

## **A Pastoral Letter of Racial Lament and Hope**

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## PREFACE

“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!’” Rev. 7:9-10

We in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) look to the day when the Lord Jesus will receive worship from the united chorus of his children from every tongue, tribe, and nation, when all suffering and strife will cease, and when God wipes away every tear from our eyes (Rev. 21:4). Until that day, we weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:15) and we point one another to the promise of the gospel: one new humanity redeemed in Christ (Eph. 2:15).

This letter arises from calls within the EPC for tools to address issues of racism with a biblical grounding. As commissioned by the 42<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly, we write and speak to this issue through biblical lament and hope and reject the worldly theories that so polarize our society. Our framework is a simple, biblical progression of experiencing pain, lamenting the gap between what is and what God has promised, to finally comforting one another with the hope of the gospel and its current demonstrations among us. Therefore, we provide a set of scriptures, texts from the Westminster Confession of Faith, prayers, and stories of hope to share with our congregations.

## INTRODUCTION

To our beloved EPC brothers and sisters in Christ, Teaching and Ruling Elders—shepherds all.

We thank God as you faithfully follow our Lord in loving service to all under your care and as you teach and guide, comfort and warn the sheep with the Word of God that they may flourish to his glory. In sharing their lives through a multitude of changing, challenging, and troubling matters and relationships, you have built into their being, helped bear their burdens, and shown sacrificial love.

We write to you to describe how racism impacts our faithful obedience to our Lord’s command in John 13:34-35: “Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Sadly, the sinful reality of racism and related false remedies permeate many human institutions, just as sin pervades all human life this side of the Fall.<sup>1</sup> And while we seek to respond to the wounds of our world (including those which may impact the EPC), we also write to you as fellow shepherds in the EPC with the aim to carry out Great Commission of Jesus as a denomination of Presbyterian, Reformed, Evangelical, and Missional congregations. This four-fold identity shapes our language as we chart a way forward towards reconciliation and hope.

Throughout this letter you will find references to the Westminster Standards in hope that you seek further confessional reflection on this topic. As the Church, we hold scripture as the final rule in all

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<sup>1</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms in Modern English (“WCF”)*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Livonia, MI: EPC, 2010), 6.2-5.

matters of faith and life; the Bible must remain our North Star. Let our conversations remain grounded in and from the biblical perspective, our Reformed and confessional heritage, and the shared experiences of our brothers and sisters.<sup>2</sup>

## DEFINITIONS

It is challenging to address the reality of racism when secular nomenclature and charged vocabulary promote polarization. The world and its language, biases, politics, and perspectives cannot rule over a Christian's perspective. *How* we talk about racism is as important as actually talking about it. And so, we define (and perhaps redefine) some common terms in the hope we can unify, not divide, in our conversations.

**Race.** The term **race** categorizes people on the basis of physical characteristics of skin color, facial form or eye shape and may include ancestry, shared culture or historical affiliation.<sup>3</sup> In current cultural conversations, **race** is the frequently used term. Yet, our research and discussions reveal that race is not a neutral term. Historically, misuse of this term has divided the divinely ordained one human race (Acts 17:26; Larger Catechism Q/A17) into a *hierarchy* of races, legitimizing a multitude of abuses. When race means distinguishing and defining only by color, such use narrows the diversity of ethnicities that contribute to who we are. It strips away the depth of individual contexts, connections, and varied histories, reducing identity to a single word.

**Ethnos/Ethnicity**, as used in common language and in Revelation 7:9, accurately defines the grouping of people sharing a common and distinctive culture, religion or language, and incorporates aspects of geography, historical background, allegiance or association.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, as we examine racism, the use of *ethnicity*, not *race*, is the biblical, more accurate descriptor of diversity within humanity.<sup>5</sup>

**Racism** is the unbiblical belief that there is a *causal link* between ethnicity and traits of personality, intellect, morality, and behavior, typically resulting in personal or collective discrimination, judgment or favoritism.<sup>6</sup> In biblical terms, we would classify racism as the sin of partiality. Racism is not a binary Black/White problem, nor one unique to the United States, but is historically entrenched within humanity, sowing distrust and conflict.

