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Redemption as the Construction of Eternally United Family: The Union of the Eternally Redeemed Community in Christ and the Necessity of Oneness in Fellowship and Racial Unity

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Introduction

Though they may seem to be distant memories of a bygone era when racial tensions were much higher and urban decay was advancing at an alarming rate, the 1992 Los Angeles uprisings [2] remain one of the most poignant results of the legacy of institutional racism in the United States. This legacy has created a network of complex social realities—fewer economic choices, poor educational systems, and racially-motivated violence—which severely limit the

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[2] Though popularly known as the "Los Angeles Riots," there is sufficient reason to use different language for these events. See Rhonda M. Williams, "Accumulation as Evisceration: Urban Rebellion and the New Growth Dynamics," in *Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising,* ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 82-83.

opportunities for whole groups of people to reach their potential. In the case of the L.A. Riots, years of violence against Black minds and bodies perpetrated by civil authorities was brought to a head with the merciless beating of Rodney King, an African-American construction worker who had been driving while intoxicated. When three of the four officers were acquitted and a verdict was not reached on the fourth after an extremely controversial trial, the African-American community in South Central Los Angeles erupted into protest. These protests devolved into tragic acts of violence and looting, before the National Guard and the Marines were called in to restore some sense of order. In the end, Los Angeles and the entire world were left in utter disbelief that such injustice and chaos could take place in a modern democratic society. Throughout this article, I hope to show how the Los Angeles riots and similar events reveal the human need for redemption. Various aspects of redemption will be discussed (personal, social, and familial) leading to the establishment of cosmic redemption as God's construction of eternally united family. Ultimately, the implications of this model of redemption for a more robust ecclesiology will be explored.

I. Redemption in Historical Perspective

At the outset, it is important to gain a stronger handle on the concept of redemption throughout historical Jewish and Christian discourse. Redemption, of course, is not an exclusively Christian (or Jewish) idea, although it has taken on specifically Christian characteristics over its many years of usage and development. Etymologically, if we take the root word "redeem" and seek to define it without any religious or theological reference, we arrive at the denotation "to claim again." Therefore, redemption is the process by which something or someone is reclaimed by someone or something else. For this reclaiming to occur, there must have been something or someone else intervening to claim something or someone of which rightful ownership is not held. In Jewish and Christian theology, God is the redeemer seeking to reclaim the people who have been claimed by something or someone else. In this section, we will seek to understand how this "something or someone else" has been interpreted and developed in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, as well as historical Christian theology.

Ultimately, the starting point for any discussion of redemption within the frame of God's relationship with humanity must begin with Israel. More pointedly, this discussion must begin with the Exodus from Egypt. After approximately 400 years of humiliation and servitude, the Hebrews had become helpless in the face of imperial power represented by the Pharaoh. On the world stage, ancient Israel would not have even registered on the radars of the powerful. Though the patriarch Joseph had become a great leader in Egypt many years earlier, this happened only by becoming an effective servant of the empire, holding off what could have been extreme drought and famine (Gen. 41:54). Making a home for his people in Egypt, Joseph set the stage for the Hebrew population to thrive and grow in this foreign land. Yet, after hundreds of years, the leaders of Egypt had forgotten the contributions of Joseph and had relegated his people to the most menial tasks. These were God's people, to which God promised great blessings through the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:1-3), and now they were being claimed by the Egyptian empire and treated as slaves. The Hebrews needed God to reclaim them and create the conditions by which they might be blessed and be a blessing to others. Clearly, the state of political servitude inspired the desire for and necessity of liberation in order for the work of redemption to occur. Thus, judging from the Exodus story, we may understand *liberation* as the starting point for God's work of redemption.

In the New Testament, there is a continuation of this process of redemption through the person and work of Jesus Christ.[3] While the full implications of the redemption made available through Jesus Christ is beyond the scope of this article, the liberatory corollaries between "Exodus redemption" and "Christic redemption" shall be explored in some depth. While Israel apparently formed a rather cohesive unit of people under Egyptian domination and first-century Israel had been widely dispersed due to the rise of several powerful empires, both situations leave the Hebrews under foreign control. Without sovereignty over their own affairs, the people were forced to

[3] Though I do not mean to dispel the radically *new* thing God was doing in Christ, we cannot fully understand this new thing apart from the very particular context of God's historical activity through Israel.

interpret their existence and shape their decisions based on the interests of the Roman empire. The "pax romana" was the guiding principle under which the people were compelled to operate. Though some interest groups within Israel were violently opposed to occupation (the Zealots), others sought to conform their own interests to the interests of the Roman Empire (the Sadducees). With the strong memory of their redemption from Egypt and their subsequent political power exemplified by King David, many Israelites were not content to be second- or third-class citizens within the world of global politics. Their recollection of liberation and prosperity empowered them to hope for a different state of affairs.

