

REGENT COLLEGE

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF BLACK-WHITE RACIAL DIVISIONS
IN THE AMERICAN CHURCH
(WITH HINTS OF HOPE FOR A WAY FORWARD)

A COMPREHENSIVE ESSAY IN

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Introduction

As recently as 2015, sixty years after the African American Civil Rights Movement began, over two-thirds (68%) of black Americans still said that racial relations in the United States were generally bad, and over half (56%) of Whites agreed.¹ Contemporary headlines continue to scream how hard to come by progress in race relations, particularly between Whites and Blacks, has been. This is not new. As Mark Noll, the Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame, concludes in his *God and Race in American Politics*: "...the American political system and the American practice of Christianity, which have provided so much good for so many people for so many years, have never been able to overcome race."² When asked, then, about steps forward for the American church in light of these on-going racial tensions, Noll replied: "Just gaining a deeper understanding of the problem is the first, very big challenge."³

Spurred, then, by the dire nature of current reality, and taking seriously Noll's admonition to *gain a deeper understanding* of the issues, this paper will seek first flesh out the foundational history and nature of the enduring tensions between black and white Christians in the United States. Then it will sketch out the contours

¹ "New York Times/CBS News Poll on Race Relations in the U.S.," *The New York Times*, July 23, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/07/23/us/document-new-york-times-cbs-news-poll-on-race-relations-in-the-us.html>.

² Mark A. Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 178.

³ Mark A. Noll, On Black/White Relations in the U.S., in person, July 20, 2015.

of a Biblical motivation for attending to the tensions, as well as offering potential steps for narrowing the White-Black divide.

Slippery Terms

Part of the difficulty in addressing the problem of racial tension among black and white Christians is that race itself is a slippery term. For many scholars, it is not considered a “biologically meaningful concept.”⁴ DNA studies reveal that there is actually no such thing, for example, as a *Black African* race, challenging the scientific integrity of the concept of race itself. Scholars generally conclude that race is not a scientifically objective reality but rather a culturally created one. It is more a matter of the “arbitrary imposition of discontinuities on the continuous physical variation of the world’s peoples” than a definitive scientific category.⁵ Technically, people could just as easily be organized by fingerprint patterns (loops, whorls, or arches), by earwax content, by amounts of body hair, or by height (interestingly, Africa has some of the tallest and the shortest people in the world).⁶ Races defined by body chemistry are not the same as races defined by skin color.

But as fluid as race might be for microscope-wielding scientists, the headlines and many people’s personal experience say that race is real: humans oftentimes differentiate themselves along even fuzzy color lines. And the tensions we

⁴ Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4–6.

experience around those color lines, or around race, are often thought of in terms of *racism*. However, once again, the definitions get slippery. What actually is racism?

Typically in white Protestant circles, racism has been defined primarily in individual terms: individual-level prejudice and discrimination towards those of another color. This has been buttressed by a theological definition of racism: “a response that violates the equalitarian principle implied in the biblical doctrine of the *Imago Dei*.”⁷ But there are also broader definitions. In their well-known book, *Divided by Faith*, Michael Emerson and Christian Smith add in the concepts of corporate involvement and systemic expression. They define racism as a “changing ideology” characterized by a “collective misuse of power that harms another group, including justifications for” a racialized social system.⁸ A racialized society, they explain, is one in which “race matters profoundly for differences in life experiences, life opportunities, and social relationships,” but unfortunately, racialization is invisible to most Whites.⁹ Racism, they contend, is the driving force keeping a racialized society in place.

Taking a simpler but still helpful approach as it includes both the individual and corporate concepts is the definition of racism given by Reformed theologian John Piper in his book, *Bloodlines*:

The *heart* that believes one race is more valuable than another is a sinful heart. And that sin is called *racism*. The *behavior* that distinguishes one race as more valuable than another is a sinful behavior. And that sin is called *racism*. The personal focus on the

⁷ H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, but...Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 1972), viii.

⁸ Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 120.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7, 9.

term *racism* does not exclude the expression of this sin in structural ways, for example, laws and policies that demean or exclude on the basis of race.¹⁰

In summary, then, racism—manifested in individual or corporate beliefs or practices (intentionally or not)—“qualitatively distinguishes” one race above others, violating the image of God.¹¹ It is sin, and sin, sadly and painfully, like a virus, often reproduces itself from generation to generation, using whatever host is available. The result is that today, with our collective national history of racism, Blacks live “acutely aware of the damaging effects of racialization”¹² while Whites see themselves as the “object of blame, anger, misperception, and ridicule.”¹³ And all of us find ourselves as psychology professor Paul Wachtel puts it, in a “complex and fateful dance” where it has become “impossible to say who leads and who follows.”¹⁴

Antebellum History

If sin, like racism, travels through generations, it makes sense that to understand today’s divides, we need to understand the history of race in the United States, generally, as well as within the church. One of the difficulties in writing about “the church” in America, however, is that in spite of Constitutional separations, the church (particularly the Protestant and Evangelical church) and the state were

¹⁰ John Piper, *Bloodlines: Race, Cross and the Christian* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 239–240.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 239.

¹² Michael O. Emerson and George Yancey, *Transcending Racial Barriers: Towards a Mutual Obligations Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁴ Paul L. Wachtel, *Race in the Mind of America: Breaking the Vicious Cycle between Blacks and Whites* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 1.

intrinsically wed for the first two centuries of the nation's existence.¹⁵ For example, in 1843, fifty percent of Americans were either Baptists or Methodists.¹⁶ So, while this paper's focus is on the racial tensions between Blacks and Whites in the Protestant church, any understanding of antebellum history must recognize the intertwined nature of both the national struggle and ecclesial struggle with race.

Slavery

Many scholars have concluded that it was not racism that drove American chattel slavery but slavery that deepened a preoccupation with race and enflamed the white supremacist ideology needed to keep the slavery system going. America did not begin with a system of slavery but with indentured servitude; servants of different skin colors typically worked three to seven years.¹⁷ And race itself was neither as initially well defined nor as divisive as it would become. For example, in 1649, William Watts (white and a former indentured servant) and Mary, an African, were both involved in the same church congregation and received a punishment for fornication. But the punishment mentioned nothing about crossing racial lines.¹⁸

Slowly, though, it became clear that economics were going to demand a steady and reliable stream of cheap labor. White servants were more expensive, and run-aways could easily blend in. Familiar with the geography, Native Americans could escape back to tribes. But Africans were the cheapest and could

¹⁵ A note on the use of the term "Evangelical" and "Evangelicals." Capitalization usage varies within the research used for this paper. For consistency's sake, I have chosen to capitalize all usage.

¹⁶ Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History*, 36.

¹⁷ Curtiss DeYoung et al., *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2003), 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

not easily hide.¹⁹ Hence, conceptualizing Blacks as inferior became crucial for legitimizing the emerging slave trade and practice. As Janell Williams Paris explains in her essay, *Race: Critical Thinking and Transformative Possibilities*, early legislation and cultural practices began to cement the importance of race, and by the 19th c., “racially minded scientists” hardened race categories.²⁰

Unfortunately, Christianity was integral to this process of focusing on race and developing a deeply racialized and racist world-view that would undergird slavery. The first child to be born of two African parents in North America was baptized as William into the Anglican Church.²¹ But recognizing that in much of the universal church’s previous history, spiritual equality had come to imply temporal equality, as early as 1634, legislation was encouraged that would insure that slaves, even upon baptism, would remain slaves.²² Alternatively, some began proposing that perhaps it would be better to avoid proselytizing black slaves at all and thereby circumvent the entire question of freedom.

Fairly soon thereafter, many North American clergy began actively arguing that an embrace of the gospel need not change one’s temporal status. Cotton Mather (1663-1728), the well-known Puritan pastor, argued forcefully *for* slavery. Slavery was part of societal order, and the gospel would help slaves occupy their place

¹⁹ Ibid., 45.

²⁰ Janell Williams Paris, “Race: Critical Thinking and Transformative Possibilities,” in *This Side of Heaven: Race, Ethnicity, and Christian Faith*, ed. Robert J. Priest and Alvato Nieves (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 22.

²¹ DeYoung et al., *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race*, 44.

²² Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, 23.

obediently.²³ Likewise, George Whitfield (1714-1770), the powerful preacher of the Great Awakening, was himself a slave owner. He argued that God had allowed slavery for His larger purposes, including the Christianization of Africans (many of whom came to faith under his preaching). The pain, he said, opened slaves to the gospel, and such “bondage was their best insurance for salvation.”²⁴

But as the colonies moved towards and beyond the American Revolution with its rhetoric about freedom, some Evangelicals began to question slavery. Most anti-slavery activists were religious in nature, but most of these were gradualists who still wanted a racialized society. Evangelism and discipleship were the priorities, and social change would have to come one relationship at a time.²⁵ Hence Presbyterians in the era could both actively support the re-colonization of Africans while simultaneously disposing a minister because his antislavery views were “too radical.”²⁶

By about 1830, however, there was a growing post-millennial energy for saving lost souls *and* exercising social reform. Early abolitionists who had lost steam after the 1808 prohibition on importing slaves gave way to a new wave abolitionists lobbying for slavery’s immediate end. But in 1839 the abolitionists split, and the more moderate Evangelicals pulled back from the more radical, non-Evangelical wing. Typifying the moderate side was evangelist and preacher, Charles Finney (1792-1875).

Finney had no question that slavery was wrong; he had called it,

²³ Ibid., 25.

²⁴ Ibid., 26–27.

²⁵ Ibid., 29.

²⁶ Ibid.

pre-eminently, the *sin of the church*" and called Christians of all denominations to "meekly but firmly come forth, ...pronounce their verdict, ...clear their communions, ...wash their hands of this thing, ...give forth and write on the head and the front of this great abomination, SIN!"²⁷

His convictions were clear, but his vision for social change conflicted with his priority for evangelism. Eventually, he disavowed the abolitionist movement because it seemed to be taking precedence over the preaching of the gospel.

As tensions over slavery increased and as the nation moved towards division, congregations in the North and the South found themselves increasingly at odds with one another. The greater the cry in the North about God's displeasure with slavery, the greater the South's retort about its goodness and Biblical rightness.²⁸

Citing Thornton Stringfellow of Virginia's 1841 work, *A Brief Examination of Scripture Testimony on the Institution of Slavery*, Noll writes that it was easy for pro-slavery advocates to show that "Abraham, Moses, the Apostle Paul, and even Jesus himself either took the existence of slavery for granted or made no obvious moves to eliminate it."²⁹

Eventually, though, as the nation split into Civil War, so too went the denominations. Christianity had proven incapable of holding the nation together. And in the face of the slave question with all its economic and cultural implications, it had proven incapable of holding its own quarters together.

It is interesting to note at this juncture, however, that while the debates and divide focused on the Biblical legitimacy or illegitimacy of slavery, the fact that most

²⁷ Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History*, 32.

²⁸ Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 7.

²⁹ Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History*, 33.

of the slavery in the Bible had *nothing to do with Africans* went virtually unnoticed. Nobody was asking *why* slavery was restricted to blacks. “Slave” and “African” were presumed by most to be synonymous.³⁰ As Noll writes, the “war to end slavery never became a war to overcome racism.”³¹ For example, Abraham Lincoln in his early debates with Stephen Douglas had declared that the black man had “the right to eat [his] bread, without leave of anybody else” and was in that way “my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas....” But in the same speech he said that the black man was “not my equal in many respects—certainly not in color, perhaps not in moral and intellectual endowment.”³²

Even if not the overt subject of public debate, however, the color questions were still deeply in play in the nation at large. As the escaped slave turned abolitionist, writer and statesman, Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), put it: “Color makes all the difference in our American Christianity ... The same book which is full of the Gospel of Liberty to one race, is crowded with arguments in justification of the slavery of another.”³³ Douglass could see lurking behind the practice of slavery and the Biblical debates, the “malignant slaveholding *sentiment*” [emphasis added], the “pride of race, prejudice against color....” These, he prophetically declared, would continue to work their insidious evil, even after slavery’s abolition. “The slave

³⁰ Ibid., 41.

³¹ Ibid., 45.

³² Piper, *Bloodlines: Race, Cross and the Christian*, 61.

³³ Frederick Douglass, “The Pro-Slavery Mob and the Pro-Slavery Ministry,” *Douglass’ Monthly March* (1861): 418–419.

having ceased to be the abject slave of a single master, his enemies will endeavor to make him the slave of society at large.”³⁴

Race and Scripture, Part 1

Preoccupying questions about color were concurrently at play in the church. And understanding the ways in which much of the (white) church, as well as the larger culture, was thinking about race is crucial for understanding slavery’s hold and the shape of the postbellum racial tensions.