**Institutional** and **Systemic Racism** have varying, culturally popular meanings that can interfere with honest discussions on how racism impacts institutions, and yet we must address the concept. We begin with first discussing what **Institutional/Systemic Racism** is *not*. To be clear, we do not believe the United States is irredeemably racist. Nor do we believe that people in any given institution or

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<sup>2</sup> WCF 1.10.

<sup>3</sup> *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. "Race"; National Human Genome Research Institute; *Cambridge English Dictionary*, s.v. "Race"; US Census Bureau.

<sup>4</sup> *Cambridge English Dictionary*, s.v. "Ethnicity"; National Institutes of Health; *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "Ethnicity."

<sup>5</sup> Many who descend from slaves cannot discover their ethnicity through genealogical ancestries. Our preference for the use of the term "ethnicity" should not be understood to discount this wrong or to discourage the use of the term "race" in popular discourse. Rather, our preference for the term "ethnicity" should be understood as an eschatological hope, a protest of the way things are and a longing for the day when every person's knowledge of ethnic identity is restored.

<sup>6</sup> Gal. 2:11-14; James 2:1-10.

system are presumptively individual racists. Nor are individuals personally guilty of or complicit in past actions committed by others of the same ethnicity.

However, as Americans, we inherit a national history that includes heinous ethnic discrimination. The impact of racism on our society's institutions—educational, judicial, financial, health care and even religious— continues to reverberate to present day injustices. Therefore, we must address this reality.

As such, we define Institutional/Systemic Racism as behaviors, policies, or practices of an organization or system that result in or otherwise support an unfair advantage to some people, and/or unfair disadvantage to other people, based on ethnicity.

With these definitions in mind, we consider our racial lament and hope.

## THE SIN OF RACISM

Racism is a sin because it violates God's principles and commands. Racism belittles and dehumanizes people, stripping them of their created dignity as image bearers of God.<sup>7</sup> The doctrine of adoption stated in *WCF* 12.1 leaves no room for misunderstanding our equality before God.

God guarantees the adoption of all those who are justified in and for the sake of his only son, Jesus Christ. Those adopted enjoy the liberties and privileges of God's children, have his name put on them, receive the Spirit of adoption, have access to the throne of grace with boldness, and are enabled to cry, Abba, Father. They are pitied, protected, provided for, and disciplined by him as a father. They are never cast off, however, and are sealed until the day of redemption and inherit the promises as heirs of everlasting salvation.<sup>8</sup>

We must also recognize racism as a tool of spiritual warfare—a powerful attack on God's people by Satan.<sup>9</sup> The enemy's strategy is to fracture the Body of Christ, assault our identity as God's people, distract and divide us from our unity in and with Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Racism contradicts the anticipation of Revelation 7:9 in which believers from all ethnicities will praise before the throne. God's triumph gathers all his people together.

## THE IMPACT OF RACISM GENERALLY

As people who understand that all humanity suffers from total depravity and the pervasive effects and deadly consequences of sin, we cannot be surprised that hateful attitudes and actions, violence, injustice, brokenness, fear of others and profound distrust abound.<sup>10</sup> Ever since the Fall, human

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<sup>7</sup> *WCF* 4.2.

<sup>8</sup> *WCF* 25.2, 35.1. See also *Westminster Larger Catechism* ("WLC") Q.62, Q.63, Q.74; *EPC Essentials of our Faith* #5. 9 Eph. 6:11-13; Rev. 12:7-9.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Jn. 2:9-11; *WCF* 16.6, 26.1,2.

<sup>10</sup> Isa. 53:6; Rom. 3:23; *WCF* 6.

beings have been categorizing and discriminating against each other, and our hearts have been prone to make such judgments. We group, actively and subconsciously, around shared distinctives and exclude based on differences, from children bullying on the playground to ethnic genocides. We deny. We tribalize. We accuse. We excuse. And this sin of partiality and even hatred is most inappropriate, hurtful and toxic when found among God's people.

