

Christian Practices for the Journey toward Shalom

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How can Christians come together to talk about matters of race? The problems seem intractable. Blacks and whites think about the world, and especially matters of race, in very different ways. This divide extends to the Church where black and white Christians think about race fundamentally differently. Sociologists have consistently found that 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. White Americans are much more likely to believe that African Americans simply lack the will or motivation to succeed.

White evangelicals are most likely to affirm individual causes of racial inequality and least likely to affirm structural causes. As Michael Emerson and Christian Smith have explained, the individualism of white evangelical theology leads evangelicals to think not only about salvation, but also other social issues, in individual terms.¹ Black Protestants, in contrast, are least likely to affirm individual causes of racial inequality and most likely to place the blame on structural causes. George Yancey points out that black and white Christians are actually farther apart in their thinking about race than other blacks and whites in the United States.² Or, as Emerson and Smith have powerfully argued, rather than bringing blacks and whites together, America's religious institutions instead reinforce America's racial divides.³

Blacks and whites, including black and white Christians, are talking past each other in fundamental ways. Not only do they see racial inequality differently, they have fundamentally different understandings of racism. Whites, and especially white Christians, tend to see racism as particular sinful acts of individual racists behaving badly toward individual people of color. Even during the Jim Crow era, many white evangelicals felt they had a duty to

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treat individual African Americans with respect, but not a duty to work to change or challenge social institutions.⁴

In contrast, African Americans and other people of color see racism as having not only an individual dimension, but a structural one as well. Certainly, the slurs and personal indignities people of color endure are and should be called

racism. But racism extends beyond the personal. They see institutions discriminating against them systematically and quite independently of the racial sensitivities (or lack thereof) of those who work in those systems. For instance, Federal Housing Administration (FHA) lending practices lead to increased, and persistent, residential segregation.⁵ More recently, the property tax system that often funds public schools leaves minority school districts having fewer resources because of lower property values. Others will point to systematic disparities in health care where whites are 89% more likely to receive heart bypass surgery than African Americans, even when their ages, incomes, and chest symptoms are the same.⁶ Many see systematic discrimination against African Americans and other minority groups in these and many other institutions in the United States. These systemic forces have little to do with what is in the hearts of those who work in them. Individuals do discriminate, of course, but institutions do so as well.

THE DIFFICULTIES WE FACE

Given these differences, how can black and white Christians come together to think and talk about race? At one level, we must simply recognize how difficult the challenges are and will be. Race is hard to talk about. Even in the Church, where our identity in Christ should be stronger than our racial and ethnic identities, talking about race is very difficult. It is so hard in large part because 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. Take as an example the issue of time. 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 multi-racial 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."⁷

Our racialized cultural constructs are powerful and they can lead to deep conflict. The issue of time is but one small example of the ways in which cultural conflicts can become spiritualized. That is, a clash about worship time can become a clash about Christian faithfulness. The literature on multi-racial churches suggests that while multiracial churches do not have more conflicts than uniraical churches, they do tend to have more intense conflicts.⁸

It is also important to remember that these conversations are so difficult in part because there is so much at stake both for whites and for people of color. George Yancey helpfully describes the fear and mistrust that has built up between our communities and that makes these conversations so difficult.⁹ He reminds us that one of the things whites fear most is being labeled a racist. That fear leads many of them to say nothing, to avoid conversations about race, lest they say something of offense. People of color are afraid too. They are afraid of not being taken seriously, or of being used in some sort of feel good exercise where whites can alleviate their guilt and then go on about their business without becoming partners in the effort to make life better for minority communities.

Moving forward requires us to be aware of the difficulties we face, but not to be paralyzed by them. We must find ways to talk about race that are grounded in our faith, and we must create safe places for those conversations to happen.

ECCLESIAL SLOTH

This in turn may require us to think differently about church and worship. Kelly Johnson provocatively suggests that one of our ecclesial vices is sloth. She argues that we have turned church into a place where we go for "peace, reflection, comfort" and where conflict should be avoided.¹⁰ Indeed, our congregations today are segregated by choice, not by law. We have, largely unconsciously, chosen to do church with people like ourselves. It is much easier that way, as scholarly research on the intense conflicts in multiracial congregations suggests and as members of multiracial congregations will quickly attest.