The Curse of Ham

Though it has long since fallen out of all but the most fringe contemporary Christian consciousness, one of the strongest popular arguments for divinely legitimizing the enslavement of Blacks was the curse of Ham by his father, Noah (Gn 9:25). The three sons of Noah had always been considered the fathers of the peoples of the world, and Ham had always been critiqued. But this critique of Ham was less about “pigmentation” and more about “paganism.” Ham’s descendants were credited with corrupting Noah’s monotheism. Early moderns had seen the Hamitic line as the “principal begetters of ... polytheism.”³⁵

However, sustainable slavery in a theoretically Christian nation needed divine justification. And Ham, whose name has long been taken to mean “black or burnt” and whose descendants were cursed by Noah to serve those of Ham’s

³⁴ Douglass quoted in Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History*, 43.

³⁵ Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000*, 74.

brothers, Shem and Japheth (seen as the father of Whites), provided this.³⁶ Popular logic went this way: Ham had gossiped about his father's nakedness. As a result, his dark progeny were cursed. All Blacks, therefore, were doomed by God to enslavement. Accepting the enslavement of Blacks by Whites was actually integral to a trust in the authority of Scripture.³⁷ This was about honoring divine order.

As inane as it might sound to readers today, this reading of the curse of Ham had incredible and insidious sticking power, within and beyond the United States. The Scottish poet Robert Burns (1759-1796) penned this couplet to be preached about this text: "How graceless Ham leugh at his Dad/ Which made Canaan a niger."³⁸ Likewise, it was not until 1974 that the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa refuted this interpretation of the Hamitic Curse, noting that the curse was not on all of the descendants of Ham, but on those of his son, Canaan. And Canaan's service of Israel had been fulfilled in the Old Testament; the curse had nothing to do with Africa or Africans. (It is also interesting to note that even after rejecting this interpretation, the Dutch Reformed Church still leaned on the story of the Tower of Babel to justify apartheid.³⁹)

Monogenesis vs. Polygenesis

³⁶ J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 52. Hays argues, however, that the meaning of "black or burnt" attributed to Ham is derived from the Egyptian word, Keme, which means "the black land," referring to Egypt. But as Egyptians descended from Ham, "to suppose that the word 'Ham' (the father of Egypt) is based on an Egyptian word for 'black' would be highly unlikely" (57).

³⁷ L. R. Bradley quoted in *ibid.*, 52–53.

³⁸ Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000*, 40.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

Popular understandings of the curse of Ham were not the only scriptural issue in play for white American Christians thinking about race, however. There was another troubling concern about race for theologians. Prior to the 19th c., “race” itself had not been a significant theological category. But the modern discovery of so many new races and civilizations had raised serious questions about the authority of Scripture. How could there be such diversity in the 5500 years since creation? Early 17th and 18th c. commentators had assumed that the descendants of Noah had populated the world and its religions. But varieties in weather and geography were proving inadequate explanations for the diversity. As a result, the theological quest became to maintain the fundamental *unity* of human origins in the face of so much diversity.⁴⁰

For example, if the American Indians had sprung up on their own and not as descendants of Noah, then the universality of original sin could be debunked. Therefore, looking for the origins of racial diversity in the Scriptures, some proposed that perhaps Ham himself had been spontaneously blackened in his mother’s womb. Or perhaps Lot’s daughters’ dark imaginations changed their children’s colors in utero. Maybe the mark on Cain and his descendants was actually dark color?⁴¹ The theories began to rage, and not willing to forgo the scriptural view of fundamental racial unity, some monogenists were willing to concede the actual chronology of Genesis, thereby allowing more time for the evolution of diversity within humanity. This aligned well with emerging “naturalistic theories of

⁴⁰ Ibid., 60.

⁴¹ Ibid., 33, 39, 69.

racial degeneracy from a white norm....”⁴² Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840) had coined the phrase “Caucasian race,” explaining Amerindians and Ethiopians as the first wave of degeneration from the world’s original (white or Caucasian) peoples. In his schema, he Malay and the Mongolians represented the next wave.⁴³

In short, though, monogenist theologians had one organizing concern: for participation in the blessings of the gospel, one must be descended from the 1st Adam, sharing in his sin and participating in the blessings of the 2nd Adam, Jesus Christ.⁴⁴ This unity of origins was a non-negotiable. But this said, Southern monogenists found themselves up against a particular difficulty.

An embrace of polygenesis would have allowed for the existence of “less evolved” peoples. In fact, 19th c. race science did buttress its view of the supremacy of the white race with an embrace of evolutionary polygenesis.⁴⁵ And some polygenist theologians embraced what had once been called the pre-Adamite “heresy,” understanding non-white races to be the descendants of pre-Adamites, not

⁴² Ibid., 82.

⁴³ Ibid., 85.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 128.

⁴⁵ John Piper, *Bloodlines: Race, Cross and the Christian* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 207. As well, it is worth noting Colin Kidd's point that science itself has now concluded that “all men are probably derived from the same common stock.” He cites the still standing first UNESCO statement on race, which reads, “Scientists have reached general agreement in recognizing that all men belong to the same species, *Homo sapiens*. It is further agreed among scientists that all men are probably derived from the same common stock; and that such differences as exist between different groups of mankind are due to the operation of evolutionary factors of differentiation, such as isolation, the drift and random fixation of the material particles which control heredity (the genes), changes in the structure of these particles, hybridization, and natural selection.” *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 271, 273.

made in God's image. This allowed for diversity and white racial superiority.⁴⁶ But Southern monogenists struggled, instead, to preserve the shared, God-created unity of all people in creation, fall, and potential redemption while both trying to explain the existence of black people *and* justify their supposed "inferiority."⁴⁷ It was virtually an impossible task, and the gymnastics necessary to hold together scriptural monogenesis and racial subordination were seemingly endless. But the bottom line was that latter half of the 19th c. brought an increased focus, within and outside of the church, on ethnology. And the Bible itself, which one on one hand was used to point to the unity of humanity, also became "grist to the racist mill, a source book of evidence for the dispersion of races and the beginnings of racial divisions and patterns."⁴⁸ Racism seemed to have no scruples about using the Scriptures as a tool. Actually, Noll goes so far as to argue that in reality, the Civil War was an essentially "religious war fought over how to interpret the Bible and how to promote moral norms in national public life."⁴⁹

Jim Crow Years

National Changes

The War ended in 1865, slavery was abolished, and Reconstruction began.

With freedom, African American men initially got the vote. But in the face of

⁴⁶ Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000*, 161, 163.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

Southern “redemption” (a counterrevolution of white supremacists which “involved the violent transfer of power from liberated slaves and their Republican allies to an all-white Democratic Party”), the door to full political participation by all citizens in the new nation was quickly closing.⁵⁰ Only twelve years after it began, with the final federal troops pulled out of the South, Reconstruction came to an end, and the Jim Crow era with its enforced segregation was born. Meanwhile, the North, wanting to hold the country together (and suffering with its own financial woes), turned a blind eye to the emerging plight of Blacks. It had won the war, but the North did not have “the moral energy required for rooting equal rights into the subsoil” of the nation.⁵¹

As well, because the Civil War had revealed Evangelical Protestantism’s inability to address society’s regional and moral conflicts, Evangelicals’ political power declined. Noll puts it this way: “Before the war, the confusion of slavery and race compromised the authority of the Bible; after the war, the acceptance of science and national civil religion as ultimate authorities relativized the authority of the Bible.”⁵² What all of this meant in practice was that Scripture’s potential (if properly read and wielded) for shaping a national understanding of the essential shared humanity of all people was increasingly cast aside. Growing Social Darwinism had opened the way for a deeper, national rationalization for treating African Americans as “subcitizens and subhuman.”⁵³ One turn of the century black novelist

⁵⁰ Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History*, 72.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 97–98.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 66.

characterized 35 years since the war as “the systemic destruction of the Negro by every device which the fury of enlightened malevolence can invent.”⁵⁴

Black and White Church Shifts

There were, of course, brief cross-cultural moments of integration both within the church and society at large. In the 1880s the Church of God Reformation Movement preached a message of holiness expressed, in part, in racial unity. In spite of much external resistance like the dynamiting of its camp meeting grounds in 1897, this church held out for racial justice and unity.⁵⁵ As well, in the South, church leaders were behind groups like the Atlanta-based *Commission on Interracial Cooperation*, which lasted from 1919-1944.⁵⁶ And in the 1940s, the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco, planted by a white Presbyterian minister Alfred G. Fisk and eventually co-pastored by Howard Thurman, a professor at Howard University, was “the first truly integrated congregation in both leadership and membership in America.”⁵⁷ But most movements like these fluttered briefly and then sputtered out. For example, by 1909, the Church of God congregations in Pittsburgh and New York City began to split, and so went the entire denomination over the next few years.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Pauline Hopkins quoted in *ibid.*, 58.

⁵⁵ DeYoung et al., *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race*, 54.

⁵⁶ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, 42.

⁵⁷ DeYoung et al., *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race*, 63.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

As well, immediately after the Civil War, African Americans began leaving white churches en masse. Under slavery there had always been an informal system of hidden black congregations, the “invisible institution.” As a former Virginia slave, Peter Randolph, put it, “Not being allowed to hold meetings on the plantation, the slaves assemble in the swamp, out of reach of the patrols.” Gatherings often began with asking slaves asking each other “how they feel, the state of their minds...[then] Preaching...then praying and singing all around, until they generally feel quite happy...The slave forgets all his sufferings, except to remind others of the trials during the past week, exclaiming: ‘Thank God, I shall not live here always!’”⁵⁹

Post-Civil War, however, Blacks were now free to throw off one painful piece of life in the here and now: the “unequal and restrictive” treatment in established, predominantly white churches; they were now free to begin building their own institutions.⁶⁰ This pattern was widely supported by white Protestants in both the North and South. As one Virginia churchman put it: “No Christian ought to allow his conscience to be disturbed by the thought that he violates the unity of the Church by insisting on an independent organization for the colored race. The distinctions are drawn by God himself.”⁶¹ Plus, Blacks choosing to form their own denominations seemed to demonstrate what Whites were championing: the natural human inclination for ‘like’ to voluntarily choose ‘like.’ Separate but equal was to be the new normal. As one publication, the *Alabama Baptist*, said it in 1891, “The Southern

⁵⁹ Peter Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life: Or, Illustrations of the “Peculiar Institution”*. By Peter Randolph, an Emancipated Slave., 2005, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/abt6879.0001.001>.

⁶⁰ Quoting Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya in Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, 39.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Whites and Southern blacks are getting along admirably, and always will, if blatant politicians keep hands off.”⁶²

White Christians might have been hoping to make the problem of race go away by quietly ignoring or actively justifying it. But with rare and short-lived exceptions, almost nobody seemed to question the color lines in the church, which by the second quarter of the twentieth century were clearly established. Actually, to the contrary, a number of self-identified white Christians were committed to violently cultivating the on-going racialization of both North and South. In the 1920s, for example, at the height of the Ku Klux Klan’s power (with over four million members), 40,000 Protestant ministers were members of the organization, including serving as “Grand Dragons” in a number of states.⁶³ As W.E.B. DuBois wrote in 1929, “The American Church of Christ is Jim Crowed from top to bottom. No other institution in America is built so thoroughly or more absolutely on the color line. Everybody knows this.”⁶⁴

The decades of America’s Jim Crow laws (and less official means of segregation) were by no means monolithic among Whites or Blacks, in the North or South, or within the Christian church, Protestant or otherwise. But painted with broad sweeping strokes, it is clear that a new cultural picture was emerging. With white Evangelical Protestants having lost their “social hegemony,” a less distinct civil religion began to take its place, increasingly woven with what was, arguably,

⁶² As quoted in David M. Reimers, *White Protestants and the Negro* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 38.

⁶³ DeYoung et al., *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race*, 60.

⁶⁴ W.E.B. DuBois as quoted in *ibid.*, 61.

the growing national idol of material achievement.⁶⁵ As Wendell Berry puts it in his critique of 20th c. white southern culture, *The Hidden Wound*, the puritan who had denied himself earthly joys for the sake of the heavenly rewards gave way to the success seeker who “would work day and night, not for any satisfaction it gave him, not even as a duty, but to get to the top...where he would rest and enjoy life.”⁶⁶

Simultaneously, much of white Evangelicalism that still had eyes for something beyond material success was, since the 19th c., increasingly focused on international missions. An awareness of the wider world and a genuine commitment to the importance of a cross-cultural Christian faith characterized much of conservative American Protestantism. Missionaries who could carry and translate the gospel to other peoples were its heroes.⁶⁷ Paradoxically, there was an inability to grab ahold of the value of those of a different ethnicity occupying the same soil. Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* classically depicts this irony when the women in the Missionary Society of Maycomb speak with great passion for the conversion of the Africans. Their passion for the unknown Africans co-exists with their casual refusal to see the humanity of the falsely accused (and black) Tom Robinson. Ralph Ellison caught the felt experience (one sometimes sought and sometimes fought) of many African Americans in his 1952 book’s title: *The Invisible Man*.