Whether individual or collective, such behavior compromises our witness, questions our integrity, and diminishes the goodness of the Gospel we proclaim and our ability to go into the world and make disciples. Racism directly harms our mission because these sins necessarily deny that all humans are created in the image of God and relativize the atonement according to perceived differences that affect how people are valued. As followers of Christ, our response to the sins of racism should reflect an uninhibited resolve to love one another and reach the nations with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup>

## THE RESPONSE OF THE EPC

The theology of the Westminster Standards, our system of doctrine, leaves no room for participating in sins of racism and partiality and provides the framework needed to develop a Reformed understanding of ethnic diversity and kingdom unity. The Bible condemns the sins of racism while proclaiming redemption by the Triune God. Through this redemption, God is creating a kingdom mosaic of his children from all people groups, bringing glory to himself.<sup>12</sup>

Racism, as Satan's tool against this redemption, promotes divisions preventing us from truly loving one another.<sup>13</sup> As a predominately majority culture denomination, we have the challenge of becoming a denomination more reflective of a Rev. 7:9 reality. We may neglect to address whether our churches are truly welcoming to those of other ethnicities versus simply accepting the comfortable status quo. We may have biases or lack of cultural exposure that: (1) make it hard to recognize the abilities, strengths, and spiritual gifts of those from other ethnicities, and (2) prevent us from recognizing the unequal power and influence we share with people not of our ethnic majority. We may also be unaware that there are pastors in the EPC who have been deeply wounded by racism, both in terms of ongoing reverberations of historical sins and contemporary expressions of discrimination.

Communities or churches with little to no exposure to people of other ethnicities can exist in a state of detachment or lack of empathy. Indifference is not an option. We are *Christians*, bound together in a global Church family. Whether or not these hurts are in our particular community, they impact our Church. If something causes pain and suffering to a fellow Christian, whether or not we can understand it or relate to it, we are called to weep with those who weep. The pain and injury, grief and fear experienced by members of our church family should not go unrecognized or unacknowledged.<sup>14</sup>

Indifference is a great ally of bias and racism. We conform not to the world and its values, but love one another genuinely, with brotherly affection and outdoing one another in showing honor (Rom.

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<sup>11</sup> Matt. 28:19-20; *Essentials* #7.

<sup>12</sup> WCF 12.1

<sup>13</sup> WCF 4.2; WLC Q. 22

<sup>14</sup> WLC Q. 131 & 132

12:2-3,9-10). In the church there “is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you all are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:27-29). We are called to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:1-4).

Our hope contradicts narratives that view humanity merely through a story of unguided emergence, brute survival, oppression, struggle, liberation, and eventual earthly utopia. And, while it is not within the power of the EPC to end racism in our country or culture, we are charged to recognize and combat racism in our denomination and prophetically shine light into the world; to seek the welfare of the city wherein we dwell (Jer. 29:5-7). We are to tell our story of God’s perfect creation, our tragic fall, Christ’s costly redemption, the church’s world-reaching mission and the glorious final re-creation of heaven and earth.<sup>15</sup>

Until now, the EPC has left this widespread, multifaceted, and profoundly troubling issue largely unaddressed, especially in terms of denominational resources for our shepherds. To truly love our brothers and sisters in obedience to our Lord, together we should reflect deeply on racism and learn to recognize its impact in our own lives. We want to give voice in lament on behalf of those who suffer from, or otherwise experience, racism.

## What Is Lament?

Lament provides a biblical way to publicly grieve our sorrows and express our anger to God; sorrow and anger we experience in the face of suffering, sin, and brokenness. Lament is the response of believers when confronted with unabating, faith-shaking injustice and gives voice to an equally persistent faith—refusing to give up hope. Lament enables us to bring our real, painful concerns to the throne of grace, pouring out our hearts before the God who loves us, knowing that he hears us (Heb. 4:16). Laments are expressed in words of hope that the God who is in covenant with us because of his word will once again remember his people, forgive our sins and rescue us. Unlike the grumbling of the Israelites in the wilderness, a lament always has hope, however apocalyptic its anchor. The hope is that, although a solution to my plight may be elusive, despair will not have the last word. As lament is not a common practice among us, we describe the practice in detail.