For many, church has become a place of refuge and renewal. We come to church to get away from the stresses of everyday life, to encounter God, and

to emerge refreshed to face the world and do God's work for another week. Some of that is right and good. But such peace and comfort cannot be our ultimate goal. Instead, we must recognize that what God is doing—reconciling us to God and to one another—is often painful, difficult work. As Elizabeth Newman suggests, this work of God “might be as terrifying as it is consoling.”¹¹

For many of us there is no more difficult part of Christian worship than the confession of sin. We must face our sins of commission and of omission, all

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we have done and left undone. We do so in anticipation of those words of forgiveness, with the promise that, in Christ, God has forgiven and will forgive.

Matters of race require us to 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. Americans must confess the structural, institutional sins that brought some to this country in chains and kept many others impoverished for centuries.¹²

Yet our confession of sin must go beyond sadness for long-ago injustices. Whites must often confront the ways they have hurt individual members of minority communities. Whites must also confront the ways they benefit from historic injustices and from America's current racialized social structures. African Americans and other people of color have anger and resentment that must be confessed and repented. George Yancey suggests that the most difficult, and important, duty racial minorities have is to forgive whites who repent. This work of repentance and forgiveness is extraordinarily difficult, and blacks and whites alike fear the process. Yancey suggests that members of minority communities need to be assured “that whites will be there to help them in their struggles” and that whites “need assurance that their expressions of repentance and white guilt will not be used against them.”¹³

THE PRACTICE OF STABILITY

In order to practice this kind of repentance and forgiveness, we must not only accept that our Christianity will involve hard work, but also commit to the long-term process of seeking racial reconciliation. These practices require regular, meaningful contact between Christians of different races. Sociologists have found that what brings people together in their thinking about matters of race is deep and sustained contact with members of other racial groups. “Contact theory” suggests that having a few relationships with people

of other racial groups is actually worse than none at all.¹⁴ In that situation, those limited relationships serve to reinforce preexisting stereotypes.

In a similar way, pulpit exchanges and occasional joint worship services with Christians from other racial groups may do more harm than good. In my own limited experience with such practices, the worship services were uncomfortable and a painful reminder of how different we were. We never got beyond those differences and never reflected on them. We acknowledged them, and then returned to doing things the way we always do things. This of course only reinforces the suspicions of minority communities. The white church does its duty and feels better about itself, but nothing really changes.

The hard work of racial reconciliation requires much more faithfulness than that. It requires a long-term commitment to continue the work, especially when things get difficult. Here again our contemporary church culture, which encourages us to choose a congregation that meets our needs, and to leave it when it quits meeting our needs, works against us. A congregation that sees racial reconciliation as part of its mission is not a congregation that will be free of tension and conflict.

Many Christians in the New Monasticism movement recognize that one of the most pressing challenges congregations face is precisely this issue of moving on when times get tough. Drawing on Benedictine spirituality and practice, many New Monastic communities take a vow of stability. They promise to stay in that place, being church with those people, until it is clear to the individual and to the community that God is calling one away. Getting out of these communities is, quite intentionally, difficult. As Jon Stock, a leader in the Church of the Servant King in Eugene, Oregon, writes, "Our immediate impulse when strife and contention arise is often to run, to avoid resolution for the sake of preserving pride and nursing resentment. 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."¹⁵ It will take such a commitment, perhaps even something like a vow of stability, to foster the kind of community where matters of race can be discussed. Trust has to be built, and there must be a commitment to finish the work.

THE PRACTICE OF HOSPITALITY

While a vow of stability is a new and unfamiliar practice (at least for most Protestants), there are other, more familiar, practices that can also help show us the way toward Shalom. One such practice is hospitality. Christian hospitality, distinct from sentimentalized or commercialized notions on the one hand, and from popular notions of mere tolerance on the other, offers Christians a way to think differently about matters of race.