⁶⁵ Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History*, 101.

⁶⁶ Wendell Berry, *The Hidden Wound* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2010), 65–66.

⁶⁷ Mark A. Noll, *From Every Tribe and Nation: A Historian’s Discovery of the Global Christian Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 11.

But perhaps in part because the eyes of the nation and the white church were fixed on new aspirations—financial or missional—what had been born as a “distinctly African-American form of experiential, quasi-evangelical, universal, and reforming Christianity” during centuries of slavery was now freed to “get up from its bed and start to walk.”⁶⁸ There was a new sense of self-determination and identity for Blacks throughout the nation. Still squeezed into an unbearably tight space by Jim Crow laws in the South and more subtle practices, like redlining, in the North, the compression was nevertheless forming (out of sight of many in the dominant culture) a powerful new agent.

The Civil Rights Movement

In the 19th c., theologians were clinging to and dying for their right to defend slavery as a legitimate biblical practice. But because there was no biblical justification for the inferiority of Blacks or any race, 1950s segregationists could not make a strong theological argument for racialization.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, many African Americans had begun to recognize that the freedoms they had fought for overseas in World War II were still being denied them in their own country. As well, by this juncture, the black church had emerged with a deep conviction that “God was on their side” in the quest for racial justice.⁷⁰

There were Evangelicals who also saw the rightness of racial justice. But most Evangelicals occupied—as had traditionally been their approach—a gradualist

⁶⁸ Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History*, 101.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

view. For example, between 1957 and 1964, *Christianity Today* published “less than two reports or articles on race issues per year.” Only after 1965 did the rate increase to an average of “seven articles” per year.⁷¹ And it was not until the 1970s that the magazine began highlighting the voices of black Evangelical leaders like Tom Skinner and John Perkins.

Conversely, mid-century, activist liberal Protestants were anxious to accept and promote civil rights; however, their theological vision lacked actual power. This was because, according to Noll, the:

liberal view of evil was too shallow to take the measure of racist sins; liberal expectations for human progress based on education and good will were too feeble to overcome the entrenched antipathies of a racially riven society; a liberal confidence in the ability of enlightened social managers to remodel American mores suffered from a blithe underestimation of the problem.⁷²

The black church, however, forged for centuries in a place of pain—and shaped strongly by the Exodus narrative and an emphasis on liberation from sinful oppression—was different.⁷³ This was a church that combined the intellectually sophisticated convictions of its elite leaders, like Martin Luther King, Jr. (who, though educated in liberal Protestantism, still held to a notion of human depravity) and the “pre-critical” and “raw biblicalism” of grass roots fundamentalism.⁷⁴ The leaders brought an emphasis on free will, the possibilities of human morality in the face of human evil, and the importance of social engagement. The traditional church

⁷¹ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, 56.

⁷² Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History*, 130.

⁷³ James E. Shelton and Michael O. Emerson, *Blacks and Whites in Christian America: How Racial Discrimination Shapes Religious Convictions* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 38, 46.

⁷⁴ Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History*, 121.

membership brought deeply supernatural convictions about “an active God” who brought “immediate consolation” and miraculous power. The result was an “explosive public force,” the movement that culminated in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1865.⁷⁵ Many Blacks and Whites in the North and South had wanted to see the “log-jam of restricted rights” blasted loose. But, in Mark Noll’s words, “the only charge that could, and did, prevail was the detonation provided by African-American prophetic religion.”⁷⁶

Black and White Tensions Today

This paper began with the reminder that in the fifty years since the culmination of the Civil Rights movement, the tensions between Blacks and Whites have continued. The gains of the movement are indisputable, but today’s tensions have “worked around” these gains. One of the culprits in the tension is oftentimes given the name *institutional racism*. Edward Gilbreath, in his book *Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical’s Inside View of White Christianity*, calls this “the term invoked to describe the unnamable brand of discrimination we experience today.”⁷⁷ One classic examples of this is the oft-cited experience of Blacks--though now empowered to take any seat on any bus—being pulled over simply for DWB (“driving while black”). Or as an another example goes: it might be illegal to deny

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 131.

⁷⁷ Edward Gilbreath, *Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical’s Inside View of White Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 11.

college entrance on the basis of race, but that does not open informal (but well-established) networks of opportunity to young African Americans. Sociologist James Jones puts it more succinctly: institutional racism includes “those established laws, customs, and practices which systematically reflect and produce racial inequities in American society.”⁷⁸ It shows up in an array of issues: education (resource devoid inner city schools); justice (inordinate numbers of black males in prison); economics (the relative net worth of blacks is 8% that of whites); and health (black babies die at two times the rate of white babies).⁷⁹

Sadly, the national cultural gaps are likewise lived and felt in ongoing White and Black church divisions, in spite of sharing a deep unity in the essentials. Traditionally, Black and White churches hold to the Apostles Creed. Both take the authority of Scripture as God’s revealed Word seriously. Both look to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for salvation. And both believe that faith is supposed to be taken into society.⁸⁰ Yet the gaps between these two expressions of American Protestantism remain glaring.

Andrew Walls, Christian theologian, missiologist and pioneer in world Christianity, says that “No one ever meets universal Christianity itself; we only ever meet Christianity in a local form, and that means a historically, culturally conditioned form.”⁸¹ It is no wonder then that an African American Christianity

⁷⁸ James Jones quoted in *ibid.*

⁷⁹ Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History*, 13–14; Gilbreath, *Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical’s Inside View of White Christianity*, 11.

⁸⁰ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, 3.

⁸¹ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 235.

built under the “long shadow of American slavery” and current “racial stratification” has taken a distinctly different form than that of white Protestant expressions.⁸² And to understand some of the current divisions, it is important to grasp some of the essential differences between the black and white churches not just in history but in the ways the understanding of Christian faith has been constructed.

The Black Sacred Cosmos

In Peter Berger’s book, *The Sacred Canopy*, he argues that religion exists not so much to make people happy as to “push back chaos and meaninglessness.”⁸³ And in many ways, the nature of the sacred canopy of the black church, whose chaos has included centuries of suffering and oppression, is different than that of the white church. Both share agreed upon building blocks, but what some scholars have called a distinctly “black sacred cosmos” leads to a different expression of Christian religion than that found within the white, Western, Protestant church.⁸⁴

According to James Shelton and Michael Emerson in their 2012 work, *Blacks and Whites in Christian America: How Racial Discrimination Shapes Religious Conviction*, the black sacred cosmos is, relative to its white, Protestant, American counterpart, both *theologically broad and definitive*. It is *definitive* in the sense that the faith of the black church absorbs the attention of its constituents in a way that surpasses that of the white church. For example, compared to 71% of white Protestants, 93% of black Protestants can declare: “I know God really exists and I

⁸² Shelton and Emerson, *Blacks and Whites in Christian America: How Racial Discrimination Shapes Religious Convictions*, 69.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 6–7.

have no doubts about it.”⁸⁵ Likewise, Blacks pray and attend worship services more often than Whites do.⁸⁶ And black Protestants are up to three times as likely as their white counterparts (particularly Evangelicals) to believe that “there is real purpose to their lives.”⁸⁷ This definitive belief is attributed to the fact that many black Protestants are deeply convinced that their survival in this nation has been because of God: “...*but for the grace of God.*”⁸⁸

Simultaneously, the black sacred cosmos is *broad*. Having lived for centuries in a context of discrimination, prejudice, and injustice, the black church has “cultivated a profound sense of openness and tolerance for others.”⁸⁹ And this characteristic is one of the big—if often unspoken—tensions with the white church. Gilbreath, an African American author and editor-at-large for *Christianity Today*, commenting on the black church’s acceptance of Jesse Jackson’s ills writes:

The African American community has been more forgiving of its fallen members. Though few whites will admit it aloud, this is one of the things that sustains the fissures between white and black believers—the impression that blacks are lax morally, that they too easily excuse sin or fail to take responsibility for their behavior.⁹⁰

Having said that, in addition to tolerance, there is simultaneously a deep interest in being a good person. Measured in how one cares about and treats others, this goodness oftentimes takes priority over concern about an individual’s particular religious belief. This is in part because history is a powerful teacher, and

⁸⁵ Ibid., 109.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 199.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 113.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 167.

⁹⁰ Gilbreath, *Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical’s Inside View of White Christianity*, 120.

centuries of arguably good, Western Protestant doctrine fundamentally failed corporately, and more often than not individually, to manifest in good treatment of African Americans. The capacity to articulate good theology is not the same thing as being like Jesus. Black Evangelicals in particular report a concern with practicing what is preached; they are three times as likely as their white counterparts to emphasize the importance of having “a favorable assessment of their own personal character.”⁹¹

Likewise, academic or propositional truth is not the focus of much African American belief but rather a “heartfelt understanding of God that is profoundly subjective and emotionally intense.”⁹² This is in part because Blacks were historically denied access to academic resources related to the faith; most of the contours of this expression of faith was forcefully shaped outside of the academy. As well, there is less of a popular commitment to an academic understanding of faith because as one pastor summed it up, African Americans “didn’t write those doctrines and didn’t write those creeds.”⁹³ Thabiti Anyabweile, a former Muslim, now a pastor and the author of *The Decline of African American Theology*, explains that the heritage of “slave ambivalence” about an “‘academic’ doctrine of Jesus Christ” emerged because of slaves’ necessary “preoccupation with the relevance of Jesus for their present suffering.”⁹⁴ For many years, Western theology failed to address the link between the good news of Jesus and the reality of poverty and

⁹¹ Shelton and Emerson, *Blacks and Whites in Christian America: How Racial Discrimination Shapes Religious Convictions*, 135.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 84.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁹⁴ Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *The Decline of African American Theology: From Biblical Faith to Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 169.

oppression; therefore its relevance to the experience of the often oppressed and poor was marginalized.

Additionally, the black sacred cosmos is broad in the sense that it is woven in with Black Nationalism, with its emphasis on racial solidarity and pride, as well as cultural preservation. This easily ties in with a viewpoint in the church that “emphasizes structural explanations for and solutions to the problems of racial inequality.”⁹⁵ This, then, links the identity of the church with those whose political beliefs and actions align with that of the church. Put differently, there is, like in all faith groups, the broadening influence of identity politics.⁹⁶ It is worth noting that a school within black Evangelicalism would say that the political link is tied to an emergent 20th century theological “optimism” in the view of man that grew to characterize much of the black church. Shaped by liberal Protestant thought and liberation theology (in part because black thought leaders were refused entrance into conservative, Christian institutions), these “high estimations of man’s moral ability” tilted the black church’s understanding of salvation to wards an emphasis on the temporal construction of the “great society.”⁹⁷

Lastly, this broad theological expression is characterized by the inclusion of what has been called “African cultural sensibilities.” On one level, this includes easily recognizable realities like the emphasis on the oral tradition, spirituality,

⁹⁵ Shelton and Emerson, *Blacks and Whites in Christian America: How Racial Discrimination Shapes Religious Convictions*, 169.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁹⁷ Anyabwile, *The Decline of African American Theology: From Biblical Faith to Cultural Captivity*, 134.

drums, and rhythm.⁹⁸ But the differences go deeper as well. Black Protestants, for example are at least “twice as likely as white Protestants in general and Evangelical Protestants in particular to report having been helped by an angel.”⁹⁹ There is a far thinner veil between the material world and the spiritual world. This thinking often manifests itself in an inclusivity that would make many white Protestants, and most Evangelicals, uncomfortable. Reincarnation is three and a half times more widely accepted among African American Protestants than among white Protestants.¹⁰⁰ This is not a Hindu formulation of reincarnation but an African sense of honoring one’s ancestors and sensing their presence in this realm. Likewise, though Black Protestants report believing in life after death, there is far greater nuance and complexity in their understanding compared to white Protestants.¹⁰¹

Summing up the black sacred cosmos is not easy. But a phrase that comes to close to capturing it is this: “the miraculous is in the ordinary and the ordinary is in the miraculous.”¹⁰² Ironically, many white Evangelicals might say that they agree. Within the Reformed tradition’s emphasis on God’s sovereignty, for example, language in the Heidelberg Catechism reads: *...[Jesus Christ] has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil and he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head.* These words reveal an implicitly intimate relationship between the supernatural and the natural. But in practice, the white church has fleshed out its religious faith quite differently. Not only has the

⁹⁸ Shelton and Emerson, *Blacks and Whites in Christian America: How Racial Discrimination Shapes Religious Convictions*, 149.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 167.

white church *not* been forged under the shadow of enslavement, the “core cultural tools”¹⁰³ that the white Protestant church has used to shape the canopy under which it lives have also contributed to the gap between Blacks and Whites in the church.