### LAMENT IN THE BIBLE

Lament characterizes much of scripture and varies from personal to corporate expressions. The Psalms are replete with prayers of lament; over one-third of the Psalms fit in this category. Some examples are Psalm 3; 10:1,12,16-18; 12; 77:1-20; 88 (which contains no resolution). The Book of Lamentations records the prophet’s heart-rending lament over the fall of Jerusalem.

Why does the Bible prominently feature lament? Because suffering sits at the center of sin-plagued human experience. We live in a fallen world, with nothing but our groans and our wordless idols to give us respite. And so we groan, even if only with the voice of the Holy Spirit who groans on our

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<sup>15</sup> WCF 14.2

behalf when we ourselves are wordless (Rom. 8:18-26). The experience of lament, as reflected by Bruce Waltke, is normal for God's people living in a fallen world.<sup>16</sup> R. W. L. Moberly similarly finds:

The predominance of laments at the very heart of Israel's prayers means that the problems that give rise to lament are not something marginal or unusual but rather are central to the life of faith.... Moreover, they show that the experience of anguish and puzzlement in the life of faith is not a sign of deficient faith, something to be outgrown or put behind one, but rather is intrinsic to the very nature of faith.<sup>17</sup>

Psalm 13 is a paradigmatic lament that helps us understand the posture and structure of this form of prayerful expression.

Verses 1-2 are an expression of pain:

How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Verses 3-4 contain an appeal to God for help:

Look on me and answer, LORD my God.

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death, and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

Verses 5-6 are an expression of faith in God:

But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me.

As we encounter suffering, pain, and injustice, let us discipline ourselves to turn to God in lament, knowing that he is the holy and righteous one who can and will make things right.

## **THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS AS ADDITIONAL BASIS FOR RACIAL LAMENT**

Our Confessional Standards further provide a context for lament, calling us to unity:

Adoption is an act of God's free grace in and for his only son, Jesus Christ, by which all those who are justified become his children, have his name put on them, have the Spirit of his Son given to them, are provided for under his fatherly care, are welcomed to all the liberties and

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<sup>16</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston and Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Lament: A Historical Commentary*, Kindle ed. (Eerdmans), 1.

<sup>17</sup> R. W. L. Moberly, "Lament," *NIDOTTE*, IV, 879.



privileges of the sons of God, and are made heirs of all the promises and fellow-heirs with Christ in glory (WLC A. 74).

WCF Chapter 26 teaches on the fellowship of all believers united to Jesus Christ and therefore to each other.

26.1 All believers are united to Jesus Christ, their head, by his Spirit and by faith, and have fellowship with him in his grace, suffering, death, resurrection, and glory. United to one another in love the saints have fellowship in each other's gifts and grace and are obliged to perform those public and private duties which nourish their mutual good, both spiritually and physically.

26.2 By their profession of faith saints are bound to maintain a holy fellowship and communion with each other in the worship of God and in the performance of other spiritual services for their mutual improvement. They are also bound to help each other in material things according to their different abilities and needs. This fellowship is to be offered, as God gives the opportunity, to everyone in every place who calls on the name of the Lord Jesus.

When we participate in the sacraments, we are celebrating the covenant relationship we have in and with Christ and with all others who are in Christ regardless of their tongue, tribe, or ethnicity. In the sacraments, we bear witness to the essential oneness we share in Christ and practice "holy fellowship and communion with each other."

## **LAMENT DOES NOT REQUIRE PERSONAL GUILT**

Sometimes we resist the call to lament because we think it necessarily includes an admission of personal guilt; the Bible teaches us otherwise. We see in scripture the people of God joining the heart of God in lamenting the brokenness of the world. Daniel cried out in prayer to God over the sin of all Israel and asked the LORD to turn his wrath away from Jerusalem (Dan. 9). Nehemiah, too, confessed sin on behalf of the people of Israel and called on the LORD to keep his covenant promises (Neh.1:4-11). The idolatry witnessed by Paul in Athens prompted him to make a faithful declaration of the Gospel (Acts 17:16-34).

