

Racism

Christian Reflection
A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS

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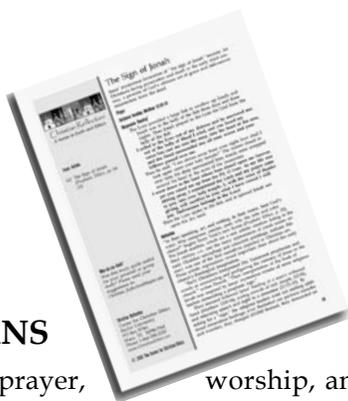
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STUDY GUIDES & LESSON PLANS

These six study guides integrate Bible study, prayer, worship, and reflection on themes in the *Racism* issue.

THE PERSISTENT PROBLEM

While whites focus on creating good-intentioned, right thinking people, people of color focus on group equality and justice. Both are important, so they need not be at war. But our focus must be on working together to undo our racialized society, and that, by definition, is not just about individuals.

“ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH SHALL BE BLESSED”

More than the other Gospel writers, Luke focuses on issues of race. From the Abrahamic covenant he gleans a radical vision of God’s people as inclusive of all who profess the lordship of Jesus Christ, regardless of socio-economic standing, physical appearance, or ethnic or racial identity.

GREGORY OF NYSSA AND THE CULTURE OF OPPRESSION

In the late fourth century Gregory of Nyssa spoke out against the institution of slavery in a way that none had before, vilifying it as incompatible with Christianity. What can we learn from this fourth-century theologian about seeing beyond the veil of oppression?

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.

LET’S GET IT TOGETHER: MULTIETHNIC CONGREGATIONS

Though difficult to achieve, there are healthy multiethnic congregations flourishing in Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical spheres. They are neither perfectly inclusive nor immune from racial conflict, but they have succeeded in breaking through the racial barriers that have plagued American Christianity for so long.

AVOIDING RACISM IN STARTING NEW CONGREGATIONS

A distorted culture is always at the heart of racism, prompting us to react to people of other cultures in ethnocentric ways. How is our ethnocentrism – expressed in the homogeneous unit principle that says “people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers” – infecting the practice of starting new congregations in the United States?

Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

How should we articulate the spiritual disfigurement caused by our racialized society, and chart a course toward authentic racial reconciliation through the Body of Christ?

When the full nature of a spiritual disorder is as easily and deviously veiled from our eyes as is the persistent problem of racism, even the recognition of our problem is a precious divine gift. “Though I knew that American racism had put whites and blacks into roles of oppressors and oppressed, I had not experienced it as a victory for the oppressor,” Wendell Berry has wisely reported. “I knew that for white people it had involved loss and spiritual disfigurement. And I knew, from my own experience, that it had involved love.” Our contributors help us to articulate this spiritual disfigurement and chart a course toward authentic racial reconciliation through the Body of Christ.

In *The Persistent Problem* (p. 11), Michael Emerson explains how racial groups tend to define racism differently: whites emphasize overt acts of prejudice and discrimination, but people of color focus on group inequalities and unjust systems. Both aspects are important; however, “We need to focus our attention on undoing our racialized society, on making our organizations fairer places for people of all racial backgrounds, on making our congregations places that do not reinforce racial division, but which instead bring people of all backgrounds together for the common purpose of glorifying God,” he concludes.

Emerson notes that three dimensions of whiteness—white structural advantage, normativity, and transparency—conspire not only to sustain whites’ position at the top of society, but also to disguise the resulting injustice from their view. Kimberly Flint-Hamilton names a more general phenomenon—being blinded by privilege—“the veil of oppression.” In *Gregory of Nyssa and the Culture of Oppression* (p. 26), she reflects on how difficult it is to break “the cultural bonds that shape our perceptions and understandings.” We can learn much from Gregory of Nyssa about seeing beyond the veil of

oppression, she says, for in his radical critique of the institution of slavery the fourth-century theologian “escapes from the invisible trap laid by generations of oppressors and confronts the established hierarchy.” Joseph Parker explores the invisibility of racially dominated systems and individual actions in contemporary America in *Smelling the Fires of Racism* (p. 70). Drawing inspiration from the biblical story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, he warns, “As racism’s fires burn the people of God should have in place a ‘spiritual detector’ – someone who is wise in the ways of God; someone who, like a carbon monoxide detector, can identify the poisonous, colorless, and odorless fumes that will kill us.”

In “*All the Families of the Earth Shall Be Blessed*” (p. 19), Mikeal Parsons reveals how more than any other Gospel writer, Luke focuses on issues of race. From God’s covenant to bless the world through Abraham’s descendants, “Luke gleans a radical vision of God’s people as inclusive of all who profess the lordship of Jesus Christ, regardless of socio-economic standing, physical appearance, or ethnic or racial identity,” he writes.

Two key Lukan stories – the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch and the Apostle Paul’s Damascus road conversion – are subjects in the artwork featured in this issue. Heidi Hornik discusses Rembrandt’s etching *The Baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch* (on the cover) in “*What Is to Prevent Me from Being Baptized?*” (p. 48) and Caravaggio’s famous painting *The Conversion of St. Paul* in *Apostle to the Gentiles* (p. 50). Caravaggio painted the latter as a pair with *Crucifixion of St. Peter* to establish a theme of suffering, she explains. Peter’s suffering as he is crucified upside down is apparent. “As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul endured suffering and ridicule as he took the gospel to those outside the Jewish faith.” In *Love that Crosses Ethnic Boundaries* (p. 52), Hornik explores the complex story-telling in Maarten van Heemskerck’s sixteenth-century painting *Ruth and Naomi*.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette’s new hymn, “O God of Creation, We See All around Us” (p. 37), draws the themes of this issue together into a Trinitarian prayer. The hymn concludes with this petition: “God, now may we work with a new dedication / for justice, equality, freedom, and peace, / until we are called to your great celebration / and share at your table in your banquet feast.” The worship service (p. 40) by Stan Wilson invites us to enact life in God’s kingdom through acts of prayer and praise and receiving the Lord’s Supper. “May all who worship together this day receive a welcome,” Wilson prays. “May they discover the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and may they find themselves to be at home, among the people God has made one.”

Three articles explore the promise and report the difficulties of welcoming people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds into one congregation. In *Christian Practices for the Journey toward Shalom* (p. 55), Victor Hinojosa commends stability, hospitality, and foot-washing as ancient Christian practices to guide us on the way to racial reconciliation. He objects to “ecclesial sloth” which makes finding peace and comfort the ultimate goal in church. “Instead,” he

writes, “we must recognize that what God is doing – reconciling us to God and to one another – is often painful, difficult work.” Kathleen Garces-Foley’s *Multiethnic Congregations* (p. 62) compares healthy multiethnic churches in Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical spheres. “They are neither perfectly inclusive nor immune from racial conflict,” she reports, “but they have succeeded in breaking through the racial barriers that have plagued American Christianity for so long.” With the promise of successful multiethnic congregations in mind, Damian Emetuche’s *Avoiding Racism in Starting New Congregations* (p. 75) critiques the widely promoted homogeneous unit principle that says “people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers.” In building their strategies around this view, “church planters in urban centers have accepted a sociocultural reality in place of biblical principle,” he concludes.

“Predictors of multiracial diversity in American congregations are charismatic worship style, younger age, small group approach, heterogeneous neighborhood, and geographic space (beltway urban),” Kersten Bayt Priest reports in *Let’s Get It Together: Multiracial and Interethnic Congregations* (p. 87). She reviews two significant sociological overviews – *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race*, by Michael O. Emerson, Curtiss Paul DeYoung, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim; and *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States*, by Michael O. Emerson with his pastor, Rodney M. Woo – and two insightful case studies – Kathleen Garces-Foley’s study of an historically Japanese-American congregation in *Crossing the Ethnic Divide: The Multiethnic Church on a Mission*; and Korie Edwards’ telling of her Midwest interracial church’s disappointments in *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches*.

In *Race in Evangelical America* (p. 82), Joy Moore surveys recent books that explore racialized churches and evangelical Christian practices of racial reconciliation. Edward Gilbreath’s *Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical’s Inside View of White Christianity* exposes the racism that lingers in the American evangelical church. Randy Woodley’s *Living in Color: Embracing God’s Passion for Ethnic Diversity* reports his quest for evangelical identity as a Keetoowah Cherokee. Two books – *Crazy Enough to Care: Changing Your World through Compassion, Justice and Racial Reconciliation* by Alvin C. Bibbs, Sr., with Marie Guthrie and Kathy Buscaglis; and *The Heart of Racial Justice: How Soul Change Leads to Social Change* by Brenda Salter McNeil and Rick Richardson – seek solutions through spiritual transformation. “The people of God should reflect God’s intended dynamic, multiethnic, multiracial community,” Moore concludes. “Conformity to an Anglo-culture on the part of persons of color is not Christian conversion.” ❖

The Persistent Problem

BY MICHAEL O. EMERSON

While whites tend to focus on creating good-intentioned, right thinking people, people of color tend to focus on group equality and justice. Both are important, so they need not be at war. But the focus must be on working together to undo the racialized society, and that is by definition not just about individuals.

For every racial group in the United States there exists at least one highly offensive, derogatory word meant to belittle them. We all know such words. But what about for white Americans, does there exist such an emotion-charged word? When I ask my students this question – no matter their hue – they are befuddled. “Honky” or “cracker” seem nothing more than funny-sounding words to them. Any words they can think of simply do not feel offensive or highly derogatory. Such words are all bark, and no bite.

Then I point out to my students that indeed there is such a word, one that will get whites’ blood boiling in a heartbeat. That word? “Racist.” Call a white American a racist and that person will be angered, the pulse will increase, and the skin will redden. Almost as if by instinct, the accused will lash out at the accuser, either with strong denial or with name calling of his or her own.

Why is this word so upsetting to so many white Americans? To answer this question, we must first understand a few central concepts within the study of race and race relations.

COMPETING DEFINITIONS OF RACISM

Racism is one of the most overused words in the American lexicon. Definitions vary widely, and the term is applied in a dizzying array of

situations, actions, and thoughts. It is a killer word—once uttered (“That’s racism”; “You’re racist”; “That’s a racist thing to say”; “America is racist”), it kills true, open social interaction.

Research consistently finds significant differences in the way that racial groups tend to define racism.¹ Whites tend to view racism as intended individual acts of overt prejudice and discrimination. Let us unpack the components of this view. First, insofar as racism exists, it is individual people who carry such views and act upon them. Groups, nations, and organizations are not racist; people are. Second, to be considered racist, the person must classify a group of people as inferior to others, and then whatever they say or do must result directly from that view. That is, they must mean for their actions to be racist for them to actually be racist. Third, racism is equated with prejudice (wrong thinking and talking about others) and individual discrimination (wrong actions against others). Finally, because of the other components of racism’s definition, if a person is a racist it is a master status, a core identity of who the person is, not just some passing act. In short, it defines the person’s essence.

To be called “racist” by others then is so very offensive to so many whites because it communicates an amazing charge. It says, “You, white person, walk around holding crazy stereotypes in your head, and intentionally and directly parading your racial prejudice and discrimination against me and others. Whatever else you may be, white person, this racist label is your master status.” Ouch. No wonder the word makes the blood boil.

Interestingly, though it is the dominant definition among whites, the individualist definition of racism is even more strongly held by white evangelicals than other whites. My colleague Christian Smith and I argue that this is due to the religio-cultural tools of the evangelical version of Christianity. Three tools in particular matter here: (1) individuals are personally accountable for their decisions (and the outcome of their decisions), (2) social life consists of individuals interacting with other individuals and change comes one heart at a time (what we call “relationalism”), and (3) anti-structuralism, that is, the rejection of the idea that relationships and individual actions might be subject to larger social forces, such as laws, institutional operating practices, and employment patterns. These religio-cultural tools direct white evangelicals either not to consider alternative definitions of racism, or if presented with alternative definitions, to view them as simply wrong.²

Most people of color define racism quite differently. Racism is, at a minimum, prejudice plus power, and that power comes not from being a prejudiced individual, but from being part of a group that controls the nation’s systems. So while anyone can be prejudiced, only whites can perpetrate racism in the United States, for they hold and have always held most of the power in American institutions. Even in a nation that currently has a president defined as black, nearly all senators, representatives, governors, and CEOs,

to name a few, are white. This view of racism is called the structuralist definition, and stands in stark contrast to the individualist definition.

We can already begin to see difficulties emerging. Race relations are fraught with land mines. One of them is that racial groups, on average, simply do not define racism in the same way. Disagreeing on racism's definition means not only the potential for more group conflict, but also reduced potential for overcoming it. Different definitions mean groups and people are working to different ends using different means. We could call this a stalemate, but even here there is disagreement. Whites often feel they live in a time of reverse racism and favoritism for minority groups. Given this view, they at times perceive themselves as the new minority group. In contrast, people of color most commonly view the system as stacked against them, that they will have to be twice as good as a white to get the job, promotion, or recognition, and that because political and organizational power remains in the hands of whites, white Americans will continue to define the terms of life in the United States – and to define it in terms favoring whites. Given these conflicts, different perspectives, and continuing suspicion, can we ever move forward?

DIMENSIONS OF WHITE PRIVILEGE

Within the study of race relations, several scholars have outlined what they call “white privilege.” We cannot understand racism in the United States without understanding the traditional position of white Americans relative to other Americans.

We can summarize what is meant by white privilege by discussing its three main dimensions.³

White Structural Advantage. As alluded to earlier, white Americans occupy the location of dominance – politically, economically, culturally, and numerically – within the racial hierarchy. They have disproportionate influence of political

parties, legal system, government-controlled institutions, industry, and business. These structural advantages provide whites with privileges – defined here as benefits accrued by virtue of having a white identity. This advantage is in everyday situations and at institutional levels.

Here are some examples, with varying degrees of significance for life outcomes. Whites easily purchase movies, literature, or greeting cards with whites in them. White Americans can ignore the experiences, writings, and

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ideas of racial/ethnic minorities without penalty. Whites are assumed to be middle-class, law-abiding, and well-meaning, unless they prove otherwise (and they will have to work at proving it) whereas for other groups it is typically the opposite. Whites have the ability to set laws and policies — in part because elected officials are overwhelmingly white — that define who is white and who is not, give them power to interpret what is a racial problem and what is not, determine who gets into the country and who does not, determine housing policies that favor their racial group, shape the development of educational curriculums that emphasize Western history and social experiences, and much more.

White Normativity. Structural advantage facilitates white normativity — the normalization of whites' cultural practices, ideologies, and location within the racial hierarchy such that how whites do things, their understandings about life, society, and the world, and their dominant social location over other racial groups are accepted as *just how things are*. Anything that diverges from this norm is deviant. Whites are privileged because, unlike nonwhites, they do not need to justify their way of doing or being. Instead, the burden for change is placed on the perceived deviants. Although white culture has many variations (compare for example a rural, Republican, NASCAR-loving, catfish-eat'n southern white and a wealthy, Democrat, opera-loving, quiche-eating Bostonian white), there remains an overarching normativity, a "configuration of [racial] practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of [whiteness]...that secures the dominant position of whites."⁴ That is, whites uphold practices and beliefs that sustain their dominant position in the racial hierarchy. Thus the practices and understandings of whites are normalized, and their interests affirmed.

White Transparency is "the tendency of whites not to think...about norms, behaviors, experiences, or perspectives that are white-specific."⁵ Whites typically lack a racial consciousness. Most whites are unaware that they are "raced," and that their race has real consequences for their lives. Rather, they believe that they earn what they get, and their achievements are nearly all based on individual effort, talent, and creativity. Whites often believe they are cultureless; it does not mean anything to be white they may think. They often think that only other groups have distinctive cultures and ways of being. Thus whites find it difficult to explain what it means to be white. In fact, they typically find it uncomfortable, even offensive to be asked. This is white transparency.

