

# Ministry Focus Paper Approval Sheet

This ministry focus paper entitled

RACE, EVANGELICALISM, AND THE LOCAL CHURCH:  
PROPHETIC PRACTICES TO AWAKEN RACIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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and submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

has been accepted by the Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary

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Date Received: March 12, 2018

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A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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MARCH 2018



## ABSTRACT

### **Race, Evangelicalism, and the Local Church: Prophetic Practices to Awaken Racial Consciousness**

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2018

The racially divisive 2016 election of Donald Trump and its aftermath has exposed the deficient theology of American evangelicalism that does more to perpetuate racism and a racialized society than to reduce it. Through the development and personal practice of a prophetic leadership framework, the project aims to challenge a local pastor's network in Irvine, California to apply the reconciling power of the gospel to the racial divides that ail our society in general, and our local congregations in particular. The project is composed of two major elements: first is the development of a better theological framework that addresses the said deficiencies, while the second is the development of a prophetic leadership paradigm that best addresses the adaptive challenge.

In the first framework development, the theological deficiencies are addressed by examining the various evangelical responses to race issues in our culture. The study identifies evangelicalism's inability to acknowledge structural forms of racism to be at the center of its problems. Three elements of the evangelical framework are observed to contribute to this mindset—a narrow reading of the gospel, individualistic understanding of spirituality, and an unconfessed history of racism. In response, the study proposes three resources to overcome these challenges—understanding the missional calling of the church, recovery of our essential communal identity in the Trinitarian personhood of God, and the development of Scripture-based empathy.

In the second framework development, a prophetic leadership paradigm is created to address the adaptive environment. Inspired by Michael Walzer's description of a prophet as an internal critic, I describe what it means to work as an insider, as an outsider, and as someone without vertical (positional) authority in pursuing my prophetic calling upon the pastor's network. The study concludes with a reflection on the lessons learned on the yearlong practice of these strategies.

Content Reader: Mike McNichols

Word count: 299

To my father

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is a daunting task to recount all the people I owe for helping me in this work, especially as the lessons I received that feed into it have been from so many different sources. My initial years in the doctor of ministry studies as part of a missional leadership cohort under Alan Roxburgh and Mark Lau Branson were key to understanding the missional approach, as well as appreciating the adaptive nature of the project's challenge. I was also pleasantly surprised to find my graduate studies on trinitarian relationality that I had undertaken decades earlier under Miroslav Volf finding their way into this work. Critically, it was Mike McNichols' insightful suggestion to utilize the prophetic framework that gave final shape to the project. My understanding of ministry has been profoundly shaped by my years with Cross Community Church and Jericho Road Church, and I am particularly indebted to Samuel Bang and Yung Kim for all the challenging conversations undertaken there, while we imagined what it meant to be a faithful community of Christ. My involvement with Micah Groups, where Michael Stafford would often bring us to brave conversations integrating justice, worship and preaching, has been formative and therapeutic as well. Lastly, this work would not have been possible without the hardworking pastors of Irvine, seeking the welfare of the city together. I am especially thankful to Scott Bullock for his leadership in guiding this group into a community.

I am most grateful for my brilliant wife Esther, who endured many years of my various studies, supporting me financially, emotionally, and intellectually as a conversation partner. I am quite sure that I would not have completed this work without her. Our children, Lucy and Max, are an incredible reminder of all the good things in this life and give me motivation to not give up on a more just tomorrow.

My father was a journalist in South Korea during a time of military coup, suffering for writing against the propaganda. I would like to believe that I received my inclinations toward justice from him. For that reason, I dedicate this work to his memory.

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## INTRODUCTION

In *Divided by Faith*, a seminal study on race and evangelicals in America, sociologists Michael Emerson and Christian Smith conclude that despite good intentions, evangelicalism does more to perpetuate racism and a racialized society than to reduce it.<sup>1</sup> Sixteen years after publication, the 2016 presidential elections have more than given credence to their findings—exposing a stark, painful divide among evangelicals along racial lines.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, not only does this divide reveal a different experience and vision for our country that is seemingly uninfluenced by our common convictions, it points to a failure to grasp the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ that has destroyed “the dividing walls of hostility” among all peoples (Eph 2:14). This project is my attempt to live out a prophetic calling to bring awareness of race issues in America to the members of a local pastor’s network in Irvine, California. Through the development and practice of a prophetic leadership framework, I intend to challenge this group to apply the reconciling power of the gospel to the racial divides that ail our society in general, and our local congregations in particular.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford Press, 2001), 170.

<sup>2</sup> In the general presidential election of November 2016, white evangelical voters overwhelmingly supported Trump by 81 percent, much greater than the 58 percent support of all white voters. Among non-white voters, 88 percent of black voters, 65 percent of Hispanics, and 65 percent of Asians all voted for Hillary Clinton, with a similar breakdown for the evangelical subset. Bob Smietana, “2016 Election Exposes Evangelical Divides,” *Lifeway Research* (October 14, 2016), accessed February 28, 2017, <http://lifewayresearch.com/2016/10/14/2016-election-exposes-evangelical-divide/>.

## **Defining the Project: Story of My Calling**

Because the issue of race is so vast, I need to clarify what this project is, as well as what this project is not. The best way I know how to do this is to tell the story of my calling to this project. In 2014, as the lead pastor of a small, predominantly Asian American congregation in Irvine, I found myself struggling to make sense of the race questions that were escalating in America in the aftermath of the Trayvon Martin shooting and the Michael Brown/Ferguson unrest. These and other events revealed the dire condition of the racial divide in America of our times, but for all the awareness of biblical calls for justice, neither I nor others in our church leadership knew how to bring our congregation to care about what was happening. In the comfort of our suburban lives, we lacked the framework to hold such concerns for more than an occasional prayer topic. I began to wonder how other churches were handling such matters; I would soon find out we were not alone in our struggles.

Two years later, I had become involved with a local pastor's network called Envision Irvine, ironically as I was taking a break from congregational ministry. The issue of race in America had taken on an even more disturbing turn, with a relentless series of videos posted on social media uncovering the brutal reality of "blue-on-black" police violence, as well as the legal system that was failing to hold perpetrators accountable. I had hoped that there might be space among this fellowship of ministry leaders to unpack these events, yet I was disappointed to find mostly silence. We would awkwardly pray for peace; we would carefully pray for justice; but it was clear we could not have a conversation on race. Cultures and diversity was a concern in context of church growth, but not in terms of the racial problems that plagued our country. For all

that we could say about God and His creation, this was clearly an adaptive challenge for which we lacked the framework. While some sense of import was present, we could not fit it into our story.

Illustrative was what happened when our network came to endorse a “Solidarity March” organized by the main African American church in Irvine. A mega-church pastor accepted the invitation to pray at the gathering, but declined to make an announcement to his congregation about the event. “You have my personal support,” he said, while withholding his congregational involvement. Confused by this seemingly contradictory response, one of the organizers asked me in private, “Why would he do that?” I replied cynically, “He can’t ask his congregation to care about something that he had never asked them to care about before.” Later, I realized there was more truth to this statement than I had intended.

Certainly, his church’s suburban insularity, as well as distance from the African American experience meant that justice was just not an urgent topic of concern. But even more significantly, I realized that something else within the evangelical belief system made us think of justice as a secondary act, outside of the primary gospel work of saving souls. Another comment made by another network pastor neatly reflects this mindset: “We need to make sure that we don’t lose our primary focus on the gospel as we participate in these justice events.” That the good news of Jesus Christ includes the redemption of just relationships between groups was understood, but would never be urgent. This was what I had been struggling with as well—we were working with a broken framework that rationalized our apathy. That this was being supposed in a diverse city like Irvine (54 percent non-white) was more than disconcerting—it threatened to

make the church irrelevant to a crucial sphere of brokenness in our world.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it failed to grasp the fullness of Christ's work.

The final piece of my story took place with the election of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States. For myself and many other people of color, so much of the rhetoric used during and after the election stirred memories of racial slurs and stereotypes we faced growing up, and seemed to legitimize the marginalization that we still face daily—an experience I had once hoped my children could avoid. But the deeper pain for many of us in the church came from the realization that it was the support of the white evangelical vote—a stunning 81 percent—that buoyed Trump, ignoring the divisive and racial undertones of his campaign.<sup>4</sup> This evangelical environment was the community that had spiritually formed me. Reading their books, attending their schools, and sharing theological convictions, I am very much the product of the predominantly white American evangelical vision of the Christian life. But now I, as a person of color, felt betrayed, even unsafe in their midst. At the very least, we were disappointed by the willing disregard for the concerns of the people of color by our fellow brothers in sisters in faith.<sup>5</sup> I wanted to leave evangelicalism behind.

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<sup>3</sup> "Irvine City, California" *U.S. Census Bureau*, 2016-2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, accessed February 14, 2018, <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>.

<sup>4</sup> Smietana.

<sup>5</sup> I was certainly not alone in feeling this. In one forum I attended recently, an African American pastor stated that she woke up the day after the elections with the primary feeling of being "suspicious." Cf. Elizabeth Eisenstadt Evans, "You Fix This Mess: Post-Election, Evangelicals of Color Disappointed in White Evangelicals" *Religion Dispatches*, (December 21, 2016), accessed January 14, 2017, <http://religiondispatches.org/you-fix-this-mess-post-election-evangelicals-of-color-disappointed-in-white-evangelicals/>.

Yet instead of leaving, I found myself being called—to engage even deeper. When the network struggled again to engage this division, I felt what I can only describe as a sense of a calling to serve this community for this purpose. To see something that others need to see, even if it is not well, is the first step in all stories of God’s calling. Specifically, I felt called to catalyze the evangelical pastors of Irvine to care about race matters in America as a gospel issue, by helping to enlarge their framework. I felt called to help them see how racial inequities in America still break God’s heart, and help create empathy to the racial issues in our city. I can imagine many other ways of being part of God’s vision for justice that has much more of a sense of being at the frontline, but that is not my call. This project is not situated in the thick of the reconciliation process, but rather, it is about getting people to the starting line. It is about bringing conservative, well-meaning, evangelical pastors who do not currently feel racial justice as a gospel issue to a place of awareness and conversation and, eventually, even to transformation.

In one sense, the project is a battle for the heart of evangelicalism. The distorted gospel is problematic for the evangelical church on several levels: we become negligent in our pursuit of God’s call to love our neighbors when we fail to attend to the pain of their suffering and their marginalization; we fail to own our complicitousness in perpetuating an unjust society—“Lord, when did we see you a stranger?” we will ask Christ in all earnestness; and we declare a weak gospel that makes the message of the cross irrelevant to one of the great social issues of our time (Mt 25:38). Sadly, these are hardly theoretical symptoms. This is the undeniable reality in 81 percent of a Christian population willing to support the authority of a divisive figure, whose vision of America whitewashes the injustices of our land. The proper framing of this project, then, is not to

help marginalized communities, nor to appreciate diversity; rather, it is to save the evangelical church from its itself, as we attempt to dismantle the distorted gospel that promotes disobedience, hides our sins, and labors against the redemptive movement of Christ's gospel.

### **Finding a Prophetic Location**

The challenge, then, is to develop a workable leadership paradigm in this situation. In one sense, this project may be evaluated more in terms of the how—the method by which I am proposing transformation, rather than the what—a well-tread topic of race relations. While theological frameworks will be addressed, the distinctiveness of this project lies in the approach, rather than the creation of a product, a solution to be implemented. In this regard, I approach this project with a leadership paradigm of a *prophetic leadership*. While often the emphasis on claiming such a call is on the certainty of one's convictions (the truth that one speaks to a given group), my intent in conjuring the term is to describe the location from which a prophet speaks (the place from which truth is declared). In Scriptures, a prophet is almost always a community insider, longing to bring wholeness and truth to their dysfunctional spiritual family, even as one feels marginalized by it. A prophet also speaks at the same level as their community, and holds no vertical authority from which to speak down to people. These three prophetic positions—of being an insider, of being marginalized, and on being level—need to be explicated.

First, a prophet is a community insider, who understands the intricacies of a communal crisis. Political theorist Michael Walzer observes that thorny divisive issues of

a community can only be resolved through the help of an “internal prophet,” for only such a person can speak in such a way to be understood and accepted.<sup>6</sup> Prophetic admonition “presupposes common ground on which prophet and audience stand,” and the power of her voice comes from her membership.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the prophetic message is rarely something radically new, but draws from already present community commitments. The prophet stands not as a dispassionate stranger, or even an estranged native, but as an impassioned voice of the community, speaking at considerable risk to herself.<sup>8</sup>

As mentioned, there was a time during the disorientating days in the immediate aftermath of the election that I wanted to leave behind this community, but I was reminded that at its core, the evangelical faith is not a culture, nor an institution, nor a political platform; rather it is a commitment to the *evangel*—the good news. Evangelicals are a community formed by a commitment to the good news, and when we stray from it, I have a family responsibility to take us to task.<sup>9</sup> I know the language and the values of this community, as well as the credibility to speak uniquely into this context. There is fear within me as I do this—of alienation and rejection from my colleagues and friends—but I do this out of love for the community.

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 27, 71.

<sup>7</sup> The prophet Jonah might be thought of as an exception, notes Walzer. But even in Jonah, Walzer notes, the Ninevites are held accountable to a minimal community standard of the land. Additionally, the primary message of the book of Jonah is to teach the *Israelites* about their identity. Walzer, 76-80, 91.

<sup>8</sup> Walzer, 38-39.

<sup>9</sup> I am inspired by a statement released by Fuller president and president emeritus Mark Labberton and Richard Mouw in this regard. “Post-Election Evangelical: A Statement from Mark Labberton and Richard Mouw.” *Fuller Theological Seminary* (November 14, 2016). accessed November 14, 2016, <http://fuller.edu/communication/post-election-evangelical--a-statement-from-mark-labberton-and-richard-mouw/>.

Second, a prophet almost always arises from the margins, where they are free to see with clarity the power relations within a society. As Walzer notes, “criticism requires critical distance.”<sup>10</sup> Prophets in service of kings rarely maintain their voice, but those outside of the entrenchment can speak with power. This is part of the reason why racism is revealed to be a convergence of racial prejudice and power; and this is why privilege is so difficult to acknowledge for those at the receiving end of the benefit. Being at the margins buffers prophets from the intoxicating effects of power.

Moreover, theologian Sang Hyun Lee reminds us that there is a unique creative potential in being on the margins, as the liminal space gives new awareness and perspective to challenge existing realities.<sup>11</sup> Practically speaking, I experience this as a sensitivity to dynamics that is invisible to those in the center—“I never thought about it that way” in a common response to my observations about race in America from my non-minority friends. My marginality then, as painful as it may be at times, is a location of perspective and sensitivity that is necessary to develop a creative prophetic voice.

Lastly, a prophet stands level with the community without vertical, or positional, authority. They exercise leadership apart from formal hierarchies of power, that even if granted such authority they divest it to speak as mere members of the community. The degree with which a prophet achieves success is based on their ability to create trust, gain credibility, and resonate with the truths already held by the given body. Prophets “lead

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<sup>10</sup> Walzer, 36.

<sup>11</sup> Sang Hyun Lee, *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 11.

without authority,” and this is particularly necessary in situations when formal authorities fail to lead.<sup>12</sup>

This is not a disadvantageous position for catalyzing transformation. As many experts now contend, complex adaptive changes cannot be mandated but only influenced. Formal authority is efficient and useful for addressing technical challenges that require a routine response. But when adaptive challenges arise that require new capacities and new frameworks, formal authority can actually get in the way. The path of adaptive transformation cannot be drawn predeterminatively, but only navigated, constantly reacting to the new realities, as previously unseen challenges come into view. Those not in formal positions of authority are freer to react creatively, and to pivot when necessary—this is how the practice of leadership occurs on the frontline of change.<sup>13</sup> Prophets are neither interested in nor able to mandate external changes, rather they instigate, provoke, and orchestrate others toward owning their transformation.<sup>14</sup> Prophetic leadership, understood in this way, is in fact the practice of adaptive leadership.

This is precisely the location in which I find myself. Previously, as the lead pastor of a congregation, I had sought transformation on this issue from a position of authority, but was ultimately disappointed by the limited impact. But now, from a position of no authority I am more conscious of the art of transformational leadership, whose tools are

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<sup>12</sup> Ronald Heifetz argues that while most people look to formal authority for leadership, much more often leadership comes from those without authority. *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 183.

<sup>13</sup> This is what Richard Pascale, *et. al.*, describe as “surfing the edge of chaos” that leads to meaningful adaptive change. Richard Pascale, Mark Millemann, and Linda Gioja, *Surfing the Edge of Chaos* (New York: Thomson, 2000), 69. Also Heifetz, 188.

<sup>14</sup> Or, they are rejected altogether.

less about programs and bully pulpits, but more about instigating and planting stasis-disrupting thoughts. When all one has is informal authority, one understands the need to invest in relationships to create openness.<sup>15</sup> And in doing this, I have discovered that it is easier to subvert defenses in the context of a dialogical relationship with a peer.

These three prophetic positions—of being an insider, of being marginalized, and on being level—define my approach to this project. I approach as an insider, not only to the network of pastors, but with regard to the evangelical community. I also believe that my marginalized status grants me certain advantages of perspective. Lastly, I approach this work as attempting to provide leadership without formal authority. While this sometimes means that doors are opened more slowly, it helps me to understand that there are no shortcuts to transformational work. These three locations will also form the organizational matrix for my project practices.

### **Defining Racism**

The last remaining introductory task is to define what I am describing when I speak of racism, race matters, or the problem of race in America. There are two clarifications that I need to make before I proceed. First, in discussing about racism, I am addressing something more than just personal prejudice based on someone's perceived race, but the "system of privilege based on race," where a group of one race imposes power and dominance through structures and institutions to another group.<sup>16</sup> In this sense,

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<sup>15</sup> Ronald Heifetz and colleagues Alexander Grashow and Martin Linsky advise in *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 133, 136.

<sup>16</sup> David Maxwell, *Race in a Post-Obama America: The Church Responds* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 7.

evangelicals who tend to focus on acts of individual racism will fail to see the greater landscape in which systemic racism asserts itself.<sup>17</sup> White evangelicals will often protest, “I have acted fairly”, or ask, “Why can’t they just learn to fit in?” without ever questioning their assumptions about “normal behavior”, or whether the system benefits one group more than others. Think about the system of legacy admission common in most competitive universities, or the highly disproportionate traffic stops for black men—these examples of a racialized society at a structural level. In the context of a church, Soong-Chan Rah observes that “homogeneous unit principle”—*the* evangelical church growth methodology of the last fifty years—“allowed the white church to further propagate a system of white privilege by creating as system of segregation.”<sup>18</sup> To deny privilege or culpability because one is “not a racist” is to fail to see the depths of power and privilege entrenched in our racialized society. Racism is much more than just isolated incidents involving “a few bad apples.” Limiting our understanding of racism to prejudice simply does not provide an adequate explanation for the persistence of racism.<sup>19</sup>

Second, in discussing race issues, or race problems in America, I mean to move beyond the dominant “black-and-white” conversations. In part, this is because such a framework fails to capture my own experience, but that is not the only reason. Certainly the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow laws, the injustices endured by the African American

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>18</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 84.

<sup>19</sup> Beverly Daniel Tatum, “*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*” *And Other Conversations About Race* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 6.

population is an indelible part of our race history, and understanding it is critical to any movement forward. But to focus only on this binary dynamic is to miss our present American reality, composed of Native American, East Asian, Latino, Southeast Asian, and Middle Eastern populations, among many others. As an Asian American man, my own experiences of racism have revolved around perceptions of being a permanent immigrant, a model minority, and being neutered of my masculinity. Members of other groups have different stories to tell. But for too long, our stories have not been given hearing, or de-prioritized to the back burner. The loss is more than silenced stories, but a deficient description of reality. While doing this adds to the overall complexity of the topic, awareness of the multiple dynamics helps us to understand the persistent truth about racism—that it is about power dynamics—and will not go away with simple acts of reconciliation that fails to address the underlying power system.

### **Overview**

This paper is divided into three parts. Part One provides the context for the project. Chapter 1 describes the network, Envision Irvine, in its membership, leadership structure, mission, and its accomplishments. Additionally, it describes the ecclesiological influences that frame the imaginary of the network pastors. Chapter 2 places the network within its socio-cultural context, focusing on the story that the City of Irvine tells about itself with regard to its diversity. In addition to making explicit the commonly accepted values of the city, the basic argument here is that despite the story of beautiful integration, there is much work to be done here with regard to race relations. The hope is to give a sense of the importance of doing this work for our city.

Part Two presents the theological reflection of the project. Chapter 3 will review the various Christian works that have attempted to address the particularly American racial condition. Curtiss DeYoung, *et. al.*'s *United by Faith* presents an argument for multicultural congregations as an answer to the problem race. As one of the co-authors is Michael Emerson who co-wrote *Divided by Faith*, it also provides an opportunity to revisit the important sociological study. Soong-Chan Rah's *The Next Evangelicalism* discusses the present "white cultural captivity" of the church that is failing our diverse reality; he argues the hope for spiritual renewal is already happening at the margins, and the only question is whether those in the "center" can humbly submit to nonwhite leadership to guide the way forward. Influential evangelical pastor John Piper's 2011 book on race relations *Bloodlines* will be reviewed next; his work represents an evangelical approach to addressing race relations without really challenging the framework—which for all its inspiring tone we will observe as ultimately falling short. Lastly, I will review two works that are more practice-oriented: Christena Cleveland's *Disunity in Christ* is helpful in breaking down the social dynamics that keep racial reconciliation from happening, while Brenda Salter McNeil's *Roadmap to Reconciliation* presents a process that can be followed when communities are willing to face up to the challenges of racial reconciliation. Lastly, Mark DeYmaz's *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church* will be reviewed as presenting some of the latest in evangelical trend when it comes to race issues.

Chapter 4 will present the current state of the conversation on race in the evangelical church, and analyze it historically, theologically, and sociologically. The aim is to identify the framework issues in evangelicalism that cause it to perpetuate racism

and a racialized society than to reduce it. Chapter 5 then is an attempt at addressing these deficiencies with resources within evangelicalism. The focus will be on three themes: recovery of the broader missional calling of the church; Trinitarian relationality as the model for human relationality; and the centrality of empathy in Christ's understanding of a neighbor.

Part Three discusses the practice. Chapter 6 describes the prophetic practices that I will be engaging with members of the pastor's network to move them toward transformation. As described above, the three coordinates—of being a marginalized insider with no vertical authority—serve as the conceptual matrix. As a delicate process that cannot provide ready-made answers but rather instigate personal questions, I rely heavily on the adaptive leadership strategies primarily associated with Ronald Heifetz. Chapter 7 then describes the result of living out these practices. After describing the successes—and the failures—of the practices themselves, stories and events that reflect signs of gospel enlargement will be recounted. I will close with my observations on ongoing challenges as well as thoughts for possible next steps.

PART ONE

CONTEXT

## CHAPTER 1

### THE NETWORK AND ITS ECCLESIOLOGICAL IMAGINARY

Envision Irvine began in 2014 when two local pastors Chris and John invited pastors in the area to a meeting with the simple idea of sharing resources together. Instead of competing with one another, they wondered rather simply if it would not better to work together for the kingdom. At first, the idea was simply about sharing resources, especially to help new church plants—equipment, facilities, musicians, preachers—but soon it became about working together to “saturate Irvine with the gospel.” Perhaps it was this sense of being part of a larger mission or a previously unaddressed longing for a peer community that attracted the already time-scarce ministry leaders; whatever the motivation, the pastors came. The name Envision Irvine was supposed to be a temporary placeholder, but the name, as well as the network, stuck. While the purpose and the leadership has since evolved, the group has grown to encompass over twenty churches and ministry organizations.

The goal of this chapter is to describe this pastors network as the locus of the project. It will be presented in two parts—the first section will provide the general overview of the group in its membership, leadership structure, mission and

accomplishments; the second section will describe the ecclesiological influences that frame the imaginary of the Irvine pastors. The overall aim of this chapter is to provide the context for the opportunities and challenges of doing this project within this pastoral community.

### **Part One: Structure, Mission and Work of Envision Irvine**

The network currently consists of about thirty pastors and ministry leaders from established churches and new church plants, from a variety of different traditions, including Presbyterian, Baptist, charismatic and non-denominational congregations. That being said, a certain Southern Californian evangelicalism—casual in attitude, conservative in theology, and stubbornly practical—pervades the group. There are senior/lead pastors, associates, campus pastors of megachurches, church-planters, and parachurch leaders in the mix. Most are full-time ministry leaders, although more bivocational pastors seem to be joining us. We think our membership encompasses about a quarter of the active ministries in Irvine.

Demographically, the group reflects diversity in age and racial make-up. The age range is quite broad—from twenties to seventies—although the majority of the group fall into their thirties and forties, generally a very active stage in their ministry lifecycle. Ethnically, the group approximates Irvine’s diverse evangelical Christian population—predominantly white and Asian, with a few Latino and African American members. Where the group falls short is in the area of gender diversity—just one female pastor regularly attends the gathering. Without oversimplifying the dynamics at play, it seems fair to say that this is reflective of Irvine’s generally conservative ecclesiology.

## Structure and Leadership

As a voluntary organization, the membership structure of the group is very loose, with no formal or explicit guidelines. The simple idea of “working together for Irvine” and being “kingdom-minded”—rather than competing with one another—is the main idea that drives the group, and whether this generous spirit makes sense to an individual pastor is the basis for their self-selected association. A verbal commitment to the overall vision and the work of Envision Irvine is usually solicited at some point. Monthly breakfast gatherings are the main means of organization and community interaction, providing the benefit of peer fellowship. Connections outside of the formal gatherings are encouraged and common, adding to a healthy atmosphere of cooperation and mutual edification.

Leadership for Envision Irvine is provided by a core team of four, of which I am one. This leadership team was formed when the founders Chris and John moved on; there was no formal process in the creation of the team—the mantle was simply passed on. This is not to imply a lack of legitimacy or vesting of authority: Ronald Heifetz describes authority as “conferred power to perform a service,” and there is clearly an implicit granting of this authority to the leadership team by the members.<sup>1</sup> However, the lack of formal structure, and particularly the voluntary nature of membership, means that the exercise of leadership is mainly relational influence.

Within the leadership team, Scott, the senior pastor of a prominent Presbyterian church in town, serves as the moderator. Again, this role was handed over rather than

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Press, 1994), 57.

designated through any formal process, but the leadership has been easily accepted due to Scott's generous personality and collaborative approach. (Scott is also the most sympathetic person to my diversity concerns, and a strong ally when it comes to the goals of this project.) His impulse to move the group away from the activity-oriented unity under Chris and John, and toward a unity built on relational trust has created a firmer ground upon which the network can build its future.

The leadership team meets at least once a month to discuss large-scale vision matters, as well as to sweat out the details of upcoming events. It has recently taken on the role of representing the network to various outside entities (e.g., local government), but by far the most critical responsibility of the leadership team has been to connect with Irvine pastors. Our goal has been to connect with all pastors working in Irvine, and chances are very high that one of us personally knows the pastor of any given congregation in Irvine.

The current lack of structure emphasizes the relational nature of the network bond, as well as the ongoing fluidity of the group's identity. It does, however, take away from the network's durability, and gives unequal voice to stronger personalities. It remains to be seen how long we will be able to function before some sort of formality takes root.

### Evolving Mission

As stated, the original mission of the network was to work together "to saturate Irvine with the gospel," a phraseology that has notable implications to evangelical ears. Founders Chris and John used to expand on this by saying that they wanted "to impact every man, woman and child by providing multiple opportunities to hear and respond to

the gospel of Jesus Christ.” What they had in mind, then, was traditional evangelical conversionism; “working together,” in this context, becomes primarily a matter of strategy, tactics, and organizational efficiency. Indeed, early Envision Irvine meetings consisted of attempting to align various churches to work together on common initiatives. This was tepidly received.

The new leadership team felt that understanding the gospel in such a limited way was problematic. This realization was in part due to the influence of the missional conversation that was occurring among the pastors, which prioritized the church’s participation in the kingdom of God rather than just attending to Sunday worship. We began to discuss how saturating neighborhoods with the gospel had to be about more than conversion conversations, but rather engagements of grace and hospitality with our neighbors; where the requirements were more about sitting, eating, and listening, rather than convicting and convincing. While this is still an ongoing conversation, it is clear that our mission is evolving. The process of reframing our mission of saturation—as an extending of Christ’s presence in our world through the exercise of mercy and justice—has begun. This shift has created the necessary opening to engage the pastors to consider race matters as part of their gospel-declaring work.

### The Work

Recently, some of us in the network looked back on our past year and were surprised by how far we had come in such a short time. At the most basic level, there has been a palpable spirit of good will among Irvine pastors as they have grown to become friends with each other. Seasoned veterans are often the first to comment on the newly

supportive atmosphere, feeling “a true sense of unity” and a “real sense of doing Kingdom work.” In one exchange, I witnessed neighboring pastors planning a lunch who for years had a rather frosty relationship. Even going beyond mere collegiality, churches have generously shared their resources with one another, offering facilities and financial help to others. No longer the competition, many in our network have begun to seek meaningful collaboration.