Scripture also teaches us that lament is not unique to humans: our triune God himself expresses lament. In Genesis 6:6, God observed the wickedness of humanity. "The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled." The LORD also expressed lament in the face of Saul's disobedience, saying to Samuel, "I regret that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions" (1 Sam.15:11). The Holy Spirit can be grieved by human sin (Isa. 63:10; Eph. 4:30). The Lord Jesus expressed lament in the face of sin and the suffering it brings:

And when he drew near and saw the city [Jerusalem], he wept over it, saying, 'Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation' (Luke 19:41-44).

Jesus also grieved and lamented over the death of his friend Lazarus (John 11:33, 35, 38). As he faced his crucifixion, he experienced deep grief and cried out in prayer to the Father (Matt. 26:36-46; Mark 13:32-42; Luke 22:39-46; Heb. 5:7). Does our being in Christ, who offered up prayers of lament, shape us as a people who do likewise?

## WHY LAMENT NOW?

In our nation's history, America has experienced key events of racial strife and their impact on society: the Civil War and emancipation; the Sand Creek massacre; the Chinese exclusion laws; the Montgomery bus boycotts and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination – to name a few among many. These moments give rise to groups advocating social change, and likewise provoke a response from those who disagree wholly or in part with the proposed change. Polarization and conflict often arise out of these events, with the church attempting to insert the peace of Christ (or perhaps remaining silent) and encourage discussion and engagement.

The death of George Floyd stands out as a recent moment. Floyd's tragic and unnecessary death, resulting in a conviction of the officer for second-degree murder, sparked a firestorm of racial unrest and sits as a modern pivot point in our national conversation about racism. Floyd's death provoked discussion of how race-based violence, and even deaths, remain overlooked or minimized. EPC churches struggled to know how to respond to the unrest and even how to pray in response to news of Floyd's murder and other highly publicized tragic deaths of people of color in 2020. In the gravity of this moment, the lack of biblically grounded resources to which our churches could turn became apparent.

Our society, and even our churches, are divided on blame, causes, and solutions for violent crime. Yet, the church can and should grieve the loss of life, the societal factors that contribute to these deaths, and the civil discord these pivotal moments expose.

And so we might pray...

*How long, LORD? How long will you allow the powerful to crush the powerless?*

*You who are near to the brokenhearted, will you not bring justice to the earth? You have sent Jesus, your Messiah, into the world to usher in peace, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim the year of your favor. He took our sin upon himself and paid the penalty on the cross. Your Spirit raised him from the dead, and he lives and reigns in victory with you. When will he return to bring final victory to the earth? When will Jesus come to judge the living and the dead?*

*As we wait, LORD, comfort us in our grief. Bring peace to those whose minds are filled with terror. Bring justice through the imperfect working of our courts. Keep us from perpetuating violence. Reassure us that vengeance is yours, that you will repay those who do evil deeds and do not bend the knee to you in repentance.*

*You are our only comfort and hope, LORD. You are the one we trust when no one else is trustworthy. We look to you. Come, Lord Jesus!*

## LAMENTING RACISM

Scripture clearly teaches us to care about and share in our brothers' and sisters' pain:

- Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:15).
- If one part [of Christ's body] suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it (1 Cor. 12:26).
- Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2).
- Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others (Phil. 2:3-4).

Our society, and specifically the EPC, has people of color who experience ongoing, painful effects of racism. When we acknowledge the pain and destruction arising from racism and prejudice, we see the wounds of our brothers and sisters and join our voices together, crying out to our God for intervention. Put another way: it may not be our fault, but it is our concern. Together as the people of God, we can maintain our holy fellowship with one another in Christ through the practice of lament in the face of hatred and injustice. We lament a situation that does not reflect God's design for his world, turning to him for justice, comfort, and transformation.