“White” Tools

While not discounting the role of the individual, the Black church has seen and taken seriously the sin and need for repentance by *society and/or specific groups*, but the White church on the whole has functioned differently. Shaped by Enlightenment thought, according to Emerson and Smith in *Divided by Faith*, white Protestants in particular make sense of the world with a minimum of three key tools: accountable free will individuals, relationalism, and anti-structuralism.¹⁰⁴

Accountable free will individualism emphasizes the individual’s responsibility to God and to others. In this vision, the individual is ultimately in control of and responsible for his or her destiny. Sin and repentance, both, are lodged in the heart of the person, expressed in his or her choices. The other two tools correlate with these assumptions. *Relationalism* refers to the context where the individual works out his or her responsibilities. One’s sin and good choices alike are practiced in individual relationships. Society is “merely the aggregation of individuals,” and whether one wants to personally mature or change society, one must choose to

¹⁰³ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, 76.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

focus on how one relates to other individuals. Healthy relationships and “personal influence” become the emphasis in a culture valuing relationalism.¹⁰⁵

Finally, Emerson and Smith name the core tool of *anti-structuralism*. This tool is in essence a product of the other two—a lens that makes it difficult to see the influence of social structures or policies on people’s choices. In this view, systems and institutions do not have power in and of themselves—and certainly no more power than the individual.¹⁰⁶ Structural explanations for everything from sin to success, which are integral to the black church’s understanding of the shape of its very history and identity, are virtually invisible to those wielding this tool. To the contrary, the anti-structuralist bent leads to a default suspicion (including of many white Evangelicals about Blacks) that those claiming a systemic issue are at best misguided, at worst “self-interested.”¹⁰⁷

There is one other tool that Emerson and Smith do not mention but that has clearly been at play. It is the historic understanding of epistemology. The black church, from its early slave beginnings accepted as normal ways of knowing characterized by “direct, unmediated communion of man and God through visions and voices.”¹⁰⁸ But shaped by Enlightenment thought with its emphasis on cognitive ways of knowing, the white Protestant church has most often defaulted to a propositional understanding of revelation (be that general or special). Among other things, this limits the default understanding of what is reliably true to that which

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 117, 118.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 80.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 117.

¹⁰⁸ Anyabwile, *The Decline of African American Theology: From Biblical Faith to Cultural Captivity*, 33.

can be cerebrally conceptualized. Historically this has made it difficult for many Whites to trust alternative ways of knowing. Visceral and experiential knowledge—ways of knowing characterizing much of the black church and culture—are not typically given much credence by Whites.¹⁰⁹

Taken together and applied to the questions of color, these core cultural tools leave the white church interpreting not just faith but racial problems and solutions on mostly individual and cognitive (and thereby potentially limited) terms. Corporate sin is neglected and systemic injustice goes unseen. This means that even conversations between black and white Christians can become difficult because the very frames for seeing and interpreting the data at hand are different. The gaps seem insurmountable. Leading black Evangelicals like the late Tom Skinner, John Perkins or Cheryl Sanders report that their white brothers and sisters have a “crippling...preoccupation with individualism” which blinds them to any sense of (white) cultural self-awareness.¹¹⁰ In response to an informal survey of African American Evangelicals, Gilbreath reports one respondent as saying, “White Evangelicals do not on a consistent basis examine or acknowledge the role their racial identity” (think: the nature of white tools) “plays in the formation of the faith

¹⁰⁹ Mark Noll writes of his change of understanding in how God reveals himself, including that which is more visceral. “Change in understanding the ways of God in the world, and in understanding myself, took place amid circumstances where God manifested himself more viscerally...I had once thought of Christian life as the arena where hard-won principles were ‘applied,’ where a proper grasp of the faith was put to work in realizing the faith in practice. Without giving up that notion entirely, I was coming to feel that the relation between conviction and experience was much tighter, much more interdependent than I had thought.” *From Every Tribe and Nation: A Historian’s Discovery of the Global Christian Story*, 49.

¹¹⁰ Gilbreath, *Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical’s Inside View of White Christianity*, 170.

practice.”¹¹¹ Put differently, if a white Christian genuinely has no conscious animosity to persons of another color, it is difficult for him or her to see, hear or accept that he or she that might inadvertently be participating in systems and structures that alienate or hurt the “other.”

Addressing the Gap

Shelton and Emerson conclude their study of contemporary, American black and white churches with these sobering words:

...black and white Protestants’ ‘hearts and minds’ are more contrary than our research methodology can account for: racial reconciliation cannot happen until a number of very wide and deep structural, cultural and individual and *interpersonal* communication gaps between black and white Protestants are closed.¹¹²

But the gaps are not completely inscrutable. The canopies encompassing the faith and practice of Black and White Christians include fundamentally different tools and perspectives. The historic experience of being “an American” has meant different things for Whites and Blacks. It is not a surprise, then, that 80% of American congregants “still attend services at a place where a single racial or ethnic group comprises at least 80% of the congregation.”¹¹³ Nor is it a surprise that in a survey of the wider American culture, the 2012 Portraits of American Life Study reported, “We do not live in a post-racial nation ... but in a land of two Americas

¹¹¹ Ibid., 15.

¹¹² Shelton and Emerson, *Blacks and Whites in Christian America: How Racial Discrimination Shapes Religious Convictions*, 198.

¹¹³ Michael Lipka, “Many U.S. Congregations Are Still Racially Segregated, but Things Are Changing,” *Pew Research Center*, December 8, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/08/many-u-s-congregations-are-still-racially-segregated-but-things-are-changing-2/>.

divided by race, and less willing than ever to find a common ground of understanding." These divides—an understanding of which is hopefully now more clear—raise, however, two final questions for this paper.

Why Should We Address the Divide?

The first is this: *Why should* black and white churches in the United States worry about this divide between them? On the whole, it is easy for Whites to bypass questions of race. Over half (52%) of Blacks Protestants say they must think about their race every day or nearly every day, but less than a fifth (18%) of white Evangelicals (and only 11% of mainline Protestants) would say the same thing.¹¹⁴ And in the last few years, more white Evangelicals now agree "it is okay for the races to be separate, as long as they have equal opportunity" (34% in 2012, up from 20 percent in 2006).¹¹⁵ Meanwhile, Whites as a whole are increasingly seeing themselves as being "treated unfairly" because of their race (14% in 2012, up from 8% in 2006). White Evangelicals, like Whites on the whole, appear increasingly "on the defensive" when it comes to issues of race, pushing back against any notion of *should*.¹¹⁶ Plus, reason a significant number of white ministry leaders shaped for decades by Peter Wagner's work, *Our Kind of People*, and the homogenous unit principle, say uniracial congregations allow the "most effective approaching for

¹¹⁴ Michael O. Emerson and David Sikkink, "Portraits of American Life Study," accessed March 21, 2016,

<http://www.thearda.com/pals/codebook/analysis/Var545.asp>.

¹¹⁵ Morgan Lee, "Behind Ferguson: How Black and White Christians Think Differently About Race," *Gleanings | ChristianityToday.com*, accessed March 21, 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2014/august/behind-ferguson-how-black-and-white-christians-think-race.html>.

¹¹⁶ Emerson and Yancey, *Transcending Racial Barriers: Towards a Mutual Obligations Approach*, 12.

developing vibrant churches.”¹¹⁷ It is not that division is to be celebrated, but in this line of reasoning, reconciliation and the integration of churches should not be sought but rather simply expected only as society gradually integrates.

Likewise, while there appears to be an unquestioning concern among Blacks to attend to national racial divides and racism, like for ethnic specific churches of all kinds, Black churches provides places where “cultural practices and traditions can be celebrated, protected, and passed on to subsequent generations.”¹¹⁸ Leaders can be developed without the encumbrance of racism.¹¹⁹ And without fatigue--even when there is shared ministry, fellowship, and doctrinal agreement, black Evangelicals speak of having to live with a “DuBoisian dichotomy—a ‘double consciousness’ that often requires them to see their faith through a white cultural lens.”¹²⁰ It is like living with the constant awareness that one is “a tourist with an expiring visa.”¹²¹ Plus among black Evangelicals reflecting on the explosion of Black-White reconciliation efforts in the 1980s and 90s, while the role of friendships, apologies for sin and personal repentance in the context of shared worship was significant, missing was a confession of social sin and a willingness to “challenge social systems of injustice.”¹²² Little seemed to change in black Evangelical’s collective experience. It is not a stretch, then, to understand that the desire within

¹¹⁷ DeYoung et al., *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race*, 126.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Eldin Villafaña, *The Liberating Spirit: Toward an Hispanic American Pentecostal Social Ethic* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), 106–107.

¹²⁰ Gilbreath, *Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical’s Inside View of White Christianity*, 18.

¹²¹ Ibid., 29.

¹²² Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, 67.

many black churches is for whites to worry less about experiences of ecclesial unity and instead simply focus efforts in a pursuit for justice for *all*.

So, *why should* black and white churches in the United States worry about this divide between them? Alec de Tocqueville wrote in the 1830s about Blacks and Whites: “the danger of conflict between the two groups ‘perpetually haunts the imagination of America, like a painful dream.’”¹²³ Perhaps an attempt to stave off future conflict should be motive enough for Blacks who are tired and Whites who are not personally interested to engage this divide. But for Blacks and Whites who say they take the Scriptures as the Word of God, there are other compelling reasons for attending to the color divides within the Protestant church.

Race and Scriptures, Part 2

This paper began with a focus on race and has slowly been hinting at the importance of questions related to corporate sin and justice. Undoubtedly, understanding the nature of justice—and the church’s responsibility for involvement in social systems and structures of injustice (sin)—is integral to closing gaps and building true reconciliation in the American body of Christ. This is worth far greater exploration. But if Frederick Douglas was right—that the system of slavery alone was not the only problem but that deeper still was the pride of race and the prejudice against color—if racism is in a sense a virus that left unattended can attach itself to any host (no matter its structural shape), then systemic change, while necessary, will not be sufficient. As well, the Blacks and Whites in America

¹²³ Alex de Tocqueville as quoted by *ibid.*, 16.

must continue to realign their understanding of race with what is revealed in Scriptures. Specifically, a brief look at both characters and concepts in the Old and New Testaments, as well as at the larger arc of the Biblical narrative, reveals the integral import of “the nations” (*ethnos*) to God and his purposes.¹²⁴

The Nations

Biblical scholarship often sees in Genesis 1-12 three significant ideas: 1) *Creation and Blessing*. Adam and Eve, as distinguished from the animals and in their capacity to relate to God, are representative of *all people* (the nations) and thereby reveal the Imago Dei (Gn 1-2). 2) *Disobedience and Scattering*. Humankind’s disobedience (Gn 3) results in an expulsion from Eden and, ultimately, the scattering of the peoples (genealogies of Genesis 10 reveal the different “political and national affiliations” of peoples scattered in Genesis 11). 3) *Promised Blessing to All Nations through Abraham*. Sin has scattered the peoples or *ethnos* of the world but God’s blessing will reunite them.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ The word “ethnicity,” derived from the word “ethnos,” is difficult to define. It is broader than the term “race” as it can include people of a variety of pigmentation. “Traditionally,” writes J. Daniel Hays, “ethnic identity has been understood as connected to either genetics (Physical appearance), language, and/or religion.” This he notes, is a definition which “goes back at least as far as Herodotus, History 8:144.” *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 28. As well, John Piper--as articulated in the start of this paper--points out that the term “race” as we use it today is used only four times in the English Standard Version, and there it refers to “the elect people, either Jews or the church.” Ethnicity is the preferred biblical term for discussing people of different backgrounds, but as the problems in our culture run along color lines, *race* is a useful term. Therefore, it is helpful to think of the terms “*ethnicity* with a physical component and *race* with a cultural component.” *Bloodlines: Race, Cross and the Christian* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 237-239.

¹²⁵ Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*, 62.

The unfolding of the larger story of God’s people, then, is the story of God’s universal (e.g. world wide) redemption. Jesus Christ emerges as the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise, and the power of the Spirit at Pentecost reveals a reversal of the Genesis scattering (Acts 2). The story culminates in *Revelation* when people from “every tribe and language and people and nation” come together as one people of God (Rv 5:9, 7:9, 11:9, 14:6).¹²⁶ Think, suggests Edward Gilbreath, of “King David as a worship leader” with a team including people “like Stevie Wonder, Johann Sebastian Bach, George Beverly Shea, Yo-Yo Ma, Dolly Parton...Aretha—or Mahalia Jackson.”¹²⁷ Racialization and racial division in the church, therefore, clearly run counter to God’s intent. It is in “direct disobedience to the central biblical theme” and the ultimate trajectory of history.¹²⁸

The Old Testament

Within this grand Scriptural narrative about the inclusion of the nations into God’s redemption, there are also some helpful, if often overlooked, examples of how this was already taking place even in the Old Testament. Much more can be drawn from the Old Testament, but it is particularly helpful to note certain examples in light of the gaps between Blacks and Whites in American Christianity.