I see the impact of white transparency in a very real way when I give the students in my race and ethnic relations course the following assignment: "For the next twenty-four hours, any time you refer to someone who is white, preface it with the word 'white.' So if you are telling someone about your professor, say 'my white professor.' If you are talking about your friend, say 'my white friend.' After the twenty-four hours are com-

pleted, write a paper about your experience. How did you feel? What were other people's reactions?"

Their papers follow a fairly clear racial pattern. The students of color either say they did not find it that unusual to do this, as they typically do so – referring to people by their racial group. Or they say they find it funny, and so too do the people of color they talk to. But they also find it difficult to refer to someone as white to a white person, fearing retribution or expressions of shock.

My white students typically find this assignment a most difficult, often excruciating experience. They tell me they never refer to people by their race, so to be asked to do so feels not only unnatural, but also wrong, perhaps even racist. Some tell me they could not do the assignment at all (I tell them in the assignment that they do not have to do the assignment, but in such a case should write about why they did not wish to do it). Many do not finish the twenty-four hours, as they are simply too uncomfortable. Of those who attempt the assignment, they often report feeling dread, great nervousness, having sweaty palms, or racing hearts as they began. They report absolute shock from their white friends or family when they refer to someone as white. Sometimes they get lectures, reactions of horror, or reactions of "What is wrong with you?" Also common is to get reactions like, "What do you mean your white professor? What color are your other professors?"

This assignment is meant to demonstrate white privilege, especially white normativity and white transparency. It should not be a big deal, for an assignment, to refer to white people as white people for a few hours. It is not for most non-whites, unless they are talking to whites. It almost always is for whites, no matter who they are talking to, for the assignment violates the boundaries of white normativity and white transparency.

Given the white transparency so dominant in the United States, a white person is simply seen as an American, or perhaps as someone who has an ethnicity and eats some special foods on holidays. White transparency is a powerful tool for maintaining privilege because of its elusive nature. How can one challenge white privilege if there is no such thing as white culture/white practices? White transparency is also why whites can feel like they are under attack for little reason, and why they may feel that society is set up against them. To be white means in part that one does not see the

Whites typically lack a racial consciousness. Most whites are unaware that they are "raced," and that their race has real consequences for their lives. Whites often believe they are cultureless.

advantages garnered from being white, so any threats to taken-for-granted ways of life are indeed threatening and feel unjustified.

These three dimensions of whiteness – white structural advantage, white normativity, and white transparency – work together to sustain whites' position at the top of society. Importantly, these dimensions can produce dominance without whites feeling like it is true (though most

anyone who is not white believes it to be true).

Three dimensions of whiteness—white structural advantage, normativity, and transparency—work together to sustain whites' position at the top of society. Importantly, they produce dominance without whites' feeling like it is true.

We have identified the very different definitions, perspectives, and social locations of Americans based in good part on the racial group of which they are perceived to be a part. White privilege is often invisible to whites, but as clear as a sunny day to people of color; contrasting and conflicting definitions of racism cause all sorts

of problems, and serve only to heighten divisions between racial groups. So can we move beyond such impasses?

THE RACIALIZED SOCIETY

We can start by acknowledging that racism is not an accurate focus for understanding race in the United States. Rather, we should acknowledge that the United States, as a nation, is racialized. By this I mean that it is a society where racial categories matter profoundly, creating differences in life experiences (including the topics explored thus far in this essay), life opportunities, and social relationships. A racialized society allocates what society values – income, wealth, fine neighborhoods, quality schools, social status, respect, psychological well-being, health, life expectancy – unequally along racial lines. Society (its institutions and its people) create racial categories which change over time, as well as the form of racialization – such as slavery, Jim Crow segregation, de facto segregation and inequality. So while its form changes, what does not change is that race matters considerably for people's identities, whom they know, where they live, whom they marry, and their life chances.

Consider for example the current case that white Americans have on average ten times the wealth of black and Hispanic Americans.⁶ That superior wealth allows white Americans to obtain the finest of neighborhoods, the best of educations, and access to many other social goods that help them pass on their advantages to their children. It allows them to help one another

out in ways impossible for other groups. We can summarize it this way: What does it cost to be black, Hispanic, or American Indian in the racialized society? On average, about 40% of your income, 90% of your wealth, and five to ten years of your life.⁷

From this racialization perspective, racism is not individual overt prejudice, nor prejudice plus power. Rather, it is the *collective misuse of power that leads to inequality in the distribution of society's valued resources*. It is a *changing ideology with the constant purpose of justifying the racialized society*. Racism, then, is a concept that helps us understand how racialized systems are maintained, but it is not itself the central issue in race relations and racial inequality.

We need to focus our attention on undoing our racialized society, on making our organizations fairer places for people of all racial backgrounds, on making our congregations places that do not reinforce racial division, but which instead bring people of all backgrounds together for the common purpose of glorifying God. We would do well to acknowledge that for all the reasons discussed earlier, whites' tendency will be to focus on creating good-intentioned, right thinking people, whereas people of color's tendency will be to focus on group equality and justice. Both are important, so they need not be at war. But the focus must be on working together to undo the racialized society, and that is by definition not just about individuals.

How can we work together without simply ending up devolving into disagreement and conflict, as has happened so often in the past? My colleague George Yancey and I have developed what we call the Mutual Obligations Approach.⁸ Although I cannot go into details of this approach here, its key steps include interracial contact under controlled conditions, listening to each other, acknowledging and defining racial problems, searching for a critical core that is agreed upon by all, giving voice to cultural uniqueness, recognizing and incorporating self- and group-interest, and devising ways that allow for negotiation of these self- and group-interests to produce an agreed upon solution. This approach is something like what is done in marital counseling, but on a much larger scale. This larger scale makes solutions more complicated, and requires using more steps and relying on more principles. But it can be done. It should be done. And with our undying hope in God's power and kingdom of heaven on earth, it will be done.

NOTES

1 For example, see George Yancey, *Beyond Racial Gridlock: Embracing Mutual Responsibility* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 19-28.

2 Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 76-91.

3 For an excellent review of whiteness studies and their sources, see Korie L. Edwards, *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

4 Amanda E. Lewis, "'What Group?' Studying Whites and Whiteness in the Era of 'Color-Blindness,'" *Sociological Theory* 22:4 (December, 2004), 623-646, here citing 634.

5 Barbara Flagg, "'Was Blind, but Now I See': White Race Consciousness and the Requirement of Discriminatory Intent," *Michigan Law Review* 91 (March, 1993), 953-1017, here citing 957.

6 Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro, *Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality*, tenth anniversary edition (New York: Routledge, 2006), especially chapter 5, "A Story of Two Nations: Race and Wealth."

7 See the articles in Charles A. Gallagher, ed., *Rethinking the Color Line: Readings in Race and Ethnicity*, second edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009).

8 Michael O. Emerson and George Yancey, *Transcending Racial Barriers: Toward a Mutual Obligations Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).



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“All the Families of the Earth Shall Be Blessed”

BY MIKEAL G. PARSONS

More than the other Gospel writers, Luke focuses on issues of race. From the Abrahamic covenant he gleans a radical vision of God’s people as inclusive of all who follow Jesus Christ, regardless of socio-economic standing, physical appearance, or ethnic or racial identity.

More than the other Gospel writers, Luke consistently focuses on issues of race in Jesus’ ministry and in the mission activity of the early church. For Luke, God’s people are inclusive of all who profess the lordship of Jesus Christ, regardless of socio-economic standing, physical appearance, or ethnic or racial identity. This radical vision of God’s covenant people was articulated in the words and deeds of Jesus and his first followers.

Undergirding this vision was the covenant in which God promised that through Abraham and his descendents “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). The Abrahamic covenant provided for Luke the scriptural warrant for the Gentile mission and the radically inclusive covenant community resulting from that mission. From the beginning of the Third Gospel until the end of its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, the nature and shape of the Abrahamic community remain a central concern.

The radical inclusivity of the Abrahamic covenant is *anticipated* in the *Nunc Dimittis*, Simeon’s speech about the infant Christ (which is replete also with echoes of Isaiah 40:5; 42:6; 46:13; 49:6; and 52:9-10):

Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of *all peoples*,

a light for revelation to the *Gentiles*,
and for glory to your people *Israel*.

Luke 2:29-32

Jesus is God's salvation for *all people*, regardless of ethnicity or race.

The wideness of God's redemptive mercy is a major theme in Jesus' inaugural sermon in Nazareth. At the end of his sermon, Jesus declares:

I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed — only Naaman the Syrian.

*Luke 4:25-27 (NIV)*¹

In recounting these two stories, Jesus emphasizes that the object of each prophet's miraculous ministry is a Gentile. In Elijah's case it is the poor widow at Zarephath in Sidon; with Elisha it is Naaman the Syrian official. These stories make it clear that prophets of old did not limit their ministries to the in-group. They, like Jesus, were no respecter of gender, class, or race.

The radical inclusiveness of Jesus' ministry shocks his audience: "When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage" (4:28). They had understood themselves to be the primary beneficiaries of Jesus' message. They could all relate to being poor, captive, blind, or oppressed (cf. Luke 4:18-19). They were ready for deliverance, but they were not prepared to share it. When they hear that Jesus intends his Jubilee ministry to extend to Gentiles, they are "filled with anger" and fulfill Jesus' prophecy that "no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town" (Luke 4:24). Instead, "they got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff" (4:29). The crowd's intentions, however, are thwarted: "But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way" (Luke 4:30). On this day, Jesus escapes death on a hill in his hometown. His radical ministry of reaching out to those excluded because of race, gender, or economic and social status, however, eventually leads to his execution on another hill called Calvary in the city of Jerusalem.

This story should not be taken to mean that Israel, in Luke's view, is permanently rejected. Stories of positive Jewish response to Jesus' ministry are found throughout the Third Gospel (and later Acts). But those who respond positively to Jesus' message recognize the inherent inclusiveness of his message. Those who do not hear that message of inclusion or choose to reject it do not respond positively.

Throughout the rest of the Third Gospel, the inclusivity of God's covenant people is seen in both Jesus' words and deeds. He tells a parable about a man

beaten, robbed, and left for dead by the side of the road (Luke 10:25-37). The only person who gives aid to the man is a Samaritan, whose identity could only have shocked those familiar with Jewish/Samaritan hostilities. Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, vilifies the Samaritans as half-breeds:

...they alter their attitude according to circumstance and, when they see the Jews prospering, call them their kinsmen, on the ground that they are descended from Joseph and are related to them through their origin from him, but, when they see the Jews in trouble, they say that they have nothing whatever in common with them nor do these have any claim of friendship or race, and they declare themselves to be aliens of another race. (*Jewish Antiquities*, IX, 291)²

Even Jesus’ own disciples shared in this hostility. In the episode immediately preceding the parable, a Samaritan village refuses to extend hospitality to Jesus and disciples. James and John ask Jesus: “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” (9:54). Their question elicits a sharp rebuke from Jesus (9:55). Later on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus heals ten lepers in the region between Samaria and Galilee. When only one of the ten, a Samaritan, returns to thank him, Jesus responds to the man:

“Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

Luke 17:17-19

In this new Abrahamic community, according to Luke, help was to be received and extended, regardless of ethnic identity.

This same concern to acknowledge and include the foreigner or outsider continues in the Acts of the Apostles. In his Pentecost sermon, Peter declares to his Jewish audience that the

promise of redemption “is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:39, NIV). While the reference to those who “are far off” could be a temporal reference to future generations, it is more likely an ethnic designation referring to Gentiles who will now be included in God’s mercies of salvation. (See the similar phrase in Acts 22:21, in which Paul recounts Christ’s commission to him on the

In Luke-Acts, those who respond positively to Jesus’ message recognize the inherent inclusiveness of his message. Those who do not hear that message of inclusion or choose to reject it do not respond positively.

Damascus road—“Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.”)

In the very next scene, Peter explicitly cites the Abrahamic promise, quoting Genesis 12:3 to the people who had gathered to him at Solomon’s Portico: “You are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God gave to your ancestors, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed’” (Acts 3:25). Peter focuses not on the gift of land or the promise of descendants but rather on the promise that through Abraham’s seed “all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” That the Abrahamic covenant, which was fulfilled in the coming of the seed of Abraham, Christ, now includes Gentiles is also indicated, however subtly, in Peter’s next comment, “When God raised up his servant, he sent him *first* to you” (3:26; my emphasis). The implication is that God’s servant came first to the Jew, but also for the Gentile. Race is no hindrance to God’s salvific mercies.

Peter would be involved later in bringing this good news to the Gentiles and perhaps in ways he could not yet have understood or accepted. But before Peter’s ministry is transformed through the conversion of Cornelius in Acts 10-11, Luke reports the conversion of another Gentile, the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. Near the end of the story of the Ethiopian eunuch’s conversion in Acts 8:26-40, the eunuch, having heard Philip’s christological interpretation of Isaiah 53 and seeing a pool of water, exclaims, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” (Acts 8:36). The answer, of course, is that nothing can exclude one who has believed from incorporation into the family of God, not even one who is from as “far away” as Ethiopia and whose body is deemed defective and inadequate by larger cultural norms.

In the very next chapter, Paul receives his commission to be the Apostle to the Gentiles through Ananias:

But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man [Saul] is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

Acts 9:15-16 (NIV)

The fulfillment of Paul’s commission will occupy the better part of the second half of Acts (chapters 13-28), but it is the story of the conversion of Cornelius and his household that remains the centerpiece for understanding the radical call for inclusiveness in the early church.

Ironically, the story turns on the conversion, or radical re-orientation, not of Cornelius but of Peter. Despite his earlier declarations, explicit and implicit, regarding the inclusion of Gentiles into the family of God, Peter’s response to the vision at Joppa reveals he is unprepared to accept all the ramifications of this radical gospel message. In his vision of the sheet filled with clean and unclean animals, Peter hears a divine command to “slaugh-

ter and eat” (Acts 10:13). If the divine voice intends that Peter’s ritual slaughtering of the animals in his vision will render them fit for consumption (see Deuteronomy 12:21-22), Peter misses those allusions altogether, hearing only a command to disobey dietary regulations: “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane and unclean” (Acts 10:14). As the narrative unfolds, the audience (as well as Peter) will be led to conclude that the clean animals were polluted by their association with the unclean animals and will apply that insight to social interaction among persons. At this point in the narrative, though, the point is simply that Peter thinks he knows what is clean and unclean, and he refuses to eat what is unclean. The scene repeats itself twice more. What remains unclear is the subject of this vision. Is Peter to disregard Jewish dietary laws or is something else at stake?

As a result of his own vision, Cornelius sends messengers to summon Peter; they find Peter “still thinking about the vision” (Acts 10:19). When he learns of Cornelius’ request for an audience, Peter agrees to return with them on the next day. Peter takes his next step toward conversion and correctly interpreting his vision when he sees the crowd of Gentiles gathered in Cornelius’ house and says: “You yourselves know that it is inappropriate for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile” (10:28a). This view conforms to that expressed in the second-century BC pseudepigraphic writing, Book of Jubilees: “Keep yourself separate from the nations, and

do not eat with them; and do not imitate their rites, nor associate yourself with them” (Jubilees 22:16a). But Peter’s view is changing: “God has shown me that I should not call anyone [common] or unclean” (10:28b). Through reflection and subsequent interaction with these Gentiles, Peter realizes that his vision was about more than clean and unclean foods: it involves

proper social interaction with persons. The logic of his statement can be drawn out in the following parallelism: the Jew who is defiled by association with a Gentile is “common”; the Gentile by nature (expressed in diet and lifestyle) is “unclean.” So, Peter claims God has revealed to him that he is to refrain from calling any Jew “common” for associating with Gentiles or calling any Gentile “unclean” because of lifestyle. Peter moves from food to persons. Not only has God cleansed the Jew who by all rights should have been defiled

Peter focuses not on the gift of land or the promise of descendants but rather on the promise that through Abraham’s seed “all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” The implication is that race is no hindrance to God’s salvific mercies.

by association with Gentiles, so that Peter should no longer refer to them as “common,” but God has also cleansed the Gentile, so that Peter should refrain from calling them “unclean.” Just as it will be important for the Jewish believers to hear that they are not defiled by associating with Gentiles, Gentiles in this passage hear Peter declare that Gentiles are no longer to be considered unclean.