As interpreted through the Gospel accounts, the Pauline writings, and two centuries of Christian scholarship, this "different state of affairs" came in full force in the life, death, resurrection, and future second coming of Jesus of Nazareth.[4] In his life, Jesus modeled humanity at one with God, united with the creator and sustainer of the universe (cf. Jn 10:30; Jn 15:1; Col. 1:15). In his death, Jesus defeats the power of sin by taking the tragic state of human depravity upon himself (cf. 1 Pet. 2:24). In the crucifixion, as Jürgen Moltmann has convincingly shown, God actually suffers the "godforsakenness" of life on Earth.[5] Therefore, in Jesus' suffering, we are given a stark image of God's presence in *every* facet of existence, even death itself. Yet, death cannot ultimately hold God for ransom; God in Christ is not subject to the same limitations as fallen humanity. In the resurrection, God changes the rules of the game by coming back to life and enacting the historic hope for the bodily resurrection of all humanity. Finally, in the promise of a second coming, Jesus offers the ongoing assurance that the final redemption of God's people will indeed come to completion.

Thus, as Otto Kirn wrote in the early 1900s, "The idea of redemption entertained by primitive Christianity is predominantly

[4] I adopt here what New Testament scholar Joel Green calls a "kaleidoscopic view" of the atonement wrought by Jesus Christ. In this view, each historical model has something important to say about the work of atonement but cannot capture the fullness of how Jesus brings about this new state of affairs. See James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 21.

[5] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 276.

eschatological."[6] Derived from the Greek *eschaton,* meaning *last* or *final,*[7] eschatology is the simply the study of what is at the end of all we currently know and experience. Recently, there has been a renewed interest among mainstream theologians and biblical scholars in the area of eschatology. Whereas the end times have been of primary concern for many fundamentalist and charismatic Christians since the advent and spread of dispensationalism, many mainline and Catholic scholars seemed to avoid this field of study, arguably to the detriment of Christian discipleship. Yet, as Richard Landes documents, the work of Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann combined with the social crises of the mid-20th century sparked the eschatological imaginations of Western Christians. [8] Of course, much more could be said about these fascinating developments, but our primary concern is that, like the early church, eschatological redemption is again a live issue with power to shape our ecclesiastical and political discourse and praxis at this moment.

The writings of the second-century theologian Irenaeus are perhaps our most powerful example of early post-New Testament development of the doctrine of redemption. In developing this idea of redemption as the construction of eternally united family, then, we would do well to draw heavily on the work of Irenaeus. Ultimately, the most lasting contribution of Irenaeus to the doctrine of redemption is his development of Paul's remarks on recapitulation (Eph. 1:10). Irenaeus construes redemption as the ongoing work of recapitulation in Christ. In recapitulation, Christ is said to "sum up" or exemplify God's desires for humanity in his body. Thus, recapitulation seems to be the starting point for most of Irenaeus's work, especially his understanding of redemption. As Kotsko has written, there are three

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6 Otto Kirn, "Redemption," in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, Volume 9,* ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson, Charles Colebrook Sherman, and George William Gilmore (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1911), 414.

7 Frederick William Danker, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009), 150-151.

8 *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "eschatology", accessed November 09, 2012, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/192308/eschatology/247668/Renewed-interest-in-eschatology.

principal elements of Irenaeus's explication of redemption: (1) the primacy of unity, (2) the importance of the natural world and the body, and (3) God's persuasion rather than coercion of humanity.[9] Drawing first and foremost on the apostle Paul's dissertation on the first Adam and the second Adam, Irenaeus sees the basis of human unity to be found in every human being's relation to Adam and to Jesus. In other words, since we are connected to Adam through his "role as father of all humanity," we have *all* inherited the need for redemption. This fundamental oneness of humanity has been obscured by sin and has led to divisions in the one family created by God. Yet, in Jesus Christ, God established a *new* Adam to be the uniting factor. Therefore, as we are connected to Jesus through his participation in humanity, we are all invited to receive salvation and to participate in God's ongoing work of redemption.[10] In living a human life, Jesus both models the importance of physical existence and the way in which God redeems and reunites humanity into one family. Through the sacrifice of his only Son, God's method of redemption is shown to be sacrificial persuasion and invitation.