The world of the Old Testament was thoroughly multi-ethnic, arguably broken down into four primary people groups: Asiatics/Semites, Egyptians, Indo-

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Gilbreath, *Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical’s Inside View of White Christianity*, 163.

¹²⁸ Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*, 63.

Europeans and Cushites.¹²⁹ According to J. Daniel Hays, professor of Old Testament at Ouachita Baptist Seminary, in his book *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*, Israel itself emerged from 400 years in Egypt not primarily as a clearly defined “ethnic community” but as a “mixed crowd” built “not around race but around Covenant relationship with Yahweh” (Ex 12:38).¹³⁰ Integral to that crowd were foreigners who were given the opportunity to be circumcised and participate in the congregation of God’s people (12:43-49). This included—not just as slaves and laborers, but as “soldiers, merchants, magicians, civil servants and nobility”—Cushites, those peoples associated with the civilization found south of Egypt, along the banks of the Nile; i.e. modern Sudan.¹³¹

Hays goes on to argue that a Western cultural “pre-understanding” of biblical material has led to a dearth of scholarship on the role of Cush and the Cushites in the Biblical narrative.¹³² In contrast, Hays anecdotally highlights Cushites such as Zipporah, Moses’ wife (Nm 12:1). In its repeated stress on her identity, the text implies that Aaron and Mariam were upset about Zipporah’s ethnicity, but Mariam is punished (with the leprosy that, ironically, turns one white), and Zipporah, the Cushite, becomes part of God’s people. It is interesting here to note that scholars repeatedly mention that an “abhorrence of miscegenation” is core to the fear of

¹²⁹ Ibid., 29.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 66.

¹³¹ Ibid., 67–68.

¹³² For example, *Cush* or *Cushite* (a black African people) is mentioned 54 times in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. *Hitite* or *Hitites* (an Indo-European group) is mentioned 61 times. But in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, “two and a half pages are devoted to ‘Kush’ while fourteen pages are devoted to the Hittites. The Hurrians, who are not even mentioned in the Bible, receive three pages...” Ibid., 27.

black males and racial tension in the United States (see footnote).¹³³ It was not, for example, until 1998 that South Carolina removed from its constitution language prohibiting “the marriage of a white person with a Negro or mulatto or a person who shall have one-eighth or more Negro blood.”¹³⁴ But in the Scriptures, the prohibition is never against marrying someone of another *race*; rather, it is against marrying outside of the *faith*.

Take, as well, the example of Phinehas, the priest of Israel (Ex 6:25, Nm 25 and 31, Jo 22:12, and Ps 106). His name could be translated “the Negro” or the Nubian” or “the Cushite.”¹³⁵ Phinehas is worth his own study, but it is worth noting that when referring back to Numbers 25, Psalm 106 pairs Phinehas with Moses as a great intercessor. “Phinehas stood up and intervened,/ and the plague was checked” and just like with Moses, “This was credited to him as righteousness/for endless generations to come” (Ps 106:30-31). Hays suggests what a difference it might have made if early Americans could have properly read that “God made an eternal covenant with ‘the Negro’, that all legitimate Israelite priests are descended from ‘the Negro’, and that God credited righteousness to ‘the Negro’.”¹³⁶

¹³³ Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 41; John Piper writes: “Show me one place in the world where interracial or interethnic marriage is frowned upon and yet the two groups still have equal respect and honor and opportunity. I don't think it exists. It won't happen.” *Bloodlines: Race, Cross and the Christian* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 213; J. Daniel Hays writes: “...the common cultural ban on intermarriage lies at the heart of the Black and White racial division in America.” *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 81.

¹³⁴ Piper, *Bloodlines: Race, Cross and the Christian*, 213.

¹³⁵ Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*, 81.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

One last example worth mentioning is the eunuch Ebed-Melech. In light of Ebed-Melech's ability to get an audience with King Zedekiah who acquiesces to his request to free Jeremiah from the pit, Hays cogently argues that Ebed-Melech, a black soldier, was probably an officer. Not only does he play this pivotal role on behalf of God's prophet, but he is also the one to whom God delivers an oracle of salvation when the rest of Jerusalem is being destroyed (Jer 39:15-18). Hays notes how Ebed-Melech is much like the Ethiopian Eunuch of the New Testament (Acts 6:24-40). Both are outsiders who trust in the revelation of God even when God's people are rejecting him and his messengers.¹³⁷

The New Testament

This encounter in Acts 6 with the Ethiopian Eunuch is far from the only example of Gentile inclusion in the New Testament (the Greek word *Gentiles* actually means "nations").¹³⁸ Rather, the Gospels and Epistles paint a picture of redemptive hope opening up beyond Israel to every tribe, language, people and nation. This emerging multiethnic people of God is made possible by the cross and empowered by the Spirit.

Like in much of the Old Testament world, diversity characterized the region around the Mediterranean Sea in which early Christianity was formed. It was "multilingual, multiracial, and multiethnic, with many different religions and

¹³⁷ Ibid., 137, 175.

¹³⁸ David M. Rhoads, *The Challenge of Diversity: The Witness of Paul and the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 2.

philosophies.”¹³⁹ Even in the narrative of the very Jewish Jesus’ birth, life, and death, Gentile people and places play a role. Caesar Augustus was ruling from *Rome*; Quirinius, born near *Rome*, was administering the greater *Syrian region*; wealthy Magi come from *other nations*; Mary and Joseph flee with Jesus to *Africa* for safety; Simon of Cyrene (modern day *Libya*) carries Jesus’ cross; a *Roman* guard declares “Truly this man was God’s son!” (Mt 27:54); and the risen Jesus declares that “repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to *all nations*” (Lk 24:47). His followers are to go and “make disciples of *all nations*” (Mt 28:19) [above *emphases* mine].

Jesus himself demonstrated a deep concern to include those who were ethnically “other.” The Gospel of Mark, most likely written for Romans specifically and Gentiles more broadly, highlights these encounters repeatedly. He casts demons out of the Gentile man calling himself “Legion” (5:1-20). He casts out the demon the Greek Syrophoenician woman’s daughter (7:24-30). It is the man living in Decapolis (a Gentile city) whose ears are opened (7:34). And when Jesus feeds the 4000 Gentiles (8:1-9), echoing the feeding of 5000 Jews in an earlier story, he is “offering the same ministry to Gentiles that he offered to Jews.”¹⁴⁰ In telling this story, Mark’s language is “the table language of the Last Supper,” where Gentiles are now—in the face of a Jewish religious leadership whose holiness and purity laws would be inclusively exclusive—included.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ DeYoung et al., *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race*, 18.

¹⁴¹ Brian K. Blount, “The Apocalypse of Worship: A House of Prayer for ALL the Nations,” in *In Making Room at the Table: An Invitation to Multicultural Worship*, ed.

Likewise, the Apostle Paul takes ethnicity seriously in his repeated emphasis that humanity's natural bent towards ethnic division should not and ultimately cannot trump God's purposes to build His unified people. Paul offers no direct counsel about relating across different skin colors, but his epistles are replete with references to ethnically mixed but unified congregations and the theological importance of sharing an identity in Jesus Christ.

For example, the congregations in Jerusalem had gotten their start with Galilean Jews *and* "Jews from every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5). And the pattern of preaching first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles results in an early congregation in Antioch of Syria, the Roman Empire's third largest city, populated by "Syrians, Romans, Greeks, Arabs, Persians, Armenians, Parthians, Cappadocians, and Jews."¹⁴² It was a city, according to Rodney Starke in *The Rise of Christianity*, "filled with hatred and fear rooted in intense ethnic antagonisms and exacerbated by a constant stream of strangers...."¹⁴³ In this context, then, the "first congregation to experience the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles into one coherent faith community" emerges (see Acts 11).¹⁴⁴ It is worth noting that in addition to Barnabas and Saul, this early congregation also had multi-cultural leaders including Simeon, called Niger (most likely a black African), Lucius of Cyrene (modern day Libya), and Manean, a member of Herod's court (13:1). Perhaps it is because this

Brian K. Blount and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 20–21.

¹⁴² DeYoung et al., *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race*, 27.

¹⁴³ Rodney Starke, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 161.

¹⁴⁴ DeYoung et al., *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race*, 27.

group of people was not easily classified into one ethnic community that they were first called *Christians* (11:36).

The list could go on. Philippi was the first multi-ethnic European congregation. And Paul's letter to the Church at Rome contains Greek, Latin, and Jewish names (Ro 16:3-16). But Paul's concern was not multiculturalism for its own sake. Rather, he knew that an inclusion of *all peoples* was integrally tied to the reality of the good news of Jesus Christ. In his letter to the Ephesians, for example, he speaks of how Gentiles who were once "far off" from the covenant with God are now "brought near by the blood of Christ" (2:12, 13). The "dividing wall of hostility" between the Gentiles and Jews has been "broken down" and there is "one new man in place of two" (2:14, 15). In and through Jesus there is reconciliation to God and to others. Hostility has been killed (2:16). This is a non-negotiable for Paul. It is not about a 21st c. preoccupation with diversity for its own sake. Rather, it is about holding to the integrity of what Jesus Christ has accomplished in and for the world: enabling the nations or ethnos to participate as fellow heirs, as members of the same body, in the promises of Christ Jesus (3:4-6).

Paul's letter to the Colossians picks up this same idea with its emphasis on a shared identity in Christ. Every believer—of every race or ethnicity—has received Christ as Lord, and his or her life is "hidden with Christ in God" (3:1-3). The old self with its old ways must be put away, and the new self must continue to be renewed in the image of the Creator (think of Adam and Eve as the *Imago Dei*). "Here," says Paul to the Colossian believers, "there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave,^[e] free; but Christ is all, and in all" (3:11).

Paul is fighting for a theological unity among those in Christ that cuts beyond ethnicity. It is no wonder, then, that in *Galatians* he reports opposing Peter to his face when Peter, fearing those incapable of seeing the simplicity of the gospel and thereby the Gentiles' unfettered inclusivity, stopped eating with Gentiles (2:11-13). Paul was radically convinced that this breaking of table fellowship was an embodied rejection of the righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to *all* who are in him. "In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith....There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (3:26, 28). A barrier-breaking oneness that reaches deeply into peoples of all ethnicities is the tangible expression of what God promised in Genesis 12 and ignited in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

How Do We Move Forward?

The above offers but a cursory glimpse into Scripture's revelation of the intrinsic value of all nations, or ethnicities, within God's purposes, revealing by contrast the radically broken nature of racial issues in the American church. But hopefully it answers our first question with a motivational reminder that the very nature of the good news of Jesus demands that the American black and white churches must attend, however falteringly, to the gaps between them. Therefore, the second question becomes clear. *How do we attend to these gaps?*

Sociologists Michael Emerson and George Yancey sum up the nature of the current racial deadlock between Blacks and Whites. "*Who is the cause of our*

problems?” we ask. “You are.”¹⁴⁵ The best exception to this stalemate appears to come in the form of multi-racial churches. In *United by Faith*, the authors detail portraits of four churches whose congregations have meaningful multiracial participation (where no racial group represents more than 80 percent of the congregation).¹⁴⁶ Even while elaborating the challenges of such congregations, they ultimately assert that such congregations are and should be, as their subtitle reads, *an Answer to the Problem of Race*. This book offers imperfect but real pictures of what Blacks and Whites (and others) pursuing oneness in fellowship and worship can look like.

But even within these multicultural church contexts, as well as a host of others, deep problems exist, and the solutions for navigating racial conflict or crossing the gap remain elusive. More often than not, solutions diverge from the very outset around the question of *who* should carry the greatest responsibility for the change. Generally, those shaped by the left or in the academy focus on dominant group obligations (reparations, critical race theory, anti-racism efforts, etc.); those on the right or in conservative think tanks typically focus on the obligations of people of color (colorblindness, minority entrepreneurial values, no victimhood, etc.).¹⁴⁷ And problematically, giving way in order to find common ground is typically seen as failure by either side.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Paul Wachtel as quoted in Emerson and Yancey, *Transcending Racial Barriers: Towards a Mutual Obligations Approach*, 65.

¹⁴⁶ DeYoung et al., *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race*, 164.