Later he will make the very bold move of declaring before a Jewish audience that God has “cleansed the hearts” of Gentiles (see Acts 15:9). In so doing, Peter aligns himself with other first-century Jews who claimed that “righteous Gentiles” had a place in the “age to come” as *Gentiles* and without having first to become converts to Judaism.³ What separates Peter from these views is his understanding that in this new Abrahamic covenant the Gentile, like the Jew, is deemed worthy of salvation by God’s redeeming grace and not by any act or deed on the person’s part. Peter declares that inclusion into the community regardless of racial identity is ultimately rooted in God’s own character: “God shows no partiality” (10:34). God does not discriminate (cf. Deuteronomy 10:17-18; Romans 2:11; Colossians 3:25; Ephesians 6:9; Polycarp, *Letter to the Philippians* 6:1), and it is wrong for humans to do so (James 2:1, 9).

The scene ends with Cornelius and his household receiving the Holy Spirit and being baptized (Acts 10:44-48). Nothing hinders the Gentile from entering the “age to come,” although for a while the Jewish church will require Gentiles to observe certain dietary restrictions in order to facilitate Jewish-Gentile social interaction (cf. Acts 15). Eventually, this restriction will also be dropped.

For Luke, incorporation into the Abrahamic covenant was no longer based on genetic descent, but rather was open to anyone who followed Abraham’s example of believing and being reckoned righteous by God. John the Baptist has put it this way: “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (Luke 3:8). There are no restrictions on God’s redeeming mercy, not in terms of race, gender, or socio-economic status. The poor, bent woman of Luke 13 is a “daughter of Abraham” (13:16), just as rich Zacchaeus is a “son of Abraham” (Luke 19:9). And so are the lame man (Acts 3), the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8), and all those Gentiles who respond to the gospel message declared by Paul and his companions.

Grounded in the authority of Israel’s Scriptures, the words and deeds of Jesus, and ultimately the very character of God (who shows no partiality), Luke has radically redrawn the map of who is in and who is out. For Luke, God’s covenant people can be a blessing to the nations only by overcoming the walls of separation and division made with human hands. If the Church today is to fulfill its Abrahamic mission to be a “blessing to all the families of the earth,” then, we, too, must embrace this wonderfully radical vision of God’s people, which includes *everyone* who calls upon the name of the Lord!⁴

NOTES

1 Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com.

2 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, Books IX-XI, Loeb Classical Library, translated by Ralph Marcus (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), 9.291.

3 Josephus reports of the Gentile king, Izates, that circumcision was not judged a necessity because of his monotheistic views (*Jewish Antiquities* 20.2-46; see also *Babylonian Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin* 13.2).

4 This article draws on my research for Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

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Gregory of Nyssa and the Culture of Oppression

BY KIMBERLY FLINT-HAMILTON

In the late fourth century Gregory of Nyssa spoke out against the institution of slavery in a way that none had before, vilifying it as incompatible with Christianity. What can we learn from this Cappadocian Father about seeing beyond the veil of oppression?

In the late fourth century a lone Christian voice spoke out against the oppressive institution of slavery in a way that none had before. Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-394), one of the Cappadocian Fathers, laid out a line of reasoning vilifying the institution as incompatible with Christianity in his fourth homily on Ecclesiastes. It is considered the “first truly ‘anti-slavery’ text of the patristic age.”¹

His words seemed not to have had much affect on the Church at the time, however. In fact, it took until nearly 1,500 years after Gregory’s death for the Christian faithful to take an unequivocal stance against slavery, and even then American Christians continued to turn a blind eye to the suffering of slaves and to the incompatibility of slavery with the message of the Bible. This raises a deluge of questions. What was the sociocultural context in which Gregory of Nyssa formed his critique of slavery? How did the culture of fourth-century Cappadocia work to ensnare nearly everyone in the grasp of slavery? What was it about Gregory that enabled him to rise above the status quo? How did a slave society transform into a culture of racism? What are the consequences of that transformation? What can we learn from Gregory, and how do we see beyond the veil of oppression?

Gregory vigorously attacked slavery as an institution. In his homily, he lays out a complex philosophical argument based on the premise that masters and slaves are equal in the eyes of God. This premise was already generally accepted by Christians. Both slaves and masters were understood

by Christian intellectuals to have the same human nature. Gregory, however, follows the argument farther than most of his contemporary intellectuals did. If slaves and masters are both equally human, then the practice of one human enslaving another is immoral in the eyes of God.

You condemn a person to slavery whose nature is free and independent, and you make laws opposed to God and contrary to His natural law. For you have subjected one who was made precisely to be lord of the earth, and whom the Creator intended to be a ruler, to the yoke of slavery, in resistance to and rejection of His divine precept. ...How is it that you disregard the animals which have been subjected to you as slaves under your hand, and that you should act against a free nature, bringing down one who is of the same nature of yourself, to the level of four-footed beasts or inferior creatures...?²

Gregory's position on slavery is especially surprising given his cultural context. Gregory of Nyssa, his older brother Basil of Caesarea (c. 329-399), and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 325-389) formed a group of intellectuals known as the Cappadocian Fathers. Together, their theological teachings and scholarship helped define Christian doctrine regarding the Holy Trinity, challenged Arianism (the concept that the Son was of different substance from and inferior to the Father), and contributed to the authorship of the Nicene Creed. Gregory of Nyssa's ideas on slavery differed, however, from those of the other two Cappadocian Fathers.

Both Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil of Caesarea considered slavery an unfortunate part of human existence. Gregory of Nazianzus reasoned that slavery was nothing more than an unfortunate "sinful distinction" — it came about as a result of sin and therefore is one aspect of the human condition.³ Basil, on the other hand, came to a different conclusion. He argued that all humans share the same basic human nature, but unlike Gregory of Nazianzus, he believed that slavery was good for slaves because of their inferiority. Slaves, in other words, are inferior in intelligence and should be grateful for their enslavement to those of superior wisdom because they could not otherwise survive. This is a position that Augustine (c. 354-430) advocated in *City of God* (19.15).

Another of Gregory of Nyssa's contemporaries, whom we know as Pseudo-Ambrose, took Basil's and Gregory of Nazianzus' justifications for slavery farther still. It was Pseudo-Ambrose who traced slavery to Noah's cursing of Ham in Genesis 9:25-27. According to John Francis Maxwell, "This disastrous example of fundamentalist exegesis continued to be used for 1,400 years and led to the widely held view that African Negroes were cursed by God."⁴ Pseudo-Ambrose, through his extreme teachings, was responsible for the ancestral link between slavery and racism. African Americans still suffer today from his interpretation. Jean Douglas writes of her experience growing up Catholic in inner-city Detroit, Michigan:

The curse of Ham has been used for centuries to rationalize the oppression of Black peoples. The message has been preached from the pulpit countless times. And Blacks have accepted it. The curse of Ham is a profound statement of God's unwillingness to forgive us the sins of our ancestors. It justifies centuries of Black subjugation at the hands of Whites, who, after all, are only helping to ensure that God's will is done. Our oppressors are the very hands of God.⁵

What becomes apparent when reading Gregory of Nyssa is just how extraordinary was his theology. He was remarkably ahead of his time. Having been brought up in a world in which slavery was the order of the day and had been for centuries, even millennia, and surrounded by intellectuals whose thinking on the topic was more in line with the sociocultural milieu, he followed his theological logic far beyond the contemporary context. Even though Gregory was not alone in his compassion for the lot of the slaves, his conclusion to attack the very institution was unique. Two early catechetical documents, *The Shepherd of Hermas* and *The Apostolic Constitutions*, advocated that slaves should be bought with monies from early Christian common funds and manumitted to alleviate their suffering.⁶ But neither of these documents aggressively advocated abolition. Before Gregory, slave owners had been urged to treat their slaves with dignity and not abuse them. They had even been urged to manumit those servants that had proven themselves worthy. Yet only Gregory suggested that slavery, as an institution, was sinful.



To understand just how advanced Gregory of Nyssa was, a brief digression on culture is in order. For generations, anthropologists have debated the definition of culture. Even though culture surrounds us – we eat, drink, and sleep according to predetermined cultural patterns established long ago and transmitted to us by our forebears – it remains frustratingly difficult to define. Most definitions focus on patterns of behavior, life ways, symbols, and shared systems of meaning. Culture may be the single most powerful adaptive strategy human beings have to help us survive in the world. It is culture, in the minds of many anthropologists, that makes us human.

Culture works because of tradition. Certain behaviors and attitudes, taught to us by our parents, teachers, priests and ministers, and society at large, persist generation after generation. Most of us go through life without questioning these complex patterns of behavior that shape our identity. Clyde Kluckhohn describes culture as a kind of "blueprint for all of life's activities."⁷ Just as we never actually see gravity but know it exists from its ability to force objects to behave in characteristic ways, so too does culture shape our behaviors and attitudes in characteristic and predictable ways, both consciously and subconsciously. Traditions for which there is no apparent logical explanation arise from generations of doing certain things

and approaching certain problems the same way. Tradition helps us understand our physical and cultural environments, and allows us to form social networks with one another. But not all traditions are good for all members of a society. Oppression and its companion, racism, are traditions too.

Most people never ponder the rightness or wrongness of their particular traditions, at least not to the point of changing their behaviors or increasing the awareness of others around them. It is too easy to go with the flow, and there are risks associated with challenging the status quo. Questioning authority can lose you your clients, your job, your position in society, even your family. It might eventually thrust you into poverty and oblivion. It takes a great deal of courage to speak out against deeply entrenched cultural traditions. Gregory of Nyssa was one of those rare individuals who could see beyond the cultural boundaries and stereotypes of his time and take the risk of speaking out. For Gregory, the real risk lay in losing his immortal soul rather than his social position.

Another anthropological concept relevant to our discussion on slavery and racism is *cultural materialism*. According to this concept, human behavior is shaped by the struggle for survival and the complex ways in which human beings in a given society gain access to the materials of life, which include things like food, water, shelter, and even jobs and political clout, but extends to values, ideas, and beliefs. According to cultural materialist analysis, in a society whose economy relies on the work of slaves it is inevitable that the dominant class will come to believe that slaves are inferior and immoral, and that they deserve their servitude.

The culture of mastery and servitude had become ingrained into the socio-political matrix of the fourth century and was accepted unquestioningly, at least by the masters. It was a culture of oppression. We will probably never know what the slaves thought of their situation, but if they were anything like the African slaves in the New World, most felt trapped and abused. The slave narra-

tives paint a vivid picture of dehumanization and oppression that ensnared master and slave alike.⁸ Paolo Freire points out that oppressors create a conservative “possessive consciousness,” and the desire to possess extends from material goods like food, clothing, and housing, to the earth itself and the individual human beings who find themselves in the oppressors’ wake. In fact, the very term “human being” gets co-opted by the oppressors whose

Christian slave owners had been urged to treat their slaves with dignity and not abuse them, even to manumit those who had proven themselves worthy. Only Gregory suggested that slavery, as an institution, was sinful.

sense of entitlement to the right to live comfortably and peacefully empowers them to reap the benefits of the labor of the oppressed who, in the oppressive society, are deemed not-quite-human. The right to life itself is an entitlement that oppressors merely concede to the oppressed. And because of this warped hierarchy of power, oppression intrinsically represents violence. A culture of oppression ultimately has its start in an act of violence by powerful individuals

It takes courage and great strength to break cultural bonds that shape our perceptions. This is what makes Gregory's accomplishment so remarkable: he escapes from the invisible trap laid by generations of oppressors and confronts the established hierarchy.

against the powerless. Freire writes, "This violence, as a process, is perpetuated from generation to generation of oppressors, who become its heirs and are shaped in its climate."⁹

The oppressive society therefore is both violent towards and possessive of its oppressed. In that value system, the oppressed deserve and should be grateful for their status.

In fact, the oppressors deserve to be on top of the social hierarchy. They are better than the ones on the other end — smarter, stronger, holier, less inclined to sin, and thereby closer to God. They are more valuable and deserve to be masters. Indeed, in the reasoning of the oppressors, the hierarchy exists because God ordained it. In Basil's, Gregory of Nazianzus', and Augustine's view, the oppressive hierarchy is an unfortunate result of sin and, therefore, slavery comes from sin. In fact, in the view of Augustine, slavery is God's just punishment for sin.¹⁰ By analogy, just as God is the overseer for creation, so too must masters be understood as overseers for those who are inferior.

Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Augustine were reading Scripture though a sociopolitical matrix. After all, slavery was very much accepted by everyone — Christians, Jews, and pagans alike. Church leaders accepted it just as absolutely as the rest of society.¹¹ Even a freed slave like Epictetus, a Stoic philosopher of the late first and early second centuries AD who had been rendered lame by his former master, never questioned the institution.¹² It had been woven into the fabric of society for so long that it was accepted without question. It became convenient to subordinate theology to tradition, and to use Scripture as a tool to explain, justify, and even sanction the culture of slavery. It would never have occurred to most people, not even religious intellectuals, to use Scripture to analyze critically an institution that subordinates God's creation. Trapped in that oppressive cultural matrix, most people were blinded to the injustices of slavery.

The same was true for the American colonists. The early years of the Virginia colonies were extremely difficult. Faced with starvation, the settlers had to come up with a strategy to cultivate enough food to survive and make a profit as well. African slaves were their answer. Given the colonists' near-starvation and desperation, and the virtual helplessness of Africans who were thousands of miles from their homes without a support network, "the peculiar institution" of slavery appeared to be an attractive solution to their problems. By the 1640s laws were created to extend servitude indefinitely for blacks, to include future generations of their offspring, and to punish whites who fraternized with blacks,¹³ because of a strong desire to force a wedge between poor whites and blacks that would circumvent any impetus for their collaboration.¹⁴ Thus, American racism was born.

The Virginians used religion to support their racist attitudes and interpreted Scripture to support the enslavement of Africans. Paul's exhortation, "Slaves, be obedient to your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ" (Ephesians 6:5), took on a life of its own. Although the authenticity of the Pauline 'household codes' has been questioned, with many theologians believing that they were inserted into the text a generation or more after Paul,¹⁵ they were still a highly effective tool to keep slaves in their place.

Later the Manifest Destiny doctrine – the belief that God intended for the United States to spread across the continent – was used to support the subjugation of non-Europeans, particularly Native American people in the 1840s. The power of religion to reinforce an oppressive hierarchy was inestimable.



It takes courage to question the status quo and great strength to break the cultural bonds that shape our perceptions and understandings. This is what makes Gregory of Nyssa's accomplishment so remarkable: he escapes from the invisible trap laid by generations of oppressors and confronts the established hierarchy. Applying a critical theological matrix to the slave society, Gregory of Nyssa casts new light on human interactions. He shows that slave-owning society creates an illegitimate human hierarchy – illegitimate because it is in conflict with God's plan for creation.