There have already been other tangible fruit as well. In the aftermath of the deaths of Alton Sterling, Philando Castile and Dallas police officers in 2016, the network brought together church and civic leaders to organize a “Tied Together” forum, an event to support the African American community, and stand against division, hate and injustice.<sup>2</sup> Admittedly, the event fell short on many levels, but it was nevertheless a step forward in an otherwise silent response of our city to the events of that time. From this event, we became connected to the largest African American congregation in Irvine and gave our endorsement to their “Solidarity March”—which some described as a toned-down, Irvine-ized version of a Black Lives Matter march. The main energy of the march was on unity, and less so on justice—even though justice issues were addressed. Yet this event was a historic step of activism for our otherwise apolitical city. For the network, it was an enlargement of what we had previously imagined to be our work.

Our Envision Irvine pastors played a significant role in helping to take the march to the broader population, and it was during this time that some of the conversations about race and justice really began. But what also became evident were the limitations of

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<sup>2</sup> Sentinel News Service, “Black and Latino Churches Call for Unity” *Los Angeles Sentinel* (July 21, 2016), accessed March 20, 2016, <https://lasentinel.net/black-and-latino-churches-call-for-unity.html>.

the current framework, as this rather subdued march was met with a variety of reactions from our members: some responded almost spontaneously in support, while others responded with hesitation and discomfort. Some gave personal support for the event, but then struggled to bring in their congregations. We lacked the common framework to make sense out of race, diversity, and justice. Unready for the differing reactions, we failed to debrief what this meant. It was an opportunity lost.

Our involvement in the march, however, caught the attention of the Irvine Chief of Police, which has led to a collaborative initiative called Know Your Neighbor: an effort to grow our neighborhoods into real communities. Led by a network member, it was groundbreaking in that it takes “loving your neighbor” conversations outside of the church walls and into real neighborhoods, in how we live next door to one another. Most recently, our network organized a National Day of Prayer event, a day that became a focal point for bringing together even more churches and leaders of the city.

There is a growing sense that we have only barely scratched the surface of the possibilities. For many of the pastors, their association with the network has broken the trap of provincialism that often accompany local church ministry. As one young pastor recently expressed to me: “Previously, I used to think I was doing kingdom work by just working on my church—everyone is responsible for their own little part of the kingdom. But the problem is that people often grow up in churches that do that, and never learn to appreciate what God is doing outside of them! The Kingdom of God is bigger than my church—that’s what being part of Envision Irvine helps me to see.” I have heard this sentiment shared among others in the network, and perhaps this is the most important work that we do.

## Challenges Ahead

Clearly, these new relationships and realizations have created a new openness for the Irvine pastors, to think about ministry outside of the walls of their own church, and beyond the job description dictated by their boards. The foundation of relational trust, and the growing respect for each other's ministry, has made it hard to not receive with grace the inevitable presence of different opinions. Indeed, the group's diversity has provided a certain freshness of perspective, helping each other to see things in new light. Specifically in terms of the work of this project, there is an opportunity to broach a conversation on race that might not otherwise take place. While it may be too early to judge the network as a safe space for open, transformative conversations, it has the potential to be one. The challenge, then, is in coming up with the right approach and mode to such conversations—one that will not break the tenuous opportunity presented. Relational trust can be fickle, and it is sometimes hard to know when you are pushing the boundaries of your trust until it is too late.

Additionally, trust in one area may not transfer as trust in another area. The network simply lacks history to know how far and how much the members can be challenged. Maintaining the diversity that we have has been hard work, as focusing on developing unity has meant at times the avoiding disagreeable conversations. For example, the aforementioned solidarity march was framed as a pro-peace event, rather than a pro-justice one. Another area of treading gingerly has been the recent elections. My sense is that the network's stress on unity has at times unwittingly supported the status quo and suppressed the challenging voices in our midst.

Lastly, in a critique I will use repeatedly throughout this project, having certain sorts of diversity can have the effect of creating blind spots for the diversity that we lack. I have heard various members shrug off the need to talk about diversity by pointing to our diverse racial make-up, a strategy common among Irvine-ites when challenged about our lack of full diversity. The danger is that exhibition of diversity in certain areas (denominations, ethnicity, age) can have the effect of masking over the lack of diversity in others (*e.g.*, gender, missing ethnic groups). Additionally, one can assume wrongly that race is not a problem because we have racial diversity, but the mere presence of difference does not necessarily translate into the incorporation of such differences into our common space. Such factors point to a budding but fragile community of ministry leaders with the potential to have great positive impact in the city—that is, if only we can hold together long enough to endure through these challenging conversations.

## **Part Two: Ecclesiological Imagination of Irvine Churches**

An imaginary is the set of common values and allowable possibilities of a given social group from which they live out their lives. In describing the ecclesiological imaginary of the Irvine evangelical pastors, I am intentionally not attempting to describe their specific theological traditions—which are quite varied—but rather the air of our context that permeates through our church walls. More than just an ecclesiological context, there is a shared imaginary about “what it means to do church” that one can perceive among most Irvine pastors. My method for describing this imaginary will be via a brief historical survey of three influential churches located just minutes from Irvine town center—Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, and

Saddleback Church in Lake Forest. Clearly, these are churches of national, if not global influence, but by our shared geography and context, Irvine churches feel their influence acutely.

#### Crystal Cathedral, Garden Grove

Despite their spectacular and lamentable collapse in 2010, the story of Crystal Cathedral’s beginnings in 1955—when a young Robert Schuller climbed on top of a drive-in theater snack bar to preach to a congregation listening in cars—is a stuff of legends for church planters. Combined with a focus on upbeat messages that emphasized the power of positive thinking,” Schuller arguably established the first “seeker-friendly” church, one that would spark the imagination of a generation of future church planters.<sup>3</sup> Schuller was unafraid to stand out, marketing to draw attention to himself and his church: his Hour of Power TV broadcasts, his iconic cathedral, and the dazzling Glory of Christmas pageant show—they all pointed to a sort of a spectacle and sensational self-promotion that many in the previous generation would have found uncomfortable, but found resonance in the rapidly growing new communities of Orange County. It is not by accident that the launch of the self-affirming TV broadcasts in 1970 coincided with the construction of Irvine that catered to the aspirational suburban self-starters.

I have had very few conversations regarding Robert Schuller or Crystal Cathedral that were without criticism—the outsized ego, the extravagance, and the overtly upbeat, self-help oriented messages grated many and rightly invited critique. But I have not

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<sup>3</sup> To this day, facilities struggles of new churches are invariably met with the reminder that “Robert Schuller jumped on top of a pop-corn stand.” Gene Veith, “‘Power of Positive Thinking’ founder dies,” *Patheos* (April 7, 2015), accessed February 15, 2018, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/geneveith/2015/04/power-of-positive-thinking-founder-dies/>.

known many pastors in the area who have not been influenced by him and the church. The idea of the innovating hero-pastor foregoing the usual ecclesial bag of tricks to grow a church, the marketing genius of dazzling family friendly performances – these still loom large and continue to grip the imagination of many young pastors. Spectacles in service of ministry is not only forgiven, but par for the course; church traditions are honored insofar as they are useful. The legacy is the near-constant pressure of the churches out-innovate others and re-invent itself. It can be exhausting. Crystal Cathedral ushered in the modern attractional model of the church, and we are still very much living under its shadow.

### Calvary Chapel

Calvary Chapel in the neighboring city of Costa Mesa traces its beginnings to when Chuck Smith inherited a twenty-five member congregation in 1965. Once bordering on closing, the church now boasts a weekly attendance of 9,500, but more impressively, counts more than 1,700 Calvary Chapel associate congregations worldwide. (One of our Envision Irvine pastors leads a Calvary Chapel church plant.) Calvary Chapel's growth was based on their successful outreach to the hippies and the surfer population of the nearby beach cities, becoming the epicenter for the Jesus People movement of the 1970s. More than just an outreach strategy however, Smith upended the traditional notions of church culture by providing a level of informality that fit the anti-establishment sensibilities of hippie counterculture—baptizing young converts in the Pacific Ocean, playing catchy praise tunes on guitars and drums (rather than organs and

choirs), and dressing in t-shirts and jeans. This was a great inversion of what had been expected when one joined a church. Historian Elmer Towns explains:

“In Calvary Chapel the ‘Jesus People’ embraced Christ as their Savior but did not abandon their subculture. Their churches included informal dress, rock music, casual speech and simple living.... Instead of adapting their lifestyle to the culture they found in Christian churches, they did the opposite: they adapted Christianity into their counterculture. From this arose a new culture within Christianity—a new culture of worshiping God.”<sup>4</sup>

The sacred was disassociated from its traditional forms; and the secular forms were coopted for sacred usage. This approach has become the default mode of Orange County churches, if not for most of America. Wearing shorts and sandals to church was no longer a spiritual faux pas, but actually a preferred mode of dress as it expressed a certain authenticity. Weeknight services were replaced with Bible studies in homes, or even at the beach. But perhaps the most prominent innovation was in music: Jesus People movement brought with it a new style of musical worship to the church, one that was characterized by “pop musical instruments, songs with straightforward, simple lyrics, and extended time dedicated to congregational singing.”<sup>5</sup> Nowadays, this time of singing is worship in many churches. Many of the early Calvary Chapel musicians would move on to the Vineyard movement, and it would be under former Calvary pastor John Wimber’s watch that worship music would find its paradigm-setting modern expression—emphasizing intimacy with God, with songs “sung to the Lord, not just about the Lord.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Elmer Town, *The Ten Most Influential Churches of the Past Century* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, 2014), 127.

<sup>5</sup> Andy Park, Lester Ruth, and Cindy Rethmeier. *Worshipping with the Anaheim Vineyard: The Emergence of Contemporary Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2017), 16.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 5.

Chuck Smith and Calvary Chapel’s influence is felt in other ways as well in Irvine, including a certain stubborn Biblicism, anti-denominationalism, and an authoritarian style of leadership. But it is in the area of church culture that Calvary has had the greatest impact. Evangelical church culture, for better or for worse, has never been the same.

#### Saddleback Church, Lake Forest

Perhaps no other church has been more influential in recent times in American evangelicalism than Saddleback. This is undoubtedly true for Irvine churches, as not only is Saddleback’s main campus located in an adjacent city, three multi-site campuses exist within the city itself. (Two of the campus pastors are part of our network.) Rick Warren planted the church in 1980, building a seeker-friendly “purpose-driven” model of a church that would become copied countless times over throughout the world.<sup>7</sup>

Saddleback relentlessly pursues growth. “All healthy churches grow!” Warren famously stated, and he would merge insights from organizational management with those from the church growth movement to pursue such growth.<sup>8</sup> Warren famously went door-to-door asking his neighbors why they did not go to church—he conducted a market survey!—and based on the feedback, he aligned the church’s strategy to make his church more attractive. People found the sermons boring, so he would preach relevant, upbeat, application-focused messages; young families needed childcare, so he made sure to implement and advertise childcare; churches were thought to be only after money, so

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<sup>7</sup> His book *Purpose Driven Church* that explains formula has been translated into over 30 languages, and would eventually lead to Time magazine calling Rick Warren “America’s Pastor” in 2005. Rick Warren, *Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995); “The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America,” *Time* (February 7, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Warren, 49.

visitors were told that they were not expected to contribute. Borrowing terms from the hospitality industry, this “customer-first” mentality—where churches prioritize the experience of a “guest”—is now *de rigueur* for most evangelical churches.

Going a step further in understanding his market, Warren would develop a target demographic composite profile named “Saddleback Sam” that would clearly remind everyone the type of person that the church wanted to attract: educated, affluent, busy professional who is turned off by organized religion.<sup>9</sup> This level of market analysis has become the prerequisite for many churches and church planters. Warren had refined the church growth movement’s *homogeneous unit principle* to its pinnacle, and many evangelical churches followed.<sup>10</sup>

This last point is actually quite significant and needs to be noted, as it has a critical influence on how churches are presently organized. In creating a target profile, there is also an implied non-target group. The picture of Saddleback Sam that Warren used was literally that of an affluent, white, male, professional—there are clear racial, cultural, gender, and socioeconomic prioritizations being made here.<sup>11</sup> Though Warren has nuanced this image somewhat over the years, he seems oblivious to the stunning message of exclusion this creates. In the business world, a target demographic can be justified, but it is theologically problematic for a church. To respond to encountering a neighbor who falls outside of target, as one might expect under such a logic, “they can

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<sup>9</sup> Warren, 169

<sup>10</sup> Many attribute this sort of profiling to Bill Hybels and the *Willowcreek Church* of Illinois. My point is not that Warren was first, but that he was greatly influential in popularizing it as part of a church planting method.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. picture of “Saddleback Sam” in Warren, 170.

attend another church that targets their demographic” is simply inadequate. Yet having followed this strategy for the last two decades, my sense is that Irvine church pastors are only just waking up the realization that this might not be what Jesus had in mind.

Whereas Smith and Calvary Chapel sought to imbue the secular with the sacred, Warren’s approach was to hide the sacred so that it no longer looks like the sacred. So Saddleback’s “sanctuary” is thoroughly utilitarian, focusing on sound design and sightlines, and has little patience for such things as promoting awareness of the sacred, or reflecting on beauty. Warren would begin his sermons with practical applications and only at the end “slip in” the gospel.<sup>12</sup> Pastors influenced by his approach give messages that often feel like a “TED talk with a Bible verse,” tweet vaguely inspirational quotes regarding adversity, while church sanctuaries are designed to look like theaters or night clubs—depending, of course, on the target demographic.

It is hard to overestimate Saddleback’s influence on Irvine. Even when churches are trying to resist it, they still implicitly acknowledge Saddleback—“We are not trying to be Saddleback” is an oft-repeated justification.<sup>13</sup> Warren’s organizational insight and explicit push was that churches need to find their particular purpose—as “most churches try to do to much”—and align everything that they do around it.<sup>14</sup> Such an approach has given permission to the already practical minded pastors of Orange County to focus relentlessly on being relevant. But there is a cost that many are just waking up to.

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<sup>12</sup> Warren, 295.

<sup>13</sup> Confer another Orange County pastor Karl Vaters’ blog *New Small Church*, whose focus is on unveiling these assumptions as being both unhealthy and unbiblical at [www.newsmallechurch.com](http://www.newsmallechurch.com). See also, Karl Vaters, *The Grasshopper Myth: Big Churches, Small Churches and the Small Thinking that Divides Us*, (Fountain Valley, CA: New Small Church, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Warren, 89.

## Concluding Remarks on Ecclesiological Influences

It would be unfair and inaccurate to describe Irvine churches in monolithic terms, as there is a whole spectrum of response to our ecclesiological context. But whether one adopts or rejects these influences, they nevertheless create pressure on the context—the pressure to be the hero-pastor, innovator, and savvy marketing guru. One effect is that in pursuit of numerical growth, Irvine churches have found themselves deeply segregated. Even for those few congregations where there is diversity, churches have failed to capitalize on the opportunity—instead of creating room for courageous conversations, they often avoid conflict like the plague.<sup>15</sup> For all the striving to be relevant, evangelical churches are dangerously close to becoming irrelevant in one of the most pressing issues of our times.

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<sup>15</sup> A recent example of this was when one prominent local church hosted a “Tough Questions” forum. Avoided were all questions about the elections, race relations, and justice matters in the church.

## CHAPTER 2

### IRVINE AND ITS VALUES

In the late 1960s, urban planners began to rethink the earlier design of American suburban development, with its dissatisfying sprawl that was criticized for its “cultural conformity, social isolation, and environmental problems.”<sup>1</sup> Suburban zoning plans that separated interminable housing developments without proportionate open space; creation of massive shopping centers and business parks with equally massive street-facing parking lots; and chronic traffic congestion from automobile-dependent communities – they contributed to a modern landscape that many felt was neither livable nor memorable. Lacking both grace and practicality, critics deemed them “ugly.”<sup>2</sup> In response, a grand experiment dubbed the “new community” movement emerged to intentionally

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Forsyth, *Reforming Suburbia: The Planned Communities of Irvine, Columbia, and the Woodlands* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: Northpoint Press, 2000), 5-12.

incorporate values such as community and livability. One of the earliest, and most successful, of these newly planned communities was Irvine.<sup>3</sup>

Established in 1970, Irvine is an affluent city in central Orange County, California, with a population of 257,000 and rapidly growing. It is also incredibly diverse: according to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2016, 45.31 percent of the residents were Asian, 45.30 were white, 3.0 were African American, 4.5 were multiracial, and 1.5 percent other.<sup>4</sup> As a planned community, Irvine was a purposeful exercise in the creation of a community designed to promote livability and integration, and many would argue that it was a success beyond the planners' wildest imaginations. A glossy new pamphlet trumpets its top rankings in quality-of-life, diversity, and safety.<sup>5</sup> In a recent list of the "Happiest Cities in the U.S." that considered the categories of "emotional and physical well-being," "income and employment," and "community and environment," Irvine was ranked third in the nation.<sup>6</sup> Though sometimes disparaged for being "too planned" and even simply "boring," Irvine is an exceedingly effective realization of an American ideal, using

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<sup>3</sup> Irvine Community proper, as a planning project, is both older and larger than the City of Irvine. For our purposes, we will focus on the city itself, although much of what is said about the city is true of the larger Irvine development.

<sup>4</sup> This makes Irvine the largest city in the continental United States with an Asian plurality. Tomoya Shimura and Ian Wheeler, "Why Asians have become the dominant group in Irvine – and what that means for the city," *The Orange County Register* (September 21, 2016), accessed April 4, 2017, <http://www.ocregister.com/articles/irvine-729359-asian-city.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Among the accolades: #1 best-run city (Wall Street Journal); #1 safest city in the country for city over 200,000 (FBI statistics); #3 Happiest places to live in the US (Wallethub.com); #1 most livable city, by the U.S. Conference of Mayors. "2017 Guide to City of Irvine," brochure available at the Irvine Civic Center.

<sup>6</sup> Richie Bernardo, "2017's Happiest Places to Live," *WalletHub* (March 13, 2017), accessed April 4, 2017, <https://wallethub.com/edu/happiest-places-to-live/32619/>.

cutting-edge architectural and urban planning methods to bring to life suburbia's possibilities.<sup>7</sup>

What is not as clear, however, is the cost of this achievement: even for communities so meticulously planned, there are inevitably unintentional consequences and losses. In particular, the question regarding who sets and maintains the planning standards becomes a critical justice concern. The plan then for this chapter is to present and analyze three of the core lauded values of Irvine—safety, aesthetics, and diversity—and discuss their effect on the racial dynamics of the city.

### Safety

By far the most highly touted quality about Irvine is its *safety*. According to the FBI statistics on violent crimes, Irvine has had the lowest crime rate of big American cities for over a decade running.<sup>8</sup> Crime experts generally attribute Irvine's consistently low crime rate to two factors: its wealth and its demographics. One expert summarizes, "It's basically a very affluent place with little poverty and highly educated, highly skilled, professional population."<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, most experts also point to the large white and Asian populations as a major factor as well—a perception that will be addressed shortly

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<sup>7</sup> Alan Hess, "Discovering Irvine," *Places Journal* (October 2014), accessed April 9, 2017, <https://placesjournal.org/article/discovering-irvine/>.

<sup>8</sup> For cities over a population of 100,000. Jeremiah Dobruck, "FBI Ranks Irvine as Safest Big City in U.S. for 10<sup>th</sup> Year in a Row" *Los Angeles Times* (November 11, 2014), accessed April 8, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-fbi-ranks-irvine-safest-big-us-city-10th-year-20141111-story.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Anmargaret Warner, "Why Irvine, California Consistently Ranks As The Safest City In America," *Business Insider* (July 20, 2013), accessed April 8, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/irvine-california-is-americas-safest-city-2013-7>.

as it seems to be reflective of the myth of the model minority regarding Asian Americans rather than meaningful statistics.

What is important to note first is that safety is seen as the result of Irvine's design. Jorja Leap, a social welfare professor at University of California, Los Angeles, states, "Irvine is a planned community and all properties built there, from its creation, have had a kind of economic selectivity... Each 'village' [particular neighborhood planning organization] has its own 'Covenants, Codes and Restrictions' which is an informal socioeconomic gatekeeper. People must have money and cherish order in order to buy and live there."<sup>10</sup> In other words, by strictly managing the community building requirements, Irvine's master planned design has become in effect a socioeconomic screening tool.

Not too many big cities have the luxury of such a screening tool. Safety, then, becomes a station in the circular logic of community planning that screens out poverty and disorder, which in turn leads to higher levels of public safety. Poverty and resultant disorder becomes "someone else's problem"—a scenario that is reflected whenever a homeless person appears in Irvine and is taxied off to a shelter in a nearby city. Economic diversity that most large cities would have to deal with is selected out. That a community prices out the poor is not particularly remarkable; that this is part of the design should be noteworthy.

The issue becomes more challenging when one asks if there might be a racial element to this. While there are no studies on this to guide us, it is interesting to

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

remember that many experts believe that the large Asian (45.3 percent) and white (45.3 percent) population has something to do with the low rate—a view that I suspect many Irvine residents may silently share.<sup>11</sup> However, there are many other big cities with larger white populations and at least one U.S. city with a larger Asian population (Honolulu) that have much higher crime rates—to postulate that it is the particular mix of the races that result in lower violence is simply unfounded. In other words, considering race as a factor in the city’s safety rather than it simply being an effect of economic screening displays a not-so-subtle presumptions about various races. One has to wonder if there are not racial stereotypes at play—that are based on both the Asian American model minority myth, as well the myth of higher criminality among African American and Latino populations.<sup>12</sup>

Anecdotally, there are reasons to suspect that there is an undertone of racism belying the value of safety. A Latino man confessed to one of our network pastors of his fears of living in Irvine. When his neighbors overheard a domestic argument he was having with his wife, they called the police, and the Irvine police department responded with five squad cars. On a popular “good neighbor” app that allows for local community interaction, there are regularly postings warning neighbors of “suspicious persons” that almost always seem to describe “darker” individuals. An African American friend describes his sense of always being watched in Irvine. Whether these qualify as racial bias may be up for debate, but what is clear is that the lack of meaningful, neighborly

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Cf., Katheryn Russell-Brown, *The Color of Crime: Racial Hoaxes, White Fear, black Protectionism, Police Harassment and Other Macroaggressions* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

contact with certain races promotes an unchallenged and faulty presumption that certain races help to promote safety, while other races obstruct it. The demographical reality of Latino and African American scarcity in Irvine gains the darker racial undertones in these moments, leading to assumptions about who belongs and who does not. This is the cost of Irvine's safety.

The value of safety presents distortional challenges for Irvine Christians. When safety is so much of our present experience, it can create a sense that violence is a distant problem that is not truly our own. This disconnect was something I sensed when I tried to bring conversations about the racial injustice to my church; the lack of direct contact with those experiencing injustice created an empathy vacuum. Additionally, it is not difficult to imagine the impact such a value of safety can have on the church's call to "love one's neighbor." When a community implicitly screens and selects their neighbors, "loving one's neighbor" can easily become a distortion that directly undermines the revolutionary nature of Christ's teaching. In other words, safety can become the rationale through which churches excuse their contributions toward a racialized society.

### **Aesthetics**

One of the priorities in Irvine design and plan is what one might call *balanced aesthetics*. As described in a 2002 articulation of "Community Planning Principles," a careful balance is prescribed—balancing between open space and development, between residence and business areas, between architectural design and landscape, and between streets and buildings—to form a whole that expresses "both unity and diversity."<sup>13</sup> It

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<sup>13</sup> Forsyth, 76; Hess.

remains the city's mission, "to create and maintain a community where people can live, work, and play in an environment that is safe, vibrant, and aesthetically pleasing."<sup>14</sup> From manicured public landscaping to hidden power lines, this is the distinct and overarching Irvine aesthetic that announces your border crossing. The intent was to address the mindlessness of the previous generation's sprawl, and to eliminate the garishness of attention-seeking architectural eyesores. But taken to the extreme, it can be seen as a "socialist experiment," with authoritarian association codes that enforce a "bland conformity of color, landscaping, and lifestyle."<sup>15</sup> For good and for bad, this is very much part of the Irvine experience.

The principle is enforced on many levels. The restrictive color palette of Irvine edifices have earned the architecture school pejorative "Irvine beige"—something I experienced personally when I became disoriented in a neighborhood of similar looking homes in Irvine. In another example, a church I was a part of was asked by the city planning commission to rework the new sanctuary plans—"to round out the fascia so that it blends in better" to the surroundings. This sense of control spills over into other areas as well: from restrictions on the size and placement of signs, to the meticulous grooming of the flora, it becomes clear that balanced aesthetics is about much more than just visual harmony, but control over all things publically visible. One might say this is the cost of livability, and most Irvine-ites seem willing to pay it.

Yet such planning cannot avoid the inevitable problems around its practical implementation. One cannot avoid the questions regarding the nature of such control as

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<sup>14</sup> Irvine City Brochure, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Hess.

well as the ultimately arbitrary adoption of culturally particular aesthetic sensibilities. One might say this is the problem of any planned community, where the creation and the enforcement of a plan is strictly centralized. Such power is neither inherently positive nor negative, but most would agree that a healthy exercise of control in the public sphere requires transparency and meaningful input from those being controlled. In looking at Irvine's system, there is almost a blithe naiveté as it describes its planning values as merely an aesthetic to be realized. The reality is far messier.

In my homeowners association (HOA), there was a recent incident between a homeowner and the board that illustrates the problem. Having been approved through proper procedure, the homeowner was undergoing a major renovation project when some of his neighbors objected to the scope and the design of his project. The board sided with the neighbors, reversing their previous approval and determining that the design was in fact aesthetically not in line with HOA codes. A threat of a lawsuit allowed the construction to continue, but not before racially tinged comments were made about the ethnic minority homeowner. It is quite possible that the homeowner's vision of an aesthetically pleasing design was influenced by his culture. But what went unnoticed in this conversation was the fact that culture influenced the board's vision as well—it just happens to be the dominant cultural framework. It does not occur to those in the majority culture to recognize their definition of aesthetics as being itself cultural.

Aesthetics is a factor in another area as well—affordable housing. Specifically, part of the reason given for why there is such a shortage of affordable housing is because it has to fit into the aesthetics of the community. Designs need to be blended into preexisting communities, and subject to the same aesthetic requirements as the luxury

homes, which means the costly process of bringing affordable homes into Irvine becomes incremental, and always seems to lag behind the rapid population growth. Even in 2014, before the latest spike in population growth, there was an estimated 10,000-unit shortage to affordable homes, effectively shutting out lower-wage workers from taking residence.<sup>16</sup> Aesthetics makes it nearly impossible for those who work in Irvine at the lower end of the pay scale to live where they are employed.

Aesthetics, then, is not just about making things livable, but really a particular way in which control is exercised. This is not a novel problem as all governmental entities seek to control and restrain to varying degrees, but it becomes problematic when there is a disproportionate influence of one cultural community on the rest. Consider then the following facts: for a city that is 54 percent non-white, the entire five-member Irvine city council including the mayor, is white; the police chief is white, the fire chief is white, the school superintendent is white, as are the five school board members; the U.S. Representative is white, as is the California state senator.<sup>17</sup> The only non-white person holding public office associated with Irvine seems to be a single state assemblyman. The point is not that this in itself makes Irvine a racist society, but rather that it enshrines one group's definitions as the de facto standard, starkly incommensurate with the city's demographics. Differences are lost, and community vision becomes skewed.

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<sup>16</sup> Kimberly Pierceall, "What Affordable Looks Like in Irvine," *The Orange County Register* (April 8, 2013), accessed 5/10/2017, <http://www.ocregister.com/2013/04/18/what-affordable-looks-like-in-irvine/>.

<sup>17</sup> There have been two former mayors who were of Asian descent. That being said the point remains, as white members have disproportionately possessed governmental powers.

There are many ways that this dynamic impacts the churches of Irvine. For now, we want to simply note that we live and worship in this environment. It is a place where the citizens are willing to sacrifice certain freedoms for the sake of controlled livability. It is a place where cultural diversity exists among its citizens, but is nearly absent from its centers of power. It is a place where what is normal is defined by members of one racial community for all others to live by—in more ways than just aesthetics. This last point leads us to our next discussion of an Irvine value.

