason we haven't solved the race problem in America after hundreds of years is that people apart from God are trying to create unity, while people under God who already have unity are not living out the unity we possess. The result of both of these conditions is disastrous for America. Our failure to find cultural unity as a nation is directly related to the church's failure to preserve our spiritual unity. The church has already been given unity because we've been made part of the same family. An interesting point to note about family is that you don't have to get family to *be* family. A family already is a family. But sometimes you do have to get family to *act like* family. In the family of God, this is done through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

A perfect example of spiritual unity came on the Day of Pentecost when God's people spoke with other tongues (Acts 2:4). When the Holy Spirit showed up, people spoke in languages they didn't know so that people from a variety of backgrounds could unite under the cross of Jesus Christ. The people who heard the apostles speak on the Day of Pentecost were from all over the world, representing at least sixteen different geographical areas, racial categories, or ethnic groups (Acts 2:8–11). But in spite of the great diversity, they found true oneness in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual oneness always and only comes to those who are under God's authority because in that reality He enables them with the power of His Spirit.

### *Broken Oneness*

Our nation has made great strides over the last several decades in attempting to bring people together across racial lines. I was able to witness this recently firsthand. Joining hundreds of thousands of my closest friends in Washington D.C. the week of the Forty-fourth Presidential Inauguration was a surreal experience for me. Even as a child growing up in the racially divided city of Baltimore in the 1950s and

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'60s, I thought that one day there would be an African-American president of the United States. The anticipation, for me, was always there.

Yet to literally and physically see the dreams of generations coming true before my own eyes was deeply gratifying. No matter what your political views or for whom you voted, the election of President Obama was a symbolic representation of the ultimate prize of progress in a nation that had been historically divided. But like the zigzag crack in the Liberty Bell, a great divide still remains. This divide exists especially in the body of Christ, offering the world an anemic reflection of the heart of our Christianity. We have a long way to go toward achieving authentic spiritual unity.

I will talk more about how we can be intentional about our pursuit of oneness at the end of this book as I lay out a vision for transforming our nation's communities and restoring hope to all who need it. But it begins through removing the lens of our own fleshly worldview, our culture's worldview, and even our denomination's worldview, and replacing it with a biblical worldview. If we want heaven to visit history like what happened in the book of Acts, we have no other choice but to adopt and apply a biblical worldview, God's kingdom perspective, on race. We must view humanity through the lens of Scripture, seeing each other, as well as ourselves, as God sees us.

For some reading this book that will mean a clearer image of who you are as an African-American—your exceptional place in both biblical and world history, accomplishments, traditions, and spirituality. For others, this book will open your eyes to see your black brothers and sisters in Christ for who we truly are rather than for how a nation birthed in racial injustice has sought to define us.

As I mentioned earlier, the swearing in of the first African-American president of the United States was a historical and meaningful moment. However, as time quickly showed, what was thought to be an answer to a problem only revealed how deep the problem really is. While cultures initially united to bring about the election, a renewed polarization formed afterward as divisions revealed themselves once again.

Rather than bringing our nation together across racial lines, it has catapulted the issue of race into the arena of national decision, leading

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many to either support or oppose initiatives based on racial identification rather than on the policies themselves. Whether you are a Democrat, a Republican, or an Independent, the election of President Obama has reintroduced the issue of race, placing it front and center in our nation today. It is tearing at the heart of our culture and, unfortunately, it is tearing at the heart of our churches as well.

Admittedly, much has happened to mend the brokenness between the races in our churches over the last several decades, for which we should be grateful. I can distinctly remember how far we have come as it was only in 1969 that I was told by the leadership of a large Southern Baptist church in Atlanta that I wasn't welcome to worship there. However, in 2010, I addressed well over ten thousand Southern Baptist pastors at the SBC annual Pastors' Convention as a keynote speaker, being sure to emphasize oneness among the races.