Gregory interprets the Book of Ecclesiastes through the lens of the *imago Dei* of Genesis. Reading Scripture "intertextually," he creates the "scriptural grammar for a theological anthropology that makes the case against slavery," Kameron Carter notes.¹⁶ According to this new dialectic, within every single human being – past, present, and future – there exists the seed of the fulfillment of God's grand design in creation. Gregory understands Genesis 1:26-27 to be about not just the creation of the first humans, but "the fullness of humankind, comprehended by God's 'foresight,'" David Bentley Hart writes. "Adam and Eve, however superlatively endowed with the gifts of grace at their origin, constitute in Gregory's eyes only the first increments (so to

speak) of that concrete community that, as a whole, reflects the beauty of its creator."¹⁷ This fullness of humankind, which Gregory calls *pleroma*, includes all humans, from the very first to the last, throughout all ages.¹⁸

In his fourth homily on Ecclesiastes, Gregory denounces slavery on the grounds that the nature of humankind is free. The *pleroma*, as the fulfillment of God's will, must be free; it cannot be subservient to any human subdivision.

**What force is so attractive as to blind
people—slave and free, black and white,
oppressors and oppressed—to slavery's
corrosive force to the point of risking their
very souls? The answer is privilege.**

Ownership of one human being over another is therefore antithetical to human nature. God endowed human beings with dominion over all other creatures, but not over other humans, so slavery calls God's will into question. "Irrational beasts are the only slaves of humankind," Gregory writes. "But by dividing the human species into two

with 'slavery' and 'ownership,' you have caused it to be enslaved to itself, and to be owner of itself."¹⁹

Since all humans are reflected in *pleroma*, the beauty of *pleroma* cannot be revealed by subordinating one portion of humanity to another. Only in universal freedom can the fullness of *pleroma* unfold, with each individual human being contributing. Slavery, racism, and oppression in general, are completely incompatible with the will of God.²⁰

What was it about Gregory that enabled him to step outside of his own sociocultural matrix and question—condemn, rather, in the strongest of terms—an institution that his contemporaries, including members of his own family, accepted and even endorsed? Kameron Carter describes the difference-maker as Gregory's theological imagination, a way of seeing present realities in light of theological truths. "I am suggesting a connection between the theological imagination out of which Gregory operates and the theological imagination that was emerging within certain currents of Afro-Christian faith in its New World dawning."²¹



Yet the message of Scripture, as interpreted by Gregory, failed to reach the faithful. The culture of oppression held too strong a grip. Nearly fifteen centuries later, Pope Gregory XVI condemned the slave trade in an Apostolic Brief, *In Supremo Apostolatus Fastigio* (1839). But it was composed in a way that invited skepticism: American bishops interpreted it as not applying to their particular sociopolitical situation. Because Gregory XVI did not include censure and did not lay a theological foundation for his condemnation of

trading in slaves, his message was diluted.²² Because slavery was considered essential to the social fabric of nineteenth century America, the bishops, priests, and lay people – many of whom were slaveholders themselves – never seriously considered questioning the institution, even in the face of papal condemnation.

What force is so attractive as to blind people – slave and free, black and white, oppressors and oppressed – to slavery’s corrosive force to the point of risking their very souls? The answer is privilege. Privilege for those in Gregory of Nyssa’s generation who benefited from the existence of slaves, for whom being a ‘good slave master’ even accrued social and spiritual rewards, so deeply entrenched was the culture of oppression. And white privilege for those in our society, who more than a century after the official end of slavery continue to link whiteness to goodness and entitlement, and blackness to crime, corruption, and disenfranchisement, so blind are most of us to the legacy of slavery and racism. In James Cone’s analysis:

Unfortunately, American theologians...have interpreted the gospel according to the cultural and political interests of white people. They have rarely attempted to transcend the social interests of their group by seeking an analysis of the gospel in the light of consciousness of black people struggling for liberation. White theologians, because of their identity with the dominant power structure, are largely boxed within their own cultural history.²³

In other words, white privilege is a theological problem, but because most white – and black – theologians are trapped in an environment of encultured and institutionalized racism, most people are blind to it and white privilege has not been studied adequately. Non-whites, and particularly blacks, have long been treated as *objects* of religious discourse rather than *subjects* in relationship with God.²⁴ Theologian Jon Nilson analyzes the problem of racism, particularly the problems raised by ignoring racism in the Church and in society: “racism is a theological problem because it creates a sinful cultural matrix. It makes white supremacy and black subordination seem normal.”²⁵



There can be no doubt of racism’s destructive force. Medical experimentation on blacks, without their informed consent – on slaves in the antebellum era and free black citizens afterward – persisted for hundreds of years and was endorsed by the federal government as well as the health care community.²⁶ The infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study is a perfect example. For forty years (1932-1972) nearly four hundred poor black men were given placebos and denied treatment for syphilis. Not one of the hundreds, possibly thousands, of physicians and politicians who knew about the study raised a finger to stop it. When the study was publicly disclosed, the federal government commissioned a team of theologians, philosophers, and physicians to study the

problems of abuse and establish ethical guidelines for the health care system. In their *Belmont Report* issued seven years later, the commissioners – blind to the entrenched structures of oppression – virtually ignored race and poverty, the dominant factors that made the Tuskegee men vulnerable as study subjects.

Shawnee Daniels-Sykes observes, “by ignoring the relevant features of the men who participated in the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, arguably, the commissioners charged with the development of the *Belmont Report* failed to protect *all* human subjects in a holistic manner.”²⁷ Applying Gregory of Nyssa’s logic, racism and white privilege so distorted the commission’s perspective that they were unable to protect the *pleroma*, and instead were concerned only with protecting one facet of humanity at the expense of another, in direct violation of the will of God.

That same distortion empowered white physicians and health care workers to perform illegal sterilizations on black women without their consent during the 1960s and 1970s.²⁸ Even today, there are countless disparities in access and quality of medical care between blacks and whites, due largely to the culture of racism and oppression that seeps into virtually every aspect of our lives.

The legacy of oppression and slavery did not end with the Tuskegee Syphilis Study and the *Belmont Report*. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina showed us how the force of oppression has blinded many to the suffering of those trapped after the levees broke in New Orleans. The victims, mostly black and poor, waited five days for relief. Compared with an even larger disaster – the Indonesian tsunami of December 2004, for which the United States responded with humanitarian aid in less than forty-eight hours for a region half-a-world away – the response to Katrina was abysmal.

Many Katrina victims could see a safe haven walking distance away, in neighboring Gretna, a predominantly white community. The Gretna sheriff’s deputies, however, set up a blockade at the bridge separating the cities and kept the victims out of their town by gunpoint. Satellite photos reveal a convoy of New Orleans public school buses rushing to rescue the white citizens of the neighboring St. Bernard parish rather than the black New Orleans residents. Federal and state officials ordered the Red Cross *not* to provide relief to the New Orleans residents while allowing it to enter other, predominately white neighborhoods affected by Katrina.²⁹

And this environment of oppression and subjugation gave free rein to the more extremist of the oppressors. At least eleven black men were shot by whites in the aftermath of the storm in what several witnesses have described as a free-for-all, a hunting season on blacks; yet, to date, no attempt has been made to charge the whites responsible.³⁰ In a culture of racism and oppression one can, quite literally, get away with murder.

One need not wonder why the suicide rate for blacks has been shown to be directly proportional with the level of education attainment. In a recent study of factors contributing to suicide, the rates were inversely proportional with levels of education attainment for all other demographic groups stud-

ied: that is, more educated individuals are less likely to commit suicide. But the reverse is true for black men. For them, increased suicide rates correlate with increased education. The author concluded that because increased educational attainment does not produce expected economic and social gains, the realization that one is trapped in a web of racism from which there is no apparent escape and the resultant frustration and depression can drive blacks to extremes.³¹



We can learn a great deal from Gregory of Nyssa. All corners of humanity, including men, women, blacks, whites, Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, and people of every race, ethnicity, class, and nationality are part of *pleroma* and reflect God's beauty and perfection.

As difficult as it can be to see past the veil of institutionalized oppression, we have a moral obligation to try. It takes wisdom and courage to challenge the status quo, to call the dominant culture to task. And it takes hard work to defuse the standard arguments that we have all heard since childhood – “They wouldn’t be poor if they worked hard,” “There wouldn’t be so many of them in prisons if they weren’t guilty,” “It isn’t really their fault that they suffer so much from unemployment and poverty, they just lack the appropriate work ethic.” Fifteen hundred years later, we are still fighting the anti-slavery, and anti-racism, and anti-oppression battles. We may be victorious yet, but it will take all of us to engage the battle.

NOTES

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5 Jean K. Douglas, *Why I Left the Church, Why I Came Back, and Why I Just Might Leave Again: Memories of Growing Up African American and Catholic* (Barberville, FL: Fortuity Press, 2006), 146-147.

6 Kimberly Flint-Hamilton, “Images of Slavery in the Early Church: Hatred Disguised as Love?” *Journal of Hate Studies* 2 (2003), 27-45.

7 Clyde Kluckhohn, “Queer Customs,” in Gary Ferraro, ed., *Classic Readings in Cultural Anthropology*, second edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 2008), 6-12, especially 6-9.

8 For a sampling of slave narratives, see the Library of Congress’ “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938” (accessed February 5, 2010), <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/>.

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11 Peter Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1996), 240.

12 Keith Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 174-182.

13 James Banks, *Teaching Strategies for Ethnic Studies*, eighth edition (Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc., 2009), 192.

14 Howard Zinn, "Drawing the Color Line" (accessed February 5, 2010), <http://www.worldfreeinternet.net/archive/arc9.htm>.

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17 D. Bentley Hart, "The 'Whole Humanity': Gregory of Nyssa's Critique of Slavery in Light of His Eschatology," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 54:1 (February 2001): 51-69, here citing 57.

18 Ibid.

19 This passage from *Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on Ecclesiastes: An English Version with Supporting Studies*, edited by Stuart G. Hall (New York: de Gruyter, 1993), 73-74, is quoted by Carter, *Race*, 238.

20 Hart, "The 'Whole Humanity,'" 62.

21 Carter, *Race*, 231.

22 Cyprian Davis, O. S. B., "1807-2007: Whose Bicentennial and Whose Abolition?" *Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium II* (2008), 11-29, especially 23-24.

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24 Carter, *Race*, 230.

25 Jon Nilson, *Hearing Past the Pain: Why White Catholic Theologians Need Black Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 9.

26 Harriet Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 2006).

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O God of Creation, We See All around Us

BY CAROLYN WINFREY GILLETTE

O God of creation, we see all around us:
how richly diverse are the people you've made!
In all of our neighbors who daily surround us,
your love for your children is ever displayed.
We're made in your image, we're equal before you;
yet often injustice and hatred abound.
Forgive us the ways that we sin and ignore you,
accepting the structures that push others down.

Christ Jesus, you lived in the same way you taught us;
you welcomed the people that others despised.
You talked and you ate with the poor and the outcast;
you saw every person through welcoming eyes.
Forgive our re-building the walls you have broken—
our making of barriers you came to tear down.
The gift of your cross is the world's reconciling
with God and with all of God's people around.

O God, by your Spirit, now give us a vision
of life in your kingdom through Jesus your Son—
where birthright and culture don't lead to division,
your children are welcomed as members of one.
God, now may we work with a new dedication
for justice, equality, freedom, and peace,
until we are called to your great celebration
and share at your table in your banquet feast.

O God of Creation, We See All around Us

CAROLYN WINFREY GILLETTE

WELSH MELODY

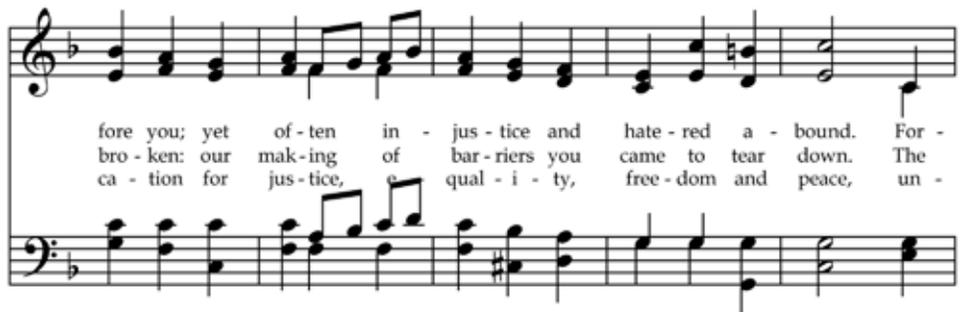
O God of cre - a - tion we see all a - round us: how
Christ Je - sus, you lived in the same way you taught us; you
O God, by your Spir - it, now give us a vi - sion of

rich-ly di - verse are the peo - ple you've made! In all of our
wel - comed the peo - ple that oth - ers de - spised. You talked and you
life in your king - dom through Je - sus your Son: where birth - right and

neigh - bors who dai - ly sur - round us, your love for your child - ren is
ate with the poor and the out - cast; you saw ev - ry per - son through
cul - ture don't lead to di - vi - sion, your child - ren are wel - comed as



ev - er dis - played. We're made in your im - age, we're e - qual be -
wel - com - ing eyes. For - give our re - build - ing the walls you have
mem - bers of one. God, now may we work with a new de - di -



fore you; yet of - ten in - jus - tice and hate - red a - bound. For -
bro - ken: our mak - ing of bar - riers you came to tear down. The
ca - tion for jus - tice, e qual - i - ty, free - dom and peace, un -



give us the ways that we sin and ig - nore you, ac - cept - ting the
gift of your cross is the world's rec - on - cil - ing with God and with
til we are called to your great cel - i - bra - tion and share at your



struc - tures that push oth - ers down.
all of God's peo - ple a - round.
ta - ble in your ban - quet feast.

Worship Service

BY STAN WILSON

Gathering Prayer

Faithful God, gather us together!

Those who have been scattered and divided,

the ones who have been stubborn and suspicious,

the lost sheep and the faithful servants,

the tired, the oppressed, the fearful and the broken,

the courageous, the willing, the hopeful, and the healing.

Gracious God, gather us together!

Your people

**the humble, forgiven people you have chosen to bear your good news
have come to this place to sing your praises.**

Opening Hymn

“O Praise the Gracious Power”

Thomas H. Troeger (1984)†

Suggested Tune: MARION

Opening Hymn (alternate)

“For the Beauty of the Earth” (verses 1, 5, and 8)

For the beauty of the earth,

for the glory of the skies,

for the love which from our birth

over and around us lies,

Lord of all to thee we raise

this our hymn of grateful praise.

For thy Church that evermore

lifteth holy hands above,

offering up on every shore

her pure sacrifice of love,

Lord of all to thee we raise

this our hymn of grateful praise.

For each perfect gift of thine,
to our race so freely given,
graces human and divine,
flowers of earth and buds of heaven,
 Lord of all to thee we raise
 this our hymn of grateful praise.

Folliot S. Pierpoint (1864)

Tune: DIX

Greeting

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
 the love of God the Father,
 and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you.

And also with you.

Welcome to this worship of the living God:
the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
 whose ways are not our ways,
 who calls together those who have been separated,
 who remembers those who have been lost or forgotten,
 and who binds together all things in love.

Welcome to this place which belongs to God
 and to this table which is set for the whole people of God.

May all who worship together this day receive a welcome.
May they discover the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ,
 and may they find themselves to be at home,
 among the people God has made one.

(Members are encouraged to greet visiting friends and to continue offering the "right hand of Christian fellowship" until all are greeted.)