### **Diversity**

Irvine loves to boast about its diversity. The very first words of the colorful brochure that introduces the city of Irvine are as follows: “A culturally diverse and fully integrated city of 260,000 residents...”<sup>18</sup> Later, four more pages are dedicated to describing this diversity, again touting Irvine as being “recognized as one of the most ethnically diverse and fully integrated cities in the country today.” It points to its Global Village Festival, where 20,000 visitors and fifty cultures are represented as the evidence of its diversity. It then concludes with this summary: “The City of Irvine values the varied perspectives of all people with diverse cultural backgrounds. The City strives to uphold the ideals of equality, equity and freedom on which the United States is based, and promotes respect for all individuals and ethnic groups as a principle fundamental to the success and growth of our community.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Irvine City Brochure p.35.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

The previous discussions on safety and aesthetics, however, have made it clear that there is more to this diversity than meets the eye. While there is a large Asian American population, the city is noticeably deficient in its Latino and Black populations; there is a vast chasm between the diversity of the residents and the diversity of the powers. Yet as unmistakable as these deficiencies may be, I have yet to hear a single mention of them in all my conversations about Irvine. No politician, government official, or even a pastor I know of has ever acknowledged the discrepancies, even though the diversity mantra is endlessly repeated. The late organizational behavior guru Chris Argyris made the observation that having a value statement can actually make one blind to all the ways in which one does not practice the stated value.<sup>20</sup> It is possible that all the rhapsodizing over diversity has in actuality made Irvine blind to its serious diversity problem.

This problematic dynamic where our hopeful aspirations distort our perception of reality is precisely what is reflected when the city of Irvine describes itself as “fully integrated”—a key phrase of self-description that I have personally heard two mayors repeat. In the city brochure, the only example of this integration is the annual Global Village Festival, which seems to be a superficial example at best. I do not think I am being unfairly critical when I observe that Irvine does not scream “cultures.” Lacking explicit definition, then, my guess is that “full integration” is meant to describe a certain lack of ghettoization by ethnicity, whether in neighborhoods or schools; or that there is a

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<sup>20</sup> Harvard professor Chris Argyris makes this distinction between *espoused theory*, and *theory-in-use*. The real trouble with having an espoused theory that is different from theory-in-use is that it can actually blind us to how we are *not* practicing that value. In Scott Cormode’s *Making Spiritual Sense: Christian Leaders as Spiritual Interpreters* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006), 20-21. Also Chris Argyris, *Theory in Practice*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1992).

high level of happiness experienced by all residents, regardless of race. This is indeed true on certain levels. But a true, healthy integration would suggest more—of participation and voice, of fair representation and perhaps even a celebration of cultures. This latter sort of diversity seems lacking.

My first ministry position in Irvine was as an associate of a large Korean American mega-church. A local marathon was organized to run on a Sunday morning, whose route would cut off access to our main entrance. The organizers merely sent a notice in the mail, and did not contact the church until two weeks before the event. When the church protested the oversight, it was revealed that the predominantly white mega-church on the other side of town was contacted months earlier as part of the event permitting process. That our church was so clearly overlooked revealed the lack of “full integration” in the minds of both the Irvine police department and the marathon organizers.

Diversity gets blocked in other ways as well. In another example, a pastor friend described how their attempt to purchase church property had stalled, even though they had raised significant funds. Part of the problem is that the city has made it very difficult for any new churches to own property—on top of the area being prime real estate, the city’s strict zoning requirements make costly design and parking space demands. But this means that in all practicality, church property ownership in Irvine has been frozen for decades and is therefore reflective of a bygone time of a white majority population. Considering the fact that most ethnic congregations were not part of the original build out,

they are now effectively shut out of property ownership.<sup>21</sup> While this is a matter of historical development, simple adherence to the status quo means the city is far from having achieved full integration.

Indeed, in my observation, “full integration” in Irvine sometimes feels more like the purging of differences—not in terms of people, but of cultures. Just this past year, I heard a city council member praise Irvine as a “great melting pot”—a metaphor for American heterogeneity that has long fallen from favor, mainly because a melting pot has little room for diversity.<sup>22</sup> To add to my reservations, I have never heard a city official at any level acknowledge the discrepancy between lack of voice in the inner circles of power and authority, with a population that is over 54 percent people of color—or the need to do anything about it. There is no diversity commission or a committee in the city. Indeed, the melting pot may be precisely what the current city leaders have in mind when they suggest Irvine is fully integrated—much like its aesthetics, it has been suggested that in Irvine cultural diversity is neutralized, subsumed under the cultural captivity of the white power brokers.

Even assuming the best intentions, the melting pot metaphor fails to capture the experience of diversity in the United States, as the trumpeting of diversity has often taken on unequal undertones. Consider the oft-repeated phrase I’ve heard from many well-meaning Irvine pastors—“we can engage in world missions by just stepping outside our doors, because the worlds has come to us.” The statement is clearly made in reference to

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<sup>21</sup> In central Irvine area, among the largest congregations, there are only three Asian churches with their own church campuses, versus twelve white dominant churches.

<sup>22</sup> While I want to be careful to read too much into a passing statement, this was spoken by someone in a position of city leadership, and perhaps gives insight into the underlying assumptions about diversity and integration in Irvine.

the large non-white population in Irvine, including myself. But Irvine is my home, as it is for almost all residents of color—to be described as foreigners who would “bring the gospel to their homeland” is ironically a statement of alienation couched in spiritualized language.<sup>23</sup> To the degree that such declarations never occur in reference to a group of second and third generation immigrants of European descent—and it simply does not—it can only be a reflection of an underlying rejection of people of color as truly belonging. Returning to the melting pot metaphor, then, it seems that certain cultures are not even worthy of the mix, but are thrown in with the wood for the fire. Diversity in Irvine is far from equal.

The city’s diversity narrative that covers its inequities is consistent with the diversity narrative of the church, where the only context in which diversity seems to be a matter is in terms of world missions or church growth; there is no awareness of it as a justice issue. There are, however, signs that change is coming, as people of color push back at these assumptions. A predominantly Asian-owned mall has overtaken a traditionally developed mall for popularity; eight out of eleven candidates for the recent city council seats were from non-white backgrounds; a Latino-heritage church has recently absorbed a predominantly white congregation; our pastors’ network is beginning to have dialogue about our assumptions. There is a growing restlessness to set things right, which gives glimmers of hope. Certainly there is plenty of work that is left, which makes for interesting times, even in “boring” Irvine.

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<sup>23</sup> This is a comment I have heard on many different occasions, made by young and old pastors, elders, and even city officials. For me, the most disturbing aspect of this comment is the implication that white members are doing the mission work, while the “immigrants” are the recipients of this work.

## **Concluding Remarks**

The purpose of this chapter was not to show that there are rampant race problems in Irvine. Rather, it was to show the ways in which racial inequity exists even in a place that prides itself in being multicultural community. Perhaps I should have begun this chapter by presenting the myriad of things that Irvine does well when it comes to promoting a multicultural city. Indeed, lest I paint a picture of Irvine as a seriously dysfunctional city, I want to clarify by stating how much I appreciate this city. It is my home, and a place that I feel strongly called to serve. I do not think a city becomes as diverse as Irvine has by accident.

But there are challenges. Not the least of these are the unacknowledged ways in which one sort of diversity hides the serious deficit of diversity in other ways. The reality is that there is very little formal integration of different voices in guiding the future of the city. The only sort of integration that I have witnessed has come from individuals, teachers, neighborhood heroes, who through personal strength of character have reached beyond their comfort zones to make meaningful relationships. These individuals seem to sense something that many of the leaders—civic, spiritual, and otherwise—have failed to see: that there is great profit to such diverse connections, and, conversely, that there is great loss when miss such opportunities.

As is true with pride on a personal level, we need to be careful not to become too proud of our city's merits—as I have presented, there is a cost of our safety; the control over Irvine's aesthetics is not as neutral as one is led to believe; and, our diversity is problematic. But the greatest sin of our city in these areas may be that we refuse to acknowledge them as issues. In my observation this means that while we work together,

and go to school together—my son’s third grade class has second-generation kids from at least a dozen different countries—we still play and worship in segregated communities.

This last observation is particularly stinging for churches, where diversity falls far below the city’s general population ratios. In the past year, I had the opportunity to visit many evangelical Irvine churches, and only a few met even the 20 percent [low-bar] standard that sociologists have set to qualify as “multicultural.”<sup>24</sup> This is the result of the decades-long evangelical church growth strategy whose serious shortsightedness we are only beginning to uncover. Even in the few congregations that meet the numerical standard, the push is always toward “assimilation” that neutralizes differences than celebrate diversity.

The biblical unity that churches can draw from to give context to such differences is breathtakingly deep—the Bible talks about us as friends, children of the same Father, and spiritually bonded to one another, just to name a few ways. To draw from this well and create communities where hard conversations about justice can take place because of the oneness experienced Christ, without nullifying our differences, must be the vision of the church. It might then be possible for the churches to lead the way toward true racial reconciliation.

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<sup>24</sup> As set by the authors of *United by Faith*. Curtiss DeYoung, Michael Emerson, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim, *United by Faith*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3.

PART TWO  
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature reviewed in the following pages all make a clarion call to the churches to engage with race issues in America. They diverge greatly from one another in their framing of the issue, as well as the solutions they propose. The aim of this chapter is to provide a broad perspective on the various approaches that are being currently imagined for the evangelical church, and to discern their practicality for the project.

#### **Toward a Multiracial Church: United by Faith**

In establishing the context for the literature review, we return to sociologists Michael Emerson and Christian Smith's landmark study *Divided by Race* published in the year 2000.<sup>1</sup> The study definitively outlined the particularly evangelical problem of race—that the American [white] church had a race problem, created by a combination of historical and sociological factors, and justified by its theology. Not only has it been flaccid in its response to matters of racial strife in our society, a cancer of systemic

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

racism had formed within evangelical Christianity, making it blind to its own sins of racism, and even perpetuating a racialized society. Indeed, as the rest of the world becomes more ethnically diverse and intermingled, evangelical churches remain staunchly divided racially. Emerson and Smith's carefully supported description of this appalling situation set off many alarms.

*United by Faith* is a direct response to this observation, to provide an alternative framework. In it, Emerson, joined by fellow sociologists Curtiss DeYoung, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim, are unequivocal in what they view as the solution: "Christian congregations, when possible, should be multiracial."<sup>2</sup> Their proposal is premised on the notion that "multiracial congregations can play an important role in reducing racial division and inequality and [thus] should be a goal of Christian people."<sup>3</sup> In other words, the antidote to the evangelical collusion with a racialized society is to live out the biblical vision of multicultural oneness in local congregations.

The authors begin their work by making their case for this biblical vision, which they base on the life and teachings of Jesus, who formed "radically inclusive fellowships" and preached an inclusive gospel of "good news for all people," in stark contrast to the religious practices of the times.<sup>4</sup> The first congregations in Jerusalem and Antioch then took this message and model to heart, breaking down dividing walls where they found them—between Jews and Gentile, slave and free, male and female (Gal 3:28). They

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<sup>2</sup> Curtis DeYoung, et. al., *United by Faith: The Multicultural Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (New York: Oxford 2003), 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

practiced inclusive table fellowship, prioritized church unity particularly between ethnicities and classes, as they understood themselves to be a people formed and united by faith.<sup>5</sup> Somewhat disappointingly, the authors do not develop their theological foundations much beyond this point. That is, they fail to push for a theological underpinning that makes such inclusivity not just an accident of history, but an intentional vision of divinity rooted in the being of God godself. Perhaps this is not fair to ask of this volume—after all, the authors are sociologists, not theologians—but it is, by their own admission, the foundation upon which their proposal rests.

The authors push forward to turn their attention to American church history, and the real surprise here is how tantalizingly close to being realized this vision was in certain pockets. They note, for example, that one of the bi-products of “The Great Awakening” of the 1740s were bi-racial congregations of white and African American men and women worshipping together, free and enslaved, addressing one another as “brothers” and “sisters.”<sup>6</sup> Far from a recent liberal development, the numerous historical examples cited by the authors make it clear: the egalitarian impulses of the churches have existed and persisted through even the darkest, racialized times, though they were often thwarted by political and sociological factors. Their point is clear: multiracial congregations—where there is at most 80 percent of membership from one ethnic group—are biblical, historical, and powerful.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 74.

Before making their final argument for such churches, however, the authors pay significant attention to arguments in favor of racially segregated congregations. Such congregations are said to allow safe space for people of color to thrive, free from the pressures of the dominant culture. While they acknowledge that there are times when such separation may be helpful—e.g., in the case of immigrant churches doing ministry in another language—they argue that it should be the exception, not the rule, for two reasons: first, because safe spaces can be created within a multiracial church, and second, because it creates unhealthy racial dynamics (e.g., greater fear of other races, more dependency on stereotypes). For these reasons, they are ruthless in their dismantling of the church growth movement’s *homogeneous unit principle* as an expedient but harmful tool of growth that is “not ordained by God.”<sup>8</sup> With respect to the growth movement’s assertion that congregational integration should happen *after* the larger society integrates, Emerson and his cohorts consider it an abdication of the church’s call to bring down dividing walls, precisely when our society needs it the most. It is a powerful argument credibly made by sociological observations.

The book culminates with their own proposal: congregations are called to be living examples of authentic reconciling faith, and in our context, only multiracial congregations can do that fully.<sup>9</sup> They note that simply focusing on whether a church is multiracial is not sufficient, but rather *how* the formation takes place is essential for it to be meaningful. To this end, they provide three multiracial congregational models on a progression. An *assimilated* congregation ultimately still displays a single dominant

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 144.

culture. A *pluralist* model may contain different cultures but has a low degree of social interaction across them. The ideal, however, is the *integrated* model that not only maintains distinct cultures but forms a new, integrated culture.<sup>10</sup> The observation of these three categories is a critical insight, as it sets a reasonable standard by which a church's multicultural health can be evaluated. For example, in Irvine, due to the great diversity already present in the general population, just having multicultural representation is not necessarily a challenge. The real challenge remains in the fact that leadership and church culture remain so stubbornly static in the assimilationist mode. The three models reveal that there is more work to be done than just counting diversity.

To attempt to become a multiracial congregation, the authors acknowledge, is a difficult journey that must begin with a strong sense of divine calling. Some of the possible suggestions for moving toward such a goal include transferring to a different congregation, or for uniraical congregations to merge.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, they urge a path to unity in faith filled with intentional steps that must sacrifice comfort. They conclude:

“Multiracial congregations require time, energy, and focus that could be used elsewhere. But... we are called as Christians to live, work, serve, and be together, forging community that can occur only with God's help. Just imagine for a moment what would happen in communities across the United States if multiracial congregations began emerging in cities, suburbs, and small towns. It is a compelling thought.”<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, one wonders if the already time-crunched pastors and church planters in Irvine and elsewhere can resist the pressures of numerical growth enough to focus their

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 165. One observation they make needs to be noted for its relevance to our project: it is critical for the leaders to be must be convinced that “being multiracial is God's design.” DeYoung, et. al., 170.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 175

<sup>12</sup> 180.

energy on such a project, even if they were convinced of the worthiness of the cause. Moreover, if the reality is that only small fraction of all churches would even be able to undertake the multiracial journey, what feels under-investigated is the possibility of other less dramatic steps to dealing with the problem of race in America. In their zeal to provide a certain solution, one wonders if the authors have not overstepped their academic credentials, by proposing a one-size-fits-all answer to a complex problem, of complex socio-historical roots. Lastly, from the perspective of addressing adaptive challenges, it seems out of order to predetermine an outcome, no matter how inspiring. Experience dictates that such solutions are often overly optimistic about their outcome. Nevertheless, the authors are to be commended for putting forth such a bold vision.

### **John Piper and an Evangelical Solution**

Appealing perhaps to the other end of the evangelical spectrum, *Bloodlines: Race, Cross and the Christian*, by the influential conservative pastor John Piper is significant simply by the fact that it was written.<sup>13</sup> As Tim Keller writes in the forward, “conservative evangelicals (particularly white ones) seem to have become more indifferent to the sin of racism during my lifetime... They give lip service to it being sin, but they associate any sustained denunciation of racism with the liberal or secular systems of thought. John’s book... is a strong antidote.”<sup>14</sup> Such high profile exposure from someone of Piper’s evangelical standing makes it hard to dismiss concerns over racism as part of the “liberal agenda.” The book is, in many ways, truly an evangelical

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<sup>13</sup> John Piper, *Bloodlines: Race, Cross, and the Christian* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

attempt at addressing the problem of race—relentless in Scriptural exegesis, and overwhelmingly centered on the individual Christian’s relationship with God. Yet as constructive as it may be at times, what soon becomes clear are the limitations this approach for dealing with our race crisis.

Piper’s problems begin with his adoption of a definition of racism that might be described as naïve: “racism is an explicit or implicit belief or practice that qualitatively distinguishes or values one race over other races.”<sup>15</sup> But it is woefully inadequate to describe racism so neutrally, without regard to historical and sociological context, particularly in our American context. In one sense, the definition follows a typical evangelical move by pointing to its universal-ness—an application of reformed theology’s doctrine of *total depravity*, “all have sinned.” But such a definition disregards the unequal power dynamics that most social scientists now consider central to understanding racism, negating any differences between, for example, the sin of the slave master and sin of the enslaved. Consider in contrast another definition: “racism is racial prejudice plus power.”<sup>16</sup> This definition acknowledges that all human beings hold racial preferences, but it becomes racism when there is a system of power that gives preference and privilege based upon it. Piper’s failure to acknowledge the historicity of racial sins, be it intentional or unintentional, preemptively skews everything else that follows.

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<sup>15</sup> He adopts this from a 2004 definition settled on by the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). It is a definition that is no longer used by the PCA.

<sup>16</sup> Variants of this definition have practically reached “common usage” status, and seemed to have percolated in community, rather than coined by an individual. Cf. Kimberle Crenshaw, et. al. eds., *Critical Race Theory* (New York: The New Press, 1995), xiv.

After presenting what he deems the two main approaches to addressing the problem of racism—a “personal responsibility” approach and a “systemic intervention” approach—and regarding both to be flawed human attempts to deal with human brokenness, Piper turns to the universal work of Christ to overcome all division.<sup>17</sup> The gospel creates new people, new bloodlines that destroys, transforms, and surpasses our old bloodlines. Christ “died on the cross not only for our sins, but also to create new identity.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, every Christian, Piper reminds, is called to live out this life as “walking miracles,” being aware that it was Christ who completed the work to make us whole, called “to bear all things for the sake of Jesus name.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, Christ, and conversion to Christ, is the only hope for the problem of race. The “solution” to the problem of race, is then for Christians to “live in sync with the gospel freedom” by being the sort of non-partial, just, diversity affirming people that Christ has formed us to be.<sup>20</sup> This is Piper at his best, reminding Christians of our identities, with such power and insistence that cuts through the static of cynicism.

Where Piper falls short is his unwillingness to wade into the complexity of the pre-eschatological reality, where Christians are both redeemed and complicit. For it is possible to live justly, refrain from prejudice, *and* benefit from an unjust system. Certainly, Piper must be aware that Jonathan Edwards was a slave owner, or that many southern churches opposed *Brown v. Board of Education*. It is a clear shortcoming that

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<sup>17</sup> Piper does tell his own story of racism, as well as the story of America’s sin of slavery, but there is a strange disconnect between these stories, and the theology that he develops afterwards. Piper, 85.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 169-177

while Piper acknowledges the existence of systemic racism, he addresses racism only as sins consciously committed, and remains otherwise silent about how Christ’s redemption works on the level of “powers and principalities” to transform structures and systems of our fallen world.<sup>21</sup> There is no call to address a broken justice system, no deep awareness of the disparate experiences of police violence, and no acknowledgement of the troubling differences in economic opportunities in our country. These are troubling omissions.

Additionally, by wanting to emphasize the universality of human sinfulness, Piper unintentionally perpetuates the illusion of a level playing field, thus strangely distorting the real story of racism in our country. Take for example his curious choice of interracial marriage as a highlighted example of his penultimate chapter. For Piper, since the new bloodline formed by Christ is what matters, he argues interracial marriages are a positive good in that it reinforces this new identity in Christ—no good Christian ought to be against it!<sup>22</sup> Yet missing in this discussion is any serious acknowledgment of the prior history of injustice that made interracial marriage problematic in the first place—good Christians of one race in our country had rationalized declaring an entire race of people legally and spiritually inferior for their sake of maintaining their power and supremacy.<sup>23</sup> The issue then is not whether or not Christians ought to embrace interracial marriages; the issue is a matter of confession and repentance.

In one sense, *Bloodlines* reveals the problematic constraints of evangelical theology when it comes to the issue of race. Even if everyone became a Christian, the

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<sup>21</sup> Ephesians 6:12; Piper, 220

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 215

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 204.

problem of racism would not go away if we do not also challenge the structural status quo. Piper's silence in challenging our structures is deafening.

### **The Next Evangelicalism, by Soong-Chan Rah**

Pushing the envelope in evangelical multicultural/multiracial conversation is Soong-Chan Rah's *The Next Evangelicalism*.<sup>24</sup> His thesis is rather bluntly made: while white congregations in America lament their shrinking attendance, ethnic minority churches are flourishing both spiritually and in numbers; yet American evangelicalism remains captive to the white, Western ecclesiology, culture and power. The future of American Christianity lies in the leadership and resources of the ethnic churches, but the question that remains is whether white American Christianity can step aside. If this critique is not stinging enough, Rah goes on to argue that American evangelicalism has "more accurately reflected the values, culture and ethos of Western, white American culture than the values of Scripture," and it is nigh time for this Western, white cultural captivity of the church to come to an end.<sup>25</sup> When first published in 2009, Rah's accusations seemed overblown, and his tone too harsh, but reading this book post-November 8, 2016, one wonders if he went go far enough.<sup>26</sup>

Rah breaks down his argument into three parts. In the first section, he describes three ways in which Western, white cultural captivity has crippled the American church:

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<sup>24</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>26</sup> This was of course the date of the presidential elections. Cf., Gregory Smith, "Among White Evangelicals, Regular Churchgoers Are the Most Supportive of Trump," *Pew Research Center* (April 26, 2017), accessed June 14, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/26/among-white-evangelicals-regular-churchgoers-are-the-most-supportive-of-trump/>.

*individualism, consumerism/materialism, and racism.* These sins have been pointed out many times by others, but Rah’s contribution is to perform a cultural archaeology of American evangelicalism, digging beneath the surface for its true master. For example, the soteriology of personal salvation is traced to a culture of narcissism that elevates the individual above all else, while the increasingly extravagant church building projects are traced to a culture of materialism.<sup>27</sup> But it is Rah’s charge of racism of the American church—manifest in white privilege that, among other things, defines spiritual normativity for everyone—that is the most provocative. Here, he describes *The* “pervasiveness of the White, Western cultural captivity” ingrained in the formation of mega churches and the church growth movement.<sup>28</sup> “The American church’s captivity to market-driven materialism” not only creates the predictable uniformity of experience from church-to-church as pastors regurgitate “successful formulas,” but also fosters and justifies the formation of racialized communities in the guise of church growth.<sup>29</sup> Surprisingly, Rah extends his critique to the more progressive emergent church movement as another expression of white privilege that fails to include and acknowledge the real emerging churches—the ethnic and multiracial congregations.<sup>30</sup> His point is made: privilege is persistent, and not easily abdicated.

Rather than just deconstruct, Rah culminates his argument by presenting resources from the ethnic minority churches that American evangelicals can learn from if

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<sup>27</sup> Rah, 42.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>30</sup> Mere nine years after they were hailed as the next best thing, the emerging church or the ‘emergent church’ movement seems already dated, to be superseded by the missional movement.

it is to move toward a hopeful future. It needs to be noted that this positive argument—that resources for healing what ails the church lies in marginalized communities—is not made often in literature. In particular, he points out the ways in which ethnic minority churches practice a more incarnational and holistic ministry, as the community comes together to suffer together, celebrate together, and live together. Rah concludes by pointing out that our new multicultural reality requires leaders who are able to see from multiple perspectives—something that second and third generation immigrant leaders from immigrant populations are uniquely qualified to do. The only real question then, is whether the mainstream white evangelical leadership are able to confess their sin of domination and captivity, and submit themselves to the authority of non-white leaders.

The arguments of this book are forcefully made, both in substance and tone, and the concern that it might be off-putting to otherwise sympathetic readers is real. Yet personal experience informs me that conversations about privilege rarely proceed without offending sensibilities. Whether the argument reaches its audience is probably a matter of perspective, as the book seems to be aimed at two audiences: one is to give charge to ethnic minority evangelicals, and the other to address the larger white church leadership. Indeed, it has been noted elsewhere that for many evangelicals of color, they now see “white evangelical spaces as their ‘mission field,’” even as they no longer view it as their “source of spiritual nourishment.”<sup>31</sup> From such a view, Rah is probably more successful in empowering the former group. (Indeed, it provides strong justification for the “prophetic” framework I have developed for myself.)

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<sup>31</sup> Deborah Jian Lee, “Betrayed at the Polls, Evangelicals of Color at a Crossroads,” *Religion Dispatches* (April 27, 2017), accessed June 1, 2017, <http://religiondispatches.org/betrayed-at-the-polls-evangelicals-of-color-at-a-crossroads/>.

Yet there is enough unevenness in Rah's approach to the latter audience to furnish his detractors with excuses to dismiss him. For example, his almost uncritical endorsement of non-white cultures lies in stark contrast to his unrelenting critique of the dominant white culture. I have witnessed enough "cultural captivity" coming from ethnic cultures to know that it is never as simple as choosing one culture over another—all cultures have elements that need to be exorcised as well as blessed. My personal experience leads me to challenge the overly favorable tone with which Rah tells the immigrant/ethnic minority church story. But the aspects of American evangelical culture that Rah deconstructs—its sins of individualism, consumerism, and racism—is hard to deny, especially in the Trump-era; self-interest is a difficult sin to recognize in oneself. The biblical model in dealing with personal sin is to look to the resources of the community. If the sin is systemic—that is, embedded in life of a particular community—then it makes sense that only the resources of another community can help overcome it. This is what Rah is proposing—step aside, and let others lead, for the church's sake!

At the most recent General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America—the conservative Presbyterian denomination formed primarily in southern states with a checkered racial past—a second generation Korean American elder was elected to serve as the first non-white moderator. This decision, along with other minority leaders taking key leadership posts in an otherwise predominantly white denomination, makes one wonder if Rah's suggestions—albeit received via other streams—are being taken seriously. Such an event gives hope to a place like Irvine, where "cultural captivity" feels too close for comfort. While my particular push would be for a more diverse leadership that includes blacks, Latinos, Asians, *and* whites (among others) I am sympathetic to

Rah's call upon the current predominantly white leaders to release their power. It is stunning that in a large, and diverse community as Irvine, that no such church exists which reflects such foresight. Rah's lack of nuance requires that his insights to be filtered and translated, but clearly they tug on the right power dynamics that uphold the current system, in denial of the present and upcoming realities of a multicultural future. It is a wake-up call to both the ethnic-minority churches to utilize those resources that they have for the larger [evangelical] community, as well as for the those currently in power to recognize their complicitousness to a flawed ecclesiology.

### **Disunity in Christ, by Christena Cleveland**

While the books reviewed so far have a certain polarizing quality—they feel as if they can be preaching to their own choir, but not to others—Christena Cleveland articulates a gracious voice in *Disunity in Christ* that appeals across the theological and cultural spectrum.<sup>32</sup> A social psychologist, Cleveland provides insights on group dynamics that create divisions, as well as provide research-tested guidelines for a way forward. In one sense, this is not a book on race—it has the broader appeal of addressing any group divisions within the body of Christ—however, Cleveland clearly intends to apply the insights from her field to guide the church's struggles in race issues.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces That Keep Us Apart* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> Indeed, one wonders if her broader approach, as well as her self-deprecating, humorous, and sympathetic presentation of the difficulties involved, is not a wise strategic maneuver on the author's part to subvert the defensiveness that we have already witnessed that accompany much of our discussion. It makes for a rare productive reading that I can imagine sharing with any pastor across the race/theological spectrum.

Cleveland begins the book by observing how easily Christians form categories of “wrong” and “right” groups—whether over denomination, doctrine, worship practice, or even music—and wonders aloud that perhaps “this was not what Jesus had in mind when he invited us to participate in his kingdom of earth... I wonder how much Christ’s heart is broken when we denigrate followers of Christ who differ from us.”<sup>34</sup> But whereas others might have left it as “this should not be,” Cleveland is able to offer a description of our innate psychological needs for group identity as a means of affirming one’s self-esteem to unpack the process by which such polarization occurs. Specifically, she explains that part of human nature is to categorize—form cognitive groupings—that help us deal with a complex reality. Such categories make us create an “us”—who are often inflated in our moral goodness, attractiveness, talents, etc.; as well as a “them”—who are always more questionable morally, less likable, less interesting. We are then more generous and open in our encounters with insiders and able to recognize their uniqueness, while outsiders are treated with stereotypes.<sup>35</sup> As preserving group-esteem is deeply connected to our own self-esteem, we engage in behaviors that reinforce the insider/outsider boundaries, by emphasizing differences over the minutest details. In stressful situations, these categorizations allow us to denigrate outside groups, even blaming them for societal ills.

All of this ought to feel stunningly familiar to many pastors, who often rely on such tactics for community formation—“our church is not going to be like their church!” Indeed, Cleveland notes our negative use of these dynamics in the church, whereby we

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<sup>34</sup> Cleveland, 15, 20.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 51.

create Right and Wrong Christians: “By simply categorizing, we often create subcategories that detract from the more important, all-inclusive category of the body of Christ... Before we know it, pro-life or pro-choice, Calvinist or Arminian, or black or white... is more important than whether they are part of the family of God.”<sup>36</sup> Such boundary creating tendencies are powerful, and must be intentionally overcome.