In 1974, my wife, Lois, and I were informed in no uncertain terms that we were not welcome in a prominent Bible church in Dallas, pastored, by the way, by one of my seminary professors. Now I am routinely invited to Bible churches all over America to teach on theology and racial reconciliation. In 1985, a number of major Christian radio station managers told me that there was little place for blacks in the general Christian broadcast media because our presence would offend their white listeners. Today, my radio broadcast *The Alternative with Dr. Tony Evans* airs on more than six hundred radio stations daily in our nation.

I regularly get calls from church leaders across the country, both black and white, telling me of the racial tensions in their community and division among their churches. Our national ministry, The Urban Alternative, is frequently called upon to work with individual churches as well as groups of churches on how to help them address the lack of oneness they often experience. As I mentioned earlier, this has led to the casting of a national vision for reaching our communities in such a way as to ensure a significant and lasting transformation. I will talk more about this in the final section.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was right: "We must all learn to live together as brothers or we will perish together as fools."<sup>2</sup> The Civil War offers us the perfect visual representation of how this truth



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played out, in that hundreds of thousands of innocent lives were lost due to the absence of the practice of biblical oneness.

One day a black man and a white man were traveling in a car together and arguing about what color God is. The black man said, "With all that soul, God has got to be black."

The white man said, "But God is so efficient. That means He's got to be white."

The two men continued arguing and as they did, they lost track of where they were on the road and crashed. Both men died.

When they entered heaven, St. Peter greeted them at the gate. He asked them what was the first thing that he could do for them now that they were in heaven. The men answered without a second thought, "That's easy because how we got here was by arguing about what color God is. So tell us—is God black or is He white?"

St. Peter said they could see for themselves. He took the men down to the throne room and walked them in. Both men were shocked when they entered the throne room and God said, "Buenos Dias, Señores."

God's kingdom includes people from all races and cultures. Spiritual oneness can only be accomplished when we expand our view of God's creation to see each other more intimately and clearly than our often limited exposure and understanding allows us to.

Due to the unique history of relationship between African-Americans and Anglos in our nation, and drawing from my own personal experience, this book focuses on this specific broken arena of racial understanding and oneness. The two most prominent cultures expressing disunity within Christianity in America today are whites and blacks. This being so, I have decided to engage a discussion on oneness in the body of Christ through a bridging of these two groups. However, I want to encourage you to also explore the great variety of family that our Father has created in Native American, Hispanic, Asian, Middle Eastern, and other ethnicities throughout your life and beyond these pages.

Satan spends most of his time trying to divide us in the body of Christ. Why? Because he knows that God's power and glory are both accessed and magnified through unity. He is not spending his time trying to make the world wicked, because he doesn't have to help

the world to be wicked. The world is born in wickedness and division. Satan just has to let the world do its natural thing and individuals will divide, fight, and oppress each other. If Satan can keep Christians ineffective due to a lack of cooperation and mutual edification, he will prevent the church from providing a model of the kingdom of God as an alternative to its chaos.

If someone is an alcoholic, it is probably not a good idea for you to listen to that person on how to stop drinking. If the church is divided, Satan hinders our witness on the transforming and unifying power of God.

### The Benefits of Oneness

Oneness brings with it many benefits. One is power. In fact, we see that even God recognizes how powerful oneness is when we read in Genesis 11 about the time when all of the people on the earth used the same language. They gathered together and decided to build a city whose tower would reach into heaven.

God's response to what they were doing is recorded for us. He says, "Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them" (Genesis 11:6). God then confused their language and scattered them over the whole earth because He knew that oneness is powerful. Nothing expresses the principle of the power of oneness as much as this incident at Babel, because if God recognizes its power and importance in history when embraced among unbelievers operating in rebellion against Him, then how much more important and powerful is it for us?

Another benefit of oneness is that it glorifies God like nothing else because it reflects His image through His triune nature like nothing else. This truth comes through clearly in Jesus' prayer, commonly referred to as Jesus' high priestly prayer, shortly before He was arrested and crucified. He prayed,

I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be *one*, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that

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you gave me, that they may be *one* as we are *one*: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to *complete unity* to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20–23 NIV, italics added)

Jesus Christ placed a tremendous emphasis on His desire for us to be one as His followers just hours before He would lay down His life for us. This isn't something that He is asking us to do only during "Unity Month" or on "Special Oneness Sunday." This is a mandate from our Commander in Chief that we be *one* with Him (vertically) and, as a result, *one* with each other (horizontally).