The writings of Irenaeus, like those of other early Christian theologians, have an eschatological orientation without which recapitulation cannot be properly understood. Kotsko interprets Irenaus' eschatology as such: "The goal of creation is for God and humanity to enter into ever more intimate relationship."[11] Given the primacy of unity and his hearkening back to every human being's relation to each other through both Adam and Christ, we can see that intimacy with God will ultimately mean a return to intimacy with each other. Seen through the lens of Irenaeus, sin has obscured this intimacy through the course of time, but Christ gathers up, or recapitulates, everything we are as humans (the good with the bad), uniting us with God and with each other in the familial relationships that should now define our manner of life as the body of Christ. Yet, though sin has been defeated by God through Christ, the effects of sin are still very much present within the social structures of this world.

[9] Adam Kotsko, The Politics of Redemption: The Social Logic of Salvation (New York: Continuum, 2010)

[10] Ibid., 82.

[11] Ibid., 86.

In the following paragraphs, we will seek to elaborate on and expose one manifestation of sin that obscures this original unity in Adam, namely societal racism.

II. Signifying Redemption

One of the tried and true modes of communication among people of African descent is a practice that has been called *signifying*. Supposedly having its origins in traditional folkloric tales of the *Signifying Monkey*, this type of speech is characterized by "figurative, implicative speech" that often holds an implicit critique of cultural norms.[12] Signifying has historically been expressed through song, drama, or poetry, and is marked by a sense of fluidity with regard to the medium that carries it. Today, the tradition of signifying can be discovered in multiple genres from stand-up comedy to hip-hop. For our purposes, it is important to concentrate on the critical, or criticizing, function of signifying. Forms of public expression often carry with them an underlying commentary on the state of society. The acts of rebellion in South Central Los Angeles, the proximate cause being the brutality against Rodney King, were actually signifiers of a deeper and more abiding need. The so-called "Los Angeles riots," though morally objectionable, encapsulated the story of African oppression in the United States and revealed the need for a redemption marked by unity.

Without delving too deeply into the history of the transatlantic slave trade and political and economic marginalization of African-American people, one connection between this history and the forced labor of the Israelites under Egyptian rule will be explored in brief. Willie James Jennings, in his brilliant and groundbreaking work *The Christian Imagination*, comments on the identity-forming power of servitude which has deformed the shape of Christian intimacy.[13] In Egypt, the Israelites took on the identity of second-class citizens, unworthy of the dignity of their election. When one's identity is shaped through psychological terror, it becomes much less difficult to control that person's body. Whether or not the purported William

[12] Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 7.

[13] Willie James Jennings, The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race (New Haven: Yale, 2010), 9-10.

Lynch speech entitled "How to Make a Slave" was actually delivered in 1712,[14] it does bring to light how those in power can manipulate circumstances in order to create division and limit the agency of other humans. In the case of Israelite servitude, God stepped in to destroy the identity-forming power of Egypt so that the people could be liberated. Effectively, as Jennings relates, God broke the hold of Egypt on the people, revealing to both Israel and Egypt their need for God's sustaining power. God becomes involved in the violent structures of Egypt in order to continue the ongoing project of constructing an eternally united family. Where Egypt threatened to thwart this project, God aggressively acted to see that not even the most powerful empire in the world could finally obstruct this ultimate goal. While this may seem to contradict Irenaeus's theory of God working through persuasion, we must remember the number of opportunities given to Pharaoh to free the people of his own volition. The Exodus example gives us hope that God will not remain silently passive while grave injustice continues.

Likewise, Africans who were forcefully imported into the "New World" faced a similar identity-shaping influence as a result of their own experience of bondage. Though many slaves found creative and courageous ways to subvert this influence, the institution of slavery still worked its way into the imagination of the community. The sociologist Orlando Patterson masterfully explores how slavery imposed on people of African descent an ethic of subordination and dehumanization. From observing the humiliation of their parents by slaveholders to the sexual abuse that many slaves experienced, servitude violently molded enslaved Africans into the image that would best meet the interests of rich white landowners. One of the starkest illustrations of this compulsory rendering of identity was name-changing. Like prisoners who are assigned a number, enslaved Africans were stripped of one of the key markers of their free existence and marked with a title symbolizing their oppression. Having been ripped away from their families through the trading of

[14] William Jelani Cobb has seriously questioned this document's validity, arguing that the explanation purportedly given for black disunity therein is much too simple to be historically reliable (http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/question/may04.htm).

flesh, their separation from previous kinship networks was now made official with a pseudonym of someone else's choosing.[15] We may witness the pain and despair this caused in the classic miniseries *Roots*, where the main character Kunta Kinte, is whipped by an overseer because he will not at first accept the name "Toby." In full relief, we are able to see how insistence of slavery's identity formation and the resistance of those who were to be formed.