Cleveland challenges Christians to break through such categories, and become more conscious of our greater identity.<sup>37</sup> She utilizes Paul’s metaphor of the body to great effect: “Contrary to common belief, the body of Christ’s diversity is an asset, not a pain in the neck.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed, for Cleveland, the primary driving force behind diversity is not that it is an antidote to the sin of exclusivity, but rather that diverse groups are simply better: “diverse groups come up with more creative and effective ideas than groups composed of similar people.”<sup>39</sup> It is a vision based on the Trinity itself, the willingness to embrace the “other”; “to partake in the sacrificial love of the Trinity is to participate in sacrificial love with *all* others, not just the ones who are part of my homogenous Christian group.”<sup>40</sup> The same group dynamic that binds us to all our little groups, then, can be used to remind us of being bound to a larger group—the body of Christ! “When we

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 60, 97.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

perceive culturally different Christians as fellow members of the body of Christ, we will be less likely to perceive them as threatening competitors.”<sup>41</sup>

To develop this awareness, Cleveland provides four elements of positive cross-cultural interaction: working toward a larger goal, creating equal status, engaging in personal interaction, and providing leadership.<sup>42</sup> I have found them to be highly relevant to my context, as they explain why some of the network’s initiatives have worked. For now I observe that the second of these elements—creating equal status among members of different racial backgrounds—is the critical lynchpin without which multicultural interactions fail. For those with power, it forces acknowledging, then relinquishing one’s privilege, for the greater good of the community. For those coming from marginalized backgrounds, it demands a willingness to engage in uncomfortable situations, and a forgiving heart. Creating equal status arises out of the a priori belief that diversity provides advantages that homogeneity cannot. In my observation, there can be no sustained movement towards reconciliation or diversity without this key ingredient. Concretely, this would mean that a true commitment to a multicultural church must then display shared power and status at the highest levels of leadership, and not just tokenism that feigns diversity.

This is an immensely helpful volume. Cleveland provides non-judgmental insights on why unity—particularly racial unity—seems so hard for the church. She identifies resources within our faith to overcome them, and gives guidance for resolution.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 158.

## **Building A Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church, by Mark DeYmaz**

Mark DeYmaz is a popular conference speaker and pastor of a multi-ethnic church in Arkansas. While John Piper's work represents the theological orientation of the evangelical church, DeYmaz better echoes the modern evangelical praxis when it comes to race issues. As the title *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church* suggests, DeYmaz's entrée into the race conversation is from the perspective of the fulfillment of the Great Commission.<sup>43</sup> In one sense, for DeYmaz the multi-ethnic church is the next step in the church growth movement: "I believe the coming integration of the local church will lead to the fulfillment of the Great Commission, to people of every nation, tribe, people, and tongue coming to know him as we do."<sup>44</sup> For the younger millennials, diversity is a key value, and the church will lose its credibility for the next generation if we do not become diverse.

DeYmaz, however, states that he wants to do this for the right reasons. In a now familiar evangelical move that contrasts justice concerns against divine redemption, he states that "the growing fascination with multi-ethnic church" for the sake of racial reconciliation is a mistake. Instead, the focus must be on "reconciling men and women to Jesus Christ" so that consequently, they become "a church in which diverse people worship God together" so that "the world would know God's love and believe."<sup>45</sup> Whether this distinction is truly valid, I will not presently argue. Regardless, multi-ethnic

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<sup>43</sup> Mark DeYmaz, *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007). DeYmaz uses the term "multi-ethnic," which I will follow in discussion of his writing.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, xxx.

churches are the expression of our obedience to Christ's prayer that the church would become one, which give credibility to a divided world of the reality of God's presence among God's people. Minorities and outsiders do not feel welcome to our churches; our homogeneity compromises the Great Commission.

In considering race issues from the framework of the Great Commission rather than justice, DeYmaz's approach encapsulates the latest trending evangelical mindset toward race issues. While the resulting push for a multiracial churches are similar to what is proposed in DeYoung, et al. in *United by Faith*, the different route of the journey makes for significant differences in practice. Clearly there is overlap, but in my observation, the focus on personal salvation as the end goal never quite does justice to justice issues. The Great Commission mindset, as practiced in modern times, is too calculating and too strategic to be able to support the unpredictable work of fighting for justice. DeYmaz's evangelical background makes him unable to imagine doing justice as an equal calling upon God's people. The scenario that he seems reluctant to pursue is that multi-ethnic churches may be not the best church-growth strategy for the future, but is still worth pursuing. By so closely connecting the value of diversity with the future of the church's numerical growth, DeYmaz undercuts the best of his own arguments for multi-ethnic congregations.

There are other problems as well—particularly because the DeYmaz does not reflect a very nuanced understanding of the interaction between cultures in a historical context of racial injustice. However, DeYmaz's description his actual practices reveal a strong, intuitive understanding of justice issues, such as privilege, voice, and implicit bias. In fact, his "Seven Core Commitments for a Multi-Ethnic Church" mirror some of the

steps that Cleveland mentions, such as “empowering diverse leadership,” and “developing cross-cultural relationships.” His section on churches needing to move beyond the “assimilation language” echoes the observation by the *United by Faith* authors that just being statistically multiethnic is not enough.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the practices embodied in his church may perhaps be a better description of his values, as it models the sort of a community that can impact racial issues in our society.

DeYmaz’s model is the framework that evangelical churches in Irvine can interact without fear of losing its evangelical credentials. *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church* may not provide the most consistent theoretical foundation, but it does provide thought-provoking insight that allow for conversations about racial diversity and justice to begin. It is a promising start.

### **Roadmap to Reconciliation, by Brenda Salter-McNeil**

The last work to be reviewed here is Brenda Salter McNeil’s *Roadmap to Reconciliation*, which provides the most directly applicable discussion on the practicalities of increasing awareness for racial reconciliation.<sup>47</sup> McNeil brings years of experience consulting, facilitating, and speaking on the subject of “moving communities into unity, wholeness, and justice” and the current book represents the culmination of her thinking.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>47</sup> Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness, and Justice*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015).

For McNeil, there are five primary “landmarks” on the roadmap: *catalytic events, realization, identification, preparation, and activation*.<sup>48</sup> Critical to the process getting started is catalytic events, without which the journey cannot begin. These are any incidents, accidental or arranged, that challenge one’s view of a stable reality. They are, to borrow from others, adaptive challenges that force one to recognize that “things might have to change if they are to get better.”<sup>49</sup> Groups or individuals can then choose to respond by either turning inward toward self-preservation and greater isolation, or using such events as an opportunity for transformation. Catalytic events are critical for racial reconciliation process, McNeil implies, because individuals wrongly hold assumptions of personal maturity that needs to be broken. It is a moment of adaptive awareness.

Realization phase then describes the process of growing awareness of the new reality, and helps us understand our newfound relative position to this reality. More than just cognitive realization, it is a disruptive reorientation similar to the one I described in the Introduction when I felt the limits of my ecclesiology. Next, in the identification phase, we embrace the “other” as our own—“your people become my people”—and find a larger, deeper category that bind us. A familiar point by now, Christian identification centers on seeing other humans as bearers of the image of God, and secondly in our identification with other Christians as belonging to the family of God.<sup>50</sup> Such appreciation of our oneness begins the process of breaking down our stereotypes that divide us. The last two steps are the preparation phase—where by we immerse ourselves

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<sup>48</sup> McNeil, 36.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 71.

in real learning—and the activation phase, the actual doing of the work of justice. This involves such activities as communicating the new realizations, advocating for change, building relationships, and constant education.<sup>51</sup>

McNeil, admittedly, is a practitioner and not so much a theoretician—her years of agonizing over this process is not always captured in these pages, and leaves much to the reader’s imagination for how to make actual use of this guide. In my literature review process, I initially did not find the work to be very helpful nor interesting. However, in writing this review after several months of working for change, I find McNeil’s work filled with wisdom, connecting theory to practice. Her framework will be revisited in Chapter 6 to help describe the project work.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 96-103.

## CHAPTER 4

### RACE AND EVANGELICALISM

The goal of this chapter is to provide a description of the current state of the conversation in evangelicalism about race issues in America. Using a three-category framework to describe the variety of approaches that Christians have taken in addressing race issues, the chapter will focus on white evangelicalism's resistance to acknowledging the existence of structural racism as the significant framework hurdle to overcome. Some possible ways in which evangelical theology contribute to this obstacle will be considered. The chapter will close with a reflection locating Irvine pastors in this evangelical framework, using the members' responses to the recent events in Charlottesville as an entrée into their thinking.

#### **State of the Evangelical Response to Racism**

As I began work on this chapter, news unfolded of the state of the emergency declared in Charlottesville, Virginia, where a white supremacist organized rally became violent in clashes with counter-protestors. Bearing torches evocative of the Ku Klux Klan and chanting Nazi-era slogans, it soon became clear that this was not meant to be a

peaceful political event, but a violent, ugly rearing of our country’s painful history of racism emboldened by the election of Donald Trump. The tension and outrage over the events—which included the deadly plowing of a car into a crowd by a white supremacist—only escalated as the president insisted that “many sides” were to blame, and insisting that there were “very fine people on both sides.”<sup>1</sup> That just a few short years earlier some wanted to discuss the coming of a post-racial America now seemed absurdly naïve.

While the silence from some church circles was deeply disappointing, many evangelical leaders boldly condemned the blatant racism of the white supremacists and challenged others to do the same. Russell Moore, a leader in the Southern Baptist Convention, wrote scathingly in a *Washington Post* op-ed piece, “White supremacy angers Jesus. The question is: does it anger his church?”<sup>2</sup> Even in Irvine, where there had previously been precious little said against racism, pastors spoke out, declaring that “racism, prejudice, and bigotry have no place in the family of God.”<sup>3</sup>

Such condemnations *are* important, but doing that, some noted, doesn’t really address the deeper problem—it is easy to condemn and distance ourselves from such outright evil, but it is another to repent of the ways in which we live with the demons.

Jemar Tisby, writing for the Reformed African American Network, compiled a list noting

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<sup>1</sup> Glenn Thrush and Maggie Haberman, “Trump Gives White Supremacists an Unequal Boost,” *New York Times* (August 15, 2017), accessed August 28, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/us/politics/trump-charlottesville-white-nationalists.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Russell Moore, “White Supremacy Angers Jesus, But Does It Anger His Church?” *Washington Post* (August 14, 2017), accessed August 15, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/08/14/russell-moore-white-supremacy-angers-jesus-but-does-it-anger-his-church/?utm\\_term=.9b49935c1909](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/08/14/russell-moore-white-supremacy-angers-jesus-but-does-it-anger-his-church/?utm_term=.9b49935c1909).

<sup>3</sup> In a Sunday service heard at a satellite site of Saddleback Church in Irvine.

*10 Everyday Ways Charlottesville and White Supremacy Are Allowed to Still Happen*, one of them being, “Never treat racism as actual sin in the church. It’s just a social issue and shouldn’t be discussed in the pulpit or the pews. Therefore Christians are never disciplined in how to think about racism in a biblical way, much less oppose it.”<sup>4</sup> Tisby summarizes: “It is not the episodic marches and rallies that define white supremacy; it is the ordinary, dull ways that society props up the racial caste system that lead to the most egregious offenses. American citizens, particularly white people, have to realize how they unintentionally allow Charlottesville and white supremacy to happen.”<sup>5</sup>

A quick survey of the responses to Charlottesville reveal that they mostly mirror the typical response to racism among Christians—white evangelicals condemning racist acts as evil but isolated, while evangelicals of color pointing to the complicitous systems and structures of “everyday white supremacy.”<sup>6</sup> Studies in fact reveal white Christians are more likely to believe that racism is not systemic versus their white non-Christians counterparts.<sup>7</sup> The combination of being white and being evangelical creates a particular understanding of race issues in America that, as Emerson and Smith concluded, not only does not diminish but adds to racial strife.

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<sup>4</sup> Jemar Tisby, “10 Everyday Ways Charlottesville and White Supremacy are Still Allowed to Happen,” *Reformed African American Network* (August 12, 2017), accessed August 20, 2017, <https://www.raanetwork.org/11152-2/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Christena Cleveland posted on her Facebook account on August 12, 2017, “Everyone who participates in and benefits from whiteness is complicit in the hateful atrocities in Charlottesville. The same evil at work in Charlottesville is at work in American churches, seminaries, and communities.” Accessed August 12, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/drchristenacleveland>.

<sup>7</sup> I would add that in my observation, this is even truer for evangelicals. Robert Jones, et. al., *Anxiety, Nostalgia, and Mistrust: Findings from the 2015 American Values Survey*, pdf publication by Public Religion Research Institute (November, 2015), accessed August 20, 2017, <https://www.ppri.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/PRRI-AVS-2015.pdf>.

To understand why this happens, I will use a three-category framework to describe the variety of approaches taken by Christians in America to address race issues. Briefly, the first category focuses on *individual responsibility*, the second on *relational reconciliation*, and the third on *systems and structures*. While the categories are used descriptively, some argue that they make up a complimentary whole—all necessary components to a meaningful response. It is this latter position that I will take, exposing problems that accompany any exclusive use of an approach to address race issues.

### **First Approach: Individual Responsibility**

The first approach emphasizes the *moral responsibility of the individual*. In this view, racism is primarily a sin of the individual, a personal moral failure displayed in racist actions such as supremacy, bigotry, and bias. Like all sin, it is rooted in the rebellious heart that refuses to submit to the will of God that teaches us to love others and consider them better than ourselves (Phil 2:3). It is a sin that needs to be confronted and confessed. And, like all sin, the only possible remedy to sin is redemption in Christ, so therefore the only true remedy for racism is Christ. Structural changes cannot deal with the arrogance of pride and in our hearts that leads to a sense of supremacy over others; the only solution is Christ's redemptive grace. As argued by the likes of John Piper, it is then this redeemed individual that overcomes racial prejudices and brings societal change, not by constructing new systems and structures, but as we "extend the joy we have in his glorious grace to others."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> John Piper, *Bloodlines: Race, Cross, and the Christian* (Wheaton, IL; Crossway, 2011), 78, 83.

There is ample theological truth to such a perspective. However, the problem with the approach appears in its application, as most proponents are eager to apply it exclusively, obfuscating the issues of racial injustice. By generalizing racial injustices as a problem of the human heart divorced from particularities of historical narrative, the approach makes all racial sins the same—which ironically is an act of racial injustice. Racism, best understood, involves unequal power dynamics, and history has revealed that while structural changes may not transform people’s hearts, evil can be better contained. The universality of human sin is a tenet of Christian orthodoxy, but as numerous biblical mandates make plain, it is not an excuse for inaction in the face of injustice.<sup>9</sup>

It was perhaps this universality of human sin that some Christian leaders had in mind when they defended Donald Trump’s post-Charlottesville remarks that placed the blame on “everyone.” Franklin Graham, defending Trump, remarked, “Really, this boils down to evil in people’s hearts... I denounce bigotry and racism of every form, be it black, white or any other... [But] our answers lie in turning to God.”<sup>10</sup> But such a reading of the situation obliterates any meaningful sense of justice by refusing to understand the particularities of this unjust situation—evil committed in support of white supremacy is not the same as a flawed protest against it.

Additionally, its overly individualistic emphasis completely fails to recognize racism’s social dimension. Slavery was a social institution regardless of individual acts of

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<sup>9</sup> E.g., Leviticus 16:19-20; Deuteronomy 27:19; Micah 6:8; Psalm 103:6; James 2:16-17.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted by Joshua Gill, “Franklin Graham Defends Trump’s Response to Charlottesville, ‘Satan Is Behind It All,’” *The Daily Caller* (August 14, 2017), accessed August 29, 2017, <http://dailycaller.com/2017/08/14/franklin-graham-defends-trumps-response-to-charlottesville-satan-is-behind-it-all/>.

kindness. Jim Crow laws were codified racism. Racial profiling had to be declared illegal. An individual may never choose to participate in any one of these systems, but they may passively benefit from them, or, at the very least, have a responsibility to speak out against it. As Soong-Chan Rah iterates, “Evangelicalism’s obsessive fascination with maintaining the primacy of the individual deepens the disconnect with social sin, particularly as it relates to race.”<sup>11</sup>

Racism certainly *is* a moral responsibility of all human beings. But to see it only at such is to fail to recognize its pervasive impact. It is perhaps the greatest flaw of the individualist approach that limits sin to something we actively choose to participate in. Yet, it has been my experience that often I am unable to identify my sin-distorted participation in life. It is only when I am outside of a given context, whether through the passage of time or by provocation of thought, that I can recognize the sin. The current problem of race in America is that no one – not even the white supremacist – is willing to claim one’s racism.

### **Second Approach: Relational Reconciliation**

The second category of response to racism strives to move beyond the individualism of the first by focusing on Christ’s call to his followers to seek *reconciled relationships*. Theologically, the approach takes its basis on the reconciling activity of Christ towards the believer—the evangelical’s “personal relationship with Jesus”—that by extension calls upon the believer to create such reconciling relationships with others. This reconciliation logic is made explicit in Ephesians 2:14-16 by Apostle Paul when he

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<sup>11</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 44.

declares that Christ has “become our peace, who has made two groups one” breaking down the “dividing wall of hostility” that separated the Jews and Gentiles, both ritually and in racial strife. Therefore, we are reminded in Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

In concrete terms, then, racism can be overcome by creating the sort of people who seek reconciliation in their relationships, building good, well-intentioned friendships with people of different ethnic backgrounds. This is the dominant approach among evangelicals, as observed by Emerson and Smith in *Divided by Faith*.<sup>12</sup> In a chapter entitled “Let’s Be Friends”, Emerson and Smith recount a survey they conducted in which nine out of ten evangelicals believed the most important way to address racism was to get to know people of another race.<sup>13</sup> This move toward greater relational contact between diverse groups aligns well both intuitively as well as with elements of social sciences: meaningful contact between two conflicting groups can promote tolerance and acceptance.<sup>14</sup> Practically among churches, this would be manifest in inter-church picnics, pulpit exchanges between preachers of different ethnic backgrounds, and even the push for multi-ethnic churches.

However, the approach becomes problematic when it is practiced in isolation, without a deeper acknowledgement that reconciliation has its limits in addressing the systemic injustices of our experience. One of the more celebrated evangelical examples

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford Press, 2001), 115-116.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>14</sup> Gordon Allport is credited with its initial development of “contact theory” in the 1950’s. *The Nature of Prejudice: 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

espousing this approach was the Promise Keepers movement popular in the 1990s that brought together diverse men in large stadium gatherings. White men confessed their sin of racism to men of color, asked for forgiveness, and then they prayed together in reconciliation. These were by all accounts powerful, genuine, and even healing events. But outside of the gatherings, there was little attention given to the actual plight of minority communities, nor a desire to acknowledge racial injustices that were still present.

Lisa Sharon Harper of Sojourners chronicles the result:

“Promise Keepers... ultimately failed ... [because] they focused exclusively on interpersonal reconciliation with no mention of systemic and structural justice. The omission of justice ultimately created a deep divide between participants of color and whites. It was great to go out for coffee and share each other’s stories and maybe even swap pulpits on a special Sunday. But those white men shut down when their black or brown or Asian or Native American ‘friends’ began to call on their friends to advocate against laws, policies, and structures in the church and society that oppressed or impoverished their people. This dynamic was so pervasive, that it caused deep disillusionment within the African American community. As a result, many evangelical African Americans now push back against the use of the words ‘racial reconciliation.’”<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, it is hard to imagine the possibility of healthy friendships where one denies the lived experiences of injustices of the other. Clifton Clarke, a dean at Fuller Theological Seminary, summarizes the exasperation of the racial reconciliation model in his response statement to Charlottesville: “The term *reconciliation* itself is a misnomer for race relations in America. Reconciliation implies that there was a time when blacks and whites were ‘conciliated’ or ‘in agreement.’”<sup>16</sup> Clarke argues that such a time has

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted by Jim Wallis, in *America’s Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2016), 120.

<sup>16</sup> Clifton Clarke “Enough with ‘Racial Reconciliation’”, *Christianity Today* (August 21, 2017), accessed August 28, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/august-web-only/christians-combat-racism-theologically-charlottesville.html?start=1>.

never existed. To seek “conciliation,” then, one must face up to the reality of white supremacy that is lived out in the ordinary via white privilege.<sup>17</sup>

It is an act of historical forgetfulness to think that racial reconciliation can proceed without addressing the larger context of societal injustice—battling racial injustice has always challenged systems and structures. This is particularly true in the American context with our sordid narrative of race and domination, an ugly strand of our national story we would rather erase but was so painfully reminded of by Charlottesville. One’s longing for reconciled relationships cannot be separated from one’s need to feel safe in one’s country. In other words, racial reconciliation cannot occur in abstraction. Indeed, it is a blindness afforded by privilege to believe that we can move ahead if we could only “just be friends.”

### **Third Approach: Systems and Structures**

Thus, the third approach to racism focuses on unveiling the various inequities of our social *systems and structures*, so that “conciliation” becomes possible. While the accusation often laid against the approach is that it is not biblically based, it would be impossible to not notice structural concerns throughout Scriptures. Cornelius Plantinga reminded us in his influential volume on sin, that the biblical goal of *shalom* is not mere peace, but “the webbing together of God, humans, all creation in equity, fulfillment and delight.” Shalom is the harmonious interaction of the whole of creation – a system that honors the Creator by flourishing in its created intention, “the way it was supposed to

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

be.”<sup>18</sup> This is the peace that the prophets were crying out for, and it refuses to limit its reconciliation to interpersonal relationships. Speaking for Yahweh, Isaiah declares that God’s desire is for his people to “loosen the chains of injustice” and “set the oppressed free,” while feeding, comforting, and clothing the oppressed. It is only then that Yahweh’s “light will break forth like the dawn” as his “healing appears” (Is 58:6, 8). Thus, by seeking God’s justice in our world, we are participating in the inbreaking of God’s justice through the restoration of God’s shalom.

This is an understanding that is carried over in the New Testament through Christ’s declaring of the coming of the kingdom of God.<sup>19</sup> While it is a kingdom like no other—one that is shaped by the power of the cross—it is a kingdom nonetheless in that it represents the manifestation of God’s rule, a new reality.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, it is clear that the earliest Christians actually believed themselves as “living in the long-promised new world in which God was sovereign in a new way, in which Jesus had already been enthroned as Lord.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, far from being an ethic of personal spirituality, or a life lived solely in anticipation of after-life, the language of the kingdom is a powerful call upon God’s people to live in the logic of this new reality. This holistic vision is the *euangelion* that we are called to declare to the ends of the earth. It is with this understanding that Paul writes in Romans 8, “For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of

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<sup>18</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 10.

<sup>19</sup> E.g., Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:14

<sup>20</sup> N. T. Wright, *Simply Good News: Why the Gospel is News and What Makes It Good* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 42.

<sup>21</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus’s Crucifixion*, (New York: HarperOne, 2016), 166.

God to be revealed... in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:19, 21).

Clearly the Scriptures are full of structural understanding of the powers that need redemption!

Structural racism is a broad category that covers over a variety of systems. It can be at the level of the legal system, whether it be the codified racism confronted during the civil rights era or more subtle legislative activities such as gerrymandering and voter access laws. It can also be found at the policy level, such as the selective law enforcement policies that incarcerate disproportionate percentage of African American men.<sup>22</sup> As it has come to light over the last few years, there is a vast difference in the experience of a traffic stops depending on one’s race. Jim Wallis describes how all black parents have to have “the talk” with their sons and daughters, about how to behave and not behave with police.<sup>23</sup> Another friend described how in certain parts of the country, young black men are discouraged from getting their drivers licenses, for fear of these traffic stops. Clearly, this is much greater than overcoming personal relational hurdles.

Additionally, structural racism can be manifest in the informal but no less powerful socio-cultural constructs of our existence that determine norms and values. Psychologists in the recent years of have identified the existence of “implicit bias” as a subtle but critical mode in which structural racism plays a role in everyday life. Through a barrage of social images as well as conscious and unconscious messaging, negative

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Wallis, 5-7.

associations are made with people of color, while positive associations are made with whiteness. White privilege, then, are those “actions, choices, behaviors, and attitudes... guided by the socially constructed system [that] predispose these attitudes to grant privilege and access to members of the dominant [white] group.”<sup>24</sup> This can take the form of an employer’s preference for white-sounding names when screening potential candidates, or educational expectations that are culturally biased.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, implicit bias can manifest negatively for marginalized groups in the form of everyday “microaggressions”—small, casual degradations experienced by marginalized members often dismissed as meaningless.<sup>26</sup> The research on the real impact of such structural racism—psychologically, economically, judicially—is robust and ever widening.

The most common way in which structural racism manifests itself in the church is in the language of assimilation. The dominant culture—in this case, that of white evangelicals—often will assume that they do not have a culture, and expect others to lose their cultures as well. Often this is done under the banner of “church values” or “Christian culture”, as “there is only one race under God—the human race.” Of course, it would be naïve to think that anyone lives de-cultured lives—there is no such thing as “non-ethnic food.” When white evangelicals are unable to see the peculiarities of their own cultural background that prioritize certain values over other, they wind up

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<sup>24</sup> Christopher S. Collins and Alexander Jun, *White Out: Understanding White Privilege and Dominance in the Modern Age* (New York: Peter Lang, 2017), 6.

<sup>25</sup> Marianne Bertrand and Sendil Mullainathan, “Are Emily and Greg More Employable Than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination” *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 94. No. 4 (September, 2004): 991-1013.

<sup>26</sup> Such as when I am asked by new acquaintances, “Where are you really from?” with the implication that I cannot truly be an American. Once can be ignored, but when asked consistently for forty years, it becomes burdensome.

sanctifying their cultural norms to domineer over others. This can be as informal as social expectations, and as codified as hiring practices that value candidates “who share our core values.”<sup>27</sup>

Yet it is at this structural level that the white evangelical response has been problematic. As Emerson and Smith summarize from their findings: “For white evangelicals, the ‘race problem’ is not racial inequality, and it is not systematic, institutional injustice. Rather, white evangelicals view the race problem as (1) prejudiced individuals, resulting in poor relationship and sin, (2) others trying to make it a group or systematic issue when it is not, or (3) a fabrication of the self-interested.” In other words, the evangelical conviction goes beyond believing that racism is best addressed through interpersonal improvements, but rather stands in opposition to even the existence of systemic factors. Indeed, for some white evangelicals, the act of bringing up structural racism is *the cause* of much modern race problems! Their reasoning is that structural aspects of the race problem were settled long time ago, and to continue to bring it up is to rehash old history with little current relevance—one need only to point to the numerous examples of hard-working minorities who have climbed to success to prove the non-existence of systemic racism!<sup>28</sup> To say otherwise is “disrespectful” and “ungrateful” to the opportunities America affords.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> All the quotation marks in this paragraph are from actual conversations.

<sup>28</sup> Emerson and Smith, 91.

<sup>29</sup> This was a common critique of Colin Kaepernick and other black athletes who chose to protest the violent death of African Americans at the hand of law enforcement by kneeling during the singing of the national anthem. In one stunning interview, pastor Robert Jeffress of the influential First Baptist Church in Dallas, declared that the players ought to be “thanking God” that they live in a country where they don’t have to worry about “being shot in the head for taking a knee like they would if they were in North Korea.” Antonia Blumberg, “Trump Evangelical Advisor: NFL Kneelers Are Lucky They Aren’t ‘Shot in the

Such a stance flies in the face of the mountain of data from social sciences. Critics would argue that the justification is disingenuous; the real reason has much more to do with preservation of privilege, power and status.<sup>30</sup> Whatever the true reason, this attitude does help to explain why systemic challenges like Black Lives Matter or affirmative action policies have been met with such hostility among white evangelicals.<sup>31</sup> The reaction has become so common that multicultural studies experts have come to coin a term to describe the defensiveness triggered by the suggestion of a structure that provides white privilege: white fragility.<sup>32</sup> The result of all this is the creation of a deep mistrust and rift among communities.

### **Deconstructing the Evangelical Resistance to Structural Racism**

Clearly, structural racism exists, and white evangelicalism's inability to acknowledge it presents a major problem that needs to be addressed. Tim Keller, one of the few evangelical leaders who affirm systemic racism, summarizes, "You can't just convert everybody and convict them of the individual sin of racism and everything will

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Head," *The Huffington Post* (September 25, 2017), accessed August 29, 2017, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-evangelical-robert-jeffress-nfl-national-anthem-protest\\_us\\_59c97231e4b0cdc77333e1da](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-evangelical-robert-jeffress-nfl-national-anthem-protest_us_59c97231e4b0cdc77333e1da).

<sup>30</sup> For example, see Wallis, 45-46.