A benefit of living a life of oneness, as we have just seen in this passage, is letting the world know about the King under whom we serve. Oneness brings glory to God by moving us into the atmosphere where we can experience God's response in such a way that He manifests His glory most fully in history. All of the praying, preaching, worship, or Bible studies in the world can never bring about the fullest possible manifestation of God's presence like functioning in a spirit of oneness in the body of Christ. This is precisely why the subject found its place as the core of Jesus' high priestly prayer. It was the core because it uniquely reveals God's glory unlike anything else. It does this while at the same time revealing an authentic connection between one another in the body of Christ, which serves as a testimony of our connection with Christ. Jesus says, "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

An additional benefit of oneness is found in the Old Testament passage penned by David,

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head, coming down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard, coming down upon the edge of his robes. It is like the dew of Hermon coming down upon the mountains of Zion; for there the Lord commanded the blessing—life forever. (Psalm 133:1–3)

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Unity is where the blessing of God rests, coming down from heaven to flow from the head to the body, and even reaching as far as the mountains of Zion. In other words, it covers everything. The reverse is also true: Where there is disunity, there is limited blessing. We cannot operate in disunity and expect the full manifestation and continuation of God's blessing in our lives. We cannot operate in disunity and expect to hear from heaven, or expect God to answer our prayers in the way that both we and He long for Him to do. Disunity—or an existence of separatism, from a spiritual perspective—is essentially at its core self-defeating and self-limiting because it reduces the movement of God's favor and blessings.

Jesus made it clear that a house divided against itself cannot stand. Whether it is your house, the church house, or the White House—division leads to destruction (Matthew 12:25). Not only that, but a spirit of dishonor can lead to this same destruction (1 Corinthians 12:22–26). Honor promotes unity while dishonor promotes division. Dishonor is not the same thing as disagreeing. A person can disagree with another person but do it in an honorable fashion. However, when dishonor is given to someone of a particular racial, social, or class background that has a history of the same, it negates attempts at unity.

What many conservative Christians fail to realize in a modern-day example is that when our first black president, Barack Obama, is dishonored either through caricatures, name-calling, or disrespectful talk by white Americans, it merely creates a greater chasm between the races. This is because the attack is not merely viewed as an assessment of the man, but of the race he is publicly identified with and that identifies with him—a race that does not have a heritage established of receiving consistent public honor or respect in our land. To disagree with policy or procedure is a right of every American, but as a believer, any disagreement ought to be framed in a spirit of respect and honor for the position and the person in question. Otherwise, disunity is bred. However, when we live and work in oneness, God is invited to manifest Himself in ways we could only imagine.

Going deeper into Acts 2, we see the manifestation when the Holy Spirit moved like a “violent rushing wind” and “filled the whole house where they were” (Acts 2:2), in the midst of the oneness of the believers on the Day of Pentecost. At the end of the second chapter,

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the presence and product of oneness is emphasized as we read, “Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common” (Acts 2:43–44). Signs and wonders took place when they were “together” and “had all things in common.” God manifested Himself when they were one.

What made this place and this period in time so electric was that the Spirit of God had taken over. The miracles that happened did not happen because the individuals had the best program, the best technology, or the biggest buildings in which to meet. They didn’t have any of that. In fact, they barely had any income. No one among them had notoriety, a wall-full of academic achievements, or charisma. They were simply common people bonded together by a common purpose across racial, class, and gender lines, thus receiving the Spirit’s flow among them.

When they were one, God poured His blessing from heaven into history. God chose to do things that He would not otherwise have done if His people had not been one. Conversely, remaining in an environment of intellectual, spiritual, or social separatism limits the involvement of God’s blessings in our personal life, family life, churches, and communities.

