



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Christian Practices for the Journey toward Shalom
(*Racism*, pp. 55-61)

What do you think?

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Christian Reflection

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Christian Practices for the Journey toward Shalom

How can Christians come together to talk about matters of race? The problems seem intractable. While the journey toward Shalom will be difficult and often painful, the ancient Christian practices of stability, hospitality, and foot-washing can help us on the way.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Colossians 3:9-11

Meditation†

The lack of safe places to discuss racial issues in the secular world means that Christians should work harder to create safe places in our churches.... Honest dialogue in a Christian setting is vital since our faith teaches us the role of human depravity in the development of racism. We will understand not only that people of other races may be insensitive to our perspective on racial issues, but that we may be insensitive to their perspective as well.

George Yancey

Reflection

“Race is hard to talk about,” Victor Hinojosa readily admits, “in large part because we carry our cultural and racial expectations with us into the life of the Church.” In America, Christians have not been able to overcome several barriers erected by their racialized culture. One barrier is fear – of being labeled a racist or of not being taken seriously. Another is what Hinojosa calls the vice of ecclesial sloth – the expectation that in church we should find peace and comfort, and no conflict. Most congregations remain segregated by choice because racial groups find it so much easier to do church with people like themselves.

But peace and personal comfort should not be our ultimate goals, Hinojosa insists. Reconciliation is not easy. To be reconciled to one another, we must “practice confession and forgiveness in difficult and painful ways. In the Church we have the chance to take seriously our sins, corporate and individual, and to deal with the structural and individual nature of racism and our racialized society.”

Hinojosa commends these three Christian practices that go hand-in-hand with honest confession and forgiveness:

- ▶ *The practice of stability* – staying with a group of people when we want to move on – is crucial because racial reconciliation is a long-term process requiring deep and sustained contact with other racial groups. It takes commitment to foster the kind of community where racial issues can be discussed. The vow of stability taken in certain classic and new monastic communities is an example for all Christians of the consistency necessary for racial reconciliation.
- ▶ *The practice of true Christian hospitality* is hard work, requiring us not merely to tolerate or be nice to others, but to welcome them into community. This is so different from the sentimentalized and commercialized form of hospitality that is popular in our culture. Rightly practiced, hospitality builds up the Church by uniting individuals’ distinct gifts of the Spirit.



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► *The ancient practice of foot washing* is a very uncomfortable experience for everyone – both those who wash and those who are washed. It forces us to admit that we are not self sufficient – that we must serve others and accept others' service. When practiced across racial lines, foot washing is a powerful reminder of our unity in Christ.

At our baptism, we take on a new identity as citizens of God's kingdom. This is why the Apostle Paul proclaims, "there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, and free; but Christ is all and in all!" (Colossians 3:11. Our identity in the body of Christ is more essential than any racial, ethnic, national, familial, or professional identity. "When we are called to remember our baptismal vows, we are called to remember who, and whose, we are," Hinojosa concludes. "We do so when we engage in these other formative practices of stability, hospitality, and foot washing as well."

Study Questions

1. Why is it so hard to talk about race in the Church? How do racialized cultural constructs prevent our unity in Christ?
2. Victor Hinojosa says we often think of church as a place for peace, reflection, and comfort, a place where conflict should be avoided. How can congregations be places of refuge and renewal, without falling into the trap of "ecclesial sloth"?
3. Consider how confession and forgiveness are related to practices of stability, hospitality, and foot washing. How do these facilitate racial reconciliation and unity in the Church?
4. In the departing hymn "Let Us Break Bread Together," what practices foster reconciliation and unity?

Departing Hymn: "Let Us Break Bread Together"

Let us break bread together on our knees,
let us break bread together on our knees.
When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun,
O Lord, have mercy on me.

Let us drink wine together on our knees,
let us drink wine together on our knees.
When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun,
O Lord, have mercy on me.

Let us praise God together on our knees,
let us praise God together on our knees.
When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun,
O Lord, have mercy on me.

African-American Spiritual
Tune: LET US BREAK BREAD

† George Yancey, *Beyond Racial Gridlock: Embracing Mutual Responsibility* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 132.