<sup>31</sup> "Evangelicals are the least likely of religious groups to support Black Lives Matter, and mostly likely to hold conservative positions on race, according the Barna Group research." Morgan Lee, "Where John Piper and Other Evangelicals Stand on Black Lives Matter" *Christianity Today* (May 13, 2016), accessed August 31, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2016/may/where-john-piper-evangelicals-stand-black-lives-matter-blm.html>; See also, Max McClure, "White Republicans and Southern Evangelicals Most Likely to Claim Reverse Discrimination, Stanford Research Finds," *Stanford Report*, (January 23, 2013), accessed August 31, 2017, <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2013/january/white-reverse-discrimination-012312.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Collins and Jun, 48.

be okay!”<sup>33</sup> The fact is that our theology has been distorted from within, making the divine gift of reconciliation a non-starter. Duke theologian Willie Jennings captures the task well as he writes that before we can “interpret the depths of the divine action of reconciliation, we must first articulate the profound deformities of Christian intimacy and identity in modernity.” Until then, he argues, all talk of reconciliation is either an ideological tool of the powerful, or an idealistic claim in denial of reality. “In truth, it is not at all clear that most Christians are ready to imagine reconciliation.”<sup>34</sup>

And while I do not presume to fully understand the intricacies of evangelical theology to be able to note all of the diseased areas, there are notable deformities to be identified. I will note three elements of the evangelical framework that I have observed that contribute to this mindset – *a narrow reading of the gospel, individualistic understanding of spirituality, and an unconfessed history of racism*. They are, ironically, evangelicalism’s structural challenges to acknowledging structural racial injustice.

### Narrow Understanding of the Gospel

At the center of the evangelical framing of the race problem is what some see as the central problem of its theology—its overly narrow reading of the gospel that understand the work of Christ as “dying for my sins so that one might go to heaven.” But the work of the cross reflects something much greater, and the redemption of humanity

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<sup>33</sup> A message given by Tim Keller, “Racism and Corporate Evil: A White Guy’s Perspective.” Ironically, this message was given during an event to mark the release of John Piper’s *Bloodlines*, which was previously noted as lacking in appreciation for systemic racism. *Desiring God*, accessed August 31, 2017, <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/racism-and-corporate-evil>.

<sup>34</sup> Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 10.

serves a larger purpose than merely attaining “after-life.” N. T. Wright, perhaps the foremost voice in recovering the larger story of the gospel, argues that Jesus’ death signified “the defeat of the powers of evil that kept the world in captivity, with the implication that the world is actually going to change as a result.”<sup>35</sup> We are rescued, then, not for the sake of personal salvation to escape a wrathful God, but to the serve our created purpose of declaring the good news of God’s coming kingdom rule. Wright reminds us that this is our true vocation—to witness, declare, and enact this “revolution” that Christ began on the cross, that the Father’s creation is not to be abandoned but restored.<sup>36</sup> It is this larger story that the church has failed to proclaim.

A helpful way to describe the difference is to use what some call “the four-chapter gospel” versus “the two-chapter gospel” model. The full biblical narrative is described as containing “four-chapters” of *Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration*.<sup>37</sup> It tells the story of a Creator God who does not give up on his creation.<sup>38</sup> In contrast, the modern evangelical gospel story consists only of the chapters of *Fall and Redemption* – “I have sinned, so Jesus came to save me.” In this narrow version of the gospel story, one’s

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<sup>35</sup> N. T. Wright, in interview. Mike Bird, “N. T. Wright: The Church Continues the Revolution Jesus Started,” *Christianity Today* (October 13, 2016), accessed August 31, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/october-web-only/n-t-wright-jesus-death-does-more-than-just-get-us-into-heav.html>.

<sup>36</sup> N. T. Wright, *Day the Revolution Began*, 166.

<sup>37</sup> I became acquainted to the two chapter/four chapter model from a friend from Flourish-San Diego, but have since learned it to be an idea that has seen some circulation. Although influenced by the works of Dallas Willard and N. T. Wright, I have not been able to find original attribution. Cf., Geoff Hsu, “The Four Chapter Gospel”, February 17, 2017, <http://flourishsandiego.org/the-four-chapter-gospel/>.

<sup>38</sup> As told in the climactic scene in Revelation 21, the Holy City/new Jerusalem—representing the final fulfillment of God’s kingdom reign—*descends* onto creation. Humanity is *not* taken up into heaven, but rather God’s kingdom rules comes down to earth, where “now the dwelling of God is with people, and God himself will live with them.”

salvation becomes the ultimate goal of Christ's mission. Creation becomes a sin-diseased artifact from which I need rescue. As reflected in the words of a popular praise song a few years ago, Christ was crucified and "took the fall, and thought of me, above all."<sup>39</sup>

The destructive impact of the two-chapter gospel on matters of justice is significant. First, there is a clear shift in the mission of God's people. Instead of seeking restoration of God's creation, evangelical mission becomes rescuing people out of creation. If one's understanding is that we are "just a passing through" this condemned world, then deteriorating environment, failing economies, and broken justice systems are ancillary concerns to the work of saving individuals. Even the caring of the poor and feeding of the hungry become means to an end of "gospel-receptivity." This means that while personal sins such as prejudice and superiority matter because they may—depending on one's soteriology—impact one's salvation, structural injustices have no redemptive significance. As mission becomes centrally focused on conversion, justice simply falls outside of the mission of God's people.

Second, by seeing justice primarily as God's punishment, rather than the restoration of God's *shalom*—"the way things ought to be"—the pursuit of justice not only loses its purpose, but is placed as being antithetical to the grace of God. Justice pursuits are then seen in a suspicious light. In a 2010 radio conversation between conservative media personality Glenn Beck, the president of Westminster Theological Seminary Peter Lillback, and the chancellor of Liberty University Jerry Falwell Jr., being concerned with "social justice" was declared "code for Marxism," that if one's church

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<sup>39</sup> From "Above All" by Paul Baloche, and Lenny LeBlanc.

supported it, the listeners should “run.”<sup>40</sup> As stunning as such a statement was, it simply made explicit what many evangelicals already believed—justice was not a part of their understanding of the gospel. Thus, without challenging this two-chapter framework, any conversation about systemic racism will fail.

### Individualistic Spirituality

The *Fall-Redemption* motif in the American evangelical context also takes on a particularly individualistic quality. Some have argued that against the distinctly communal understanding of biblical faith that considers believers belonging to each other as integral members of a body,<sup>41</sup> western Christianity has allowed the cultural values of “autonomy and independence to seep into the church, creating privatized versions of Christianity that prize a ‘personal relationship with Jesus’” but has little understanding of our connectedness.<sup>42</sup> Therefore the central sacred moment is not the historical cross and the resurrection of Christ, but the personal experience of the cross and the resurrection—the experience of being “born again.” This moment of conversion—the deeply personal conviction of one’s sins, and the turn toward Christ—is a prerequisite for a full-fledged faith-life, and is understood to be the beginning of a spiritual journey. In many circles, it

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<sup>40</sup> Transcript of Glen Beck show, published May 19, 2010, “The Roots of Social Justice. May 18, 2010” *Fox News*, accessed August, 30, 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2010/05/19/glenn-beck-roots-social-justice.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians 12:14-20.

<sup>42</sup> James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2016), 148. See also Rah, 27-45.

is marked as a spiritual birthday, and most are expected to be able to recount the date, time and the circumstances of the experience.<sup>43</sup>

Individualistic understanding of salvation leads to an individualistic understanding of spiritual formation whose goal, understandably, is the self. Such spirituality allows little space for concerns for societal transformation. Indeed, for many evangelicals, societal transformation is simply the accumulation of many personal transformations. Gary Haugen, founder of International Justice Mission, described how he was unable to motivate churches to become involved with his organization's work when he framed it as a justice issue. However, when reframed as a matter of personal spiritual discipleship, people became motivated.<sup>44</sup> Haugen may have found an effective approach to involve churches, but such a self-centered understanding of discipleship falls short of the biblical standard.

Additionally, this particularly personal approach to salvation means it creates also a particularly personal understanding of sin. Sin is understood to be those things that I should have done, or not done, but ultimately they are about my choices for which I am culpable: "a personal affront to a personal God."<sup>45</sup> But throughout Scriptures there is a larger understanding of sin—the prophets long for a future when the destructive impact of sin will free nature into true flourishing;<sup>46</sup> there are mentions of sins that beget curses

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<sup>43</sup> The centrality of conversion is one of three characteristics historian Randall Balmer uses to define the term *evangelical*. *Evangelicalism in America* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), xi.

<sup>44</sup> Gary Haugen, in the foreword to Jim Martin's *The Just Church* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2012), x, xi.

<sup>45</sup> Plantinga, 13.

<sup>46</sup> E.g., Isaiah 2:2-4; Joel 3:18-21.

passed on from generation to generation.<sup>47</sup> Families are condemned and families are baptized, and nations are judged and nations are saved. All of these point to the inadequacy of an individualistic hamatology, and to sin's larger impact that makes us corporately culpable as members of a community, humanity, and even creation.

The corporate sense of sin helps us understand that we all participate in systems and structures, for which we may benefit in a subtle ways, perhaps even unconsciously. Benefitting from systemic evil does not require a traditional understanding of intentionality or even active choice. Additionally, our 'participation' in systemic evil might be more along the line of silence in the face of someone else's suffering. None of these modes of activity fit well with a strictly personal understanding of sin, but their Scriptural witness cannot be denied. Apostle Paul in Romans 5, generally considered a central passage to the development of much Protestant doctrine, lays out a theology of grace based on our judgment for the sins of Adam and Eve. As members of humanity, we find ourselves all condemned by our connection, not by any specific intentionality or activity on our part! Yet as Paul explains, it is this very understanding of corporate responsibility that allows for the corporate salvation of all humanity based on the single man Jesus Christ: "For just as through the disobedience of one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous" (Rom 5:19).

Commonly used illustration of corporate culpability from modern history is the silent complicity of the German citizens during World War II that allowed for the great

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<sup>47</sup> E.g., Genesis 27:29

atrocities of the Nazis. While they took no direct participation in the holocaust itself, they were willing participants in a evil system that was responsible for the murder of millions. Therefore, to deny the existence of corporate sin is to deny both the historical reality of some of the worst forms of evil the world has ever witnessed, as well as the biblical accounting of the workings of sin.

### Unconfessed History of Racism

Lastly, evangelicalism's present unwillingness to acknowledge systemic racism stands in ironic contrast to the uncomfortable truth of our own heritage, where churches have often stood on the wrong side of racial problem.<sup>48</sup> Recently, this disconnect was on display at the 2017 annual meeting of the Southern Baptists Convention, the largest protestant denomination in the United States. There they struggled to bring to vote a resolution condemning white supremacy that was brought forth by two prominent black pastors. Initially, the denominational leadership declined to bring the condemnation to vote citing procedural reasons, but after an embarrassing public backlash they reversed their course, allowing the vote to come to the floor. (The resolution would be approved nearly unanimously by the general convention.)

The stumble from the leadership, however, was tone-deaf on several levels. First, they failed to understand the racially-charged present context that necessitated the statement – the meeting was in June of 2017, and only two months later Charlottesville would take place. They also failed to recognize the painful divide that the Trump

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<sup>48</sup> This is consistent with the general a-historical tendency of evangelicals, where convenient forgetfulness of the historical context is embedded in so much of its hermeneutics and ecclesiology.

ascendency had created among their membership along racial lines. Lastly, the leadership seemed to be denial of its painful history that requires such condemnations at every opportunity: the Southern Baptists were formed explicitly in defense of slavery.<sup>49</sup> The lack of forceful denouncement of white supremacy was seen as undermining overtures toward racial reconciliation that the denomination had committed to in the past.<sup>50</sup> If there ever was an appropriate occasion to forcefully denounce their past and make clear the Southern Baptist's stance against white supremacy, this was the moment. Instead, the leadership allowed their bureaucracy to prevail, because they failed to appreciate the burden of their history.

Southern Baptists, of course, are not alone in failing to appreciate the burden of one's history; the passing of time has revealed the plain complicity of many Christians in racial systems. Acknowledging our racially broken past could be a catalyst for recognizing our present involvement, but instead, many seem intent on telling revisionist versions of the story, thus allowing for our unconfessed past to keep grip on our lives. One powerful example is recounted by historian Randall Balmer, who tells the harrowing story of how racial segregation was the real motivation behind the religious right's machination to make abortion become *the* evangelical political platform issue. Quoting those who had direct access to the conversations among the movement's leaders, "The

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<sup>49</sup> Emma Green, "A Resolution Condemning White Supremacy Causes Chaos at the Southern Baptist Convention," *The Atlantic* (June 14, 2017), accessed August 30, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/06/the-southern-baptist-convention-alt-right-white-supremacy/530244/>.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

religious right did not get started with *Roe v. Wade*... abortion was not mentioned.”<sup>51</sup>

Instead it served as the emotional hook to mobilize the larger evangelical public to the conservative platform, whose real concern was the IRS revoking tax exemption status to private Christian colleges with racially discriminatory practices.<sup>52</sup>

The sad truth is that many institutions of higher education in America practiced racial discrimination, even though many were founded by devout Christians. Consider then the comments by the current Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, a devout member of the Christian Reformed Church, who recently attempted to reach out to historically black colleges and universities by stating they were “real pioneers when it comes to school choice.”<sup>53</sup> “Choice,” of course, was far from the motivating factor in the founding of the schools—they came into existence because black men and women were banned from white institutions of higher learning. As one might imagine, such a historically naïve remark failed to have the intended conciliatory effect. But racism is a fact of our country’s past—and by corollary a fact of the American evangelical church’s past—and revisionist white-washing of it will doom us to continue reliving it, making reconciliation near impossible.

It is true that all Christians are called to a ministry of reconciliation—with God and with one another. Yet no true reconciliation can take place without the facing up the

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<sup>51</sup> Balmer, 115-116.

<sup>52</sup> Specifically Bob Jones University in South Carolina that did not admit African Americans. I attended a northern Christian college that always admitted all races, but I remember there would be a tone of concern over governmental overreach among some of my classmates whenever the case of Bob Jones University was mentioned. Balmer, 111.

<sup>53</sup> Benjamin Wermund, “DeVos Sparks Controversy With Comments On Black Colleges,” *Politico* (February, 28, 2017), accessed September 1, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/02/betsy-devos-hbcu-historically-black-colleges-235498>.

truth of our past. Miroslav Volf clarifies, “There can be no truth between people without the will to embrace the other. Inversely, the will to embrace the cannot be sustained and will not result in an actual embrace if truth does not reign.”<sup>54</sup> This is precisely the possibility created by the ancient disciplines of confession and repentance. Such a practice might be helpful for our current plight.

There are reasons to hope. During the 2016 General Assembly of the conservative Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), the denomination took explicit steps to name, confess, and repent of their corporate sin of racism during the Civil Right era by adopting a resolution recognizing it. Specifically, the denomination was formed in the immediate aftermath of the civil right era, where many of the founding churches had specifically worked *against* civil rights movement by adopting racist policies. In fact, some of the key founding “churches segregated worshipers by race, barred blacks from membership and black churches from joining presbyteries, participated in and defended white supremacist organizations, and taught that the Bible sanctioned segregation and opposed inter-racial marriage,” the resolution declared.<sup>55</sup> With clear, unequivocal language, the resolution was a stunning example of a confession done right. Fourteen years earlier, the denomination had confessed their general involvement in the racial sins of America, but that confession lacked power as it did not name specific denominational offenses.<sup>56</sup> But this resolution

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<sup>54</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 258.

<sup>55</sup> Overture 43 of the 44<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, Presbyterian Church in America, adopted by a vote of 861 to 123, June, 2016. Accessed August 18, 2017, [http://www.pcaac.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Overture-43-Final.Final\\_.pdf](http://www.pcaac.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Overture-43-Final.Final_.pdf).

<sup>56</sup> Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, “Presbyterian Church in America Apologizes for Old and New Racism,” *Christianity Today* (June 24, 2016), accessed September 1, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2016/june/pca-apologizes-for-new-and-old-racism.html>.

created new space for true reconciliation—a *conciliation*—by naming their haunting past. This commitment to difficult dialogue would result in refreshing, generative conversations about listening to another’s stories of pain, privilege, and confession that pushed the evangelical envelope, creating a new path forward together.<sup>57</sup> It also seemed to energize the denomination at a time when many denominations were faltering. In the following year, it would lead to the overwhelming election of the first non-white moderator Alexander Jun, who happens to be a university professor focusing on diversity issues. As one pastor blogged, “in the past two years, the PCA has expressed a clear desire to be more ethnically diverse. From my perspective, this isn’t just a goal, but rather [with the election of Jun] it has become an encouraging reality.”<sup>58</sup>

Expectedly, such change is neither easy nor without pushback: as soon as Jun’s election was announced, there were grumblings of ‘liberalism taking hold.’<sup>59</sup> Confession often only marks the beginning of the hard work of reconciliation. Yet for this community, the future seems promising. It might not be a bad path for others to follow.

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<sup>57</sup> One concrete example is the collection of essays that arose out of the PCA dialogue, *Heal Us, Emmanuel*, edited by Doug Serven (Oklahoma City, OK: White Blackbird Books, 2016).

<sup>58</sup> Dave Kulp, “Notes From This Year’s PCA General Assembly,” *Uptown Church* (June 22, 2017), accessed September 1, 2017, <http://www.uptownchurch.org/notes-from-this-years-pca-general-assembly/>.

<sup>59</sup> For example, see the article by Trey Sanchez, as well as the comments: “Social Justice Prof Tapped as Moderator for Annual Conservative Presbyterian Meeting: The PCCA, Politically Correct Church in America?” *Truth Revolt* (June 15, 2017), accessed September 1, 2017, <http://www.truthrevolt.org/news/social-justice-prof-tapped-moderator-annual-conservative-presbyterian-meeting>.

## Race and Irvine Churches

We began this chapter by discussing the various responses to the Charlottesville incident by evangelical church leaders, and it now seems appropriate to return to it as a gauge to locate the Irvine pastors and their congregations within the presented evangelical approaches to race issues. As I have indicated in the earlier discussion, the response to the event gives insight into one's appreciation of the structural issues that plague our American race problem. Moreover, because of Donald Trump's equivocating response to the incident being defended in some Christian circles, I believe it became a pulpit issue.<sup>60</sup> I know that I was not alone in feeling that this was an important moment in which churches needed to make some sort of a stand, so I asked some of the pastors if Charlottesville was a topic, in whatever manner, in their Sunday worship.<sup>61</sup> Among the twenty or so pastors I queried, about half stated that nothing formal was stated in worship. Such silence speaks volumes. As Stephanie Wildman and Adrienne Davis observed, "Members of privileged groups can opt out of struggles against oppression if they choose. Often this privilege may be exercised by silence."<sup>62</sup> Their discomfort outweighed their sense of need to speak out.

Their specific reasons were varied: several stated that they "simply forgot" – indicating that they just did not consider the event significant or urgent enough to register

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<sup>60</sup> Antonia Blumberg, "Trump's Evangelical Advisors Largely Silent on His Handling of Charlottesville Violence," *The Huffington Post* (August 18, 2017), accessed September 1, 2017, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-evangelical-advisors-charlottesville\\_us\\_599717e5e4b0a2608a6c097b](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-evangelical-advisors-charlottesville_us_599717e5e4b0a2608a6c097b).

<sup>61</sup> Charlottesville rallies and counter-rallies occurred on Friday/Saturday, making it quite a fresh topic for Sunday gatherings.

<sup>62</sup> Stephanie Wildman and Adrienne Davis, "Language and Silence: Making Systems of Privilege Visible," *Santa Clara Law Review*, Vol. 35, No. 3., (1995): 895.

in their consciousness. Others revealed a slightly different motive for their silence, stating that they felt it was not an appropriate topic for Sunday worship. A few others noted that their silence was because they knew it to be divisive topic for their community: “We have people on both sides of the political spectrum,” one person said. All of these responses indicate a framework issue—justice matters were simply not part of their understanding of the core mission of the church. It was left out, because justice concerns had always been left out. Intentional or not, this may be the effect of the narrow reading of the gospel that focuses only the salvation of souls.

Among those who did make some sort of statement on Charlottesville, many were strong in their condemnation of white supremacy, declaring that it was “incompatible with Christianity.” One of the more forceful responses came from a megachurch pastor with several satellite locations in Irvine. His two main points coincided with the points that other pastors drew on to make their statement: first, he emphasized that everyone was created by God, and second, he pointed out that racism was a sin, because it is born out of pride in one’s skin color or ethnicity. Favored scriptural references came from Galatian 3:28 which declares that “there is neither Jew nor Gentile” in Christ, and Philippians 2:3, where Paul exhorts the church to “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.”

Yet while such declarations were significant steps forward, I found it disconcerting that most of them were stated without any introspection, nor sense of connection to their own context. In other words, the condemnations were of the “evil out there” that did not require the perhaps the uncomfortable introspection of admitting that perhaps there was work to be done close to home. In fact, most declared their own

churches to be “safe havens” from such racism, stating that if “you think racism is okay, you are not going to like our church.” The overall effect, in my opinion, was that these statements had no meaningful impact, and in fact could even be harmful as it gives the impression that racism was something that was far removed from us. As Jesus reminded his disciples, it is much harder work to see the log in our own eye. I wondered if this—the resistance to seeing our own complicity—is the real reason why we evangelicals resist acknowledging structural racism.

Most of these leaders are very conscious of the social context that creates certain trends and tendencies in populations; they are remarkable readers of culture. Yet strangely they seemed oblivious of the social, structural factors that allowed for Charlottesville to occur. Only a single leader—the one African American pastor in our group—conveyed any awareness of the systemic injustice underlying Charlottesville. Noting how for him, Charlottesville was a doxological issue, he prayed, “I can’t shout about Jesus and stay silent about the hate and injustice in Charlottesville... Lord, may your will be done while your people confront the ugliness of inhumanity and injustice.” Sadly, I sense that this was not a prayer many of us fellow believers understand in Irvine. Denouncing Charlottesville, I thought, would be a low-hanging fruit, but instead I was reminded of our daunting reality. The resistance to seeing our racism runs deep.

## CHAPTER 5

### REPAIRING THE EVANGELICAL FRAMEWORK ON RACE

In the previous chapter it was argued that a critical framework issue for evangelicalism was its resistance to acknowledge structural dimensions of racism. No meaningful reconciliation is possible if white evangelicals cannot acknowledge and appreciate the different experience of America that people of color must endure because of the established systems and structures that favor certain groups. Three evangelical characteristics were observed as contributing to the problem—a narrow reading of the gospel narrative, individualistic spirituality, and unconfessed history. In this chapter I will address and propose three ways to help overcome these challenges, so as to create space for a more positive engagement with race issues in America. The first step addresses the need to fully recover the Church's missional calling that is concerned about the restoration of all creation, rather than just the rescue of the faithful. The second step addresses the problem of individualistic Christianity by recovering our essential communal identity in the Trinitarian personhood of God. The final step focuses on developing a conceptual framework that includes empathy toward the plight of others, based on a reading of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan.

## **Recovery of the Church's Whole Mission**

Evangelicalism's refusal to acknowledge the larger narrative of the racialized experience in America was traced to its narrow reading of the gospel that understood the goal of Christianity as "getting into heaven." It leads to a distortion of the evangel—the good news—that focuses on the redemption of individual souls, rather than the restoration of all creation. The narrow reading of the gospel thus allows no conceptual space to attempt to establish justice in our creation since "we are all being rescued from it anyway." Moreover, the narrow reading has led to the formation of a curious suspicion among evangelicals toward any attempt to create social justice as a rejection of God's grace.

In such a reduced framework, discipleship and spiritual formation is often reduced to counting conversions. For despite the stated mission of many churches to form "disciple-making disciples," in actual practice they promote the nurture of "convert-making converts." The distinction, I would observe, is that a convert focuses mainly on the benefits of following Christ, while a disciple realizes one's calling, one's vocation to be God's agents of grace to all creation. The distressing impact is that this essential vocation of the disciple—to declare to the world the victory achieved in Christ's name, by which we have been freed from the powers of this world—now falls outside of an evangelical spiritual formation paradigm. This problematic abdication of our call is what was reflected when a pastor declared to me, "We are called to be disciples of Christ first, not fighters of justice!"

The issue is only exasperated at the church level, where congregations are organized around conversions, rather than true evangel-ism. An entire generation of evangelical ecclesiology was molded around the principles of the church growth movement that focused on numbers rather than transformation, never bothering to ask if there was a cost to creating churches around “homogeneous units.” Far from waning in influence, numbers are still the measure of a church; only last year, a prominent pastor of an influential mega-church declared that it was “stinkin’ selfish” if your desire was to attend a small church. His logic was stunningly pragmatic: bigger churches have more resources, so they are better both for you and your children.<sup>1</sup>

Yet when entire ministry models are founded on numerical growth, bringing up difficult and possibly divisive issues like structural racism becomes rather inconvenient. “Church unity” in such a setting becomes code for “non-confrontational evasion of issues that may lead to attendance decline.” Compare briefly to the biblical notion of unity, as epitomized in Christ’s high priestly prayer in John chapter 17 when he prayed that his disciples “may be one, as the Father and I are one” (17:21-22). Here, Christ makes a close connection between this call for unity with qualities of “peace” and “truth” (Jn 14:27; 17:17). It is a oneness based on the speaking of truth, of confession, and forgiveness. Unity for the sake of retainment of members avoids such things, and can hardly find its precedent in Scriptures.

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<sup>1</sup> Andy Stanley was rather publically called out for this remark. Cf., Karl Vaters, “Dear Andy Stanley, Please Be the Small Church’s Ally, Not Our Enemy,” *Christianity Today*, March 3, 2016, accessed September 1, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/karl-vaters/2016/march/dear-andy-stanley-please-be-small-churchs-ally-not-our-enem.html>.

The incessant drive for growth—something that I have already discussed as being very much part of the Irvine air—also promotes agenda-laden relationships. Instead of “loving our neighbor” with qualities of hospitality and generosity, congregations are asked to foster “intentional relationships”—friendships for the sake of evangelism.<sup>2</sup> This logic of evangelism inevitably leads one to see others as “target demographics,” and turns the commandment into a program to follow rather than the quality of transformed soul who sees the image of God in others. I have been part of too many meetings discussing potential converts that mirror business sales team meetings, with someone reporting that they were close to “closing the deal.” It requires little imagination then to appreciate why so many evangelical church leaders found kinship with a businessman who wrote a book subtitled *The Art of the Deal*.<sup>3</sup>

Pre-evangelism activities are meant to bring non-churched neighbors “one step closer”—all of which seem benign until we find realize that genuine relationships of trust cannot grow in such agenda-laden soil. Surprisingly, however, the pre-evangelism soil is the only space within the current evangelical framework that allows justice concerns a foothold. A well-meaning elder once told me that the church’s homeless ministry provides food to “lure men and women to Christ.” A director of an international Christian food and relief organization explained to me, “They come for the physical food, you give them spiritual food.” To be clear, I am not second-guessing the heart-felt intentions nor the sacrificial actions of these good men and women, nor do I doubt the value of

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<sup>2</sup> For example, see Mark Mittleberg, *Building a Contagious Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 68-70.

<sup>3</sup> This was, of course, Donald Trump’s memoir, by Donald Trump and Tony Schwartz, *Trump: Art of the Deal*, (New York: Random House, 1987).

“spiritual food”—I am, after all, an evangelical! Rather, I am pointing out the impoverished framework that limits their ability to appreciate what they are doing. Stated bluntly, the understanding that justice is important insofar as it leads to conversions is far from biblical witness.

Moreover, I have seen many “diversity initiatives” in churches that feign appreciation for different cultures, but are ultimately a “growth strategy” for the church—much like how Apple and Google might wade into developing markets. It is one thing to note as one local pastor did that there are sixty-one languages spoken by their church members; it is another to have that fact make a difference in how they do church. Such a superficial posture toward justice issues ultimately fails because of its lack of true interest in the experience of the marginalized. Churches, like cities and corporations, like to tout their diversity statistics, but really wrestling with the issues of privilege and justice requires one to enter the deep waters, willing to be challenged in our convictions of rightness long enough to allow it to change us.

True worship, Mark Labberton argues, includes “the enactment of God’s love and justice,” and is “dangerous” because it is the place where God transforms us into his image.<sup>4</sup> But the stunted, self-centered spirituality that results from the narrow focus on conversion-ism diminishes of our call to be God’s agents in creation, and creates inauthentic relationships. To take our call seriously as disciples of this God is to become people who understand that “the message of the Cross is the power the God” to those of us whom God has called, because, as N. T. Wright asserts, it signifies “the ultimate

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 13, 42.

revelation of the divine love that... renews and summons to life the holiness and unity, suffering and mission, that was the heart of the vocation of the church in the first century as it is today” (1 Cor 1:23).<sup>5</sup>

One attempt to recover this full sense of mission based on the entirety of the Scriptural narrative in recent years has come from the missional movement. Though the term has become controverted in the recent years, the original intent of the term as coined by Darrell Guder and his colleagues was to harken the church back to its missionary calling to the world, to foster an understanding of the itself as “fundamentally and comprehensively defined by its calling and sending, its purpose to serve God’s healing purposes for all the world as God’s witnessing people to all the world.”<sup>6</sup> Alan Roxburgh, an original member of Guder’s cohort, describes few of the characteristics of the missional movement.<sup>7</sup> First, they began by identifying Western society as a mission field: the “cultural narrative” of Western society—its values, norms, and imaginaries—can no longer said to be reflective of the biblical values.<sup>8</sup> Second, mission is first and foremost the *missio dei*—the mission of God. Rather than seeking the institutional success for the Church, the missional work of the church is to participate in God’s missional activity by

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<sup>5</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus’s Crucifixion*, (New York: HarperOne, 2016), 229

<sup>6</sup> Darrell Guder from his Payton Lecture, “Walking Worthily: Missional Leadership After Christendom,” given at Fuller Theological Seminary, May 2-3, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Roxburgh, “The Missional Church”, *Theology Matters*, Vol. 10, No. 4, (Sep/Oct 2004), 2-4.