¹⁴⁷ Emerson and Yancey, *Transcending Racial Barriers: Towards a Mutual Obligations Approach*, 30–32.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

A Mutual Obligations Approach

The research of Shelton and Emerson in *Transcending Racial Barriers: Toward a Mutual Obligations Approach*, however, reveals that approaches that foist all the responsibility onto one side or the other are forever doomed to failure. This, the authors assert, is because as research and history have demonstrated, there is the irreducible reality of group self-interest at work in all sub-cultures. Sub-cultures by their very nature exist to protect the interests of the group.¹⁴⁹ To get groups to look to the interests of others, so to speak, needs—in addition to the empowerment of the Holy Spirit—the accompanying confidence that the group itself will also benefit.¹⁵⁰ Efforts to move forward must promise and ultimately be experienced as a win-win for both groups. This, Emerson and Yancey say, has been the missing but crucial piece of the understanding in attempts to cross the racial gaps to date.

Drawing heavily on the metaphor of marriage, they explain that when a marriage is in trouble, everyone suffers. And the solution is not so much to discover whose fault the current situation is so much as “to work together to fix it.” “Racial groups,” they contend, “are in a marriage, too.”¹⁵¹ The marriage is the larger society, or for Christians, the church. And like in a troubled marriage, it is not that apologies for past sins and forgiveness are not important; they are necessary but not

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 93.

¹⁵⁰ J. Daniel Hays in *From every People and Nation* repeatedly points out the role of the Holy Spirit in empowering individuals and groups to overcome group self-interest and pursue the well-being of others. Though this is far beyond the bounds of this paper, it would be inestimably valuable to discover more about the role of the Holy Spirit in communal, organizational and cultural change.

¹⁵¹ Emerson and Yancey, *Transcending Racial Barriers: Towards a Mutual Obligations Approach*, 91.

sufficient. The racial reconciliation efforts of Evangelicals in the 1970s and 1980s repeatedly fell short, in part because white Christian repentance did not issue in corporate change.

For change to happen, the authors assert, there must be a mutual commitment to a *shared core goal* that is valuable to both parties. In a marriage it might be the survival and health of the marriage and family. Between the black and white churches it might be an expression of unity in the body of Christ, the witness to the larger world, or the call to flesh out the kingdom, through and beyond the borders of the local church. And in the pursuit of the goal, each party's part must be recognizably integral to the success of the whole. This looks like less the American melting pot model and more like "lasagna," where each ingredient flavors the other and helps create the whole.¹⁵²

As well, as in a marriage, *careful listening* is crucial for the process. For example, even a shared goal like the American value "freedom" would need to be unpacked. For Blacks, typically, it means freedom *from* oppression, prejudice, etc. while for Whites, it typically means freedom *for* achievement, self-expression, etc.¹⁵³ Listening to what the other needs (even to the point of being able to articulate it to the others' satisfaction) *and* demonstrating a willingness to address this need are absolutely necessary for building towards the shared core goal.

Also critical is *on-going, experiential contact*. But this contact cannot be forced or formal, nor can it carry an unacknowledged power imbalance (one need only think of marriage counseling to understand this). Rather, research shows that

¹⁵² Ibid., 117.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 110–113.

contact, which is “voluntary, egalitarian, cooperative, intimate” and “supported by authority,” is most likely to promote transformation.¹⁵⁴ In *Divided by Faith*, Emerson and Smith explain how and why such contact is difficult for Whites to attain.¹⁵⁵ But the research suggests that interracial contact in churches is likely to “promote attitudinal changes.”¹⁵⁶ As well, it is interesting to note that for Whites to change fundamental attitudes around color (think again of Frederick Douglas’ assessment of the “slave holding *sentiment*”), research shows that Whites need more than contact; they need African American friends sharing similarity and proximity as well as “*equal, and especially higher, socioeconomic status.*”¹⁵⁷

In summary, then, for Whites and Blacks in the American church who—in spite of divergent histories as well as different sacred canopies and tools—want to move towards crossing what for the most part appear to be almost unbridgeable divides, there must be a clear, core goal, shared in common; careful listening and a willingness to act in response; and voluntary, on-going, experiential contact in the shared pursuit of this shared core goal (and for Whites, this contact must include black friends of equal, or higher, socioeconomic status). Such relating, let alone the achievement of the shared core goal, cannot come, conclude Emerson and Yancey, without a cost to both sides. Whites so committed inevitably will be forced to see that which they have long wanted to ignore and in which they and their group might

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁵⁵ See chapter 8 “Structurally Speaking, Religion and Racialization” in *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, 133–168.

¹⁵⁶ Emerson and Yancey, *Transcending Racial Barriers: Towards a Mutual Obligations Approach*, 74.

¹⁵⁷ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, 131.

be implicated: “structures that perpetuate racial inequality.” Blacks will also lose. They will lose the freedom to “fix all of the blame...on majority-group members.”¹⁵⁸

Having said this, though, the authors propose that the benefits can be massive; there is, they conclude, the possibility for a break in the stalemate and the dismantling of the institutional racism that has so deeply divided this nation, including White and Black Christians.

In Conclusion

It could be argued that a specific focus on the tensions between Blacks and Whites in the American church is soon to be a moot issue. Ethnic demographics in the United States are rapidly shifting. By 2050, for example, the Hispanic population of the U.S. is expected to triple to 132.8 million people, representing 30% of Americans. The number of Blacks, however, will remain more or less constant as a percentage of the population, moving from about 14% (41.1 million) to 15% (65.7 million).¹⁵⁹ And non-Hispanic Whites are projected to go from 66% of the population (2008) to 46% (2050). Even in the stereotypically “White” Midwest, for example, the Phillips neighborhood in South Minneapolis has already “become the most diverse single neighborhood in American with one-hundred-plus languages spoken there.”¹⁶⁰ Perhaps the old and painful Black and White histories will come to be overshadowed by more pressing cultural tensions and questions in the likewise rapidly diversifying American church. Perhaps.

¹⁵⁸ Emerson and Yancey, *Transcending Racial Barriers: Towards a Mutual Obligations Approach*, 136.

¹⁵⁹ Piper, *Bloodlines: Race, Cross and the Christian*, 51.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

But this paper's closer look has revealed that the problems around race—historic and present, individual and institutional, buttressed and deconstructed by the Scriptures themselves—are, like all sin, an ever-mutating virus, infecting relations between the very peoples for whose redemption Jesus died. So as the American church, like the nation, continues to rapidly change colors—inevitably bringing with it new expressions of racial struggle—maybe the best possible place to turn our attention is back towards Black and White racial realities.¹⁶¹ Looking closely at the centuries of Black and White relations is at best sobering and, at worst, outraging. But this need not be surprising. As Mark Noll says, “A religion anchored in the murder of God incarnate is a religion that takes the sinful proclivities of believers as seriously as the entire world's need for redemption.”¹⁶² Believers, of all colors, can and do carry profound sin with them, individually and collectively, even for centuries.

Still, with the help of God, staring down the snake face of race-related sin is possible. Andrew Walls, having studied Christianity's movement around the world, says that as the gospel travels into any culture, it continually finds a home in that culture even as it continually offers critique. “Not only does God in Christ take

¹⁶¹ Conversion in the Global South is remaking the face of Christianity. As Mark Noll explains, in 1900, there were 60 million Christians in Latin America, and now that number is 550 million. Likewise, there are more Anglicans in individual countries like Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, or Uganda than in Britain and the United States combined (Noll, *From Every Tribe*, 138). And as John Piper reports, by 2050, there will be about “three billion Christians in the world,” and “non-Hispanic Whites” will comprise only between “one-fifth and one-sixth the total” (Piper, 54). Historically the majority Christian culture, Western Christians will need to learn new ways of relating not just within their national or local churches, but also within the larger, global church.

¹⁶² Noll, *From Every Tribe and Nation: A Historian's Discovery of the Global Christian Story*, 187.

people as they are: He takes them in order to transform them into what He wants them to be.”¹⁶³ Black and white American Christians alike—with our broken histories and our strengths and weaknesses in tools and canopies—are accepted “as we are” (the indigenizing principle). Likewise, be we currently dominant culture believers perhaps fearing the loss of our historic power or minority culture believers perhaps hoping for the just and great society, neither group will ever find for itself in America the sought after “abiding city” (the pilgrim principle).¹⁶⁴ Jesus’ bigger story of a new heavens and a new earth still to come will not ultimately allow for it.

But in the meantime, if white and black Christians in America will risk looking at our hard shared history and current reality honestly and together; if we will risk granting one another legitimacy as redeemed image bearers in God’s redemptive plan for the nations; if we will risk seeking this gospel-shaped change in how we relate (excruciatingly difficult when history has cemented deep divides, and arguably demanding that those with the greatest power willingly lay it down first); and if we will risk our time, energy, and resources to pursue shared core goals, there is hope for something new. In addition to potentially closing some of the gaps and thereby tasting and establishing new expressions of the kingdom that is to come, we also can contribute our discoveries about navigating ethnic tension to the larger and increasingly diverse and globalizing worldwide church. And last but far from least, if and as we can move across the divides towards unity, we will offer to this rapidly post-Christianizing nation, the powerful and prayed for evidence that Jesus Christ

¹⁶³ Walls as quoted in *ibid.*, 94.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

has been sent by His loving heavenly Father into this world for the consummate redemption of all its peoples (Jn 17:20-23).

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Book Summaries

United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race by Curtiss DeYoung, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim

In their book, *United by Faith: The Multicultural Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race*, the authors—Curtiss Paul DeYoung, et. al.—explicitly declare their intention: to demonstrate that “Christian congregations, when possible, should be multiracial” (2). This, they contend, will enable congregations to play “an important role in reducing racial division and inequality...[which] should be a goal of Christian people” (3).

In their first section, *Biblical Antecedents for Multiracial Congregations*, the authors trace the movement of an ethnocentric congregation in Jerusalem to a multiethnic church in Antioch. Highlighting the inclusion of Gentiles in Jesus’ own story, they emphasize Mark’s Gospel where Jesus touches, heals, engages, and feeds Gentiles.¹⁶⁵ Citing Isaiah, Jesus, they point out, is the one who declares, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for *all* the nations...” (Mk 11:17).

The congregations of the early church were multiethnic in part because the Mediterranean region was “multilingual, multiracial, and multiethnic.”¹⁶⁶ Early followers were Galilean, Hellenized and mainstream Jews. Then Gentiles began to join. And from the start, the Apostle Paul refused to tolerate an ethnically divided church (31). Whether in his conferring with Jerusalem leaders (Gal 2:1-10), opposing Peter publicly about his refusal to eat with Gentiles, or in the summit with

¹⁶⁵ See: Mk 2:11, 5:25, 5:41, 6:35-44, 7:34.

¹⁶⁶ Rhoads, *The Challenge of Diversity: The Witness of Paul and the Gospels*, 2.

leaders from Jerusalem and Antioch (Acts 15:1-31), Paul demonstrates his radical commitment to the new unity birthed in Jesus Christ.

Section two, *Multiracial Congregations in the United States*, reveals quite a different ethnic picture in the American church. The first African American to be born (1619) was baptized as an Anglican, even as an increasing economic demand for slave labor began to generate and cement the “philosophy and practice of white supremacy” (44). By the early 18th C., ministers like Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards possessed slaves. For a short time during the Great Awakening, African Americans converted under George Whitfield’s preaching were offered the “right hand of fellowship,” and a few black pastors served racially mixed congregations. But that did not last long (47). Slavery demanded that blacks be treated as inferiors. Therefore, post Civil War, African Americans exited en masse from “white” churches in the North and South.

A few cross-cultural churches did emerge after the war, but most were often crushed.¹⁶⁷ However, in the 1940s, multiracial congregations began to emerge with some strength. For example, in 1944, Howard Thurman, an African American theologian, began a partnership with Alfred Fisk, a white Presbyterian, in the arguably first truly integrated church: *The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples* (San Francisco). Such partnerships began springing up, even as “church visits” (African American teams visiting exclusively white churches) forced the race issue

¹⁶⁷ When the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana) formed, Daniel S. Warner, a white minister, partnered with Julia A.J. Foote of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in ministry. But by 1895, the Church of God’s commitment to racial inclusivity was wavering (55). Likewise, the Azusa Street revival (b. 1906) was characterized by diversity and inclusivity, but by 1909, the diversity began to wane (55).

for many white churches. By the 1970s, many denominations were becoming involved in multiracial congregations. Many of these expressions are still around today.¹⁶⁸

Resistance to such an emphasis has come from many sectors, however. Section three, *Rationales for and Responses to Racial Segregation of Congregations*, acknowledges what separation can provide for minorities: space to embrace and nurture one's culture, affirmation of one's humanity, refuge from racism/Euro-centrism, and a team with whom to fight racism. Likewise, many in white culture have embraced the "homogeneous unit principle" which argues that evangelism is far more effective when done by and among people of a similar ethnic background. The authors, however, refute these claims with the assertions that the "day of Pentecost birthed a multicultural church that served as a re-creation of God's original intention" (131); cultures brought together reflect more of the character of God; and multiracial congregations have the opportunity to shine as "parallel communities in a racist society" (141).