As we live into our covenant union, listening to one another's expressions of pain creates awareness of ways in which we possibly participate in the racial brokenness of the world. The Holy Spirit may prompt us to turn to God in confession and repentance. Lament can open our hearts to one another and to God and invite the healing work of Christ's Spirit, overcoming our earthly divisions (Eph. 2:11-22) and demonstrating the truth of the Gospel (John 17:20-23).

If we refuse to join our brothers and sisters in lament, or if we move too quickly to claim gospel victory without taking time to grieve with those who are hurting, we communicate to them that they shoulder their pain alone. In so doing, we fail to bear one another's burdens, and an opportunity for unity and solidarity is lost.<sup>18</sup> As Richard Mouw stated in 1978, "To make covenantal promises on behalf of a black child is to commit ourselves to the black struggle. If society tries to treat him like a second-class citizen, we will have to protest on his behalf since he is our brother in a holy nation!"<sup>19</sup>

And so we may pray:

*Heavenly Father,*

*We acknowledge your eternal goodness and the gracious covenant you have established with us. It is not our own righteousness that has brought us into this relationship but the righteousness of Christ, covering us and restoring us to our purpose as image bearers chosen to reflect your glory.*

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<sup>18</sup> Waltke, Houston and Moore, *The Psalms*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Richard J. Mouw, "Baptismal Politics," *Reformed Journal* 28, no. 7 (July 1978): 2-3.

*We grieve over how individuals who bear your image and likeness are subjected to abuse. We lament the discrimination and denial of dignity experienced by those in America who have been marginalized, not only by those distanced from you but even by those who declare Jesus as Lord. Regrettably, the church has fallen short in taking action, speaking out against and publicly or privately condemning and lamenting racism in any form toward any individual or group. This racism is evident in acts of antisemitism and ethnic hate. We lament racism in both personal and structural contexts.*

*We humbly pray for healing, unity, and justice. May your love permeate our hearts and communities, transforming us into reconciliation agents and advocates for equality. Grant us the strength to confront and change the structures that perpetuate discrimination and grant us the courage to stand against racism in all its forms.*

*We pray in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen.*

## **Our Hope**

The realism of lament can seem like a path only of gloom, but the opposite is the case! When we enter the grief of people without dismissing, qualifying, or blaming, we find ourselves bearing one another's burdens and showing love... a true *kingdom harmony*. Engaging in lament, we live out our faith that Jesus will bring a new heaven and a new earth. In that hope we live and minister.

### **JESUS RECONCILES US TO GOD AND ONE ANOTHER**

Amid the human tendency to tribalize around ethnic distinctions, we have one great reason for hope: "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Cor. 5:19). Through Jesus' sinless life, atoning death, mighty resurrection, and glorious ascension, the great divide has been crossed and a new and living way to God is open.

Moreover, Jesus has created in himself reconciliation for humanity with one another. "For he himself is our peace," wrote Paul to the variety of ethnicities in the Ephesian church. Christ "has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph. 2:14). Jews and Gentiles, people intently aware of "the other," discovered a deeper oneness.

Every person who is united to Jesus by the Holy Spirit through faith and repentance becomes a new creation. We die to the sinful self. Paul testified, "I have been crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20). Ethnicity recedes before the primary identity of being in Christ and so we repent of any identity we held as supreme. Nation, language, social class, education, ethnicity in all their manifestations remain part of us, but they yield in priority to the one supreme marker, signified in baptism, of our having died and risen with Christ Jesus. Nothing from the old humanity may remain elevated above the new Adam, Jesus. "The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17).

This dying to self and rising in Christ, being joined to his humanity as the only reconciliation with God, is also the only basis of being truly reconciled to others. Kingdom harmony can only occur if the very basis for relationship is set at this deeper, grace-filled level—to deal with personal sin, of course, but

also to provide the bridge whereby we can find connection, even unity, turning “others” into “one another.” An angry, polarized world with its human-centered theories cannot provide this sort of genuine reconciliation.