Even with the official end of sanctioned slavery, the historical fallout of this grave injustice has continued. From "separate but equal" to voter identification laws, African Americans have been systematically disenfranchised from the political mainstream in the United States. When a person cannot fully participate in the decisions affecting his or her well-being, how can that person contribute to society? Moreover, when the society in question is actively working to limit this person's contributions, there is no strong incentive or pathway toward positive relations among the races. Particularly in urban areas, where there is frequent contact between people of different ethnic origins and racial classifications, the cultural memory of injustice and current feelings of alienation create deep fault lines between communities. Taking into account the advent of quick information and media voyeurism, these fissures are sometimes strained to the breaking point.

One of these breaking points was reached in the early 1990s when footage of the police assault of Rodney King was released to the public. South Central Los Angeles, once a predominantly middle-class area, had declined economically due to the flight of manufacturing jobs and decline of service sector wages.[16] As a result, an increasing number of men and women began turning to illegal activities to earn a satisfactory income.[17] Coupled with a substandard educational system and lack of productive activities to engage children and youth, this situation was a recipe for increasingly

[15] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 54-55.

[16] Joao H. Costa Vargas, Catching Hell in the City of Angels: Life and Meanings of Blackness in South Central Los Angeles (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2006), 56.

[17] Ibid., 45.

strained police-community relations.[18] The brutal tactics used by police against African-American men and women were common knowledge in the community. The early lyrics of the popular hip-hop group N.W.A. are testament to the powder keg waiting to explode in South Central. Therefore, when the beating of Rodney King happened to be filmed by a man in a nearby apartment, the widespread exposure of what was obviously unnecessary use of force and the subsequent acquittal of the officers involved served as the spark that ignited the explosion. Countless individuals of multiple racial groups took to the streets, violently protesting what was clearly a mistrial. In the words of Omi and Winant, "The riot acted as a 'pressure cooker,' intensifying and revealing the ambivalences, fault lines, and polarizations which characterize U.S. racial identities today."[19] The *revealing* aspects of this riot/rebellion/uprising will be explored further below.

III. From Hell on Earth to a Redeemed Humanity

The New Testament scholar Lewis O. Brogdon, in a convocation address, drew attention to the concept of *hell* as it is interpreted and experienced in many African-American communities. Using cinema and hip-hop lyrics, he underscored the idea that the Christian eschatological concept of hell has become an existential reality among Black people. The suffering and injustice faced by African Americans has led to a sense of nihilism which can be discerned in destructive cultural patterns. Thus, with no hope of earthly redemption, "hell on earth" is the inevitable result.[20] Taking Matthew 10:28 as a cue, hell is a place where body and soul are destroyed by someone who has total control over both. Given these parameters, how can slavery, disenfranchisement, and alienation be likened to anything *but* hell? Therefore, the ensuing chaos after the announcement of the Rodney King verdict simply exposed a society, and community within that society, trapped in hell, badly in need of redemption.

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[18] Ibid., 35.

[19] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, "The Los Angeles 'Race Riot' and Contemporary U.S. Politics," in *Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising* (New York: Routledge, 1993)

[20] Lewis O. Brogdon, "Hell on Earth," Address, Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, September 8, 2011.

The events in question reveal the need for redemption on at least three levels: personal, social, and familial. The first level of redemption, personal, speaks of the human need to be redeemed by God. We cannot effect this ourselves, so we are dependent on the grace of God for personal redemption. Yet, explosions of violence in response to extreme injustice expose the human desire for self-redemption. While Christians may be sympathetic with the complaints that lead to rebellion, we simply cannot condone acts of targeted violence against civilians. Personally, Christians are called to a radical trust in the God who redeems through persuasion rather than violence. Ultimately, violence can only lead to the deconstruction of the eternally united family created by God. On the other hand, the practice of nonviolence as exemplified in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ gives us a pattern to follow in combating injustice and seeking God's redemption. Through the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Christ (Hebrews 9:12), we are freed from the struggle for self-redemption and led toward the foolishness of the cross (1 Corinthians 1:18).