<sup>8</sup> Based on Lesslie Newbigin’s original observations, Guder and Roxburgh both note this as a point of lament, that our culture is becoming quickly de-Christianized. This is a point of disagreement for me, as I only see positives in the liberation of the church from the shackles of Christendom that created a Christianity based on power, privilege, and dominance. Those characteristics necessarily, I would argue, undermined the message of the cross.

prayerfully asking, “What is God doing in the world, and how can we be part of it?”<sup>9</sup> This is what Jürgen Moltmann observed when he wrote: “It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill to the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church, creating a church as it goes on its way.”<sup>10</sup> Contrary to much self-centered ecclesiology of our time, this means the primary beneficiaries of the church’s mission is not the church, but the world. Third, the church is called to embody kingdom ethics, to be “the sign, foretaste, instrument and witness of the kingdom of God,” as the “primary means through which God loves the world.”<sup>11</sup> Clearly, this goes beyond a simple gathering of people who are saved, but rather points to the formation of a community imbued with the ethics of the kingdom, in its mercy, righteousness and justice. The church, then, becomes the “plausibility structure” by which the inner logic of God’s reign becomes meaningful to the watching world.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, to be “for the world” is not inconsistent with being “for God”; rather, it is precisely through our love for the world that we inhabit the love of God.

Consider the first two descriptions of the missional movement as applied to evangelicalism’s framework limitations on justice. First, in noting that our Western society is a mission field, it rightly notes the distinction between Christianity and cultural Christianity. Particularly in our country, where there has been a historical blurring of the lines between the church’s understanding of the kingdom of God and American

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<sup>9</sup> Roxburgh, “The Missional Church,” 4.

<sup>10</sup> Moltmann, *Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 64.

<sup>11</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 136.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

exceptionalism, this is a crucial point. For some, the impulse has been to try to go backwards—to re-capture the privileged position of the church in the centers of power, influence, and attention.<sup>13</sup> I would argue that not only is this not possible, but a mistake. As others have argued, the better position for the church has always been the margins, away from the shackles of power that lead to cultural captivity, where it can find its prophetic voice.<sup>14</sup>

In this sense, the missional movement joins the ethnic minority Christians who have always been at the margins—and can begin to awake from the intoxicating effects of power and privilege. It is no coincidence, then, that this parallels the justice journey, as they both call for the recognition of the trappings of privilege. This is to say, the acceptance of the de-centered reality for the church creates the space to see the effects of power ecclesialogically, missionally, and socially. The corruptive effects of privilege was early observed by Lesslie Newbigin when he wrote “When the Church tries to embody the rule of God in the forms of earthly power it may achieve that power, but it is no longer a sign of the kingdom.”<sup>15</sup> Conversely, when we no longer feel defensive about our justice system because we have not sanctified the system, we can speak prophetically into it. This critical interaction with our context is not easy, and does not occur without great

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<sup>13</sup> Donald Trump recently invoked this yearning, when he spoke to a conservative evangelical gathering, saying he was “returning moral clarity to our view of the world and ending “attacks on Judeo-Christian values.” Dan Merica, “Trump: ‘We Are Stopping Cold Attacks On Judeo-Christian Values,’” *CNN.com* (October 13, 2017), accessed September 10, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/13/politics/trump-values-voters-summit/index.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom?: How the Church is to behave if freedom, justice, and a Christian nation are bad ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991); also Alan Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership, Liminality* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Newbigin, 108.

intentionality. But the missional framework creates enough space for discussions to proceed that might not have before. For example, in the past year, when Envision Irvine became involved in the coordination of a multi-church National Day of Prayer event, the most extensive discussion we had leading up to it was about embracing our role as God's people praying for the welfare of the land, away from the sort of religious nationalism with which the event had been historically linked. Leading the discussion were some of the pastors who had begun to embrace the missional framework. Clearly, letting go of our addiction to power is not easy, as the temptation to return to the center is ever-present. But letting go of the center allowed for new imaginations to surface about what it means to pray and serve our community.

Roxburgh's second description of the missional movement provides another corrective, this time as the focus is moved from the "mission of the church" to the "mission of God"; instead of the church having a mission, it is God's mission which is prior—"the mission has the church." Much of evangelicalism's near obsessive focus has been on itself—its growth, its institutional health, its success. God, in this version of story, is mainly about meeting human needs. But the biblical narrative tells a fundamentally different story, about "God's mission in, through and for the sake of the world."<sup>16</sup> It carries forth a message of forgiveness that challenges the powers that rule the world.<sup>17</sup> In this story, Christ is not only redeeming his people, but subjects all creation under his Lordship as he moves it toward shalom—"the way it was supposed to be"—as "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given" to him (Mt 28:18-19). Such re-ordering

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<sup>16</sup> Roxburgh, "The Missional Church," 3.

<sup>17</sup> Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, 362.

is a fundamental act of justice, as shalom demands the right ordering and relationship in the wholeness of creation, toward the “unspeakable beauty” of God’s universe that sin had vandalized.<sup>18</sup> To be awakened to this vision, then, is our worship and our vocation.<sup>19</sup>

A church formed around this framework would necessarily need to look outside of itself, as it seeks to participate in the ways that God is already at work; institutional success would hardly be the right measure of success. Worship formed around this view would convict and challenge us in our complacency toward the suffering and the injustice of our world.<sup>20</sup> Neighbors would no longer be analyzed and filtered for how they fit into our target demographics; instead, we would have to learn how to “welcome the stranger,” as God moves into our neighborhoods (Dt 10:19; Jn 1:14). It is only when we ask such questions, and humbly listen for replies, that we become part of God’s mission.

Spiritual formation formed around this understanding of the church would be also be different, as learning to become “agents of unconditional grace” is quite different from learning to become “agents seeking conversion.” The former requires no reciprocating agenda, while the latter seeks to close the deal. We become “free from ourselves to be free for God and God’s purposes in our world.”<sup>21</sup> In speaking with people who have embraced this freedom, they speak of immense joy in being able to serve people freely as they grow in empathy. Incredibly, conversions still occur.

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<sup>18</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 10,16.

<sup>19</sup> Labberton, 21.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*,14.

In practical terms, the actual ministry of the missional framework requires the nurture of a different traits and skillset than the following of programmatic evangelism methods. Perhaps the most important among these is the ability to notice. A friend shared a story of noticing his neighbor's son shooting into a backyard basketball hoop incessantly one Saturday morning. After hours of listening to the bouncing ball, he realized how unsatisfying it was to hear the ball go through the hoop because the net was frayed. A quick trip to the store and a knock on the door later, he presented the boy with a new basketball net. They later told him it was the first act of neighborliness that this immigrant family had received.

In many ways, this describes the freedom that the missional framework draws us into—toward listening and being concerned about our neighbors, as we live and work in our neighborhoods. Instead of trying to rescue the boy by bringing him to the basketball court at church, my friend expanded his understanding of where God was drawing him—to a neighbor's backyard. It is significant that his participation in Christ's mission was not by moving in the direction of the church, but rather towards the world. A mission for the world demands that we understand and empathize with the need for mercy and justice in our world, precisely in the neighborhoods. So much of the church's credibility has been lost to the coming generation because they saw through to the inauthenticity of our self-serving, attractional ecclesiology. A return to our original mission—to God's mission—is our road to redemption.

Having a different framework, of course, guarantees no results. Soong-Chan Rah is rather blunt in his remarks about the missionally-influenced “emergent church movement” as just a more youthful, hip, slight more socially-conscious version of the

status quo.<sup>22</sup> While I wince at his tone, Rah is correct to note the inconsistency: that for a movement whose leadership present themselves as incisive cultural critics, their failure to address race issues with any meaningful engagement is disappointing. A new, missional framework will not necessarily create transformation.

Yet new frameworks do create new possibilities. It is simply too early to tell whether the correctives from the missional framework will be more conducive to addressing racial justice issues. But as noted, there are reasons to think that it reveals a more promising path.

### **Recovery of Our Communal Identity**

Much has already been written regarding the prioritization of the individual in American culture in general, and evangelicalism in particular. Historian George Marsden well-describes the American Christian mindset: “The individual stood alone before God; his choices were decisive. The church, while important as a supportive community, was made up of free individuals.”<sup>23</sup> This focus on the individual has been blamed for some of the most persistent distortions in American Christianity: from the nearly narcissistic focus on a “God who meets my needs,” to the overtly privatized “that’s between me and God” spirituality, individualistic understanding of Christianity has had a very real impact in our everyday practice of our faith.

Even explicit teachings of the church are undermined by the primacy of the individual. Recently I was in conversation with a mother about her teenaged daughter,

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<sup>22</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 108-126.

<sup>23</sup> George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, (New York: Oxford, 2006), 224.

who was baptized as an infant in a church that explicitly taught the sacrament as an admission into the covenant community of God. However, the parent was insistent that her teen had to “find her own way into faith.” While I appreciated the parent’s longing for the child to own her faith maturely, I could not help but wonder if they had altogether missed the point of a covenant community.

Such a conversation is hardly an aberration. I have had countless other Christians convey similar assumptions, regardless of the denominational context, that “we all must find our own way.” It seems odd as so many churches nowadays also emphasize “community,” but just under the surface lie a slew of implicit messages that undermine it: preachers give therapeutic messages meant to meet personal needs; prayers are considered authentic when they are uttered in our own words; Scriptures are taught to be an avenue for personalized revelations of the divine; small groups are formed around commonalities of those who are like me. At every turn of church culture, the prioritization of the individual self subverts whatever explicit messages of community formation the church may teach. In a recent conversation with two graduate students of an evangelical School for Spiritual Formation, I mistakenly heard them saying that community was an important part of their curriculum. When I declared my support for such an approach, they clarified that it was not, explaining ironically that “community... is up to the individual.” It is no wonder that Jim Wilhoit entitled his book *Spiritual*

*Formation as if the Church Mattered*, because for the vast majority of Christians, it really does not.<sup>24</sup>

In this context, notions of justice and righteousness becomes primarily about personal responsibility—*I am responsible for my actions, and my actions only; sin is those things that I commit or do not commit. Societal change is an aggregation of many individuals making better (or worse) moral choices. However, I cannot be held responsible for the actions of others, including my ancestors and my family, even if I am benefitting from their sin. And I cannot be responsible for any privilege that I myself did not consciously seize. Just like the rich young ruler that encounters Jesus in Luke 18, my understanding of righteousness is limited to what I do or not do, but the social framework is a given that is left unchallenged.*

Jesus, of course, does challenge our social framework. He does it in the above encounter, as he does it in countless others (e.g. Samaritan woman at the well in John 4). He tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, which we will discuss in the next section, not merely to teach hospitality, but to challenge our social structures: the pivotal question to which the parable is given in response is “Who really is one’s neighbor?”—a question with deep implications for our structural assumptions. Insistence on personal righteousness has the effect of blinding us to our participation in the myriad of social connections and structures that give meaning to our individual actions.

One of most compelling resources to bring correction to the distortion of individualism is the doctrine of the Trinity. The social significance of this distinctly

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<sup>24</sup> Jim Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 13-14, 81-103. Unfortunately, Wilhoit’s actual description of communal spiritual formation is itself sequential, rather than co-generative.

Christian understanding of divinity was lost to the Western church for many generations, as the focus was wrongly on comprehending how the one God can simultaneously be said to be three. Such theology led to abstractions and analogies on how one can be many, like trying to reconcile a mathematical mystery, with little practical impact on the life of the church. However, taking their cues from a traditionally Eastern church emphasis, theologians in the last several decades reversed the question, asking how the historically encountered three persons of God can be said to be one. They found their answer in God's relationality. As described by John, "God is love" and the prerequisite of love is a relationship (1 Jn 4:8).

The recovery of the "social Trinity" was brought on with three critical insights. First, they argued that the understanding of God's sociality is not to be based on abstract speculations, but on the history of God's revelation to us in Jesus Christ.<sup>25</sup> From Christ's birth narrative and his baptism by John, to his life lived in the will of the Father, and his death, resurrection, and ascension, we are given witness to the relationship between the Father, Son, and the Spirit. The significance is that it gives us a tangible entry into the Trinitarian interaction, both in nature and quality. Thus, not only can we talk about the divine Godhead being relational, we can speak of the qualities of this connection. Rather than mere vertices of a triangle, the biblical witness helps us to see that the Trinity exists in a relationship of deep, sustaining love.

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<sup>25</sup> Among the variety of minds helping with the recovery effort were the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, the American Catholic feminist theologian Catherine Mowry LaCugna, and the Brazilian liberation theologian Leonard Boff. See Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1981),61

Second, building on Gregory of Nazianzus’s early description of the Trinity as beings in *perichoresis*—a deep connection of oneness that is sometimes translated as a “mutual indwelling”—theologians began to describe the inner relationship of the Trinity as a “mutually loving, interacting, sustaining society.”<sup>26</sup> The word was originally used by the church fathers against the heresies that subordinated the Son and the Spirit, to describe the eternal Trinitarian coexistence. They realized that for the sociality of God to be eternally sustainable, their relationship had to be egalitarian, mutually giving and receiving of one another, in a perfect relationship that maintains their subjectivity and yet provide non-coercive unity.<sup>27</sup> It is a relationship that gives life.

Following the impulse of mystics such as John of Damascus, Moltmann winsomely described this relationality as a “divine dance” (a play on words, *peri*—“around”; *choreo*—“coordinated movement”), a metaphor made popular recently by the likes of Richard Rohr and Tim Keller.<sup>28</sup> While the translation is questionable historically, it captures analogically the poetic beauty, and the dynamic circularity of purpose and empathy, or joy and delight. In his classic *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis well captured this moving, living Trinity: “In Christianity, God is not an impersonal thing nor a static thing—not even just one person—but a dynamic pulsating activity, a life, a kind of drama, almost, if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance... [The] pattern of this three

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<sup>26</sup> Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 56.

<sup>27</sup> Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 150; Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 209

<sup>28</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2016); Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 213-225,

personal life is... the great fountain of energy and beauty spurting up at the very center of reality.”<sup>29</sup>

The third insight then flows from the first two: the inner relationality of the Trinity now has implications for humanity. Understanding the Trinity as a “mutually loving, interacting, sustaining society” provides for us a rich metaphor, and a paradigmatic social vision, for harmonious existence “first in the church and also in society.”<sup>30</sup> Focusing on the perfect relationality of the triune Godhead, theologians have made the point that the relational unity of the Godhead is the essential *imago Dei* that is to be expressed in our existence—to be God is to be social; to be human, then, is to be social, in the manner in which God is social.<sup>31</sup> Simply stated, the Trinity considered from a social perspective serves as a model for the social existence of humanity. Thus, the doctrine of God must have practical and normative implications for the life of the Church, whether the issue is gender identity, ecclesial structures, or worship practices.<sup>32</sup> As Catherine Mowry LaCugna concluded, Trinity is “ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life.”<sup>33</sup> Specifically for our purposes, there are clear implications for race and race relations.

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<sup>29</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan, 1943), 136.

<sup>30</sup> Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 56.

<sup>31</sup> John Zizioulas *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985); Moltmann, 198.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*; Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*; Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

<sup>33</sup> LaCugna, 1.

The Christian answer to the question “What does it mean to be a human?” then is not found in discussions about the essence of one’s dignity, capabilities, or capacities as individuals. Rather, it is our relationality that is essential to human existence—as the great Karl Barth wrote, “the humanity of man consists in the determination of his being as a being with the other.”<sup>34</sup> As beings created by God’s relationality, it is the primary description of human essence; there can be no description of human life and activity without it. The Greek Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas stated even more powerfully, no one exists as an individual, but rather, “communion is an ontological category.”<sup>35</sup> This is not simply a descriptive relationality—i.e., relationality as an inevitable fact of life lived among others—but a prescriptive, ethical ontology that demands responsibility toward others. While we cannot mirror this Trinitarian perichoretic relationship perfectly, it is the vision that stirs our hearts precisely because it is the image of God imprinted upon human beings in creation.

In other words, to affirm the Trinitarian God is to denounce the sort of individualism so prominent in American evangelicalism. We can reclaim our communally formed identities. We are deeply connected beings first, and our individual identities only make sense within the context of our relationships.

The practical implications for the politics of the church are significant. First it provides a true foundation for affirming diversity in congregations, and the formation of multi-racial congregations. A social personhood implies that our relational encounters

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<sup>34</sup> Barth was an early proponent of Trinitarian theology that in many ways laid the foundation for many to follow. *The Church Dogmatics* Volume III Part 2: The Doctrine of Creation, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960) 243.

<sup>35</sup> Zizioulas, 18.

help to shape our identities as individuals. In a sense, I am an aggregate of all my relationships.<sup>36</sup> If my encounters are mainly with those who are like me, I am in essence affirming who I am, but I do not experience meaningful enlargement of my personhood. Taken to the extreme, I become a narcissist. However, when my relational encounters break through my self-absorbed reality, and they are broadened through meaningful perichoretic encounters with others not like me, I grow in empathy, perspective, and in my personhood. Thus, diverse encounters are essential for our maturity in personhood, for becoming people of generous hearts, who are able to reflect God's grace. Miroslav Volf describes this as the development of a "catholic personality," a personality that is "enriched by otherness, a personality which is what it is because multiple others have been reflected in it in a particular way... The Spirit unlatches the doors of my heart saying: 'You are not only you; others belong to you too.'"<sup>37</sup>

Second, our churches need to cultivate an affirmation and openness toward different cultural expression of faith, as we come together to declare the unity in Christ. The Trinity is a model of identity and difference; we cannot erase or dominate over differences, and must always be conscious to embrace in unity without demanding uniformity. A perichoretic understanding of our relationships means that true communion always requires mutuality: we cannot receive others who are different than us in our congregation and simply expect assimilation into the status quo. Instead, the status quo—whether it be in terms of power, culture, and perhaps even congregational vision—must

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<sup>36</sup> The inspiration for this insight come from Alistair McFadyen's *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theology of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>37</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 51.

be open to being changed. We indwell in them, and they indwell in us. I have witnessed countless churches undertake diversity initiatives, only to be surprised when new members of different cultural/racial background challenge certain aspects of church culture. Often, their concerns are dismissed as being “ethnic,” while the existing views are simply about “the church.”

Pastor Ken Fong tells the story of how his seminary professor proclaimed “The ethnic church in this country is an abomination to the all encompassing gospel message. Eleven o’clock on Sunday mornings is the most segregated hour in America. We should all go to the same church.” When Ken inquired during class break if the professor planned to attend Ken’s Asian American church, the professor answered, “Why, no, I meant for you to come to our church.” Ken Fong writes, “This fine Christian gentleman and world-class theologian could clearly imagine the cultural peculiarities of our church, but he was blind to those of his own.”<sup>38</sup>

The events of that story occurred over twenty years ago; while there is generally greater awareness of culture issues, such assumptions are still dominant among evangelical circles, among both the young and the old. Our cultural diversity efforts must be mutual, even as we are resolute in our unity in Christ. Color-blindness—attempts to gloss over our differences—only feigns unity, but is almost always the tool of the dominant culture to remain unchanged. As churches, we ought to oppose any systems and cultures that discourage the flow of perichoretic relationships, as it takes us away from the image of God. Conversely, churches ought to encourage the development systems and

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<sup>38</sup> Ken Fong, *Pursuing the Pearl* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999), 1-2. Found in DeYoung, *Unity in Christ*, 113.

cultures that encourage the mutual, deep relationships between diverse members of the body of Christ.

Third, the deeply relational nature of our personhood means justice issues cannot be discussed simply in terms of personal moral responsibility. As our moral vision is founded on the vision of a relational God, morality is meaningless apart from our relationality, and the treatment of those with whom we are in relationship. Our ethical ‘ought’ is created not in a vacuum of moral imperatives, but in relationship: first in our relationship with God, but then in our relationship with each other. Doing justice in this context is then about seeing the image of God in others, and treating them as divine dance partners—with mutuality, without subsumption, with empathy. An un-catholic personality who seeks only self-centered relationships with those who are like them fails to honor the sort of life that God had imagined for us to live.

Additionally, we have already noted that there are structural aspects to this relationality, one that gives context to our moral responsibility. This is based on the model of the Trinity that provides God’s people an alternate vision of the sort of a plausibility structure upon which to base their lives. This vision is our hope-giving telos, but, just as importantly, it makes it possible to make prophetic judgment on people, structures and cultures that obstruct it. Without such a vision-giving context to our activities, there can be no logic to our morality.<sup>39</sup>

Recently, a leading member of the presidential cabinet waded in on the controversy surrounding the removal of confederate statues, by defending Robert E. Lee

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<sup>39</sup> This stance of “leaving while staying” is what Volf calls the creation of a “double vision.” Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 250-253.

as an “honorable man.”<sup>40</sup> In doing so, he was bringing up the old mystique around Lee as a righteous, god-fearing man. It may be that Lee was a true southern gentleman, an epitome of honor in private and public conduct. But to consider his “honor” or “godliness” apart from his participation and defense of the system of slavery that desecrated the image of God in his fellow man seems highly selective in what we understand to be “spirituality.” Sadly, this selective spirituality is still in full effect in our country. We can only hope that the Trinitarian vision of society will return us from our errant ways.

### **Learning Empathy**

Colin Kaepernick was the quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers when he gained nationwide attention during the 2016-2017 season for protesting police violence against African Americans by not standing during the playing of the national anthem before the games. He was explicit in the meaning of this gesture: “I am not going to stand and show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color.”<sup>41</sup> Yet strangely, his act of protest against racism was soon hijacked and placed within very different narrative: he was disrespecting the military. Kaepernick had clarified time and again that he was not anti-military; in fact, upon conversation with a former Green Beret, he would change his position from sitting to kneeling, as to explicitly show respect to the service. But the refusal to hear his narrative continued, even fanned by inflammatory

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<sup>40</sup> Eli Rosenberg and Cleve Wootson Jr., “John Kelly calls Robert E. Lee and ‘honorable man’ and says ‘lack of compromise’ caused the Civil War,” *Washington Post* (October 31, 2017), accessed November 20, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/10/31/john-kelly-calls-robert-e-lee-an-honorable-man-and-says-lack-of-compromise-caused-the-civil-war/?utm\\_term=.b858d5f9adf6](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/10/31/john-kelly-calls-robert-e-lee-an-honorable-man-and-says-lack-of-compromise-caused-the-civil-war/?utm_term=.b858d5f9adf6).

<sup>41</sup> He had since filed a grievance against the National Football League owners for collusion. John Branch, “The Awakening of Colin Kaepernick” *New York Times*, September 7, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/sports/colin-kaepernick-nfl-protests.html>

comments from the president, as Kaepernick was effectively blacklisted from playing professional football. What began as a protest against racism ironically became an unexpected revelation into our racially divided country. My dialogue with others also revealed for me a grave deficit of a core Christian character quality: empathy.

Empathy is generally defined as “the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within the other person’s frame of reference.”<sup>42</sup> To coopt another’s actions from their own narrative and to place it a different story, is the antithesis of empathy that can only lead to misunderstanding and misplaced emotions. In Kaepernick’s case, so much of the ire directed against him is based on this sort of hijacking; while his supporters continue to protest police violence, the primary narrative of his detractors is that he is disrespecting the flag, as they refuse to even acknowledge his narrative. It would be more sincere to disagree with the protest on its merits, or even question the effectiveness of the method, but what is disingenuous is to claim that this is a story of disrespect to the military.<sup>43</sup> Suffice to say, the lack of empathy is not isolated to this case, but permeates much “race talk,” shattering any hope of a productive dialogue.

My primary concern, however, is that this lack of empathy seems just as prevalent in the church, if not more so; I have simply not seen any noticeable positive difference among Christians in their ability to respond well to protests. The Scriptures offer plenty of evidence to consider empathy as a Christ-like virtue: Jesus is regularly described as

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<sup>42</sup> “Empathy,” *Wikipedia*, accessed October 20, 2017, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empathy>.

<sup>43</sup> There are admittedly, many aspects to this highly controverted story. I’m mindful of the narrative that is connected to the flag in the minds of many Americans—particularly for white Americans—for whom the flag represents sacrifice in battle. But this too points to the larger race problem, where the dominant race insists that their story of the flag is the “only right one.”

being “moved in his Spirit” by the plight of those he encounter (Matthew 5:4; John 8:43-48, 11:33-35); the image of Christ’s incarnation in the kerygma passage of Philippians 2 is the epitome of empathy; Paul’s declaration in 1 Corinthians 9:22 that he “became all things to all people” reveals the centrality of empathy in the apostle’s life. But perhaps the definitive teaching of topic is given in Christ’s parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. The rest of this chapter will attempt to draw lessons from this story for our context.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is often referenced as a simple moral lesson, as a reminder to help those are suffering, even strangers, but the story does much more than that. Much like our story, it is a story about the boundaries that we human beings draw for ourselves, and how an encounter with Christ upends them. Luke’s narrative underscores the interconnectedness of the boundary issues by placing what could have been a rather staid theological debate on the definition of “a neighbor” in the context of actual geographical and ethnic crossroads, as Jesus is heading toward Jerusalem through Samaria. The stakes of this conversation about boundaries mirrors our own struggle with crossing racial, theological, and spiritual barriers—this is no mere intellectual debate, but a lesson on what it means to live out our stories as God’s people in a world determined to erect barriers.

In Luke’s arrangement of the gospel, the story is immediately preceded by Jesus’ triumphant commissioning the seventy-two to spread the word of the coming of the kingdom of God; the disciples return in joy, declaring “even the demons submit to us!” (10:17). They are almost rudely interrupted by a challenger: “Just then an expert in the

law stood up to test Jesus” (10:25). While his motivations are not made explicit here, the abrupt timing of his challenge says much—Jesus had just attempted to minister to the Samaritans (9:51-56), and presumably commissioned his disciples to enter into the religiously contentious territories to declare that the kingdom had drawn near. The lawyer saw in Jesus a threat, spreading heterodoxy by compromising Israel’s place in God’s salvation history. In Jesus he saw someone who intended to enlarge the good news of God’s redemption to outsiders, before they pledged to conform and assimilate to the law. In Christ’s overly generous understanding of God’s mercy, the lawyer felt his story threatened. He was not the first to be threatened by God’s mercy, and he certainly would not be last. In many ways, this feels like human nature, to want to limit the reaches of God’s mercy, even before we step anywhere close its limits. Thus, the lawyer needed to expose Jesus as a fool or an outright false teacher by trapping him to admit to his antinomian ways.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, as the encounter will bear out, the lawyer was right in his intuition that Jesus was about something different—he was ushering forth a new world.<sup>45</sup>

This is probably the context in which the lawyer’s first question to Jesus regarding the requirement “to inherit eternal life” should be understood (Lk 10:15). Jesus responds by asking for the lawyer’s summation of the Torah, which he obliges by reciting the *Shema*, the classic summation of the law in Deuteronomy known to all Jews, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength and all your mind,” adding the Levitical command, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Dt

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<sup>44</sup> Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), Kindle edition, location 10879.

<sup>45</sup> Green, location 10896.

6:4; Lv 19:18). This was an oft-quoted and well-accepted response taught by the rabbis.<sup>46</sup> But when Jesus simply agrees to the answer, it gives the expert no ammunition; thus, he asks his second question: “Who then is my neighbor? (Lk 10:29).”

The question reveals the lawyer’s hand perhaps more than he had intended: “Who then is my neighbor?” is a question about limits and requirements – “How far am I required to extend my neighborliness?” It is about borders and boundaries, of distinguishing “us” from “them.” Certainly there are theological issues here regarding the nature of God’s salvation—for the lawyer, “God is the God of Israel, and neighbors are Jewish neighbors”—but it cannot be separated from the affective dimension to justify the limiting of his love toward non-neighbors. One certainly cannot be expected to love everyone, the lawyer thinks to himself, “So who then are my neighbors, and perhaps even more importantly, who are *not* my neighbors?” Translated to our context, the lawyer is asking “To whom do I need to extend empathy, and whose story can I ignore?”

The setting of the parable Jesus tells in response is straight from the headlines of the day, in which a traveller on the road to Jericho from Jerusalem is attacked by robbers, and left for half dead on the side of the road. A priest, then a Levite, encounters the man, presumably on their way from worship. It is not by coincidence that these are men who belong very much to the same social and religious class as the expert in the law. They are the pious leaders of the faith, who presumably would know all the “right” answers. Disappointingly, they pass the dying man on the “other side of the road” (10:31-32). There are plausible religious, levitical reasons for why they do not stop, for not being a

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<sup>46</sup> Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, 128.

neighbor, but the lack of empathy is stark in its cruelty.<sup>47</sup> “Might this be Jesus’ way of passing judgment on me?” the lawyer might be wondering.