Christian hospitality calls us not just to tolerate or put up with people, but to bring them into community. These 'others' are brought into community for a central purpose: the building of the Church.¹⁶ When Paul lists the gifts

of the Holy Spirit, he tells us that the gifts are given for the “common good” and for the building of the Church (1 Corinthians 12:7). The gifts of the Spirit, and thus the diversity of the Church, are not celebrated in and of themselves. Instead, Christian hospitality calls us to recognize that the Church is not complete unless the gifts of all of God’s children are represented there.

Christian hospitality is hard work. The building of community and the welcoming of others is scary and difficult. Moreover, as Elizabeth Newman reminds us, we are not allowed to always play the same role – either guest or host. That is the temptation many will face, to always be the ones who welcome others into our fellowship with open arms. Instead, “the role of guest and host are fluid when hospitality is practiced rightly” and we must come to see ourselves as “guests, receiving from the other, and hosts, offering ourselves to the other.”¹⁷

THE PRACTICE OF FOOT WASHING

The practice of foot washing is another practice that reminds us of our role as servants. This biblical practice has fallen into disuse among Protestants, and even Anabaptist communities now do it almost exclusively on Maundy Thursday. It is a difficult practice and requires us to do uncomfortable things. Our discomfort with the practice is about far more than taking off our shoes and socks in front our friends (though that is part of it). Kneeling before a brother or sister and serving them in such an intimate way is hard. For many, being served in that kind of way is much harder. Yet, just as when hospitality is practiced rightly the role of guest and host is fluid, so too are we called both to wash and to be washed.

In following Jesus’ example to wash one another’s feet, we are reminded of our obligation to serve our brothers and sisters. We are also reminded that we are not self-sufficient, that we cannot go it alone, and that we must accept the gifts of others. When practiced across racial lines, foot washing is a powerful reminder of our unity in Christ and of our need for one another.

These practices remind us of our unity in Christ and of the call to be reconciled to God and one another. Baptism plays such a role as well, reminding that we have become citizens of God’s kingdom and have taken on a new identity. Our racial and ethnic identities are important ones. But like our national, familial, professional and other identities, they are not to be idolized. We all must submit to our fundamental identity in Christ. When we are called to remember our baptismal vows, we are called to remember who, and whose, we are. We do so when we engage in these other formative practices of stability, hospitality, and foot washing as well.

The journey toward Shalom will be difficult and often painful, but there are resources in the Christian tradition and in Christian worship that can help us on the way.

NOTES

1 Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

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

3 Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 18.

4 *Ibid.*, 75.

5 Yancey, *Beyond Racial Gridlock*, 91.

6 See the reflections on the larger literature in Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 14.

7 Brad Christerson, Korie L. Edwards, and Michael O. Emerson, *Against All Odds: The Struggle for Racial Integration in Religious Organizations* (New York, New York University Press, 2005), 53.

8 Michael O. Emerson with Rodney M. Woo, *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 146.

9 Yancey, *Beyond Racial Gridlock*, Chapter 10 is especially helpful here. This section draws on his insights.

10 Kelly Johnson, "Thoughts on Racism as Ecclesial Vice," Plenary Address, 2008 Gathering of the Ekklesia Project (accessed March 4, 2010), http://web.me.com/zkincaid/EkklesiaProject/gathering2008_files/racism%20vice%20for%20EP-2.pdf.

11 Elizabeth Newman, *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 13.

12 Yancey notes that there are resources in Scripture for confessing national sins and the sins of those who have come before us. See his discussion of corporate repentance in *Beyond Racial Gridlock*, 94-98.

13 *Ibid.*, 108.

14 For a helpful introduction to contact theory and its impact on racial attitudes, see Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 106-109.

15 Jon Stock, "Stability" in Jon Stock, Tim Otto, and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Inhabiting the Church: Biblical Wisdom for a New Monasticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2006), 92.

16 This section draws on Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 28-31.

17 *Ibid.*, 121 and 144.

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