Hymn

"All Creatures of Our God and King" (verses 1, 3, 5, and 7)

All creatures of our God and King,
lift up your voice and with us sing
 alleluia, alleluia!
O burning sun with golden beam,
O silver moon with softer gleam,
 O praise him, O praise him,
 alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

O flowing water, pure and clear,
make music for your Lord to hear,
 O praise him, alleluia!
O fire so masterful and bright,
providing us with warmth and light,
 Refrain

All you who are of tender heart
forgiving others, take your part,
 sing praises, alleluia!
You who long pain and sorrow bear,
praise God and on him cast your care,
 Refrain

Let all things their Creator bless,
and worship him in humbleness,
 O praise him, alleluia!
Praise, praise the Father, praise the Son,
and praise the Spirit, Three in One!
 Refrain

Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), translated by William H. Draper (1919), alt.
Tune: LASST UNS ERFREUEN

Call to Confession: Isaiah 1:16b-18

Cease to do evil,
 learn to do good;
seek justice;
 rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
 plead for the widow.
Come now, let us argue it out,
 says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet,
 they shall be like snow;
though they are red like crimson
 they shall become like wool.

Unison Confession

Eternal God,
 you have reconciled a sinful world to yourself in Christ,
 and given your Church the ministry of reconciliation.
In your new creation,
 everything old is passing away.

We, your people,
confess that we have been slow to believe and follow you
into the newness of your kingdom.
We have remained captive
to the powers of sin and death.
We have submitted our thoughts
to false images of power, glory, and beauty.
We have been lulled into apathy and inaction.
We have doubted your power
to heal and give new life.
We have feared and distrusted
our brothers and sisters,
allowing ourselves to be ruled
by the divisions of race, gender, nation, and wealth
that belong to the old order, which is passing away.

Holy and gracious God,
pardon our sins,
free our captive imaginations,
and raise us out of the paralysis of despair
into the freedom of a forgiven and forgiving people.
Renew us in the power of your love,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Hymn of Response

“There is a Balm in Gilead”

*There is a balm in Gilead
to make the wounded whole;
there is a balm in Gilead
to heal the sin-sick soul.*

Sometimes I feel discouraged
and think my work's in vain,
but then the Holy Spirit
revives my soul again.

Refrain

If you cannot preach like Peter,
if you cannot pray like Paul,
you can tell the love of Jesus,
and say, “He died for all!”

Refrain

African-American Spiritual
Tune: BALM IN GILEAD

Assurance of Pardon: Colossians 1:13

He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

**Brothers and sisters,
hear the good news that by Jesus Christ our Lord,
we are freed from sin. Amen.**

The Old Testament Reading: Deuteronomy 26:5b-9

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

The Epistle Reading: 1 Peter 2:9-10

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.

Hymn

"I Love the Lord, Who Heard My Cry"

I love the Lord, who heard my cry
and pitied every groan;
long as I live and troubles rise,
I'll hasten to God's throne.

I love the Lord, who heard my cry
and chased my grief away.
O let my heart no more despair
while I have breath to pray.

Isaac Watts (1719), alt.

Tune: AFRICAN-AMERICAN SPIRITUAL

Gospel Reading: John 1:10-13

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

Homily

Prayer of the Faithful

Merciful God,
in response to your good news,
we offer the prayers of your people
who ask you to bring to completion
the good work of your redemption.

(As members voice prayers of intercession – for the needs of those present; for the fellowship of this and neighboring congregations; for the local community, especially where tension, distrust, and division are present; for the country; and for the world – the minister and congregation respond to each request:

*Lord in your mercy,
hear our prayer.)*

Gracious God,
who is always more eager to hear us
than we are to pray,
we lift to you now our many prayers,
united as one.

(As members offer individual petitions, the minister and congregation respond to each request:

*Lord in your mercy,
hear our prayer.)*

Eternal God,
hear these prayers,
the spoken and the silent,
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
to whom with you and the Holy Spirit,
be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Invitation to the Celebration of the Lord's Supper

Hymn of Response

“Let Us Break Bread Together” (verses 1 and 2)

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.

African-American Spiritual

Tune: LET US BREAK BREAD

Words of Institution: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Gracious God, we give you thanks.
 Once we were estranged,
 but now we have been befriended.
 Once we were lost in darkness,
 but now we have been found by the light of your word.
 Once we were alone,
 but now you have given us this meal,
 and promised your presence in it,
 that all your people may be fed, healed, and blessed.

**We praise you Christ,
 your cross has made us one!**

Let all who hunger for justice and thirst for the unity of God’s people
 keep this holy feast.

(The congregation will come forward to receive the bread as a witness of our common faith, and remain seated to receive the cup as a sign of a shared fellowship which holds no distinctions.)

Hymn of Response

“O God of Creation, We See All around Us”

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (2010), *www.carolynshymns.com*

Tune: ASH GROVE

(pp. 37-39 of this volume)

Blessing and Sending

Now that we have been reunited,
look up, and see your family,
step out and find your place
in God’s still-unfolding story.

Since we have been given
this taste of heaven,
let us hunger and thirst
until that good day,
when we shall meet again.

Amen and amen.

NOTE

† Carol Doran and Thomas H. Troeger, “O Praise the Gracious Power,” *New Hymns for the Lectionary: To Glorify the Maker’s Name* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 2-3. This vibrant hymn, based on Ephesians 2:11-22, praises Christ whose cross has made us one body.



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the print version of *Racism*.

Devoid of color, Rembrandt's print THE BAPTISM OF THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH helps viewers transcend the ethnic boundaries that are etched so deeply into this pivotal event.

“What Is to Prevent Me from Being Baptized?”

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Luke’s brief, opening description of the man—“an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury” (Acts 8:27)—is more than enough for his first-century audience to vividly imagine this character. He was from a country widely believed—by authorities like Homer, Herodotus, and Strabo—to lie at the southernmost limit of the earth. Thus, in sharing the gospel with this man from the “ends of the earth” (cf. Luke 11:31), Philip confirms Jesus’ call to his followers to be “witnesses” to such distant lands (Acts 1:8).

Early readers would understand that this man was ostracized for several reasons. First, his skin color was dark. Ancient writers believed this was an Ethiopian’s most distinctive feature. Furthermore, he was a eunuch. This prevented him from entering into the assembly of the Lord; he would have been allowed to worship only in the outer chambers of the Temple.¹

Yet this God-fearing Gentile became the first Gentile to be received into the Body of Christ. He was baptized by “Philip the evangelist, one of the seven” chosen to serve the Hellenist widows in the church of Jerusalem (Acts 21:8; cf. Acts 6:5).

The great Dutch Baroque artist, Rembrandt, was a master in both the print and oil media. *The Baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch* is a study that he executed before his oil painting of the same name.² The print, being devoid of color, helps viewers transcend the ethnic boundaries that are etched so deeply into this pivotal event. Just as Philip could see past the stereotyping and prejudice of his own day to be a witness to this man, so the print medium allows us to bracket the boundaries of race and focus only on the faithfulness of this God-fearer who asked, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” (Acts 8:37).

NOTES

1 Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 118-124.

2 The oil painting is located today in the Museum Catharijneconvent in Utrecht, the Netherlands. See www.catharijneconvent.nl/index.cfm/site/Home/pageid/BC62177C-083C-2E23-F331563B02233B9E/index.cfm (accessed March 1, 2010).

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**In Caravaggio's painting, Saul is knocked flat on his back
before our eyes and almost into our space. His suffering
as the "apostle to the Gentiles" has begun.**

Apostle to the Gentiles

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Caravaggio painted *The Conversion of St. Paul* as a pair with *Crucifixion of St. Peter* to establish a theme of suffering. The suffering of Peter, the apostle to the Jews, as he is crucified upside down on a cross is immediately apparent. As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul endured suffering and ridicule as he took the gospel to those outside the Jewish faith.

Monsignor Tiberio Cerasi, treasurer general under Pope Clement VIII, commissioned Caravaggio to paint the two pictures in his recently acquired private chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome. On September 24, 1600, Caravaggio signed a contract to paint them on two cypress panels measuring 10 x 8 *palmi*.[†]

Keeping close to the details in the biblical accounts of the apostle's conversion (Acts 9:1-6, 22:5-11, 26:13), Caravaggio does not embellish the narrative with an apparition of God or angels. The psychological dimension of the painting is very modern: Saul, the Jewish persecutor of Christians, is knocked flat on his back before our eyes and almost into our space. He is converted through the penetrating light of God, "a light from heaven, brighter than the sun" (Acts 26:13). He does not react in fear, but opens his arms to receive as much of the light as possible. His eyes are closed to indicate the blindness that he endures for three days. His commission to be the apostle of the Gentiles is symbolized by Caravaggio's depiction of him in Roman garb.

At this point in the biblical story, Luke describes a second important vision. Saul continues to Damascus where a disciple named Ananias is told by the Lord in a vision to seek out Saul of Tarsus. Ananias is understandably worried that Saul will continue his evil deeds of persecution,

But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

Acts 9:15

After he is healed by Ananias, Saul is filled with the Holy Spirit and baptized.

NOTE

[†] Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 118-137. The palmo, a unit of measure based on the breadth of a human hand with the fingers splayed, was a little more than eight inches.

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**Through multiple layers of story-telling, Maarten van
Heemskerck's RUTH AND NAOMI depicts love that crosses
ethnic boundaries.**

Maarten van Heemskerck (1498-1574), RUTH AND NAOMI (1530-1540). Oil on canvas, 70 x 58 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria. Photo: © Eric Lessing / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

Love that Crosses Ethnic Boundaries

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The story of Ruth provides models of love that cross ethnic boundaries. The story unfolds when a Jewish couple, Elimelech and Naomi, move their family from Bethlehem to the nearby country of Moab in order to avoid a famine in Judah. Moab was only some thirty or forty miles away, but its customs were very different. For instance, the Moabites worshiped the god Chemosh.

Naomi becomes stranded in Moab. Elimelech dies while their two sons are young. After their sons grow up and marry Moabite women, the sons die as well. With no source of support, Naomi becomes responsible for the welfare of her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. Learning that Judah is no longer under famine, Naomi decides to return to her native land. She releases her daughters-in-law from their obligation of a Levirate marriage—which required that they marry Elimelech’s nearest living relative in order to provide Naomi with a continuation of her family. Orpah decides to remain in Moab, but Ruth expresses her intention to go with Naomi.

But Ruth said, “Do not press me to leave you and to stop going with you, for

wherever you go, I shall go,
wherever you live, I shall live.
Your people will be my people,
and your God will be my God.
Where you die, I shall die
and there I shall be buried.
Let Yahweh bring unnameable ills on me
and worse ills, too,
if anything but death
should part me from you!”

Ruth 1:16-17 (NJB)[†]

Despite her mother-in-law being a foreigner by birth, Ruth is devoted to Naomi and to the God of Israel. When they arrive in Bethlehem, Ruth is

now the alien. She gleans ears of corn that the law requires farmers to leave in their fields for the poor to eat. *Ruth and Naomi*, Maarten van Heemskerck's painting in the Northern Renaissance style, depicts this and subsequent events of the narrative in multiple layers.

In the right background Ruth is kneeling to gather the random stalks left over by the reapers. Boaz, the landowner, stands to her right. When Boaz learns that Ruth is the daughter-in-law of Naomi, he offers her a protected place to glean the corn. When Ruth recalls this event to her mother-in-law, Naomi realizes that Boaz is her next of kin. Naomi wants a marriage proposal for Ruth from Boaz.

Because Boaz is sleeping in a tent at the threshing floor to guard his harvest, Naomi instructs Ruth to go to him. In the foreground of the painting, Van Heemskerck depicts the end of the conversation between the women; Ruth is pointing in the direction of Boaz's tent. On the right side of the composition is the tent with the two figures: Boaz has awakened to find Ruth at his feet.

Boaz desires to marry Ruth, but he is an honorable man and sends her away until he can redeem her for a price from another man who is closer in kinship to her. Boaz and Ruth's son, Obed, became the father of Jesse, the father of King David, in whose line Jesus the Messiah was born (cf. Matthew 1:5-6, 16).

Like Naomi before them, Ruth and Boaz faced the challenges of multi-ethnic relationships. Through love and respect for one another, they made choices that led to blessings for them and for those of us who follow Christ.

NOTE

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Christian Practices for the Journey toward Shalom

BY VICTOR J. HINOJOSA

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, resources in the Christian tradition and in Christian worship can help us on the way.

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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Multiethnic Congregations

BY KATHLEEN GARCES-FOLEY

Though difficult to achieve, there are healthy multiethnic churches flourishing in Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical spheres. They are neither perfectly inclusive nor immune from racial conflict, but they have succeeded in breaking through the racial barriers that have plagued American Christianity for so long.

Multiethnic congregations are not unique to the twenty-first century, but in American history they have been rare, short-lived, and have almost always perpetuated racial inequality and white hegemony. According to the 1998 National Congregations Survey, only seven percent of American congregations were multiracial, defined as having no more than eighty percent of one racial group. More specifically in the case of Christian congregations, fifteen percent of Catholic churches, six percent of conservative Protestant churches, and three percent of mainline Protestant churches were multiracial.¹ Four decades after the civil rights movement, these figures revealed how much had not yet been accomplished. Over the past decade a multiethnic (multiracial, multicultural) church *movement* has been taking shape and gaining momentum that is challenging the racial divide in Christian churches. The growth of this movement has been noted especially among evangelical Christians, but parallel movements have developed among Catholic and mainline Protestant Christians.

For evangelical Christians the turn toward multiethnic churches was due in no small part to a book written by two sociologists. Sociology books rarely find an audience beyond the halls of academia or make much of a difference in the real world, but Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith's *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (2000) quickly became a must read for evangelicals concerned about racism. Using survey

and interview data, Emerson and Smith argued that white evangelicals espouse a colorblind approach to race that severely limits their understanding of the causes of racial injustice and their ability to combat it. Furthermore, homogenous white and black churches “help perpetuate socioeconomic inequality of race, and generally fragment and drown out religious prophetic voices calling for an end to racialization.”² Coming after a decade of racial reconciliation actions, most notably the dramatic confessional statements by leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1994 and the National Association of Evangelicals in 1995, Emerson and Smith’s analysis changed the evangelical conversation on racism profoundly. Confessions and group hugs at Promise Keepers rallies would no longer be sufficient – institutional changes were needed and churches were an obvious place for Christians to start.

In a follow-up book, *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race*, a multiracial team of scholars boldly made the case for multiracial congregations: “Christian congregations, when possible, should be multiracial.”³ Assuming that only homogeneous churches could flourish, many evangelicals were skeptical that multiracial churches could work, but others had already taken up the challenge and were proving they could. In 2003 I began an ethnographic study of Evergreen Baptist Church in Los Angeles, which had done just that. Founded as a mission church for Japanese immigrants in 1945, Evergreen had morphed into an Asian-American church by the mid-1990s when Pastor Ken Fong began to reshape its identity into a multiethnic church. In less than five years, Evergreen had gone from ninety-eight percent Asian American to seventy-five percent Asian American and twenty-five percent black, Latino, white, and multiracial. I discovered that many members of Evergreen had become convicted by the need for multiethnic churches after reading *Divided by Faith*. Most significantly for future trends, I found that it was young adults, almost all of whom had been involved in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, that were most passionate about creating multiethnic churches.⁴ I concluded from my study of Evergreen and InterVarsity Los Angeles that young, cosmopolitan evangelicals will not be comfortable in “ethnic” churches (including Euro-American churches) contrary to the assumption of the homogeneous unit principle.⁵



As interest in creating multiethnic churches grew, scholars of American religion paid attention. Using survey data and congregational studies, they have identified key characteristics of vibrant multiethnic churches. Though there is tremendous variety among evangelical churches that meet the 20/80 definition of multiracial, there are several common features. Most are intentional about signaling that racial diversity is valued. Hiring racially diverse staff persons and mentoring a racially diverse team of lay leaders are common,

as is using a variety of musical genres in worship, but there are many other ways that churches signal what they value from the types of programs they offer to the images that appear on their Web sites.