The parable continues with a surprising twist: a Samaritan comes by, and has “pity on the man” and aids him, becoming a sort of a Christ-figure, as he bears the burdens of the stranger (10:33). The word that is translated pity, *splagchnizomai*, is literally “moved in his guts,” an apt visceral description of affective empathy.<sup>48</sup> It is the one distinguishing inner quality of the Samaritan that gives insight into why he helped.<sup>49</sup> The word is used two other times in Luke, both to emphasize an intense movement of the heart: the first time to describe Jesus’ reaction when he encounters the widow of Nain (7:13) in a funeral procession for her dead son; and later in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15, used by Jesus to describe the reaction of the father when he sees his prodigal return home. *Splagchnizomai* is the obvious missing piece in the neat spiritual equation that the priest, the Levite, and the lawyer are working with. It is simply not possible to love God without being moved in one’s guts at the sight of suffering and injustice. Jesus’ challenging response begins to take form.

The Samaritan dresses the traveler’s wounds, carries him to safety, and secures his welfare. “Who then was a neighbor?” Jesus asks the lawyer finally, mirroring the question he was asked. Cornered, the expert gives the only answer possible, “the one who had mercy on him” (10:37). Up to now, the legal expert had thought he was the

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<sup>47</sup> C. F. Evans, *Saint Luke* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 468

<sup>48</sup> John Kohlenberger, “*splagchnizomai*” (5072), *The NIV Exhaustive Bible Concordance*, digital edition 2015.

<sup>49</sup> Green, 426.

interrogator, thinking that he already knew what it meant to love God, and to love one's neighbor. He began the conversation wanting to limit the reach God's salvation, and the limits of his moral responsibility.<sup>50</sup> Instead, Jesus reverses the flow of mercy, through a story where the Samaritan becomes the righteous neighbor to the Jew, fulfilling the commandments. We are part of God's kingdom and fulfill God's law when we stand on the side of mercy. Samaritan, lawyer, priest, Levite, whatever labels we give ourselves is not determinative of whether or not God is on our side; instead, we stand with God when we extend his mercy. "Who is my neighbor?" the man had asked presumptuously assuming that he already knew his place in God's story. Instead Jesus inserts the lawyer in the least expected role in the story—as the half dying man desperately needing help, the recipient of mercy from a Samaritan. "Now go, and do likewise," Jesus concludes; be the sort of person who is "moved in the gut" at the sight of those who are suffering, and show them mercy.

Significantly, the meaning of the word neighbor goes through a critical reversal in the text. At first, the word is used to describe the recipient of one's mercy: "love your neighbor." But when Jesus asks the question, the neighbor is the one who does the good work, "the one who shows mercy," the one who saves me. The reciprocity of mercy that defines the neighbor is reminiscent of our discussion on our perichoretic relationality. Indeed, if we are perichoretic beings, we can only truly help others as we create space within ourselves to enter into meaningful, mutual relationship with them. We love, not from a position of superiority, but from a position of humble mutuality. The lawyer's

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

assumption about his calling as a helper was not wrong, but rather incomplete. As is true in so much diversity conversation, we often do not realize that the stranger might be the one to save us.

The pivotal quality of being a neighbor is empathy, the willingness to open oneself inwardly toward the plight of others, in our hearts and our minds. It demands that we let go of our need to have our stories dominate, in submission to the greater story of the kingdom, so that other stories can begin to form us. Stated alternately, we find our *imago Dei* as we recognize the divine image in others, in the context of the back-and-forth of shaping and being (re)shaped. This quality stands in stark contrast to what is often assumed as mature Christian identity, whose static, already-formed quality mirrors that of the lawyer in Luke 10. It is what stands in the way of true, meaningful reconciliation, particularly between races – no reconciliation can exist if there is no longing to understand and feel the suffering of others. No reconciliation can exist if we demand that our stories dominate all others, and our definitions of reality supersede all other realities. And no mercy can be extended to others if we cannot also open ourselves to receive mercy from them as fellow image-bearers of God. Jesus, in this parable, subverts the story the lawyer tells about himself, and in turn, redefines his reality.

The implications for how churches might address Colin Kaepernick's protest are many. It would mean that part of our duty as Christians is to engage deeply with the stories of those who speak of their suffering. To be a neighbor in such a situation is to listen empathetically, asking how their story might also be my story. We can disagree and perhaps even reject calls for particular solutions, but we cannot dismiss someone else's earnestly told stories of pain. Particularly if we are part of the dominant race, we would

need to be careful about silencing such stories, lest we deface the divine image. To talk about the appropriateness of a protest *before* we even seek to understand the protest is simply another form of violence.

Racism always involves the power to define stories and meanings. Racism always involves structures, because structures order our reality based on the meaning given to it through our stories. So recognizing that there are structures that give advantage to one group and disadvantage to another is simply recognizing that we all have our stories to tell.<sup>51</sup> The writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in an eloquent talk given for a TED conference entitled “The Danger of a Single Story” states:

It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power... How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power.... Many stories matter, because stories have been used to dispossess and malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.<sup>52</sup>

The most neighborly thing we can do right now may be to listen to each other's stories. I do not know if empathy can be induced, but after many months of working on this project, I am convinced that it is a critical first step if we as churches are ever going to have progress in the race issues that ail us. Fred Rogers, of the Mr. Rogers fame, once

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<sup>51</sup> It was Jean-Francois Lyotard who definitively argued that “incredulity toward the metanarrative” is our postmodern condition. Whether one understands this descriptively or prescriptively, the connection between power and the stories we tell ourselves is clear; the truth dictated in the single story is rarely the whole truth. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 3.

<sup>52</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's “The Danger of a Single Story,” talk given at TEDGlobal 2009, (July, 2009) at *TED.com*, accessed December 13, 2017, [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en).

said, “There isn’t anyone you couldn’t learn to love once you’ve heard their story.”<sup>53</sup>  
Somehow, we need to be brought to be a place where we can truly hear one another’s  
stories, especially when their stories challenge our realities.

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<sup>53</sup> Mr. Rogers supposedly carried this quote from a social worker in his walled. Told by Andrew Stanton, “The clues to a great story” TED2012 (February, 2012), at *TED.com*, accessed October 8, 2017, [https://www.ted.com/talks/andrew\\_stanton\\_the\\_clues\\_to\\_a\\_great\\_story/transcript](https://www.ted.com/talks/andrew_stanton_the_clues_to_a_great_story/transcript).

PART THREE:  
PROPHETIC PRACTICES

## CHAPTER 6

### PROPHETIC PRACTICES TO AWAKEN RACIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Having thus developed the critical theological framework, I now turn to describing the prophetic leadership practices. They form the core practices of the project that have guided my interactions with the members of the Envision Irvine pastor's network over the past year. As described in the introduction, I consider these practices to belong to the biblical tradition of prophetic ministry in their particular mode of leadership engagement. That is, a prophet declares what they discern to be divine truth, for the sake of prompting transformation in the community of their belonging. The three prophetic locations I previously identified as integral to my practice – as being marginalized, of being an insider, and on having no positional (vertical) authority – now serve as the three coordinates of my engagement activities.

Two clarifications are needed before we get to the description of the project practices. To describe one's role as "prophetic" risks coming across overly self-serious, perhaps even a bit dramatic. That is far from my intent, as the actual description of the work in the following pages will hopefully convey. Rather, the prophetic calling is meant to describe the particular set of capacities and perspectives through which I engage my

community. Alan Hirsch has argued that one of the greatest failures of the modern church has been to understand leadership only through the particular giftings of a shepherd and a teacher, instead of the full five-fold ministry described in Ephesians 4:11-13: apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd, teacher.<sup>1</sup> It is the fruitful practice of all five of these inter-dependent callings that allow for the church to grow into maturity, into fullness in Christ (Eph 4:13).<sup>2</sup> It is in this sense that I approach this prophetic work, as a regular work of the church among other less dramatic-sounding leadership roles.

Secondly, it cannot be overemphasized that the primary prophetic work is to “hear God.” While a foundation of a life engaged in spiritual disciplines is a requirement for every leader in the body of Christ, there can be no prophetic work apart from listening to the Spirit. Such awareness of God’s voice for our world is not for me some sort of a mystical experience, but all the normal ways in which God speaks to all people: through prayer, meditation, study of Scripture, spiritual conversations, and corporate worship. I do not think that it was coincidence that I found myself on a journey of personal renewal in my spiritual disciplines during the same timeframe as when I became aware of my prophetic calling. Without such reliance on the leading of God, there can be no prophetic work

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Hirsch, *5Q: Reactivating the Original Intelligence and Capacity of the Body of Christ*, (n.p.: 100 Movements, 2017), xvi-xxi, 8-17.

<sup>2</sup> Even if one does not agree with Hirsch’s argument in whole, his general critique still remains.

## Two Models

Two racial transformation models provide key insights for the practices of the project. As introduced previously, Brenda Salter McNeil is an established racial reconciliation advocate with strong evangelical credentials. For McNeil, the journey begins with a *catalytic event*—a moment of adaptive crisis that forces one to choose either the path of self-preservation or the path of transformation leading to a process she calls *realization*.<sup>3</sup> More than cognitive recognition, this second phase signals a shift in perspective that leads to a “visceral awareness of reality and a sense of one’s relatedness to it.”<sup>4</sup> The impact is to change one’s world, creating a restlessness that something in one’s life needs to change to address this new reality. In terms of race issues, the realization might be an awareness of a commonality that breaks through stereotypes and divisions that justify our mistreatment of others. This realization, then, leads to a deeper sense of connection in the third phase of *identification*, where one’s horizons are broadened through a sense of interconnection with those who are of different cultures and racial backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> It is the process of “embracing the stories of others” and “building empathy” where “your people become my people” (Ruth 1:16). Two further stages—*preparation* and *activation*—complete McNeil’s transformation cycle, but for the purposes of my project my focus will be on the first three phases, as they coincide with the first-half markers of the journey.

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<sup>3</sup> Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 47-54, 117. McNeil also describes her calling as a prophetic journey.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-79.

A second model by Christopher Collins and Alexander Jun dubbed a “Cycle of Critical Consciousness” helps to nuance the project practices further. Collins and Jun are professors of higher education at a Christian university, and developed their model as they asked the question, “What characterizes White folks in higher education who choose to engage in social justice and diversity work?”<sup>6</sup> Based on interviews of people who became race conscious, their findings are quite salient for this project. Similar to McNeil’s catalytic event, their model begins with an *awakening* stage. However, their focus is not on an event, but on a person, an *activator*. “Activators are individuals who exposed our participants to diversity and difference.”<sup>7</sup> This is consistent with my observation as well, as even impersonal catalytic events require a cultural interpreter, someone who is able to see events differently, from a different narrative framework.

It is on this secondary level of interaction, *interpretation*, where individuals “reframe knowledge from their dominant identity categories (race, ethnicity, socio-economic standing) into a greater understanding and empathy for individuals with subordinated group identities.”<sup>8</sup> This stage, which is similar to McNeil’s realization phase, then leads to the formation of *allies* and *advocates* in the struggle toward racial equality and reconciliation. Whereas McNeil’s model describes these phases as being sequential, Collins and Jun describes them as a bidirectional loop (awareness leads to advocacy, advocacy in turn leads to greater awareness, and so on...).

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<sup>6</sup> Christopher Collins and Alexander Jun, *White Out: Understanding White Privilege and Dominance in the Modern Age* (New York: Peter Lang, 2017), 104.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

The value of Collins and Jun's model is not only that it validates the first model with its similar observations, but that it adds these two insights: one, identifying the central role of the role of the human agent in the activation process, and two, of the non-sequential pattern of consciousness awakening phases. In my observation, adaptive transformations such as these are holistic, requiring change at the intellectual, affective and social levels, sometimes in sequence, but often times in parallel. The identification of the human agent, as the catalytic activator, helps to place the prophetic role in the process.

### **Engagement from Three Locations**

The project takes form mainly through interpersonal interactions with the members of Envision Irvine, encompassing personal conversations and group discussions. Specifically, I scheduled minimally two conversations per week over a course of ten months, in both one-on-one situations and small group settings. I attempted to interact with all of the regular members of the network at the beginning (twenty-three leaders), but eventually settled on repeated conversations with a smaller subset of seven leaders. I recorded my thoughts afterwards in a journal. In all, there were sixty journal entries.

To be clear, there is an element to these engagements that may be described as “subversive”—while I have not been deceptive in any way, I do not always reveal my position on race matters in America fully from the outset of my encounters. Part of the reason for this is to avoid the defensiveness that is triggered among some evangelicals with regard to structural racism and matters of social justice that we previously discussed. But the other is because the adaptive nature of the work demands a more fluid reactivity. As such, these conversations did not follow an agenda, but were rather free-flowing

conversations about ministry, culture, and matters of personal connection. Rather than a framework for the conversation, I worked from a framework of self-understanding. In working in this way, the engagements fit one or more of the following activities described in the previous section: catalysis/activation, creation of awareness/realization, creation of identification/empathy building, and the development of allies. Quite intentionally, the project does not take the form of a program, nor preset interviews, as such formality runs counter to the reactive, opportunistic nature of the work and may actually undermine it as it should become obvious. This is because the transformation process is primarily relational and experiential, rather than cognitive and intellectual.<sup>9</sup> Instead, I have inhabited these three prophetic locations in the context of normal, everyday interactions, albeit with intentionality. They provide the three concurrent and complementary layers of activity with its distinct set of tasks, challenges, and questions.

#### First Location: Margins

As being marginalized is a critical modifier for my status as an insider, I begin with a description of working from this location. As described in the introduction, a prophet almost always arises from the margins. Indeed, for matters such as social justice, where the plight of the marginalized are not being attended to by those with powers to effect change, the center is a place often suspected of complicity and compromise. The periphery, on the other hand, can be an advantageous location that gives clarity of vision, away from the temptation of the powers.<sup>10</sup> It is also the place from which disruptions to

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<sup>9</sup> Collins and Jun, 117. McNeil, 34.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980), 72.

the status quo can be instigated. Lastly, it is a location of an alternative perspective and sensitivity that is necessary to develop a creative prophetic voice. A biblical example of someone working primarily from this location might be the prophet Amos, a poor farmer turned prophet who lived literally on the margins in the countryside town of Tekoa. While lacking the usual credibility—"I am not a prophet nor a son of a prophet" he would declare (7:14)—he brought both clarity voice and sharpness of words: "Hear this word, you cows of Bashan," he called out the heartlessly wealthy, as he declared God's judgment (4:1).

The margins describe my sense of disconnection from others. I experience this both as an Asian American man in the context of the larger setting of our country, but in some ways more acutely as an Asian American pastor. In the former sense, one way I experience this is by being regarded a "perpetual foreigner," even now being asked, "Where are you really from?" by strangers that I will have just met; replying "New York City"—the location of my formation—is never good enough. As painful as that reality may be, it is in the latter sense—in my experience working with white pastors—where I feel my alienation most acutely. At a gathering early in the formation of the network, I was the only non-white pastor in a group of about twenty. Through explicit remarks and implicit insinuations, it became clear that I was seen as the token Asian pastor. Questions directed toward me would often begin with the phrase, "In your culture..." unintentionally compartmentalizing my experience as "not-our-culture," and limiting my contribution to the "ethnic" perspective. I of course did have insight into an ethnic perspective, but insight from the margins is not limited to insight about the margins. To

have one's contributions to the whole be preemptively dismissed is part of what it means to work from the margins.<sup>11</sup>

Yet the experience and the insights I have gained because of being marginalized, are precisely the tools that I can use to bring awareness to others. Walter Brueggemann describes the work of social analysis that nurtures “an alternative consciousness” critical to the role of the prophet.<sup>12</sup> The margins are the location from which the work of an Activator proceeds, where unchallenged cultural assumptions can become catalytic events. Hidden in plain sight are opportunities for transformative discussions—like the layout of our city, the American flag, and church evangelism programs—as they become catalytic moments in the presence of an Activator, who see in them a different story. Structural elements of our racialized society that may go completely unnoticed by others are visible from the margins, and can become catalytic moments.

My task from this location, then, is twofold. One is that I need to become alternative framework ready, so as to be able to seize the opportunities and provide a different possible narrative. Part of this work is reflected in this paper, but the ongoing work is to develop a habit of what some call “cultural exegesis” especially as it pertains to the convergence of race and faith matters.<sup>13</sup> While I do not presume to understand fully

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<sup>11</sup> Even Sang Hyun Lee, a respected professor of systematic theology at Princeton, describes similar experiences to this day. *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 12.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 3.

<sup>13</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, ed., *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 7-8. David Gibbons describes the unique quality of being a third-culture leader like this: “First culture is the dominant homogenous culture you live in. Second culture is ... the parents’ home culture. Third culture is being able to live in both first and second culture and even adopt an entirely different culture.” In *The Monkey and the Fish*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 37.

the experience of other marginalized communities, it is my experience that those who are marginalized can more easily recognize the corresponding experiences of marginalized others. This means that I can hear and tell stories from multiple perspectives about the same event in a credible way.

But the second part of this task to actually step into brave, possibly dangerous, conversations. It is not always a pleasant experience to challenge someone's story, nor is it pleasant to have one's story challenged. These conversations are dangerous and require courage because it can alienate others if one pushes beyond the limits of the existing relational trust. Worse than merely getting our feelings hurt, this can lead to rejection by others, where one's voice is relegated as an outsider, a "liberal" to be guarded against.<sup>14</sup> This is the balancing act I have had to perform, to provide a truthful reproach that leads to empathy, to push into the tension without breaking the bond.

Some questions that I have asked to bring greater awareness might be as innocuous as "How has your church been dealing with the multitude of cultures in Irvine?" or "What do you do to reach out to your neighbors?" knowing that the neighbors are of different ethnic backgrounds. A stronger instigation might be to ask about some of the current events, such as "How did your church process Charlottesville?" or "What do you think about the kneeling during the anthem in the NFL?" Listening carefully to the response, I would look for opportunities to bring in different perspectives. Sometimes it might be to provide some basic information about a situation—e.g., many people I spoke to simply did not know what Colin Kaepernick's protest was about. In other situations,

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<sup>14</sup> Indeed, as I will share in the next chapter, I experienced painful rejection in the course of doing work for this project.

my response would be to ask a more challenging question—“What then do you think is an appropriate way to protest?” The particular choice of words and timing of asking these questions are critical, as to not raise defensiveness. Significantly, I chose not to provide answers and leave the questions open ended, allowing others to come up with answers that they can own.<sup>15</sup> The very first question that provokes the rest of the conversation may be prepared, but the practice requires deep listening, and when the opportunity rises, to ask more challenging question.

The primary temptation of working from the margins is giving up. It is a constant battle for the marginalized person to remain engaged with the center, as we have to reestablish our credibility with each new relationship. The margins are an exhausting place to stand; “I am tired,” was a pleas often heard from other consciousness prophets. It is harrowing work to constantly balance the tension, to engage in dangerous conversations, fearful of pushing too far. There is strange comfort in “accepting one’s place,” but to do that would be a loss for all.

#### Second Location: Insider

The second location describes my connection to the community, my status as an insider to the evangelical community in general, and to the pastor’s network in particular. Prophetic admonition “presupposes common ground on which prophet and audience stand,” and the power of my voice comes from my membership.<sup>16</sup> The prophetic message

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<sup>15</sup> This practice is similar to the sort of leadership Richard Pascale, Mark Millemann, and Linda Gorja, describe as “walking on a trampoline” in their book *Surfing the Edge of Chaos* (New York: Thomson, 2000), 61-75.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 76-80, 91.

draws from the values already present in the community, as the prophet stands not as a dispassionate stranger, or even as an estranged native, but as an impassioned voice on behalf of the community.<sup>17</sup> Thus, while marginalization allows the necessary critical and creative distance, the insider status gives one the language with which to communicate these insights, and the compassion to speak with the goal of repentance, rather than condemnation.

The most significant accomplishment of the network was not the organization of large multi-church gathering, or the growing list of associated churches. Rather, it has been the growth of trust among the group, a true sense of community among pastors of different theologies and denominational backgrounds. Based on Jesus' prayer for his disciples in John 17 that in our unity the world will know the truth of Christ, we focused our energy on building trust among ourselves through honest vulnerability. At one point last year, through the encouragement of friends within the group, I shared with the group very honestly about my recent struggles in ministry, my struggle with rejection as a pastor, and my path to healing. The group not only received my story graciously, but responded with openness and vulnerability of their own. This was the moment when I sensed that what I was a part of was not a mere network, but the beginnings of a community. And it was this awareness that opened the possibility of Envision Irvine becoming a place where I could serve out my prophetic calling.

Inside the community is the place where the otherness of marginality can be made familiar. Here, the work of "identification" can take place, where we can adopt one

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 38-39.

another's joys, concerns, and struggles as our own. True embrace of other stories can occur only within the confines of a safe space, something that takes hard work to create and to maintain.<sup>18</sup> It requires a mutual commitment, and openness to tell and hear our stories. There were times during the past year, when I realized that the only reason why certain difficult conversations were possible was because of the trust that I had engendered within our community. Simply stated, the greater the level of trust I had with my conversation partner(s), the deeper I was able to provoke.

The work of identification is spiritual work, as reflected in the Trinitarian perichoresis, and remembered every time a church celebrates communion. As McNeil argues, Ruth's statement to Naomi that "your people will become my people" (1:16) gains new resonance as it models for us the sort of the incarnational cultural identity Christians are called to live out. Identification, specifically in the area of race issues, is about opening ourselves to the struggles of our neighbors and other race communities, where we can say, "your pain becomes my pain." It is the opposite of "demographics hunting"—where we seek to bring together a community that is least likely to cause tension—which many church growth strategies have encouraged us to practice in the past. Identification is cultural perichoresis that breaks apart the myths and stereotypes that we use to keep the concern's of other communities at bay, and reveal them for what they are: half-truths, that simply don't tell the real story. The horrific lie that "black lives matter" movement is equivalent to white nationalist ideologies—something I heard insinuated in several conversations this year—cannot withstand the true lived experience of a black

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<sup>18</sup> McNeil, 71.

friend detained at a traffic stop for no reason, again, and again, and again. Identification creates space for empathy, to feel viscerally the injustice of racial inequality and privilege.

The task then is to help create space for empathy to grow. My work from the insider's location reminds me that the goal of these practices is not to produce "white guilt", but allies who are awakened to the existence of a different reality. Doing this means investment in trust, which develops when I listen to other's stories, and as I become vulnerable myself. Building trusting relationships, especially cross-culturally, does not happen without a lot of intentional work; it is psychologically easier to be with people who are like to us.<sup>19</sup> In fact, just bringing together people from different backgrounds is not enough, and can even produce greater hostility.<sup>20</sup> But under certain circumstances—when we begin to see one another beyond stereotypes, and express mutual respect—relationships with others can flourish, as one begins to appreciate the personal growth benefits of cross-cultural contact.<sup>21</sup>

Because of the investment we have made in creating an "us", another way that I have worked prophetically from the inner location has been to challenge the group to imagine a different future together: "What would it look like for the churches in Irvine to take the lead in racial reconciliation process rather than just follow the talking points of our culture? What would it look like for us to love our neighbor when we disagree about the flag?" In this way, we can begin to see ourselves differently, as our identification with

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<sup>19</sup> Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces That Keep Us Apart* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 29, 79-100.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

others challenge us to a different in the future. Even the act of asking the questions feels aspirational at this moment; separating the politics of our times from the politics of the church seems daunting. But it is clearly becoming a valid question for us to ponder.

### Third Location: No Vertical Authority

The third location describes my level standing with the group—without vertical, or positional authority. This location does not describe so much any particular task (the what) of the work, but the manner in which I carry them out (the how). In this sense, this third coordinate has already influenced the work from the other two locations. There are two qualities of this location. First, it describes the setting into which many prophets enter—a place where formal, recognized authority has failed to lead. Amos, Hosea, Micah, among many others, were just “one of the people” when the formal authorities, be they religious or political, failed to lead. It is because of their failures that the prophet finds her calling and her voice. This is true even in modern times when you consider the lives of Rosa Park, Nelson Mandela, and Mahatma Gandhi who all came into prominence by being prophetic without formal authority. Thus, leading without authority is necessary in situations when formal authorities fail to lead.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, as I have recounted earlier, part of my resolve in pursuing this calling is because I was disappointed by the work of those who had a formal platform.

Second, the location describes the adaptive nature of the work. Complex adaptive changes cannot be directed from above, but only influenced as people own the problem

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<sup>22</sup> Ronald Heifetz argues that while most people turn to formal authority for leadership, much more often actual leadership comes from those without authority. *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 183.

and grow in their capacity to address it. While not all adaptive challenges require prophetic leadership, prophetic leadership always entails adaptive work. Clearly, the race issue is an adaptive challenge for the evangelical church. The prophetic role here then is not for me to demand change, or even proffer a solution; rather, the tools at my disposal are to instigate, provoke, and orchestrate others toward owning their solutions. The temptation is to provide a ready-made solution to the group, perhaps even a program that they can roll out at their church. But doing so would actually undermine the necessary transformational work required of every leader, and every congregation. Ronald Heifetz and Martin Linsky warns, “By trying to solve adaptive challenges for people at best you will reconfigure it as a technical problem and create short term relief. But the issue will not have gone away. It will surface again.”<sup>23</sup>

Reminding myself of this third location helps me to practice the work from the other locations better, as indeed, adaptive disciplines that have guided my overall approach. Adaptive leadership guru Heifetz considers the practice of self-reflection he calls “getting on the balcony” as a critical step to looking beneath the surface of a problem, and understand what is really motivating people to react in certain ways, by “listening for the song, beneath the words.”<sup>24</sup> This is particularly important in thinking about race and the evangelical church, as churches have a history of giving quasi-theological justifications for racially motivated fears. I have “gone to the balcony” in the midst of conversations, trying to understand why someone was resisting a seemingly

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<sup>23</sup> Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 123.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

innocuous idea, or to try to dig through an offensive comment to name the tension. I have often had to step back in meetings when I sensed that my presence was perceived as some sort of tokenism, to think of ways to reconfigure expectations. I have also set aside time in intentional reflection, identifying patterns and separating symptoms from the actual core failings, asking, “What is the unstated assumption that is making it so difficult for someone to hear me?” or “What is the fear that is being masked with this self-righteous anger?” Sometimes I would have to reflect upon my fears that were keeping me from pushing the conversation further. Separating the various strands of implicit motivations from the explicit statements is critical balcony work that allows me to stay the course in my prophetic journey.

Additionally, Heifetz beckons adaptive leaders to make a commitment to “give the work back.”<sup>25</sup> This means I must resist providing answers, but rather encourage others to come up with their own creative solutions. Instead, I need to know when to stop talking, to allow for tension to foment: “silence is a form of action.”<sup>26</sup> Such restraint can actually give rise to the development of allies and advocates, as people are given opportunities to own the problem themselves. From a spiritual perspective, “giving the work back” is trusting in Christ to work through the body of Christ.

Lastly, Heifetz describes the skill of “holding steady,” of persevering when opposition inevitably comes.<sup>27</sup> One can always expect pushback when challenging people to change adaptively, and this is acutely true dealing with race problems. In the midst of

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 146.

strong opinions and strong emotions, it is sometimes difficult to maintain a steady course. It has required great discipline to stay calm and to refocus the attention on the main issue. Receiving wise counsel from others who are been in this journey longer than I have has been critical to my maintenance. Mostly, however, it has meant trusting in the greater purpose of the work, even as temporary oppositions form against you. Holding steady “demands that we remain true to a purpose beyond ourselves and stand by people compassionately, even when they unleash demons. Taking the heat with grace communicates respect for the pains of change.”<sup>28</sup> More than once, I found myself stepping back, remembering how God has recruited me into his greater purpose, “to press on toward the goal” (Phil 3:14). Holding steady, I have learned, is not just an act of the heart, but a discipline of wise engagement.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 146

## CHAPTER 7

### LESSONS LEARNED

When this project began to take its final form sometime in the fall of 2016, I could not anticipate the events of this past year that would redefine the state of affairs for race issues in our country. Continued reports of police violence, targeted travel ban, intensifying anti-immigrant sentiments, Charlottesville, confederate statues, reaction to Colin Kaepernick, and emboldened white nationalism are just the tip of the cultural iceberg that now feed the racial crisis in America. All the while, the “everyday” racism of structures and systems continue without fanfare. My newsfeed is filled with daily reports of racial injustice that will never reach national level attention, but draw the issues closer to home. In a strange answer to their prayers, white conservative evangelicals have found themselves at the center of power and influence as Donald Trump’s most reliable base. Sadly, they seem oblivious to the growing sentiment among marginalized communities that white evangelicals are more about protecting their “white-ness” and

less about their “evangelical-ness.”<sup>1</sup> Truly this is a moment of crisis for the church, where our choices and our actions now will have lasting repercussions for generations to come.