### The Bridge of Oneness

Achieving God’s mandate of oneness is not as simple as reading a book about it. Just as a husband and wife must give up a lot to gain the oneness that marriage offers, so the races must be willing to pay the price of spiritual oneness. Both sides must be willing to experience the potential rejection of friends and relatives, whether Christians or non-Christians, who are not willing to accept that spiritual family relationships transcend physical, cultural, and racial relationships. This is what Jesus meant when He said, “Whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he *is* My brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:50, italics added).

Pastors and spiritual leaders must actively remind our congregations of Ephesians 2:14–22:

For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into *one* and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in

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His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. And *He came and preached peace to you who were far away, and peace to those who were near*; for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit. (italics added)

This passage makes the issue of oneness first and foremost theological, and not simply social. Jesus Christ died so that we might be unified as “one new man” in “one body” having access to God in “one Spirit.” The absence of the oneness that Jesus died to bring hinders God's involvement and work in the church because the Holy Spirit occupies the church, and His work is directly tied to our unity.

Important as preaching is, it is not enough. Important as teaching and cultural-awareness seminars are, they are not enough. Important as books such as this one can be, they are not enough. The church must follow up with practical opportunities for bridging the cultural divide through mutual acts of service. The time has come to take an active role in inviting not only God's favor but also His blessing into our churches and lives through the intentional pursuit of oneness in the body of Christ. That is why I have purposefully cast a strategy for oneness at the end of this book. Nothing will bond people together more than working toward a common goal.

I go into greater detail about this and other ways of intentionally embracing oneness in the final chapter because while information is a necessary element, it is only the start. Transformation is the revelation that the information has taken root. It is high time for a transformation in the body of Christ.

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It is high time to rip off the tainted lenses of tradition in order to see each other, and ourselves, for who we truly are . . . valuable members of one another made in the exquisite image of our God. Only then can the church accurately reflect its spiritual content in this age in such a way that the world can clearly see an alternative to the brokenness of our current state. Having seen this alternative and responded to it, individuals, families, and communities will then be placed in the sphere where they too can experience a bit of heaven on earth until the fullness of heaven comes to earth.

So many individuals today live segmented, compartmentalized lives because they lack implementation of God's kingdom worldview and subsequently lack His blessings. Families disintegrate because they exist for their own satisfaction rather than for the kingdom. Churches are limited in the scope of their impact because they fail to comprehend that the goal of the church is not the church itself, but the kingdom. Communities have nowhere to turn to find real solutions for real people who have real problems because the church has become divided and ingrown, making it unable to significantly transform the cultural landscape. When God, and His rule, is no longer the final and authoritative standard under which all else falls, hope exits with Him.

But the reverse of that is true as well: As long as there is God, there is hope. He's the only one you or I can truly bank on. As long as God is still in the picture, and as long as His agenda is still on the table, it's not over. As long as God, and His rule, is still present in our lives, our families, our churches and communities, there is hope. But in a world where everyone is divided around their own cultural ideas, we end up losing the very thing that can carry us through each day: hope. When truth loses meaning, we cannot be sure about anything. This makes it difficult to find hope since truth, ultimately, is the centerpiece of hope.

I live in Dallas, Texas, and in Dallas there is a loop that I take when I want to get somewhere on the other side of the city but don't necessarily want to head straight through downtown. This loop will take me close enough to the city so that I can see its towering buildings and skyline, but not close enough to actually experience it.

This is precisely what we, as a culture, have done with God regarding oneness in the body of Christ. We have put God on the

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“loop” of our lives. He is close enough to be at hand should we need His call for oneness in a national emergency like 9/11 or the after-effects of a lady named Katrina, but far enough away that He can't be the centerpiece of who we are each and every day. Therefore, He will not bring hope or deliverance.

It doesn't take much more than a cursory glance around our society today to realize that our world is in desperate need of hope. Our communities need hope. Our churches need hope. Our families need hope. We need hope. Without God's truth as the centerpiece in all that we do and say, we will forever lack hope. We will continue to exist biding our time rather than experiencing the fullness of a life, family, church, and community pregnant with the sublime.

### Notes

1. For an in-depth look at the philosophy and theology of the kingdom agenda, see the author's book by the same name, *The Kingdom Agenda* (Chicago: Moody, 2006).
2. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Western Michigan University Speech Archives, 1963.