Christian Practices on the Journey toward Shalom

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To review the difficulties that congregations face in fostering open conversations about race.
2. To consider how confession and forgiveness make honest communication about race possible in the Church.
3. To understand how the Christian practices of stability, hospitality, and foot washing facilitate racial reconciliation.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Racism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Let Us Break Bread Together” locate the tune LET US BREAK BREAD in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Comment

“Our immediate impulse when strife and contention arise is often to run, to avoid resolution for the sake of preserving pride and nursing resentment,” Jon Stock has written. “In a day when people flow in and out of churches, imagine the effect that stability could have on our ability to love one another, to bear one another’s burdens, to resolve conflicts, and to forgive each other” (Jon Stock, “Stability,” in *Inhabiting the Church: Biblical Wisdom for a New Monasticism*, [Wipf and Stock, 2006], 87-118, here citing 92).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to open your hearts to Christian practices that facilitate racial reconciliation.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Colossians 3:9-11 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study explores why it is difficult to talk about race in church. The problem, Victor Hinojosa says, is we uncritically import into the church certain racialized attitudes from the wider culture, and we yield to ecclesial sloth—the mistaken expectation that church should be a place of unalloyed peace and comfort. He commends practices that lead toward true peace, or Shalom. Though difficult and often painful, confession and forgiveness, stability, hospitality, and foot washing can help us to find unity in Christ without denying or destroying our diversity.

Study Questions

1. One cultural barrier, Victor Hinojosa notes, is that black and white Christians think about race very differently: "African Americans generally explain racial inequality in the United States as being caused by structural factors, such as racial discrimination and the lack of access to educational opportunities. In contrast, white Americans blame the divide on individual factors, or more precisely, the failings of individual African Americans."

Furthermore, "we carry our cultural and racial expectations with us into the life of the Church. And in the Church, where we deal with matters of transcendent significance, minor cultural conflicts often become major dividing lines." Often we do not question our own racial and cultural assumptions, so we respond with frustration and stubbornness when other people's racial and cultural habits and expectations grate against our own. He gives an example of how a minor issue of time can become "spiritualized" and elevated in importance. "In some congregations, Sunday morning worship begins at 11:00 a.m. and ends precisely at 12:00 p.m. This sort of orderly arrangement is said to model the order of God in creation, and to violate it not only inconveniences people, but goes against the very nature of God. In other congregations, worship begins when it begins, and ends when it ends. This model is said to be more faithful to God's creativity, and violating this norm is said to be a failure to listen to and to follow the direction of the Holy Spirit. A frustrated Sunday School teacher in a multiracial church told researchers, 'one culture thinks it offensive not to be on time, the other thinks it offensive to be on time. No easy solution there.'"

Encourage members to examine their assumed racial and cultural norms. How do they get in the way of unity and reconciliation with others?

2. Ecclesial sloth results from sadness that church-life is not as comfortable as we want it to be. This sadness may itself in laziness (e.g., not working at racial reconciliation), or distracting busyness (e.g., focusing on other good works to avoid the problem of race). Do members see signs of ecclesial sloth in their congregation?

Ecclesial sloth is spiritually deceptive because it turns the good byproducts of God's work—peace and comfort—into our primary goal. "Some of that is right and good," Hinojosa notes, "*But such peace and comfort cannot be our ultimate goal.*" These experiences find their proper place in a congregation with higher priorities. Only when we participate in God's work of reconciling us to God and one another—which can be difficult and "might be as terrifying as it is consoling"—do we find true refuge and renewal.

3. Begin by discussing how confession and forgiveness make honest communication possible in personal relationships. Members may share examples of this from their own experience. Because many of our hurtful racial attitudes are unexamined and unacknowledged to others, Hinojosa says confession and forgiveness are required to build relationships of trust that are necessary for racial reconciliation.

Ask three groups to review the Christian practices of stability, hospitality, and foot washing. How does each practice reshape our respect and love toward others? How does each one presuppose a foundation of trust established through confession and forgiveness? How does it cultivate discipline and humility? When confronted with the cultural habits, assumptions, and expectations of other racial groups, it takes discipline and humility not to give in to fear and ecclesial sloth.

4. "Let Us Break Bread Together" alludes to the practice of Communion in the first two verses, and the practice of worship in verse three. Like baptism, Communion unites disciples into the one body of Christ. There is no more beautiful expression of the unity of the Church than these two sacraments. The practice of prayer is exemplified in the closing line of each verse. The unity of believers formed through these Christian practices leads to humble confession and a request for forgiveness, "O Lord, have mercy on me."

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.