## THE WORK OF RECONCILIATION

Reconciled in Christ, we then can turn outward: “We should also harbor charitable thoughts, love, compassion, meekness, gentleness, and kindness. Our speech and behavior should be peaceful, mild, and courteous. We should be tolerant of others, be ready to be reconciled, patiently put up with and forgive injuries against us, and return good for evil” (WLC A. 135).

These reconciling actions arise from understanding how people of diverse ethnicities share *equal* standing in Christ. “Equals are required to pay attention to the dignity and worth of each by honoring each other above themselves and by rejoicing in each other’s gifts and success as if their own” (WLC A. 131). In other words, we live out the prayer our Lord taught us: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, *on earth*, as it is in heaven.”

Our evangelism, our witness, will have integrity when we live out visibly this kingdom harmony. We can pursue the unity that exists in Jesus only as we lay down our own ethnic barriers in order to find deeper identity with one another in Christ.

## PURSUING HOPE: EXERCISING THE GIFTS ALREADY GIVEN

Through the person and work of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit, the EPC has the:

**1) Power and courage to engage** humbly in the lives of people from different ethnicities and *ask to listen*. We can intentionally set aside time on a regular basis to allow open, candid, and respectful discussions between ethnicities to occur, promoting forgiveness, lament, and transformation. We already see our churches taking responsibility to vigorously pursue activities that foster such kingdom harmony.

One example is Hope EPC in Memphis which developed a course called *Ethnos*, an 8-week multi-ethnic, intergenerational small group which includes three outside joint class spiritual adventures. *Ethnos* features a hot meal eaten together, Bible study, guided table-talk and biblical deliberation on ethnicity and culture from a Scripture-centered view. Active listening, praying, caring, and sharing each other’s life experiences allow the group to appreciate and celebrate their God-given varieties, while breaking through the barriers of ignorance or fear to promote kingdom harmony and their commonality in Christ.

**2) Courage to embrace** the lives of the overlooked, gazing in love until we are deeply moved with compassion out of which arises Spirit-prompted acts of love. As relationships develop, we can risk an exchange of ethnic stories. This would include, in time, sharing experiences of the effects of racism. Those whose stories express pain and suffering will find such exercises riskier and more burdensome. Those whose ethnic stories have nurtured and sustained us will want to be

grateful for the effort it takes to tell painful stories. We all want to be patient as we begin noticing as precious people those we have not seen or seen only through a lens of dismissal or blame.

Congregations could recognize and celebrate the different ethnicities in their congregations. If a church is largely homogenous, the congregation could seek relationship with another church in its community. For example, the staff of First Presbyterian in Baton Rouge met with the staff of a neighbor church, Abounding Love Ministries. They shared stories of their history, their people. In particular, the mainly Caucasian staff of FPC listened, grieved, and prayed over the stories of those who grew up Black in Louisiana. A few weeks later, together they visited the River Road African American Museum together, and then over lunch, processed the visit, sealing their friendship in gentle tears.

**3) Commitment to lament alongside** others who have experienced the effects of racism. We know that the Spirit leads us into the sorrow of creation over the Fall of humanity (Rom. 8:22-23). Regular confession of sin lays down the tracks along which regular, honest, and healing lament over racism can occur. Our worship services could regularly include prayers of confession that draw us to lament and repent of various aspects of racism. Ethnic indifference, blindness to racial pain, acts of diminishment, discrimination or hostility, stereotyping and blaming can all be acknowledged. Such lament is healing and uniting.

In our wider communities, we can find a model in Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC. In 2015, a racially motivated shooter killed nine members gathered at the church. The pastor of the church has since begun a ministry called One New Humanity, which in November 2022, organized a Prayer Procession through seven places in Charleston, including the Old Exchange Building where slaves had been traded. The multi-ethnic event focused on lament, repentance, forgiveness, and unity. Such creative ways of shared sorrowing for sin can lead the church to a richer experience of faith, hope and love.