This leads right into the second level of redemption under consideration: social redemption. The struggle for self-redemption by individuals has become embedded in systems that perpetuate themselves through history. From the moment Adam and Eve attempted to gain the knowledge that only God possesses, humankind has experience the fallout of human pride and arrogance.[21] This leaves every human being in a state of alienation from God and from each other. This alienation was placed front and center when the world saw video footage of both the beating of Rodney King and the riots in South Central. Countless acts of terrorism were perpetrated against people who represented "the enemy" by virtue of their racial-ethnic group or socioeconomic status. Years of simmering tension between Korean storeowners and Black and Latino residents of South Central boiled over into destruction of businesses which had been a perceived thorn in the side of the community since the 1965 Watts

[21] Cyrus H. Gordon and Gary A. Rendsburg, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (New York: WW Norton and Co., 1997), 106.

riots.[22] In reality, the racial classifications that allowed both police and rioters to target individuals are socially constructed. There is no ontological link between skin tone or place of origin and character. Though social categories are often used as a basis for discrimination, they are often simply reflections of human arrogance and the desire for domination.[23] Often, these categories and their corresponding associations are internalized by oppressed groups, further dividing humanity and undermining God's redemptive work in society.[24]

This redemptive work is theologically rooted in God's intention of creating an eternally united *kinship network.* The Ghanaian theologian John S. Pobee describes a widespread philosophy of African kinship that encompasses a wide range of relations, both living and deceased.[25] For many Africans and people of African descent, kinship networks form the basis of group responsibility and communal solidarity. Drawing on this deeply meaningful framework for social relations, we may understand the Church as the body called to reflect the kinship network inherent within God's self. The Triune God may be understood as an eternal kinship network of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As part of God's creation, humans are invited to partake in this eternal kinship. Christians, in particular, are called to reflect this kinship through embodying Christ's love and participating in God's redeeming work. In the closing paragraphs, I will explore two ecclesiological implications of this theological foundation.

First and foremost is the matter of language. Especially in the Reformed tradition, Christians are people of the Word. The power of language is clearly understood, as we believe this is one of the primary ways in which God has communicated God's self. Therefore, the language we use as the body of Christ should reflect the ways in

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[22] Sumi K. Cho, "Conflict and Construction," in *Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising,* ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 198-201.

[23] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, "Racial Formations," in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States,* ed. Paula S. Rothenberg (New York: Worth, 2007), 14-17.

[24] Keith Osajima, "Internalized Racism," in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States,* ed. Paula S. Rothenberg (New York: Worth, 2007), 139-140.

[25] Diane B. Stinton, Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 145.

which God's redemptive power operates. Our preaching should emphasize our kinship with believers around the world, our teaching should seek to create awareness of social injustice, and our advocacy should empower the poor and hopeless so that they may recognize and claim their identities as beloved children of God. In far too many cases, the Church as it exists in the so-called "developed" world has simply blessed the will of the state, whether this involves complicity in racism, economic discrimation, or any other number of injustices. However, prophetic speech that comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comforted will serve to further solidify God's ongoing work of redemption through the Church.

The second ecclesiological implication here involves geography. Where we gather as Christians maintains an understated influence on how we gather. A congregation surrounded by affluence and excess will likely worship with less urgency than one surrounded by degradation and visible poverty. Real estate salespeople tout the line that "location is everything," which applies every bit as much to places of worship. A church's proximity to the signs of an as-yet-unredeemed world should create just enough dissonance to compel Christians to action. Though most churches in affluent areas cannot simply relocate (nor should they), these congregations can be aware of the shaping influence of geography and take steps to ameliorate the numbing effects of wealth. Local and global mission trips, volunteering in schools and after-school programs, and participating in civic life are all ways Christians can subvert the geographical limitations of wealthy neighborhoods.

In this paper, I have sought to show how catastrophic events such as the 1992 Los Angeles uprising reveal the need for God's ongoing work of redemption. Through a brief survey of the history of the doctrine of redemption, Irenaeus's development of the doctrine of recapitulation formed the basis for a further exploration of redemption's personal, social, and familial dimensions. Ultimately, redemption was interpreted as the construction of an eternally united kinship system, whereby the triune God is continually inviting humans into relationships based on bonds of responsibility and solidarity. This work was then applied to ecclesiological considerations of language and geography. Further work must be done on the operation of the Holy Spirit in the process of redemption,

but I hope to have established a foundation for future development in the area of redemption and race relations.

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