The leadership of the pastor is crucial for successfully transforming the congregational culture or planting a new multiethnic church. There is no better example of this than Willowcreek Church outside Chicago. Founder

Willowcreek is part of a national trend: large churches are becoming multiracial faster than smaller ones. Protestant churches with over 1000 weekly attendance were three times more likely to be multiracial in 2007 than in 1998.

Bill Hybels credited reading *Divided by Faith* in 1999 with a radical change of direction in his ministry.⁶ According to a recent *Time* magazine profile of Willowcreek, Hybels began to address the topic of racial divisions in his preaching and the church's small group discussions, books clubs, and larger seminars.⁷ He added people of color to the music and worship teams and a Spanish-language service.

By 2009 Willowcreek had become a multiracial church with whites accounting for eighty percent of the membership, Hispanics six percent, Asians four percent, blacks two percent, and eight percent other.

Willowcreek is part of a national trend: large churches are becoming multiracial faster than smaller ones. According to Michael Emerson's analysis of the latest National Congregations Survey, Protestant churches with over 1000 weekly attendance were *three times more likely to be multiracial in 2007 than in 1998, and evangelical churches of this size were five times more likely to be multiracial in 2007.*⁸

Ten years after *Divided By Faith* put the multiethnic church on the radar screen of evangelical Christians, there is little doubt that multiethnic churches are possible and becoming more common. A similar shift in thinking has occurred among many Catholic and mainline Protestants as well. Catholics and mainline Protestants are much more likely to speak of multicultural churches than multiethnic or multiracial, but they share with evangelicals the strong desire to overcome the long-entrenched patterns of segregation in their churches. Though there are significant differences in how they approach the goal of integration and envision the ideal church, these three Christian families – evangelical, Catholic and mainline Protestant – have intensified, both rhetorically and structurally, their focus on issues of racial diversity in order to achieve greater racial and cultural integration. Coming from very different polities and institutional histories, they share a strikingly similar goal.

Historically, mainline Protestant denominations have been predominantly white but have reached out to minority groups by creating ethnic churches. In the last two decades all the mainline denominations have made official statements in support of racial equality and inclusion, but there is considerable variation in the level of institutional commitment to congregational diversity. An example of a highly committed mainline Protestant denomination is the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which committed in 1998 to increasing its overall "racial ethnic membership to 20 percent" by 2010. The PCUSA created The Mission of Multicultural Congregational Support with a full-time director, staff support, grants, and significant Web resources to support new church plants and help existing churches become more diverse. Of all the mainline denominations, the PCUSA appears to be offering the most institutional support for creating multiracial/multicultural churches and there are signs of success. In 2003 one in six Presbyterian churches described their church as being a congregation with one cultural majority (at least eighty percent of membership) and a significant influence from other cultures.⁹

In contrast to the PCUSA, some mainline Protestant denominations have only minimal institutional structures to support multiethnic congregations. An interesting comparison can be made with the American Baptist Churches USA, which is by far the most racially diverse of the mainline Protestant denominations with forty-seven percent African American membership and no racial majority.¹⁰ Like the other mainline Protestant denominations, American Baptist Churches USA has made racial justice and reconciliation a priority in recent years and worked to include more people of color in the decision making processes of the governing bodies at the regional and national levels. However, though calling itself "the most racially inclusive Protestant body," only four percent of ABC USA congregations are multiracial.¹¹ ABC USA has a long history of supporting ethnic church growth, but recently it too has turned its attention to multiethnic congregations. In 2008 ABC National Ministries launched the Intercultural Ministries Initiative by forming an Intercultural Ministries Team and Web resources to help members build bridges among cultural groups and create multiethnic churches. The other mainline Protestant denominations fall somewhere between the example of PC USA and ABC USA in terms of support for ethnic church growth versus multiethnic (multiracial, multicultural) church growth. As the multiethnic church movement continues to build momentum, we can expect more energy and resources will be put toward multiethnic church growth in the future.

Because Catholic churches are organized by local territory, they naturally reflect the diversity of Catholics in local neighborhoods. This organizational structure is reflected in the 1998 National Congregations Survey finding that Catholic churches were three times more likely to be multiracial than Protestant churches. Historically, American bishops allowed new immigrant groups to have their own "national parish" or mission church, and the same

rationale was used to create African American parishes, whether black Catholics wanted them or not.

Since 1965 the American Catholic church has been experiencing its largest immigration growth, but rather than create separate churches for new immigrants they have been absorbed into their local parish by adding masses in different languages. American bishops have strongly supported the right of immigrant groups, as well as black and Native American Catholics, to maintain their own cultural practices as one aspect of Christian hospitality. The result has been internal segregation among various groups in the parish, leading to the co-existence of "parallel parishes."

In the 1990s, some church leaders began to criticize the "balkanization" of the parish, while others defended the necessity of separate language masses and cultural communities. Taking a middle path, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a pastoral letter in 2000 urging parishes to find ways to honor cultural differences and overcome cultural divisions. While recognizing that "immigrants must guard their cultures for the enrichment of the world," the bishops insisted that "Knowledge of cultures cannot just come from books, but must come from the concrete efforts of individuals to get to know their neighbors, in all their diversity." Therefore, they urged pastors to learn "effective models for accommodating multiple cultural groups within a single parish structure."¹² As a result, multicultural parishes have been working to create more opportunities for cultural exchange and collaboration among parishioners.

Because it is difficult to assess the degree of exchange and collaboration occurring, it is hard to judge what progress has been made. What we can observe is the increasing number of events and publications produced to help Catholics create truly inclusive multicultural parishes. Conferences and workshops are held in parishes, dioceses, and at the national level regularly. Perhaps the most important change occurred at the national level when the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops was re-organized to create a Secretariat of Cultural Diversity.



All of this activity from Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical spheres feeds into what I am calling a multiethnic church movement, but in many respects there are really three independent movements. While they share the goal of overcoming the historical racial-ethnic-cultural divisions that have kept Sunday morning segregated, these three Christian families are working largely in isolation from each other. With the exception of the few mainline pastors who attend evangelical conferences, there is little awareness of what other Christians are doing to form diverse churches. This lack of awareness helps to perpetuate falsehoods that I hear frequently, such as "multiracial churches are impossible," "we are the only church doing this," and "we are holding the first national conference on multiracial churches

in the country." In my own research I have been surprised by the degree of convergence among these three Christian families on the goal of racial inclusion. Coming from very different polities and institutional histories, church leaders are facing similar challenges in similar ways.

Much of the energy behind the push for multiethnic churches comes from white Christians who are uncomfortable with all-white churches, fearing that the absence of people of color in the pews is a conspicuous indictment of their racial sins. But white Christians are not alone in their assertion that a multiethnic congregation best reflects God's intention for the Church. The heightened urgency surrounding the goal of diversity within the three largest Christian families reflects a broadly shared value for diversity and desire to improve race relations in America.

These are laudable goals to be sure, but before all churches take up the diversity goal it is important to consider the trade off. Ethnic churches have been extremely important for racial minorities and immigrants in the United States. They provide physical and social spaces for mutual support in the face of racialization and pressures to assimilate to middle-class white American norms. Moreover, ethnic churches provide spaces for sharing cultural traditions with co-ethnics and American-reared children. Ethnic churches have benefited white Christians as well, but as the racial majority, whites have many spaces in which their cultural norms dominate. In comparison, the costs of leaving an ethnic church for a multiethnic one or transforming an ethnic church into a multiethnic one are much greater for people of color.

As minorities in a white-majority multiethnic church, they will likely face pressure to assimilate to the norms of the majority group.

Churches that take pride in being "color-blind," which are more common among evangelicals, are especially likely to pressure members to hide their ethnic identity and to discourage discussion of

racial issues for the sake of church unity. Even white-majority churches that genuinely want to embrace differences will reproduce the norms of whiteness if members are unaware of their own taken-for-granted norms and values. A recently published study by sociologist Korie Edwards reveals how white normativity can become dominant even when whites are in the minority.¹³ Edwards studied a black-majority multiracial church in the Midwest led by an African American pastor. Despite their minority status, the congregation

All of this activity from Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical spheres feeds into what I am calling a multiethnic church movement, but in many respects there are really three independent movements.

accommodated the wishes of the white members to keep them from leaving. Edwards's research serves as a cautionary tale reminding us to take seriously the costs of creating a multiethnic congregation in a society marked with racial inequality.



Given the costs and dangers associated with the multiethnic church, the multiethnic church movement should not be lauded uncritically. Some observers are skeptical that a truly inclusive multiethnic church is even possible in the United States, while others insist that multiethnic churches only work if they efface difference and operate as mono-cultural. I disagree. Though difficult to achieve, there are healthy multiethnic churches flourishing in Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical spheres. They are neither perfectly inclusive nor immune from racial conflict, but they have succeeded in breaking through the racial barriers that have plagued American Christianity for so long.

More ethnographic research is needed to identify what makes them work, though the number of pastoral books offering advice is growing quickly. In my own research I have found a combination of knowledge, attitudes, and skills to be essential: understanding racialization and the implicit operation of cultural norms, delight in the cosmopolitan, and humor in the face of cultural discomfort. With these ingredients, multiethnic churches can avoid the all too common traps of reproducing racial inequality and promoting white normativity.

NOTES

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Smelling Fires of Racism

BY JOSEPH C. PARKER, JR.

Who today is starting and maintaining fires of racism with their awful smell? In the book of Daniel we find a biblical paradigm to guide our thinking—namely, the story of the siege of Jerusalem, the domination of its people by King Nebuchadnezzar, and the responses of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Daniel 3

I was not yet eleven years old when the following scenes were indelibly burned into my memory. Though the passing years have faded their clarity, their deep impressions remain.

I first smelled smoke from the fires of racism in 1963 in my hometown of Birmingham, Alabama. In May of that year I accompanied my father—a Baptist pastor and leader in the Alabama civil rights movement—to a bombing scene. The home of Reverend A. D. King, the younger brother of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been bombed. Smoke was still rising. The odor was strong. The front half of the home was demolished. No one was injured or killed. This was the first time I smelled racism’s smoke.

That day we also went to the A. G. Gaston Motel, where another bombing had taken place. Four people were injured. Three house trailers were damaged heavily. I smelled racism’s smoke a second time.

In September, I accompanied my father to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in downtown Birmingham, the scene of another bombing. Four girls near my age, attending Sunday School classes at the church, were killed. Twenty-three other people were hurt. I smelled smoke from a fire of racism the third time.

The people and systems of my city had embraced racial hate. I saw their signs. I heard their words. The god of racism was being worshipped, even by God's people. Racism's fires were being fanned. Its fumes engulfed the people of Birmingham.

Those fires of racism changed me. I can still smell racism's smoke. Though its smell is different and more subdued, my memory is triggered.

The smell is emitted from racially dominated systems and individual actions—even inadvertent—that continue to legitimize bigotry and discrimination. This legitimization can be found in attitudes, behaviors, social structures, ideologies, and the power to impose these on a less dominant race, to paraphrase Margaret Guider's understanding of racism.¹



Who today is starting and maintaining these fires of racism with their awful smell? In the book of Daniel we find a biblical paradigm to guide our thinking—namely, the story of the siege of Jerusalem, the domination of its people by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and the responses of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

King Nebuchadnezzar would not have called himself a racist. He saw himself as a king protecting and expanding the legitimate interests of his people and himself. Nebuchadnezzar did not have a compassionate focus on the people he dominated; he focused on them only when they (and their things) advanced his interests. But he did not act alone. He put in place systems and representatives that perpetuated these interests. Those who benefitted from these systems took advantage of what was accessible to them, even if they did not recognize the negative impact on the dominated group.

The king probably embraced the notion that self-preservation is the first law of the universe. This myopic mindset is amplified when the dominant group believes resources are scarce or threatened, or when greed is a factor. It is dangerous when the dominant have no spiritual compass or are not guided by it. We should not be surprised by King Nebuchadnezzar. He did not know or serve Yahweh.

But God's people are different: they know God and realize God is jealous, requiring allegiance. They must not embrace a God-defying culture or dress up in its symbols. They must not eat at the table of bigotry and discrimination, or take on a disloyal identity. They must not serve, participate in, or perpetuate God-defying systems. They must actively become firefighters of racism's fires; any delay in doing so makes it more dangerous for them and others because fire spreads and firefighting becomes more difficult.

Racism has a Nebuchadnezzar spirit. It demands God's people to be disloyal and give allegiance to racially disparate treatment. It requires them to displace God and ignore God's requirements. It misappropriates the purpose

of God's human creation – which is to give God glory – and attempts to convert God's creation into a distorted use.

God's people must be loyal to God. They must be sensitive to hearing God's voice and guidance. They must recognize when people and systems entice them to become disloyal and engage in attitudes and behaviors that are offensive to God's nostrils. Racism is a foul smell to God, and should be to God's people. God's people must understand the power of racism's fumes and must not succumb to them.

Nebuchadnezzar expected the people to comply with his demands and perpetuate them. Although some of God's people embraced the culture of the Babylonians, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were committed to being virtuous by doing what is right and avoiding what is wrong in God's eyes. Yet even they wore the system's tunics, trousers, turbans, and other clothes (Daniel 3:21) and entered its service. Perhaps systems like this one have a way of dividing those who are dominated and even make some feel as if they are exceptional. Perhaps some succumb to the Stockholm Syndrome – inadvertently becoming aligned with their captor as they benefit from the system.

Should not God's people today know that the powers defiant to God are prodigals, and they have been captured by God through Christ Jesus? Can we not remember that Christ has "disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it" (Colossians 2:15)? With Peter and the apostles God's people should proclaim: "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (Acts 5:29).

God's people should act in harmony with one another and be known by God's love. They must give greater control to the fires of unity through God's Spirit that touched those early believers at Pentecost:

They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Acts 2:3-4 (NIV)²



Racism likes compliant companions. Nevertheless, God's people can be delivered from its fires and taken to safety. As racism's fires burn God's people should have in place a "spiritual detector" – someone who is wise in the ways of God; someone who, like a carbon monoxide detector, can identify the poisonous, colorless, and odorless fumes that will kill us.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego could have been loyal to Nebuchadnezzar's God-defying system. They could have worshipped his Babylonian image (Daniel 3:1-7). They chose to be loyal to God in the face of violence – the threat of being thrown into a blazing furnace.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

Daniel 3:16-18 (NIV)

The system now turned on them and used the furnace—an implement of the system likely designed for baking bricks, smelting metals, or disposing of the Babylonian dead by cremation—to hurt them.

The system now had to maintain its integrity. Self-preservation is the first law of the universe. But deliverance was available to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

The soldiers, participants in the system who threw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into the furnace, got killed in the process. Instead of being harmed, these three faithful disciples were united with another one, whom Nebuchadnezzar thought was a man that looked like a son of the gods. They were saved.

Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God."

Daniel 3:28 (NIV)



God's people can use fires as places of unity rather than places of division.

I recently talked with a group of young Christian ministers in Austin, Texas. They shared with me a scene that takes place on a regular basis in their predominantly and historically African American neighborhood. It is in a part of the city that is in transition—what many would call gentrification. These ministers are primarily Anglo and Asian.

As they moved into the neighborhood, they were met with suspicion as to their motives. They were seen as representative of a racially dominated system of nonblacks. They began to smell fires of racism, but decided they would dissolve their scent. For some time now, on Friday evenings, these young ministers have literally burned fires in a pit. They and other indigenous people to the neighborhood gather around as those fires burn, telling stories about the area and themselves. They connect with each.