**4) Ability to do justice** in our communities. As our churches address racism and its effects, we can seek more just communities. This can include churches partnering with public schools or even creating Christian schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Jobs and training programs can open paths for the formerly incarcerated returning to society. Our churches can encourage members to serve on town/city councils and task forces that address transportation access, housing, policing, and economic initiatives. Churches can host or organize community festivals that welcome a variety of ethnicities to participate. We look for creative engagement cultivating kingdom harmony.

For example, Forge Church is an EPC multi-ethnic church plant in Greensboro, NC. Their leading edge of evangelism is through children's sports leagues. Pay It Forward promotes multi-ethnic and socio-economic integration by offering participation at no charge. Sports for children becomes an invitation for families to participate in the church. Multi-ethnic sports leagues have readily led to a diverse worshipping community.

**5) Knowledge to resist narratives** that respond to the pain of racism without lament, empathy, confession, repentance or reconciliation in Christ. We want to become aware of and counter the non-Gospel strategies (e.g., Critical Theory or Christian Nationalism) which define liberation as

moving *into* more of ourselves and our tribes. These philosophies set people of different ethnic, economic or social groups against one another. We know they are doomed to fail, dividing others and furthering hostility. We offer the Gospel as the truly freeing alternative. But instead of being silent on issues of ethnicity and racism, the EPC can encourage teaching that clearly distinguishes true from false models for kingdom harmony.

The purpose of the EPC Rev.7:9 Task Force is, in an age of increased adversity to the Gospel, to assist churches in improving the delivery of the Great Commission and the Great Commandment within their local 1-3-5-mile radii. About 15% of EPC churches have either inquired or begun a step reaching a more local diverse audience.

**6) Authority to wield** scripture, prayer, and the truths of our Confession against the principality of racism in the church. Even as we expose errant narratives of liberation, we are also bold to shine the light of scripture into our individual hearts and the ways racism has affected the EPC. Revelation 7 envisions glorious multi-ethnic worship of the true God. It offers a great picture of unity and equality. Has our largely homogenous denomination intentionally opened doors for service and leadership by those not of the majority ethnicity? Have we risked our preferred styles of worship to be enriched and challenged by the worship flavor others may bring? Let us more boldly proclaim a message of kingdom harmony, and the change it calls for, even at risk of creating initial discomfort or anger.

In 1964, the elders of Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis barred African Americans from entering its sanctuary. Following their Pastor Jeb Russell, the congregation overruled those elders and later Pastor Sandy Willson led the congregation to public repentance, asking forgiveness from the surviving members of the local “kneel-in” movement.<sup>20</sup> Over the last several years, Second Presbyterian Church aggressively has pursued racial diversity and unity in its pastoral staffing as well as membership, with wonderfully positive results.

**7) Inspiration** to plant more multi-ethnic churches, to encourage mono-ethnic churches to envision a widening reach in worship and mission, and to engage varied and creative interaction with believers across ethnic lines. At the presbytery level, we are encouraging new church development leaders to focus more intentionally on fostering churches with diverse congregations.

Cherry Creek Presbyterian in Denver hosted pastors and ministry leaders from the local ethnic congregations including Mongolian and Filipino churches, a Hindi/English speaking southern Indian fellowship, and an Indian Telugu speaking fellowship. Scripture was read in native tongues, each pastor/leader prayed corporately as part of the liturgy, and the Telugu choir led special worship music. A subsequent panel of church leaders discussed movement of the Lord in their churches, outreach and missions, what their gatherings involve, and what the unity of the Spirit looks like across our ethnically diverse congregations using the same facilities.

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<sup>20</sup> Stephen R. Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour: The Memphis Kneel-Ins and the Campaign for Southern Church Desegregation*. Oxford Univ. Press (2012)

## **BENEDICTION**

We pray that the scripture, confessions, stories, and thoughts above assist you in the ministry of peace and healing you carry out in Christ's name. And we pray that our shared work produces disciples committed to realizing unity in the church.

May the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus, to whom be glory forever and ever (Heb. 13:2-21).

*The Ad Interim Committee*

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