Lastly, in *Developing Multiracial Congregations in the Twenty-First Century*, the authors return to the Scriptures, highlighting Peter's interaction with Cornelius (Acts 10:1-11:18) and emphasizing what it is to be "in Christ." Barriers between people have been done away with for those who are in Him (Gal 3:28).¹⁶⁹ Unity in

¹⁶⁸ The authors flesh out the experience of four contemporary, multi-ethnic congregations. Riverside Church, a liberal, American Baptist church in NYC; Mosaic, a Southern Baptist church in Los Angeles; St. Pius Catholic Church in Beaumont, TX; and Park Avenue UMC in Minneapolis.

¹⁶⁹ See as well as Galatians 3:38.

Christ was core to Paul's gospel and therefore must be taught and experienced by believers today.

The book ends with practical suggestions for moving towards an "integrated multiracial congregation" (165). Characterized by ethnically diverse leadership, willing to share power and deal with the inevitable cultural/racial conflicts, and undergirded by prayer, such churches have the potential to demonstrate a church "where racism is no longer a defining characteristic" of American Christianity. And while this might not change the entire nation, it is the irrefutable call of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to believers of all nations.

Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America by Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith

Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith's *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* purposes to "asses the influence of white evangelicalism on black-white relations in the United States."¹⁷⁰ While exploring the historic roots and current realities of the relationship between white evangelicalism and black America, they reveal ordinary evangelicals' understanding of and proposed solutions to America's racial issues, demonstrating how religious congregations (of most theological stripes) continue to contribute to a racialized society. In short, they conclude, that while white evangelicals might hope to be assets in producing a more just society, in actuality, they—if unintentionally—contribute to the perpetuation of a racialized society.

After defining its terms, the authors highlight the current black-white divide, delineating the history from 1700 through the last 20 years of the 20th century. Then they offer their core argument: white evangelicals are hampered in their understanding of and work towards solutions for racial issues in America because of their "core cultural tools."¹⁷¹ Shaped by Enlightenment thinking, white evangelicals make sense of the world with a minimum of three key tools: accountable free will individualism, relationalism, and anti-structuralism.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, 169.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

Accountable free will individualism presumes that individuals are in control and responsible for their own destinies (and sin). Simultaneously, relationalism acknowledges that personal relationships are crucial because they are the context for working out our personal responsibilities. Lastly, anti-structuralism shows up as a concurrent default reluctance to see how social structures, laws, or institutions can bring power to bear on the individual. These three presuppositions lead white evangelicals to interpret racial problems and solutions on almost solely individual terms.¹⁷³ Contrary voices about a racialized society are interpreted as the product of unhelpful government engineering, media bias, or those with axes to grind.¹⁷⁴

The authors acknowledge that black evangelicals share theological presuppositions with white evangelicals, valuing the Bible's ultimate authority, Christ's death for the salvation of all who receive him, and the importance of taking faith into the larger society.¹⁷⁵ But black evangelicals diverge from their white counterparts when it comes to their tools. Sin is seen as individual *and* social. Individuals must be challenged to live as they should, *and* systems also must be challenged to operate as they should. This different assumption leaves white and black evangelicals in two very different camps.

Focusing in detail on black and white evangelical reconciliation efforts in the last decades of the 20th century, Emerson and Smith catalogue the work and influence of evangelical black and white leaders. But they demonstrate that on the whole, in part because of their 3 non-negotiable tools, white evangelicals are

¹⁷³ Ibid., 89.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 82.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 3.

fundamentally incapable of identifying social sin as a culprit. Systemic, institutional injustice goes unseen, and corporate confession of and repentance (turning) from social sin is neglected. White solutions, then, can only run along the lines of loving people, working for changed individual hearts, and practicing personal influence.¹⁷⁶

The exceptions to this purely individualistic understanding come only when white evangelicals have African American friends, live in integrated neighborhood and have African American acquaintances. When these conditions are met, and when the white person has an African American friend “of *equal, and especially higher, socioeconomic status,*” perspectives begin to shift.¹⁷⁷ The power of the racialized *society* (vs. just the practice of individuals) is more readily acknowledged. In short, the core cultural tools for white evangelicals can turn up different conclusions if exercised in a dramatically less racially isolated context.

But unfortunately, when American religion is consumer-oriented. From a plurality of choices we get to choose where and with whom we worship. And driving our choices are two powerful undercurrents: 1) the ‘homophily principle’—being naturally drawn to “people like us”—and 2) the reality that the strongest groups are those with the greatest internal solidarity. So because being in strong groups of people like us feels better, most of us are compelled to congregate with those like ourselves.¹⁷⁸ Therefore, the status quo cannot change. To the contrary, the authors conclude, as long as congregations exert their influence in the nation,

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 118.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 131.

¹⁷⁸ 90 percent of African Americans and 95 percent of white Americans attend predominantly homogeneous congregations. Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, 16.

religion—instead of integrating and thereby exposing congregants to those whose experience and perspective is different—will continue to exacerbate the problem.

Transcending Racial Barriers: Towards a Mutual Obligations Approach by Michael O. Emerson and George Yancey

In their work, *Transcending Racial Barriers: Toward a Mutual Obligations Approach*, Michael O. Emerson and George Yancey state their main goal directly: "to work toward a solution to racial division, racial inequality, racial alienation, and the racialized society" (11). The authors begin by describing the racial climate of the contemporary United States, highlighting influential factors from the past and describing present day realities. Next they focus on the nature (and limits) of attempted solutions to transcend racial barriers thus far, thereby making the case for their "mutual obligations" approach. This is an approach which takes seriously the irreducible reality of group self-interest at work in all sub-cultures, explaining why solutions which put all the cost on the majority culture, or on minority cultures, are doomed to failure. Rather, what they demonstrate is the need for a "shared core" which all sides value and whose mutual pursuit stands to bring the greatest gain for all.

The authors argue that the contemporary racial climate is super-charged. It is assumed that "majority-group members ignore the racialized concerns of people of color while people of color denigrate the racial interest of majority-group members" (92). Many whites see themselves as "objects of blame, anger, misperception, and ridicule" (11) with social advantages increasingly going to non-whites, while blacks live lives acutely aware of the damaging effects of racialization, even as other non-whites work hard to stay far from the black "super minority" and to become a part of the "expanding majority" (15). In short, people are left looking

at the issues (and postulating solutions) to racial division, inequality, and alienation from very different vantage points.

In large part, this is because of the inevitable impact of the American historical context. A nation founded with dependence on indentured servants morphed into a southern economy that needed slaves. Africans were the logical choice for slavery as they could not hide in the broader culture and were being actively conceptualized as inferior.¹⁷⁹ But even with the end of slavery, Jim Crow laws kept abuse and discrimination largely in tact. And it was not until the era of civil rights legislation that blacks were widely shown to have the "same abilities, experiences, feelings, strengths, and weaknesses" as whites (21). Even since that time, however, while white supremacy and active racism have dissipated, institutional racism--oftentimes not actively intended by its perpetrators or those who profit from it--continues (21). Euro-Americans still occupy a privileged place in American society (measured by everything from the more concrete measures of socio-economic achievement and accumulated wealth to the less tangible factors like relative influence of personal social networks).

The question when looking for solutions then becomes "who has the responsibility for change?" Typically, the answers are split between those who focus on the dominant group obligations versus the people of color obligations.¹⁸⁰ The former, articulated by those on the political left and in the academy, and held mostly by people of color, presumes that the white majority bears the responsibility

¹⁷⁹ Native Americans could not easily hide in European-heritage America, but they were more familiar with the geography and, if they escaped slavery, they could, obviously, be farm more easily reabsorbed into tribes.

¹⁸⁰ see chart on p. 30.

to change systems, which of course will necessitate whites surrendering social advantages. The latter, promulgated by conservative think tanks and pundits, and held by most dominant culture members and well-paid supporters, emphasizes the obligations of people of color to move beyond victimhood towards greater cultural conformity, presupposing that we all are now living in a colorblind era.

Rarely, though, do these two sides ever see the others' perspective. And so, the majority and minority cultures (and their respective supporters) continue in a "complex and fateful dance" where it is "impossible to say who leads and who follows." Mostly without intention, each side "issue[s] the cues that lead our partners across the racial divide to perform their roles and in turn to transmit to us the cues that again elicit ours."¹⁸¹ "Who is the cause of our problems?" both sides are asking. The answer is, "You are." It is like a marriage that has been bad for as long as anyone can remember.

This approach--holding "the other" responsible for the change--has led to a stalemate. But what is missing in this approach is the understanding that all subcultures are predisposed to help their own. Group self-interest theory makes it clear that any solution must bring some sense of "win" to each side. Groups will not give up power unless it can be shown to be in their own best interest.

With this in mind, Emerson and Yancey lay out their approach to transcending racial barriers. Taking multiracial churches and interracial marriages as their examples, they begin with the assertion that experiential contact between parties is a non-negotiable starting point. The contact with the "most potential for

¹⁸¹ Wachtel, *Race in the Mind of America: Breaking the Vicious Cycle between Blacks and Whites*, 1.

generating positive interracial relationships" must be "voluntary, egalitarian, cooperative, intimate" and "supported by authority" (74). Out of this contact will typically come a greater capacity to listen, understand, and care about racialization on the part of whites, even as people of color gain "economic and social capital" (77).

Contact, though, is not enough. There must also be a shared common core, which--while still allowing for and even celebrating the beauty of diverse cultures--provides a goal that is worth the work of uniting across races.¹⁸² Each sub-cultures' part becomes integral to the achievement of the whole. It is not a matter of all cultures assimilating (the melting pot), nor is it pure multiculturalism (a tossed salad of different but equal parts). Rather it is about mutuality, reminiscent of a beef stew--where the broth is shared in common--or a lasagna--where each ingredient is necessary for the whole (116).

However, even a common core with a shared goal, the authors admit, is not an answer in itself. For example, "freedom" is part of the cultural core in the United States. But for majority culture, this tends to mean the freedom *for* doing "what one wants" (110) while for African Americans and some native Americans, freedom is about being released *from* oppression (109). What this implies, then, is that careful listening and a conscious decision to recognize cultural (and power) differences, even as we must seek shared definition of the terms of discussion, must always be at play.

¹⁸² Multiracial churches, for example, might have the shared goal of evangelism or attending to the needs of the poor in their city. Their goal might not be racial unity per say but issues of race will inevitably need to be addressed in the effort to achieve this other shared goal.

Then, the authors contend, if these factors exist: meaningful contact, a shared core around which different cultures can unite, and a willingness to listen and acknowledge difference, and if each group can demonstrate that its vision of a solution that meaningfully addresses the concerns of the other racial groups, it will be possible to transcend a measure of our differences. We can, Emerson and Yancey assert, "get to work" and leave the sad story of racism, racialization and the related injustice to the history books (138).

Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical's Inside View of White Christianity by Edward Gilbreath

Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical's Inside View of White Christianity by Edward Gilbreath, the former editor at large for *Christianity Today*, offers a contemporary portrait of the experience of black evangelicals in the United States. In short, the picture leaves the reader—as well as the author—singing “the blues” (182).¹⁸³ This slow, sad head shaking comes because black evangelicals repeatedly report that though new professional and relational doors have opened in the post-Civil Rights era, at the end of the day, for those living in the “white Christian’s world” (28) it is still “business as usual” (19).

Gilbreath’s work focuses on two lines of inquiry, the first of which is the experience of influential African American Christian leaders, within and beyond evangelicalism (a term which many of even the most theologically traditional African Americans still hesitate to embrace because of its white-culture connotations) (41). His interview research with pastors and professors is extensive. And leaders like the late Tom Skinner, John Perkins, Dolphous Weary, William Pannell, Albert G. Miller, Crawford Loritts, Cheryl Sanders and others repeatedly report encountering the “crippling” white evangelical preoccupation with individualism, lack of self (or cultural) awareness, and default embrace of the homogenous-unit principle (170).

¹⁸³ “Evangelical” seems to mean *white* to those outside the church. As of 2001, 61% of blacks self-described as “born again,” but the African American Protestant population is normally not included when polls report on 25-30% of the American population being *evangelical*. “Black evangelical” does not appear to be a category available to secular researchers.

Simultaneously, these leaders speak of the divide that is deepened when encountering the broad-based mistrust of white evangelicals towards the influential civil-rights era, black, religious leaders—particularly Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jesse Jackson (King having risen into greater favor over the years; Jackson having fallen into substantially less favor). This mistrust, combined with more sinister expressions of “complacency, hypocrisy, paternalism, and smugness” have left black evangelical leaders profoundly ambivalence about their white counterparts (72). (Gilbreath also draws on the work of Emerson and Smith in *Divided by Faith* to substantiate what these leaders have encountered.)