They have discovered that these fires have lowered the walls of hostility (Ephesians 2:14) and observed these fires "had not harmed their bodies, nor

was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them” (Daniel 3:27, NIV).

The same can happen to us. As we smell the fires of racism, God’s people who are not afraid of its flames or unwilling to succumb to its fumes can experience how good and pleasant it is for brothers and sisters to dwell together in unity (Psalm 133:1). Amen!

NOTES

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2 Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com.



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Avoiding Racism in Starting New Congregations

BY DAMIAN EMETUCHE

A distorted culture is always at the heart of racism, prompting us to react to people of other cultures in ethnocentric ways. How is unacknowledged ethnocentrism manifest in contemporary practices of church planting in the United States?

To better understand racism, we must understand its root. The basic dictionary definition of racism is “an excessive and irrational belief in the superiority of one’s own racial group. A doctrine, program, or practice based on such belief.”¹ Missiologists prefer to use a broader term, “ethnocentrism,” of which racism is one prominent species. Enoch Wan defines ethnocentrism as “the belief that one’s own people group or cultural ways are superior to others.” This belief often breeds attitudes that lead to unfair treatment “manifested in individual action or institutionalized policy toward others as in the case of anti-Semitism, apartheid, bigotry, fascism, and racism.”²

Of course, no one is born a racist. We acquire the distorted beliefs, programs, and practices of racism and pass them along to other people through the processes of acculturation. Charles Kraft argues that “culture patterns perceptions of reality into conceptualizations of what reality can or should be, what is to be regarded as actual, probable, possible, and impossible. These conceptualizations form what is termed the ‘worldview’ of the culture.” This worldview is “the central systematization of conceptions of reality to which the members of the culture assent (largely unconsciously) and from which stems their value system.”³ Therefore, a distorted culture is always at the heart of racism, prompting us to react to people of other cultures in ethnocentric ways.⁴

CULTURE, GOSPEL, AND RACISM

The American evangelical church has not lived above the ethnocentrism in our culture because it has been unwilling to challenge some of the defining aspects of the Western cultural worldview. Because cultural worldviews are “largely unexamined and implicit,” Christian missiologists warn, they “are reinforced by the deepest of feelings, and anyone who challenges them challenges the very foundations of people’s lives.”⁵

The West accepted the gospel and correctly contextualized it to fit the Greco-Roman mindset. With the rise of Western political states and spread of colonization, Western missionaries spread Christianity and planted churches worldwide. However, indigenous churches were never given the opportunity to contextualize the gospel in their culture. On the contrary, because of Western cultural preoccupation with order and control, along with ethnocentrism, missionaries planted churches that reflected their home cultures, and changed indigenous names to English, Greek, or Hebrew names even when the native names were more theologically sound than the imported.

Likewise in regard to music for worship, the missionaries simply translated traditional Western hymns for the new Christians to use. One might hear almost the same tune, rhythm, and style from London to New York, Hong Kong to Mexico City, and from Lagos to Sao Paulo. The colonial missionaries, because of their lack of interest in the culture of the people they were serving, imposed their musical style on the indigenous population.⁶

This is not to say that every colonial missionary action was racist, though some of them definitely were. Even the best people will often default to behave uncritically according to their culture and traditions. “It has always been the aim of the missionary to present to the non-Christian the pure doctrine of Jesus Christ without local or cultural adulteration. But this has, in fact, proved impracticable. We are all conditioned by our background and traditions, by our forms of speech, by inherited values which have little relationship to the Christian gospel,” Stephen Neill observes. “It was natural for the representatives of each western nation to regard their own culture as superior to that of other western nations; it was natural for the representatives of all the western nations to regard western culture as superior to that of the countries in which they carried on their missionary work, and to regard as Christian many things which only remotely, if at all, related to the Gospel.”⁷

While the missionaries may have been versed in the Scriptures, they did not understand the people they were called to served, and this led to their message not being understood by the people.⁸ “Churches they planted were often alien and, as a result, remained dependent on the outside support for their existence,” Paul Hiebert concludes. “Missionaries brought with them, not only the gospel, but also Western cultures, and often they failed to differentiate between the two. Many rejected Christ because they rejected the foreignness of the missionary message – not because of the offence of the gospel.”⁹

THE HOMOGENEOUS UNIT PRINCIPLE

Ethnocentrism is expressed in other ways in contemporary practices of church planting. Let me briefly describe three of these ways.

A widely used guideline in church planting, often called “the homogeneous unit principle,” states that “People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers.”¹⁰ A leading church-growth strategist, Donald Garvan, famously wrote, “It takes no great acumen to see that when marked differences of color, stature, income, cleanliness, and education are present, unbelievers understand the gospel better when expounded by their own kind of people. They prefer to join churches whose members look, talk, and act like themselves.”¹¹

Church planters who embrace the homogeneous unit principle in the United States believe that a gathering of people who share an ethnic background, political beliefs, social standing, and so on, will be more comfortable with one another and, therefore, more successful together in forming a new congregation. Yet this does not follow the guidance of the New Testament, in which there are no homogeneous new congregations. The Jerusalem church in Acts 2 consisted of Jews from more than fifteen nations, and Gentile proselytes. The Antioch church in Acts 13 was a multicultural congregation of Jews and Gentles. All of the Pauline house churches were located in strategic cosmopolitan centers and their members were drawn from diverse ethnic backgrounds and social standings.

Why do we employ the homogeneous unit principle in church planting? The primary reason is that it appeals to our fallen cultural sensitivity. We love to congregate with people of the same affinity; we resist integration across racial, ethnic, and class barriers

because we cherish personal freedom and individualism. This principle does no harm, of course, when it is applied in the settings of homogenous tribes – because there are no competing cultures and no part of the population is left out or discriminated against. But to apply the homogeneous unit principle in modern cosmopolitan centers today is to violate the New Testament model.

By adopting the homogeneous unit principle in urban centers, the church has accepted a sociocultural reality in place of biblical principle. Michael

By adopting the homogeneous unit principle that says “people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers,” church planters in urban centers have accepted a sociocultural reality in place of biblical principle.

Emerson and Christian Smith make the point that “white evangelicals’ cultural tools and racial isolation curtail their ability to fully assess why people of different races do not get along, the lack of equal opportunity, and the extent to which race matters in America.... [A] highly effective way to ensure the perpetuation of a racialized system is to deny its existence.”¹² Non-caucasians, in reaction to the racialized culture of the American church, have planted immigrant and ethnic congregations. Many of these, on close inspection, are not much more than subculture social organizations which further segregate the people of faith. This is contrary to the Jesus’ prayer for the unity of all his disciples:

They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, 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. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

John 17:16-23

FUNDING OF ETHNIC CHURCH PLANTERS

A second manifestation of ethnocentrism is evident in the discrepancy of financial support for ethnic church planters. All church planters have difficulty securing ministry partners, but nonwhite planters have the most trouble. A good number of the established white evangelicals do not connect with the ethnic planters, share their concerns, or support them financially. Most ethnic planters suffer financial hardship, and many work odd jobs to support their families.

One of the contributing factors to their financial difficulties is lack awareness by the majority of white churches. “I do not think the majority of people involved in church planting in the United States even think about this issue, so they cannot be aware of the disparity,” Gary Irby, the church planting director at the Puget Sound Baptist Association, told me in an interview. “I know this to be true because I am usually the one raising the issue and peoples’ reactions are that of surprise or ‘I never even thought about that.’ Just as denying the existence of racism is the strongest support of perpetuating it, the lack of awareness about the inequity in funding is one of the biggest issues in overcoming it.”¹³

A Hispanic church planting strategist in the northwestern part of the United States recounted the following experience of one of his church planters. The church planter was a full-time Hispanic pastor in a congregation in which the Hispanic membership was spiritually vibrant and growing as new converts were baptized. In the same congregation, a part-time Anglo pastor served the Anglo portion of the congregation which unfortunately was dwindling in numbers and experiencing no spiritual growth. Yet, the church placed the Anglo pastor on a salary of over \$4,000 a month, while the hard working, full-time Hispanic pastor received less than \$2,000 a month. The Hispanic pastor discovered what was happening only when the bookkeeper of the church made a mistake and sent the wrong payment voucher to him. When the Hispanic pastor tearfully confronted his colleague, the Anglo pastor pretended he was not aware of his financial difficulties. The Hispanic minister asked him, "Is it because I am not white?" Such racial insensitivity and lack of financial support toward non-Anglo church planters is all too common in some mainline evangelical denominations.

LEADERSHIP AND RESPONSIBILITY

A third manifestation of ethnocentrism that affects church planting is that the decision-making bodies of most, if not all, major evangelical churches in America are composed disproportionately of Anglos. There is still resistance in accepting people of color in leadership positions. The church leadership appears to be the last bastion of racism even in the midst of changing demographics in the country.

On a positive note, the Christian Reformed Church has responded to this situation by instructing their Board of Trustees to take concrete steps toward ethnically diverse leadership in their denomination.¹⁴ Their task will not be easy. It will require what Margaret Guider has called a new "moral imagination." Church power structures in North America "continue to be largely under the direction of the descendants of Europeans, power to make and enforce decisions continue to be in their hands. They set the standards of behavior considered to be normative, if not superior, and these standards continue to be those by which the behaviors of other groups are judged," Guider has warned. "When talking about racism, the descendants of European immigrants often define reality incorrectly. As the beneficiaries of racism, they fail to understand that the 'problem' tends to be constructed in ways that repeatedly overlook the dynamics of racial privilege."¹⁵

CONCLUSION

Where do we go from here? We must recognize that racism is present in our fallen culture, and that our own attitudes and actions often are embedded in unacknowledged ethnocentrism. Therefore, we need vigilant circumspection and correction by our brothers and sisters in Christ in order to recognize and repent from racist thoughts, words, and actions.

The church must reexamine her institutions, including administrative and ministry structures. Any that promote racial discrimination must be restructured to reflect more of the kingdom of God. For example, mission and church leaders could raise an awareness of our racialized church culture by deliberately featuring non-Anglos as instructors and keynote speakers in settings other than ethnic conferences. And in the area of church life in which I work, the church planting assessment kits could be redesigned to be more multicultural. This would increase the chances of recruiting non-Anglo planters.

The prophet John saw that heaven is a noisy, multicultural community:

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Revelation 7:9-12

In God’s kingdom there is no room for individualistic faith. We are a family.

NOTES

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Race in Evangelical America

BY JOY J. MOORE

Even the best efforts among Christians have not overcome racial segregation during Sunday morning worship. The narratives in these four books call the Church to continued attentiveness to the particular manifestations of the sin of racism.

Now that an African American president of the United States is no longer merely a dream of Hollywood casting, some may question the need for a continued discussion on race. But the magazine articles describing racist children and the statistics about the whitening of college graduation classes suggest that we are far from being a post-racial culture. Despite advances, we still live in a society shaped by three hundred years of racial delineation. Though racial reconciliation is favored by most, it is in reality practiced by few.

Even the best efforts among evangelical Christians have not overcome racial segregation during Sunday morning worship. In the major Christian institutions the presence of persons of color in leadership often calls for a description of “the first.” The narratives and experiences of these groundbreaking few call the Church to continued attentiveness to the particular manifestations of the sin of racism.

InterVarsity Press has published several books that examine, often through personal narratives, the complex issues of social injustice, racialized churches, and evangelical Christian practices of racial reconciliation. In *Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical's Inside View of White Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008, 207 pp., \$16.00) Edward Gilbreath provocatively exposes the inherent racism that lingers within the American evangelical church. In *Living in Color: Embracing God's Passion for Ethnic Diversity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004, 217 pp., \$18.00) Randy Woodley, a Keetoowah Cherokee, chronicles from a Native American perspective the

effects of the quest for identity in a racialized culture. Seeking solutions to social injustices in general, *Crazy Enough to Care: Changing Your World through Compassion, Justice and Racial Reconciliation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009, 150 pp., \$16.00) by Alvin C. Bibbs, Sr., with Marie Guthrie and Kathy Buscaglis, offers a twelve-session study guide for small groups to convert passive Christians into radically compassionate people. Brenda Salter McNeil and Rick Richardson's approach in *The Heart of Racial Justice: How Soul Change Leads to Social Change* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009, 206 pp., \$15.00) is to place problems in a larger theological frame and construe the work of racial reconciliation as the ecclesial demonstration of spiritual transformation.



In *Reconciliation Blues*, Edward Gilbreath provides a thought-provoking depiction of practices of discrimination and intolerance among evangelical Christians, exposing the indifference, disrespect, or neglect often experienced by persons of color in an Anglo context. Writing candidly of the difficulty of finding a spiritual home in the predominantly white evangelical church and then living out his vocation as a journalist for the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*, Gilbreath details his own survival strategy to preserve his racial identity while working and worshiping in a 'white world.' While recognizing the gain in race relations that his profile alone signals, the author nonetheless chronicles the often painful experience of being the minority in a majority context. For Gilbreath, the racial division evident in the evangelical church mirrors that found in society, rather than demonstrating a glimpse of God's reconciled community.

The book rehearses the key events and leaders in the racial reconciliation movement—from Tom Skinner to John Perkins—in order to challenge readers to take action. Gilbreath's personal accounts of a black man worshiping in a largely white church give validity to his pronouncement that "it's no longer slavery, Jim Crow or organized discrimination that we're up against in our churches, ministries and society; it's an institutionalized racialization of religion that blinds us to the systemic issues of justice and reconciliation, even as it purports to bring us together" (p. 174). Clearly, for Gilbreath, the seeming collective progress of the reconciliation movement has not been without significant individual setbacks. Nevertheless, he maintains that "the church is the one institution that's best equipped to overcome racial divide" with God's justice and grace (p. 21).

While Gilbreath's call for faithfulness may seem modest, it indicts an evangelical movement that believes it can achieve the reign of God by the human efforts of tokenism, publicity stunts, and policy revisions, but has nevertheless failed to move beyond gestures of tolerance toward genuine neighborly hospitality. Sorting through the issues of prejudice versus racism,

integration versus assimilation, and multicultural versus multicolored solutions, Gilbreath demonstrates the pervasive oppression of America's institutional racism not only outside congregations but also within them. His admonishment of those who do nothing toward racial reconciliation while claiming not to be racist might be read by some as gentle. But he understands that his audience would not give a hearing to simple prescriptions. *Reconciliation Blues* may depend too much on the narration of personal experience rather than directly addressing new efforts toward racial reconciliation, but the narratives frequently have the force to awaken readers to their own provincialism and highlight the problems that exist both without and within the Church.



Randy Woodley's *Living in Color* tackles the dangers of desiring sameness and celebrates the diversity of God's creation. Acknowledging the human desire for stability and historical continuity, Woodley counters these human tendencies with biblical and theological descriptions that explain how sin "tries to exclude or denigrate the identity of others not like us; to limit or thwart potential relationships; and to impede communication by making our differences seem intolerable" (p. 144). From here Woodley aims to help the reader understand diversity and the effects of opposition to it, as well as God's intended restoration through diversity.

Woodley is familiar with the injustices committed against Native Americans, intimately knows Native American customs, and possesses a biblically literate theology. Using these resources, he shows how God can be encountered in many ways and warns against construing current dominant Western cultural practices as definitive of all Christian practices. He explores avenues from his own heritage and experience through which God may be encountered. His discussion of the need to heal the land and his recognition of its defilement as sin illustrate the promise in Scripture that God will heal all creation—the people and the land.