This chapter attempts to capture the lessons that I learned working to bring awareness of this moment to the church leaders in Irvine in the past year, through the practice of prophetic leadership attempting to solicit adaptive responses. The lessons listed here are my reflections based on the hundreds of hours of conversations over the past year in a variety of circumstances. As recounted above, the topic has grown in intensity, adding to my sense of urgency and to the difficulty of navigating the increasingly charged environment – what needs to happen has far outpaced what I anticipated doing at the outset. At the risk of giving away the conclusion prematurely, it bears noting that the work has only just begun.

### **1. Eager for Racial Diversity, But Silent on Racial Injustice.**

For the vast majority of churches in Irvine, race as a category of social justice simply does not register as a regular topic of concern. Despite the high level of current relevance, with the exception of one African American church pastor, no pastor or church leader ever offered any plans or desire to discuss race as a justice issue in the church. This was made evident in my follow-up conversations with church leaders about Charlottesville that I describe in Chapter 4. None of this was surprising, as it was this observation that I gave as the initial impetus for my journey. But the conversations

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<sup>1</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, in his powerful article “The First White President” deconstructs the 2016 election of Donald Trump as being based on explicit appeal to intrinsic white nationalism, fear mongering the loss of white cultural dominance in the Obama era. Whether or not one agrees, Coates gives voice to a prevailing sentiment in marginalized communities. “The First White President,” *The Atlantic* (October 2017), Accessed Nov 23, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/the-first-white-president-ta-nehisi-coates/537909/>.

confirmed its widespread reality. If racism was ever mentioned as a sin, it was almost always brought up as an issue of personal bias (i.e., explicit racism), which for the most part simply did not occur in our otherwise civil city.

A more immediate discussion opportunity for acknowledging a broader, social aspect of racial bias came in May of 2017, when a major article appeared in Los Angeles Times about Irvine, describing the growing tension in the city's diversity.<sup>2</sup> In it, the writer implied that while diversity is outwardly celebrated in Irvine, many of the ethnic residents feel that "first you have to conform."<sup>3</sup> White residents of the city are quoted as resenting the incoming ethnic populations: "when I first moved into the city, there was no bustle, more calm. We felt safe in our yard. Nowadays, you see indications of Asia everywhere." Another is quoted as saying that ethnic presence is "a bit too much," ironically adding, "I don't want people to think it's prejudice... There should just be a balance of all cultures co-existing, not one over the other."<sup>4</sup> The article was a great opportunity to discuss some of the race issues close to home, and rightly identified some of the tensions, so I brought it up in many conversations. Many of the pastors of color (Asian, Latino, Black) hinted at their identification with the sense of alienation, even among the pastors: "I didn't feel accepted, because I was ethnic," one said rather bluntly. Some of the white pastors were sympathetic but were surprised by the sentiment expressed. But when I pressed the pastors, "do you think this is something some of your

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<sup>2</sup> Anh Do, "Even with Irvine's Diverse Mix of Cultures, Some Residents Feel They Don't 'Fit,'" *Los Angeles Times* (May 30, 2017), accessed November 28, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-ln-irvine-immigrants-20170511-htmlstory.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

members might be feeling?” none responded from a justice perspective (that there is something that needs to be confessed and repented of), but responded as a ministry opportunity: “we need to work together to reach out to people who are feeling left out.”

This silence to race as a justice issue stands in stark contrast to many of the leaders’ excitement over racial diversity. It is a topic many of the churches in Irvine would point to describe their health—“We lost overall membership, but we’ve since added people from all different ethnicities!” one pastor joyfully described. Another pastor talked about how their church planting team exhibits the same multiculturalism of the community. While not a single church I know of even remotely approaches the diversity of the general population of Irvine, racial multiculturalism is clearly a value for a growing number of churches. This seems to be true particularly with the newer church plants led by millennials, where diversity is prominently claimed, if not actually manifested. Done well, this could be an important first step, as awareness of race issues comes from growing relationships with those of different backgrounds. Done poorly, superficial commitment to diversity could actually do more harm by giving an illusion of diversity.

The reasons why these churches pursue multicultural congregations are varied. For some, it feeds into their understanding of “doing missions” as now the “world has come to our doors.” Such an approach has the unnerving logic of thinking that people of color are not truly Americans, and will somehow return to their “homeland” with the gospel. Thankfully, many others seemed to have moved beyond this paradigm. They view multicultural congregations as the biblical answer to racial strife: “We pursue boundary-crossing relationship because Jesus pursued boundary-crossing relationships”;

“Our churches need to become multicultural because heaven is going to be multicultural.”

Certainly developing meaningful cross-cultural relationships in the church are critical first step toward breaking the ineffectual approach of current evangelicalism, but their rationale—the theological framework—will have to be better than this if such multicultural congregations were to truly move beyond the initial stage, where deep appreciation and integration of cultures can occur at all levels of church structure. With some of these leaders, I have been able enter into relationships to suggest better theological frameworks for their work, which I hope will pay dividends in the future.

Regardless, this is a positive trend that ought to be encouraged. There is great value in simply getting pastors to acknowledge and talk about cultures and races. In the process of verbalizing their value of diversity, I have noticed their growing sense of awareness of its importance. Often, this growing energy would be reflected in our follow-up conversations, where they would celebrate new stories of diversity in their encounters, both personally and congregationally.

## **2. Aware of Injustice, But Afraid of Pushback**

Generally, I found most of the pastors to be very supportive of the idea that churches should have a leadership role in addressing the race problems in America. Among some of these pastors—approximately one-third—I even found significant concern and empathy toward the marginalized communities, particularly as continued reports of racial strife spread through the media.<sup>5</sup> But the very same pastors often

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<sup>5</sup> About another third of the pastors were immovable from their pro-police position, quickly shutting down any possible conversations about such incidents as “media bias.” In my experience, this is actually the most prominent position of white evangelical churches.

expressed reluctance to bring up such concerns in their churches, not for theological reasons, but rather for the fear of pushback from ecclesial structures. Associate pastors would defer to senior pastors, while lead pastors would talk about the lack of board support. Others would point to members of their congregation that they might offend: “We have guys in law enforcement,” one stated, while another mentioned, “We have military families.” One pastor explained his avoidance of Facebook to me: “You should see the comments I get; I posted a thing about refugees and the travel ban, and it became a huge deal.” For these pastors, the fear—whether it is of reprisal or of sowing disunity—is very real. On the other hand, living in the buffered, gated communities of Irvine, the racial issues feel far away; “I am picking my battles,” one said of his inaction. In one instance, while most pastors I spoke to did not address the 2016 presidential election in their churches, one assistant pastor of a large church who happened to be on pulpit rotation that week decided to speak on it: “We need to be aware that some people in our communities don’t feel safe right now,” he stated rather benignly. Yet it was one of his last sermons preached as he was released from his position just two months later, in part for being “political.” It speaks volumes about the current climate in churches.

This then points to an important way in which racism is systemized in the church: most evangelical churches in Irvine, even when they do have significant ethnic diversity in their membership, are disproportionately led by white, male leaders—pastors, elders, board members. There is a distinct lack of diverse voices in such top tier leadership roles. Such leadership simply lacks the diversity of perspectives to navigate sensitively through our diverse community. I have been surprised by how often I would speak with white pastors and leaders with relatively diverse membership, who seemed to have little

awareness of how people of color might feel in this political climate. As one Asian American pastor said to me, “White churches don’t know that we don’t feel safe.”

### **3. Preference for a Certain Type of a Leader**

One way to think about the above dynamic—where pastors are implicitly and explicitly silenced by such fears—is to consider the personality type of pastors often preferred in churches: a nurturing caregiver, a gentle shepherd. This is particularly true in Orange County, with its history and culture of positive, therapeutic preaching. Generally, such a personality would not want to do things that would disrupt the peace, or bring disunity to the body. Indeed, this is central to the image of a shepherd, as the one who protects and feeds the sheep. Following Alan Hirsch, however, part of the unhealth that our modern churches find ourselves in is because for centuries churches have prized the role of the pastor and the teacher and the personalities that typify them, while devaluing the other Spirit-given roles—the apostle, the prophet, and the evangelist.<sup>6</sup> Hirsch argues that while a holistic, healthy, and balanced leadership in the church requires the functioning of all these roles, the church has favored only the roles of the shepherd and the teacher, to its detriment.

The challenge for our setting then is this: assuming that understanding racial injustice at a social, systemic level will invariably be upsetting to our congregational dynamics, we need to ask whether we even have the right personality types leading our

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<sup>6</sup> Alan Hirsch, *5Q: Reactivating the Original Intelligence and Capacity of the Body of Christ*, (n.p.: 100 Movements, 2017), xxviii—xxix.

churches into such conversations.<sup>7</sup> At least part of the answer is to revitalize the role of the prophet in the church, as someone who creates dis-equilibrium for gospel's sake. That role, currently, is outside of the job description of most pastors. There would also have to be parallel structural work done to create space for such a role, as all roles are by definition part of a system. None of this would be easy, and points to the difficulty of transforming the embedded leadership and the expectations for leadership.

#### **4. Aware of Many Cultures, Oblivious to Own Culture**

Psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum, in her acclaimed book on racial identity development "*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*" describes the different journeys of racial identity development among people from historically subordinated communities, versus those from the dominant community. In essence, when kids from subordinated communities encounter dissonance in perception and expression—e.g., teachers assume something very different when they describe things like "family," and "police"—they seek out a place where their experiences are validated, i.e., peer groups of similar racial background. Whites, however, "pay little attention to the significance of their racial identity... 'I'm just normal,'" they say.<sup>8</sup> It simply does not occur to those in dominant culture groups to ask questions about their identity formation, because their socialization is never challenged. As Debby Irving writes, until such people "wake up" to their white-ness, and "find themselves in the story of race" their tendency

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<sup>7</sup> "In true adaptive change, there are no unanimous votes." Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 163.

<sup>8</sup> Beverly Daniel Tatum, "*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*" *And Other Conversations About Race* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 95.

will be to diminish the significance racial identity plays in their experience of reality.<sup>9</sup> “I don’t see color!” they will protest. Indeed, I was surprised by how often I encountered this dynamic among white pastors in Irvine; despite the plurality of cultures present in our city, they did not recognize their own racial and cultural framework.

Often, this was expressed in comments about “churches being about Christ” and “not about cultures.” Another common expression of this underlying assumption was when one pastor preached a message on “What the Bible says about race,” concluding that “God only cares about one race – the human race.” Although the message was intended as a statement against racism, it carried the same logic of “the color blind society” that makes sense only in a context of an already present just society. In actuality, however, it has the effect of preserving the dominant race already in power, as it denies the reality of systemic injustices and disadvantages. This naïve framework was conjured repeatedly in conversation with several white pastors, who believed their churches did not exhibit a culture that may favor one race over another.

The problem of the “human race” rhetoric is that it represents a poor theological anthropology that dismisses God’s creation of nations, races, and cultures. Differences are seen as a negative quality that faithful people learn to grow out of. But when our cultural stories become flattened, all lose out. Diversity is a reflection of divine creativity, and a reflection of the trinitarian Godhead. In Acts chapter two, we witness the Church

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<sup>9</sup> Debby Irving, *Waking Up White* (Cambridge, MA: Elephant Room Press, 2014), xi.

specifically being born into a diversity of races and cultures, where the Spirit forms the unity of God's people while preserving their differences.<sup>10</sup>

My encounter with this dynamic was both in terms of a conceptual challenge, but also in terms of the subtle structural racism it reflected. In other words, this was a way in which structural racism was manifest within our church leaders. White normativity that perceives white churches as being without culture deem other-race dominant churches as “not normal.” So even in our network's conversations about local churches, the African American church was described as “having an agenda,” and the Asian American pastor led churches were regularly assumed to be “for Asians only.” With no sense of irony or awareness, I have had white pastors tell me that they feel awkward when they are in a setting with too many minorities. At the very least, there needs to be recognition that all of us are cultural, and all of us need to become aware of our cultural framework.

It has been argued that this loss of normativity space is the motivating fear for white Americans—the term “white anxiety” has been used to describe the fear of white Americans of the changing cultural landscape that is shared by a plurality of cultures and losing what was once a privileged location. I would observe that this anxiety is evident in the American evangelicals churches as well, though perhaps with less awareness, as church tend to sanctify their cultures theologically. But white normativity conflated with ecclesiology not only leads to unhealthy interactions with other groups like tokenism and patronization, but it veers dangerously close to idolatry. While there were many white

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<sup>10</sup> Specifically in Acts 2:1-13 account of the Spirit's descent on the day of Pentecost, devout Jews from “every nation” were gathered, as “tongues of fire” rested on each of them. When they spoke, they spoke their own languages, but were amazed to hear everyone “speaking in the native language of each.”

church leaders with mature racial self-awareness, the prevalence of this dynamic was challenging to me at times. Nevertheless, it is an inevitable and important part of awareness raising work in race, to help reveal these hidden assumptions to even those that are committing them.<sup>11</sup>

### **5. Empathy is Primary; Everything Else Follows.**

The most critical piece to catalyzing critical consciousness is empathy. This conclusion was unexpected to me, as I had imagined some sort of a conceptual paradigm shift to be primary. However, in conversation after conversation, the first steps of people who were racially aware almost always involved empathy. Alternately, those who struggled the most to grasp the race issues that were being clearly presented displayed the least amount of empathy. Whether it was Trayvon Martin, Charlottesville, or Colin Kaepernick, I found the response of many church leaders to the frustrations expressed by the African American community to be stunningly emotionally disconnected. In one illustrative incident, an African American pastor friend posted on social media his anger and frustration at the report of a local fire chief calling a black NFL coach “a no-good

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<sup>11</sup> One helpful tool I have discovered and used in this regard is a parable about the elephant and the giraffe. First told by Roosevelt Thomas and Marjorie Woodruff, it tells the story of a giraffe in Giraffetown who builds a perfect, aesthetically balanced house that wins many awards, with tall windows and long narrow hallways that accentuate all the right things. An elephant family moves into the neighborhood and the giraffe invites the elephant for a visit and welcomes him warmly to his house. But the elephant finds the proportions of the house all wrong for him, and clumsily damages the beautifully architected space. The fable concludes with the giraffe suggesting that there is something wrong with the elephant, and that he should change, and maybe even take some aerobic classes. That is an example of giraffe normativity. Dealing with someone else’s norms placed upon us makes us awkward, and places us at a disadvantage; having someone enter into our normativity makes us anxious. In *Building a House for Diversity*, (New York: AMACOM, 1999).

n\*\*\*\*r.”<sup>12</sup> In response, one of his friends reminded him that rappers say the n-word all the time, utterly missing the point of my pastor friend’s easily understandable anger. Sadly, I have encountered many exchanges similar to this in my conversations, where the response of church leaders have been to dismiss the concerns and feelings of those who are expressing pain and hurt. Instead they would sidestep receiving the emotional information with an argument that dismisses the validity of the pain. While I realize that this dynamic is common to many human interactions, I found it to be particularly evident in racially involved discussions. The failure of empathy is not only a symptom of our racial problems; rather, it perpetuates our racialized misperceptions.<sup>13</sup>

In realizing this, whereas in the past I may have thought it was my primary work to provide a better conceptual framework, I found myself looking for opportunities to create space for empathy, mainly through the sharing of stories of pain. In one early dialogue, I shared how the rhetoric of Trump’s and his supporters brought back painful memories of growing up a second-class citizen, and how I had to have a conversation that with my children about how some people in our country did not view them as “real” Americans. My friend with a southern upbringing listened wide-eyed, accepting now my sense of urgency over why this was a matter that the church had to tackle.

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<sup>12</sup> Kristine Phillips, “Fire Chief who called Steelers coach Mike Tomlin the n-word has resigned,” *Washington Post* (September 27, 2017), accessed October 29, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/09/26/fire-chief-embarrassed-for-calling-steelers-coach-mike-tomlin-the-n-word-over-anthem-protest/?utm\\_term=.ee82f0cb9c6d](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/09/26/fire-chief-embarrassed-for-calling-steelers-coach-mike-tomlin-the-n-word-over-anthem-protest/?utm_term=.ee82f0cb9c6d).

<sup>13</sup> I am not alone in this observation. A Slate.com article entitled “Why White People Don’t Feel Black’s People’s Pain” describes the “racial empathy gap” where people feel more empathy when a white person was in actual physical pain, and dramatically less when a black person was in pain. One consequence of this empathy gap is that minority patients in hospitals are given significantly less pain medicine, and their overall pain management is treated unequally. By Jason Silverstein, *Slate* (June 13, 2013), accessed November 18, 2017, [http://www.slate.com/articles/health\\_and\\_science/science/2013/06/racial\\_empathy\\_gap\\_people\\_don\\_t\\_perceive\\_pain\\_in\\_other\\_races.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2013/06/racial_empathy_gap_people_don_t_perceive_pain_in_other_races.html).

Similarly, a white pastor friend who had gone through personal transformation in this area shared with me about a conversation with a black pastor, whose mother cried when he got his driver's license, for fear of being killed in a traffic stop. Having recently celebrated his son's passing of the driving test, the white pastor sat stunned at the disparateness of emotions at the same event. In the best circumstances, such stories create momentary openings of empathy space that allow for a dialogue, rather than a debate.

Empathy creates space for the hard work of listening to one another to take place, where our fears, anxieties, and even ugliness can be vulnerably shared. Empathy also allows patience to address the assumptions of someone earnestly seeking to understand. Empathy makes us want to persevere in difficult conversations, past the discomfort to understanding and self-awareness.

## **6. There is No Singular Race Conversation.**

The plurality of cultures, particularly in Irvine, means that there was a plurality of conversations on race and cultures coming from many different angles. While the issues facing the African American community rightly drew much of the attention, each of the marginalized communities struggled with different challenges. For example, Latino communities were most directly impacted by immigration issues, particularly with regard to “dreamers” affected by changes to Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy. Asian American communities—which is a vast collective of many cultures unified mainly by a general geography of origin—also struggled with immigration issues, but it was the theme of the “model minority” and being a “perpetual foreigner” that haunted their stories. The “Muslim” communities in Irvine—and anyone that was

perceived as “looking Muslim”—were the target of much slurs and hateful suspicion of terrorism. To be attentive to the particular stories of injustice is not only important for meaningful empathy to occur, but in understanding what it means to support each of these communities.

This adds complexity to the conversations, as being aware of the issues facing one’s own community does not necessarily entail awareness of others’ plight. Each require different a response that sometimes may seem to pull in contrary directions. Additionally, awareness of this fact means that one cannot make presumptions about “the unity of the disenfranchised.” I have witnessed awkward attempts to bring diverse groups together fail as groups vie for the seemingly limited attention span of the general public. Marginalized stories do have certain thin strands of commonality that run through them, but there are no short cuts to the hard work of careful listening.

The complexities of the many race conversations can sometimes make it daunting to step into any one of them. But in doing so, my journey has been nourished by the stories of others, my horizons being expanded through their struggles. I have learned about life in the internment camp and its aftermath by a Japanese American man born in Manzanar; I learned about the hundred racist stares that had to be endured to get on an airplane as an Iranian American man; I prayed with a Salvadoran friend who feared for the deportation of her nephew. During one of the many difficult days in the past year when racial outrage became overwhelming for me, I turned to an African American friend, who somehow seemed to be able to hold on to these events with more grace than I. When I wrongly implied that perhaps he wasn’t as upset about the events of the week as

he should be, he replied, “We’ve been doing this for a long time, Jin.” That day, I learned what perseverance looked like.

### **Considering the Impact**

Lastly, the practical and probative impact of the practice is considered. I had set out to develop and practice a prophetic leadership framework with the intention of challenging local pastors to apply the reconciling power of the gospel to the racial divides in our congregations and our society. While it was made clear from the outset that the focus of this project was the creation of such positional framework to do the work rather than a quantifiable measure of change, it is not unreasonable to discuss observable movements. With appropriate provisos in place then, it can be stated that working from the prophetic leadership framework helped contribute to the network’s progress in their journey toward racial consciousness. I would point to two factors – the development of multiracial congregations, and a growing group of “allies.”

Concretely, I know of six new or young churches (less than three years) in the Irvine that have made multiracial diversity an explicit value for their community, both in terms of their members and leadership. In my observation, this newest crop of church plants is the first in the area to explicitly break with the homogeneous congregational model that was even recently the norm.<sup>14</sup> Five of these churches are led by pastors of color, or include them at the most senior level of leadership. While their sizes vary—between 50 to 300 members—their diversity makeup far exceed that of other local

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<sup>14</sup> Prior to these churches, I knew of only one church in Irvine that had explicitly claimed multiracial diversity as a value. That church is no longer in Irvine.

churches, and are among the few in the area that would meet the 20 percent threshold set by Michael Emerson and his colleagues in *United by Faith*. While I do not mean to take any credit for their multiracial commitments, I have been in conversations with four of the leaders over the course of the year, discussing the church's role in race issues.

Additionally, I have developed strong, trusting relationships with several members of the network, whom I would consider "allies"—not necessarily to racial issues yet, but in support of my work on racial advocacy. This means that in their presence, I can safely push the conversation on race further along than I have been when I began this journey. As this has happened, there is a growing sense that talking about race issues is becoming "normalized" in our community. These and other relationships lay the foundations for ongoing work. All these point to a positive movement.

The focus of this project, however, was not on creating a new reality, but rather on developing a framework for engaging others toward transformation. It is in that sense that I can describe the most positive result. The prophetic framework empowered my engagement with the network leaders and the events of the past year. Numerous times in the past year, I was emotionally exhausted by the experience of marginalization, alienation and disappointment. I imagined during those time of simply disengaging and giving up, on both the network and the evangelical church. But the prophetic framework allowed for a more hopeful interaction with such disappointments, and the larger context in which I could persevere.

There are two ways in which I would have modified my approach. First I would have expanded the timeframe significantly, perhaps even as long as five years. While having a sense of urgency is helpful, I do not believe the sort of transformation I feel

called to be part can be done urgently. There are some deeply rooted, and entangled convictions in place that demand patient labor. There are practical limits to consider, but for those who seek to engage in such work as a labor of love, the slower path is the probably the faster path. Second, while I found some allies along the way, it would have been significantly easier work emotionally to do this work in partnership with others. I knew this would be a difficult journey; I do not think it needed to be so lonely.

## CONCLUSION

I hardly recognize what passes as the evangelical faith anymore. If I began this project with conflicted feelings toward the faith that nurtured me through most of my life, the past year has made things exponentially more grim. Though I am far past the age befitting youthful idealism, I started the journey with a bit of a heroic optimism, wanting to recapture the gospel of Jesus Christ from those who would cripple it of its power to heal our society. I gave those who would defend the distorted gospel the benefit of the doubt, believing that “speaking the truth in love” these brothers and sisters would be turned from their misguided perspectives. I am not so sure anymore. As I was preparing to write this conclusion, an incredible race for the vacant U. S. senate seat in Alabama unfolded in which Roy Moore, a man with obvious and disturbing character issues nearly won. What was truly unsettling was the support he received from white evangelicals in this Bible belt state, in which a staggering 80 percent voted for Moore (in far excess of the 68 percent he received from all white voters), despite the numerous allegations of sexual assault and misconduct with teenage girls!<sup>1</sup> Amazingly, 96 percent of the black voters in Alabama supported his opponent Doug Jones to hand Moore a stunning defeat.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the damage was done. Even before the election was completed, *Christianity Today* opined, “the biggest loser in the Alabama election is not Republicans or Democrats, but

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<sup>1</sup> Exit polls show 80 percent of white Christians who self-identified as born-again or evangelical voted for Moore. Carol Kuruvilla, “White Evangelicals Voted En Masse For Roy Moore in Alabama,” *Huffington Post* (December 13, 2017), accessed December 14, 2017, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/white-evangelicals-voted-en-masse-for-roy-moore-in-alabama-to-no-ones-surprise\\_us\\_5a314abee4b01bdd7659366c](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/white-evangelicals-voted-en-masse-for-roy-moore-in-alabama-to-no-ones-surprise_us_5a314abee4b01bdd7659366c).

<sup>2</sup> “Alabama Senate Election Results,” *Washington Post* (December 12, 2017), accessed December 13, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/special-election-results/alabama/?utm\\_term=.cade2fed8824](https://www.washingtonpost.com/special-election-results/alabama/?utm_term=.cade2fed8824).

Christian witness.... When it comes to either matters of life and death or personal commitments of the human heart, no one will believe a word we say, perhaps for a generation.”<sup>3</sup> As article after article appear describing the moral bankruptcy of the white evangelical church, I wonder what, if any, is left of the gospel I once encountered through it.

Irvine, of course, is not Alabama. But in many ways the evangelical churches in our city too have lost its voice in standing up against the gospel distortions that have accompanied the Trump presidency. I have heard more critique of the president and his policies from my son’s playground than I have from our church leaders. Thus, for all the care with which I have approached the topic of race, I have experienced rejection and alienation for being too vocal. (In 2017, the most common form of rejection is an “unfriending” on Facebook, as well as the timeless “unwillingness to acknowledge my presence in any meaningful way” method.) This “rejection of the prophet” was expected, but nevertheless painful to experience. But the deepest disappointment I experienced in the past year has come in the form of silence, from some of the people I have respected the most. I know enough of their particular situation that to justify their inaction in the moment, but when a year like this goes by and there is no word, it is time for me to acknowledge that our racial issues go even deeper than I was willing to admit. Maintaining the church’s status quo with regard to race issues is simply no longer theologically justifiable.

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Galli, “The Biggest Loser in the Alabama Election: It’s Not Republicans or Democrats, but Christian Witness,” *Christianity Today* (December 12, 2017), accessed December 14, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/december-web-only/roy-moore-doug-jones-alabama-editorial.html>.

It is this process of coming to terms with the entrenchment of the sin of racism that has been the most draining part of this work. Looking back at the introduction, there is a certain optimism, a sense in which I thought that if we just had a better conceptual framework, things could improve. The thought now strikes me as naïve. Yes, frameworks are important—and even useful—but it was not based on reality. I would first need to mourn the “loss of innocence” with which I thought about the evangelical church. I needed to acknowledge the deep ways in which evangelicals were not only unhelpful to our nation’s race crisis, but were in fact carriers of the disease.

Strangely, coming to terms with this creates in me a sense of continuing responsibility and connection. My relationship with the evangelical faith continues, as this dysfunctional family is still the only family I know; depending on the day, I feel like either a “jilted lover” or a “disowned child.”<sup>4</sup> To acknowledge the sin of my church is to acknowledge my complicity, and my penance work, if you will, is to remain in the fold and demand the return to of the full, beautiful gospel for which Jesus became incarnate.

At the conclusion of this project, I am more convinced of several things. First, I am convinced that the answer to evangelicalism’s race problems will have to come from the *margins*. If Alabama taught us anything, it is that we need the people on the margins to stay and fight the good battle, for everyone’s sake. Not only are the margins a place of a different perspective, it seems that there is a certain clarity of vision that is not possible from the center. I do not mean to imply that white evangelical leaders should simply step aside, as Rah has argued. But I do believe that a co-equal leadership in which the

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<sup>4</sup> Randall Balmer helped me with the self-description of a “jilted lover.” *Thy Kingdom Come: An Evangelical’s Lament*, (New York: BasicBooks, 2006), ix.

diversity of our stories are equally represented—harkening back to the Pentecost event when the Spirit united the Church in a diversity of tongues—is the sort of unity that Jesus was praying about in John chapter 17. As mentioned, of the six church plants in Irvine explicitly prioritizing multiracial congregation, five of them are led by pastors of color. As white evangelical churches continue to lose their credibility in the eyes of the watching world, leadership will have to depend on such men and women of color for leadership.

I am also convinced that I identified the proper *adaptive* approach to this work, where it was not about the development of a program, but of a personal leadership framework that instigates by asking questions rather than provide answers. To be clear, there really were not too many other options in doing this work. Programs are useful for helping people who are already committed, but it cannot draw people who do not currently have the awareness. Understanding the work from the adaptive perspective provided a leadership framework that did not depend on any formal authority—a reality not just for me but for others with similar sense of calling—that would have been otherwise difficult to navigate. It is a constant temptation to *not* provide answers, but the only lasting solution is the one that you truly own.

Lastly, I am convinced that the work that I have been doing is properly *prophetic* work. Initially, I was hesitant to describe the work as such, as the term invokes tangential images that can misdirect its apprehension. But, as Walter Brueggemann clarifies, and as I have learned, the prophetic consciousness is not about the mystical, but rather “it is the

capacity to imagine the world seen through the eyes of the Gospel God.”<sup>5</sup> For me this has meant that prophetic work requires careful, gospel-honoring social criticism, as well as persevering in hope, working toward the future that is promised by the God of hope, where “justice will roll on like a river, and righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (Amos 5:24).

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann, in conversation with Kenyatta Gilbert, “What Does It Mean to be Prophetic Today?” *Sojourners*, accessed December 14, 2017, <https://sojo.net/media/what-does-it-mean-be-prophetic-today>.

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