Living in Color unpacks how we can build cross-cultural relationships, contextualize the gospel message, honor one another's particular contributions to the Church, and recognize the subtle racism practiced in contemporary Christian communities. Woodley narrates stories that awaken the reader to the capacity of God's created diversity to expand experience. By challenging current practices, Woodley draws us toward a theologically rendered expectation that the people of God should reflect God's intended dynamic, multi-ethnic, multiracial community, and that conformity to an Anglo culture on the part of persons of color is not Christian conversion. The presence of persons of color among evangelical Christians should be a witness to the world of the reign of God: anything less is a reflection of hypocrisy.



In their text designed for group study, *Crazy Enough to Care*, Alvin C. Bibbs, Sr., Marie Guthrie, and Kathy Buscaglis do not focus on racial issues alone. They explore broader issues of injustice, brokenness, and suffering in contemporary society. The twelve sessions presented in the book guide participants through discussions that challenge claims of faith that are not actively practicing justice, compassion, and racial reconciliation. A detailed leader's guide provides a one-hundred-minute lesson plan for each session.

Like *Reconciliation Blues*, the book points out the ease with which we all are prone to engage in insensitive and unjust behaviors, or more often, ignore them. Speaking to the fears that impede our willingness to acknowledge others as neighbors, the authors use biblical events and true-to-life stories of rejection and reconciliation in order to move us to compassion.

These authors regard compassion as the primary Christian virtue through which racial reconciliation can be achieved. The exercises provide useful tools to engage conversation and raise awareness within the group to the reality of injustice, brokenness, and suffering in contemporary society. More than a mere description, *Crazy Enough to Care* offers viable means to practice reconciliation in the everyday encounters of life.



Larger in theological scope is Brenda Salter McNeil and Rick Richardson's *The Heart of Racial Justice*. Here the struggle for justice and reconciliation in general, and the work of racial reconciliation in particular, is described as spiritual warfare. As the authors say, "soul change" leads to "social change."

The book's premise is that evil—displayed as racism, hatred, division, and injustice—is a spiritual problem that cannot be solved by relations skills, good intentions, or insightful social analyses. While not denying the need for personal and institutional efforts, the authors emphasize the spiritual dimension to bring about change. They call for the Church to respond to evil in the world, making manifest the presence of God by being reflections of God's goodness in the world. They challenge Christians, who often *speak* of spiritual things, to actions that overcome their neglect of poverty, injustice, racism, and hatred.

Building on the work of past generations, the authors call for a new paradigm by noting that the presence of God makes all things possible. They bring to mind the atrocities of the past whose horrors could not have been halted without divine power working in the transformed imagination of humanity. By considering the slave trade, the Holocaust, the near destruction of First Nations people in North America, and the marginalization of Palestinians in the Middle East, the authors call us to move beyond the limited

navel-gazing of self-protection, resentment, or woundedness. Even as they identify larger spiritual forces at work against us, the authors also remind us that this work of reconciliation is possible because it is grounded in the forgiveness and work of Christ.

With the importance of worship setting the stage for this work of reconciliation, Salter McNeil and Richardson lean on the experiences of events and seminars they have led or attended to suggest a way forward. Their proposals are not general suggestions, but explained experience. They find hope in Christians recognizing the healing power of God that allows humanity to be transformed personally.

Though these books happen to be written from evangelical perspectives, they will challenge Christians who do not identify with the evangelical movement, as well as all persons of color who have taken part in cross-cultural or multicultural opportunities. Raising awareness is the first move toward more productive practices of reconciliation, and the narratives found within—or those elicited by—these books provide a glimpse into the cross-racial experiences of evangelical Christians in their congregations, at work, and in personal relationships. Thus the people behind the statistics speak with their own voices about the personal costs of racial integration.

In whatever ways we identify ourselves racially or theologically, these narratives offer a severe indictment of where we are now as a diverse society, but they also reveal that God is up to something in the world, something to which Christian communities today must give witness as they seek unity in diversity.



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Let's Get It Together: Multiracial and Interethnic Congregations

BY KERSTEN BAYT PRIEST

If so many institutions have begun to integrate, why not congregations—especially since Christianity is held in common across racial and ethnic groups? To understand more about bridging racial and ethnic divides, read these four books and keep them handy on your bookshelf.

If so many of our nation's institutions have begun to integrate, why not congregations—especially since Christianity is held in common across racial and ethnic groups? With that simple question Michael Emerson and Christian Smith riveted the attention of both academics and lay people in their study *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (2000). Their persuasive answer was derived from national random survey data and extensive interviews. They discovered that although white evangelicals and African American Christians shared a great deal theologically, they diverged markedly in their social understandings. While African American Christians, believing socio-structural constraints are operative, had a socially and politically active faith, their white evangelical counterparts, believing in individualistic explanations and emphasizing personal faith, engaged social ills quite differently.

As many scholars explain, the painful reality of race in the United States emerges from a history of systematic socio-political preference for whites and those who assimilate Anglo culture. America's internal colonization of tribes, slave-based economy, and exclusionist immigration practices were undergirded by racist academic projects (e.g., the Harvard University crani-

ometry studies), public policies (e.g., eugenics), and bad religion (e.g., the Scofield Bible's "Curse of Ham" study notes). While it is true that mandated segregation no longer divides the army, public schools, and other civic arenas, de facto segregation still exists. The vast majority of white and nonwhite Christians remain divided in their life experiences and in their worship.



Michael Emerson, a white sociologist at Rice University who intentionally lives and worships with his family in interracial settings, was deeply disturbed by the findings of his research in *Divided by Faith*. In a follow-up study, *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, 240 pp., \$19.99), which he coauthored with Curtiss Paul DeYoung, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim, Emerson notes that "just 7.5 percent of the over 300,000 religious congregations in the United States are racially mixed" and "[f]or Christian congregations, which form over 90 percent of congregations in the United States, the percentage that are racially mixed drops to five and a half" (p. 2). White/black churches are especially rare.

For his second national research project entitled "Multiracial Congregations and Their Peoples," funded by the Lilly Foundation, Emerson invited Yancey and Chai Kim to form a multiracial team of sociologists. Together they created and administered 2,500 phone interviews and also located congregations "in which no one racial group accounts for 80 percent or more of the membership" (p. 3). Thirty congregations were finally selected for closer study. The project took six years and was nothing less than a labor of love!

In *United by Faith*, the first of two books to result from this research, Curtiss Paul DeYoung collaborates with Emerson's team as co-author. DeYoung is a black reconciliation theologian trained at Howard University School of Divinity. *United by Faith* is a clarion call for Christians to heal national racism by bridging racial and ethnic divides through formation of intentional worshiping communities. The book presents a systematic recounting of New Testament ethnic church history, early American racial church history, pre- and post-Civil Rights church history (the early reconciliation movement), along with narrative description of present day interracial congregations examined by the sociologists. Some of these congregations were relatively new, others had long rich histories. While they note that some church growth specialists favor the formation of ethnically and racially homogeneous congregations, the authors dismiss this stratagem for growth as quasi-racist. And although the historic safe haven of separate black churches is recognized in another chapter, it is path-breaking, race-bridging individuals who are commended to readers as exemplars worth following.

National interracial church data is summed up in a three-by-three table entitled "Characteristics of Multiracial Congregation Models." The researchers

propose that variable characteristics of organizational culture, race of leadership, and degree of social interaction across races combine to produce three distinct models: the "assimilated multiracial congregational model," the "pluralist multiracial congregational model," and the "integrated multiracial congregational model" (p. 165). The most positive scenario, according to the authors, is the "integrated multiracial congregation," which maintains aspects of separate cultures and also creates a new culture from the cultures in the congregation. Its leadership is representative of the different races in the congregation and has a high degree of social interaction across races.

United by Faith is strong in its biblical, historical, and sociological analyses, but its understanding of culture and ritual is weaker, being heavily reliant on a worldview approach not well suited for the study of ritual in worship. Worship involves culturally inflected, embodied markers of sacred identity. All churches must be particular in their ritual choices and therein is the dilemma: whose choice will get precedence, and why? And what are the stakes when those choices are conflated with the sacred (God's choice!).

When the authors use key incidents from the data to exhort practitioners, the book is very helpful. For example, the data show that the first minorities to join a multiracial congregation tend to be those most like the dominant group, and the leadership tends to listen to these more assimilated people, ignoring other minorities who join later and are less like the dominant group. Bottom line, Emerson's team believes in a radical vision: interracial churches are the answer to America's race problem. These fragile communities are called to shoulder a heavy responsibility.



Emerson's second book, *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006, 288 pp., \$21.95) is written with his pastor, Rodney M. Woo, and presents the bulk of the Lilly-funded data. Multiple perspectives are important in any examination of race and religion. Therefore, I appreciate the collaborative nature of Emerson's books. In *People of the Dream*, Woo and Emerson's Texas church serves as the engaging qualitative case study around which larger issues and findings from the national data are woven to understand how such churches form and who joins them.

The book begins with some good history which frames the issues involved. I would suggest reading the appendices immediately after the prelude and first chapter. Appendix A is an essay on the historical and political philosophy implicit in U.S. race and ethnicity metaphors. Appendix B presents five statistical tables, and Appendix C gives the rationale and methodology of the Lilly Project. Appendix D avails readers of the full instruments used for telephone and congregational surveys. These surveys give readers a peek into the interaction between researchers and their interviewees.

Woo's story as a pastor of a fledgling interracial church personalizes and charts the process of such a community. Bar graphs and pie charts present the relationship between congregational homogeneity/heterogeneity and many other variables such as age, race, geographic region, neighborhood demographic, and denomination. Predictors of multiracial diversity are

In American congregations, predictors of multiracial diversity are charismatic worship style, younger age, small group approach, heterogeneous neighborhood, and geographic space (beltway urban).

charismatic worship style, younger age, small group approach, heterogeneous neighborhood, and geographic space (beltway urban). Emerson found that racial diversity draws economic diversity.

The primary impetus for change varied. Some churches saw change as their mission either because their neighborhoods were changing or because they wanted to embrace a niche

group. Other congregations, after doing resource calculation, pragmatically embraced mergers or invited ethnic churches into their basement in a survival merger. In some cases change was mandated by external (denominational) authority structures. The stories of how interracial churches are formed can be surprising. In one instance black Christians began attending a white church in the south because it had air conditioning—and discovered the whites were friendly. Many congregations must move through stages—often painful—to arrive finally at a stable and reorganized new identity.



Given the challenges faced by congregations that wish to unite across racial boundaries, Kathleen Garces-Foley took her inquiry to the local level. As member of a multiethnic family in Southern California—she is white and her husband Filipino American—she recognized that many such churches are in fact multiethnic. Her *Crossing the Ethnic Divide: The Multiethnic Church on a Mission*, AAR Academy Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 192 pp., \$55.00) is a case study of an historically Japanese American church that over time embraced Chinese Americans to become a homogeneous pan-Asian congregation. Eventually they split: one group retained a pan-Asian identity and the other, recognizing their own emerging multiethnic/multiracial families, forged a strategically diverse community that sought to exemplify healing across multiple historic divides.

Bypassing race theory and emphasizing ethnicity, Garces-Foley shows how

concerned leaders and members at Evergreen Church used broader contextual factors and salient symbols as tools to create a milieu conducive to “ethnic boundary crossing.” They benefitted from factors such as increasing rates of mixed marriages and multiethnic offspring in the Los Angeles region, and broader acceptance of cosmopolitan multiculturalism. The key ideas they used as tools of persuasion were derived from InterVarsity’s college-based racial reconciliation movement and innovative evangelical theology and church growth strategies.

By tracking the congregation’s history, studying its Web site and published materials, and adding her observations from visits and interviews, the author shows the extensive work required for a racial/ethnic reconciliation church to survive. For example, one interviewee explained that it hurt her feelings when the majority Asian American members avoided her “healthy” bean salad at the potluck. Such incidents were common in a church aiming for ethnic diversity. Clearly, those with cross-cultural experience had an advantage. The senior pastor, an Asian American, made efforts to use self-deprecating humor to ease the inevitable misunderstandings.

While some of the largest interracial/interethnic churches succeed by an “ethnic transcendence strategy” which is color-blind and does *not* pursue a pro-racial/pro-ethnic reconciliation mission, this tends to attract only the subset of people assimilating to a shared dominant culture. Mosaic Church – with its booming, hip, young, artsy Hollywood crowd – is an example of this. By contrast, Evergreen attempts to minister to those who retain a sense of ethnic identity while simultaneously uniting with others. This commitment is expressed in a theology of discomfort, which stresses that members choosing to join must sacrifice their own comfort and exercise sensitivity towards one another. For many individuals and families – especially young biracial/multiethnic couples and their children – ethnic inclusion and ritual inclusion are worth institutionalizing.



Ethnography, a methodology which depends on intensive participant observation in a delimited face-to-face setting over time, allows researchers to document *how* social change occurs. Although it is difficult to turn the researcher’s eye on one’s own church, ethnography can capture important contextual data beyond surveys and interviews. Using ethnography and statistics, African American sociologist, Korie Edwards, provides an up close telling of her Midwest interracial church’s disappointments in *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, 240 pp., \$29.95).

Drawing on national congregational data (Appendix C), Edwards shows that statistically white/black interracial churches evidence white mainstream religious practices (e.g., praise music) as opposed to black church mainstream

traditions (e.g., call and response) and activist socio-political commitments (e.g., government-supported social programs). Furthermore, *all* interracial churches studied were closer to white mainstream practices than to African American church practices. Edwards set out to discover whether white mainstream practices predominated in her interracial church which straddled a gentrifying neighborhood and a neighborhood in economic decline.

In order to overcome deep cultural divides in congregations, we must intentionally educate ourselves on how to become good neighbors in both the private and public arenas of socially relevant Christianity.

Her church presented a good case study because it had shifted numerically from mostly white members, led by a white senior pastor committed to reconciliation, to mostly black members led by a black senior pastor. By documenting congregational interaction over a period of several years, she discovered that “whiteness” still dominated because when white mem-

bers were disturbed by expressive worship, withdrew from racial reconciliation efforts, or complained, black members self-censored and adjusted. The capitulation to white norms was achieved with the support of a core group of black sympathizers while the rest grudgingly dampened emotion and ceded power. Edwards found that as long as white members were young, without teenagers, and willing to experiment with worship, there was flexibility on their part. However, this changed the older their children were. White families with teens were likely to leave.

The book is rightly entitled *The Elusive Dream* because those with power do not easily see it or relinquish it. Edwards’ findings support my own research and analysis of an attempted interracial church merger.¹ Her book is such a painful read that I could only absorb it in small doses. But, like medicine, it’s good to take.

Given Edwards’ quantitative findings about rituals of worship, it would seem that worship itself is an area requiring further research and analysis of a qualitative and theoretically nuanced sort. Embodiment in joint ritual practices is closely linked to preconceived ideas about class and, by extension, race.²

To overcome deep out-of-awareness cultural divides, we must intentionally educate ourselves on how to become good neighbors. As we have seen, this can be difficult in the most sacred domains—in the public and the relatively private aspects of socially relevant Christianity. Any religion scholar or pastor who desires to understand more about bridging racial and ethnic

divides in the American context should read these four books and keep them handy as references on their shelf. The research is excellent, but even more importantly, all the authors care deeply about how future generations of believers will be able to live together in harmony and diversity.

NOTES

1 Kersten Bayt Priest and Robert J. Priest, "Divergent Worship Practices in the Sunday Morning Hour: Analysis of an 'Interracial' Church Merger Attempt," in Robert J. Priest and Alvaro L. Nieves, eds., *This Side of Heaven: Race, Ethnicity and Christian Faith*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 275-292.

2 See Timothy Nelson, "Sacrifice of Praise: Emotion and Collective Participation in an African American Worship Service," *Sociology of Religious Research* (1996), 379-396; and Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).



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