Gilbreath’s other line of inquiry is into his own racial encounters, as well as that of many lesser-known African American evangelicals. “Tolerated but not embraced as equals” could be the refrain of many of these men and women (92). Most speak of having to live with a “DuBoisian dichotomy,” a “*double-consciousness*’ that often requires them to see their faith through a white cultural lens” (18). In the end, personal experience, combined with institutional racism (a terms that Gilbreath uses to refer to the “unnamable brand of discrimination” which shows up in disparities within education, justice, and economic systems), leaves many black evangelicals lonely and tired (18). “Masks” become part of the uniform necessary for those forced to live “sociologically ambidextrous” lives (52). It is a very far cry from the inviting picture of unity for which God called the Apostle Peter to forsake his notions of the supremacy of his own cultural identity (Acts 2).

By the end of this book, Gilbreath’s honest assessment also includes the experience of other United States evangelical minorities. He tells one very

discouraging story about Rev. Soong-Chan Rah's experience with an evangelical publishing house. He even offers the possibility that "separate but equal" might not be a "bad thing" (99).

Nevertheless, Gilbreath emphasizes that even within such an unhappy landscape, what keeps black evangelicals pushing forward is "God's call. A slow-boiling conviction that, despite our loneliness, frustration or flat-out rage, this is where we're supposed to be" (32). Convictions about the classic, evangelical tenets of personal salvation and Scripture-shaped faith trump even the current, and often painful, cultural gaps. And, Gilbreath, almost in spite of himself, seems to hold on to hope.

Revelation 7 is a promise, and so Gilbreath offers a hopeful image of "King David as worship leader" with a team including people "like Stevie Wonder, Johann Sebastian Bach, George Beverly Shea, Yo-Yo Ma, Dolly Parton...Aretha—or Mahalia Jackson" (163). Such a dream, or vision, is what keeps Gilbreath pursuing the elusive oneness that Jesus prays for his followers in John 17:21—oneness, "that the world may believe."

From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race by J. Daniel Hays

In his book, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical theology of Race*, J. Daniel Hays, professor of Old Testament at Ouachita Baptist Seminary, explores the historic and ethnic contexts of both the Old and New Testaments, examining the key passages which particularly bear on the issue of race. He focuses his exploration around the questions of Black-White understanding in the United States, as the States—including the church—has been plagued by centuries of tension. His hope is that in so doing, he can deepen the church’s understanding of the Scriptural importance of “the nations,” including those with Black African roots.

Hays asserts that most Americans have historically brought a “cultural pre-understanding” to biblical material, shaped in part by the dearth of scholarship taking seriously the role of Cush/the Cushites in the biblical narrative (25).¹⁸⁴ In contrast then, Hays demonstrates that the Old Testament world was thoroughly multi-ethnic, broken down into four primary people groups: Asiatics/Semites (including the Israelites), Egyptians, Indo-Europeans (including Hittites/Philistines) and Cushites. Hays acknowledges that the *significance* of the “table of nations” listed in Genesis 10 is debated by scholars. But he emphasizes that in the overarching movement of Genesis 1-12—from creation and blessing, to disobedience and scattering, to the promise of all the nations (ethné) on earth being blessed through

¹⁸⁴ While “Cush” or “Cushite” appears 54 times in the biblical text (only five times less than the Hittites), it shows up in virtually no scholarship. The *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, for example, gives three pages to the Hurrians, who are not mentioned directly in any text that is not disputed, while “Kush” receives only two and a half pages of commentary (27)

Abraham—these multiple ethné, hailing from Adam and Eve as representative of *all* people, reveal the *imago Dei* and are integral to God’s redemptive purposes.¹⁸⁵

Picking up Walter Bruggeman’s line of reasoning, Hays then shows how the Israel that emerged in the course of 400 Egyptian years included Amorites, Canaanites, and Egyptians, as well as Cushites. Israel was not primarily an “ethnic community” but a “mixed crowd” emerging “not around race but around Covenant relationship with Yahweh” (66). With this premise as the backdrop, Hays highlights the role of foreigners, particularly Cushites (later known as Ethiopians) within Israel’s experience. In the Old Testament, Zipporah, Phinehas, Cushite soldiers, and Ebed-Melech get extensive treatment.¹⁸⁶ As well, Hays points out how Cushites “generally function[ed] in the prophetic picture as representatives of the rest of the nations of the world” (139).

Likewise, in the New Testament, Hays asserts that the gospels reveal a universal blessing for the nations or “other sheep” (Jn 10:16), with Luke-Acts

¹⁸⁵ As a side note, Hays deconstructs erroneous (but longstanding and still quietly powerful) notions that the curse in Genesis 9:18-27 is actually a curse on Ham and all in the Hamitic line. Instead, he argues, the curse is actually on Ham’s son, Canaan, and was fulfilled during the monarchy when the Israelites invaded and subjugated Canaan. As well, he debunks the notion that Ham means “black” (asserted by those on extreme sides—both black and white). While Ham does mean “black” or “burnt in Egyptian,” Egyptians are in Ham’s line (not vice versa), and therefore retrospectively applying Egyptian definitions to his name is “hermeneutically hazardous” (57).

¹⁸⁶ In Hays’ treatment of Zipporah, he focuses on Scripture’s consistent prohibitions on marrying “outside the faith,” not against interracial marriage (79). The prohibitions are theological because interfaith marriage brings with it the worship of other gods. But this is a far cry from the miscegenation laws and fears in the United States and many of its churches. This misinterpretation of Scripture has had many far-reaching negative effects. Hays goes as far as to assert that “the common cultural ban on intermarriage lies at the heart of the Black and White racial division in America...” (81).

including race “in the most central” of its theological elements (157). The larger New Testament narrative, he argues, is about God’s hope given in his promise to Abraham opening up to the nations (157). He points to certain events such as Pentecost (noting that the work of God’s Spirit as integral to the crossing ethnic barriers) and the Apocalyptic picture of the great multitude from “every nation” as the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise (Rv 7:9-17). As well, he specifically highlights Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan; figures such as the Ethiopian Eunuch and Simeon called *Niger*; and Paul’s emphasis in Galatians, Ephesians, and Colossians on both the blessing of the nations and the oneness of all believers, regardless of ethnic background.

In short, the multiple nations of the biblical world (which included Blacks as playing a significant role) have been “involved in God’s unfolding plan of redemption from the beginning” (201). And the picture of God’s people at history’s climax reveals “a multi-ethnic congregations from every tribe, language, people, and nation.” Therefore, in these in-between times, Hays’ hope is that believers in America—with an understanding of the importance of the nations (specifically including Cush)—will consciously choose to live into the both the promise (and the requirement) of compassionate culture-crossing and familial oneness, made possible by Jesus’ work on the cross and the presence of the Spirit. Believers have the opportunity to obey our way into greater foretastes of that which is to come. But either way, the future will arrive and those who will sing a new song around the throne of the Lamb will reflect the multiple ethné, together embodying God’s very image.

The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000 by Colin Kidd

The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000, by Colin Kidd, offers an in-depth look at the ways in which encounters between white Christendom and peoples beyond Europe have “compelled reinterpretations of scripture” in the post-Reformation era (2). Beginning with an overview of the contemporary science of race, the prologue establishes that race is not, fundamentally, a “biologically meaningful” construct (3). Rather it is a “property of *our minds* and not of *their bodies*” (18). Nevertheless, understanding the place of “race” has been of increasing importance in the last five centuries.

For most of the West’s intellectual history, the genealogies of the Old Testament served as the starting point for understanding the peoples of the world. According to Kidd, race as thought of today—a skin deep expression of identity—was not the Old Testament’s concern; rather, its focus was on a related concept: lineage. But fast-forwarding to the modern era, as exploration, missions, and colonization brought white cultures into increasing touch with variegated “others,” scholars turned to the scriptures to make sense of the incredible diversity.

Key questions arose with increasing import. Was Adam black or white? Was Cain’s “mark” blackness? Was Noah white? Yellow? Was Shem red? Japheth white? Ham black? Did Moses practice miscegenation? Did one of the ten lost tribes of Israel beget the red Amerindians? Was Jesus Aryan or Semitic or, as some would later ask, African?

In the early modern era, the flood of such questions brought great anxiety (55). How was such diversity possible in history's 5500 years? Racism did exist.¹⁸⁷ But the relative value of race was not the central focus of early modern theologians. Instead, at stake was the authority of scripture and protection of the central tenets of Christianity: human unity in Adam's original sin (implicit in monogenesis) and shared potential blessing in our blood redeemer, Jesus Christ. Driven to protect these non-negotiables, the quest became to discover Scriptural linkages among a vast array of people.

The Enlightenment continued to presuppose universal shared humanity. But championing scientific method, it also opened up two doors for "scientific racism" (120). Seeking to account for the data of racial difference while preserving scripture's authoritative claims, Scriptural monogenists increasingly explained race as "degeneracy from a white norm" (82). Alternatively, religious skeptics embraced polygenesis, easily explaining racial variety but posing an explicit challenge to the "scriptural view of human racial unity" (82).

By the nineteenth century, race finally rose to the surface as "the dominant theme in western intellectual life" (121). The study of geology, evolutionary biology, and archeology, as well as new approaches to biblical criticism, had damaged Genesis' authority. Christians protecting monogenesis and the theological unity of humanity found themselves in difficult waters. Particularly in the American South,

¹⁸⁷ For example, a popular London journal, *Athenian Mercury*, founded in 1691, addressed whether or not blacks would rise on the last day. Seeing blackness as imperfection, "the *Mercury* concluded that the Negro would 'not arise with that complexion, but leave it behind him in the darkness of the grave, exchanging it for a brighter and better at his return again into the world'" (68).

championing orthodoxy while simultaneously justifying race slavery of an “inferior” black people demanded impossible hermeneutical gymnastics (146). Racist arguments flourished.¹⁸⁸ Most popular were arguments focusing on Noah’s curse of Ham, historically seen as the father of Africans. God had willed Ham’s descendants to serve the descendants of Ham’s brothers. Therefore, slavery of darker people was justified as a fulfillment of the Scriptures whose word on monogenesis and human unity could remain authoritative.

By the end of the nineteenth century, “ethnological awareness” had become integral to theology, including a focus on “higher and lower” races (169). Race itself was increasingly seen as the explanation for religion; “religious diversity” as “an expression of the deeper underlying truth of racial differences” (171). Christianity still was considered the “sole globally relevant exception” as it seemed able to cross into all cultures, but racism tainted this perspective as well. Christianity’s success was attributed to its carriers: the Japhite (white) West had taken a Semite religion and “improved” upon it (172).

Inevitably, distinctly racialized religious factions began forming in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Most notable were separatist movements in the U.S. built around black counter-theologies. Though not monolithic, there were two

¹⁸⁸ Theories explaining Ham’s legacy of blackness included 1) Ham as having been cursed in utero and God thereby supernaturally having injected black blood into an otherwise all white people (140). 2) Lot’s daughters having had dark imaginations, which into turn gave rise to dark children (69). 3) An allowance for pre-Adamites—subordinate, less enlightened, black or red people not created in God’s image. The flood was seen, then, as a punishment for previous generations in Adam’s (later) line having intermarried with these inferior people of color. In this view, Ham was the one who unfortunately had carried this mixed lineage forward (150).

basic streams. One stream emphasized black equality and kinship with whites (universalism). The other focused on white hypocrisy and the push for separatism (ethnocentrism). And across the board, many black theologians sought to move beyond a “white understanding” of Christianity, which had proved incapable of transcending racialization.¹⁸⁹

In summary, Kidd’s dense overview reveals that in the last five hundred years, historic biblical constraint of polygenist origins did hold aspects of coherent, intellectual racism in check. Simultaneously, the dethroning of scriptural authority created space and energy for the emergence of modern, broad-based, systemic racism. But Kidd’s study also reveals that racist attitudes were often at work within those with a high view of scriptural authority. It took only increasing encounters with the “Other” to bring them to the fore. Racism is insidiously resourceful. As Kidd concludes: “the human imagination is equally capable of interpreting the Christian scriptures in a racist as in an anti-racist manner” (271). Racism can utilize any tool, biblical ones included, to accomplish the objectives of its master.

¹⁸⁹ Many early black theologians worked to undercut the popular understanding of Ham’s curse, pointing out that Noah’s curse was not on *Ham’s* descendants but on the descendants of Ham’s son, *Canaan*. “Africans,” they began emphasizing, “are *not* Canaanites” (251). As well, in most strands of black theological thought, the power of the “Exodus idea” and identification with the plight of God’s people in the Old Testament became key (252). In the latter part of the twentieth century, an affinity emerged between black theology and liberation theology. Kidd also makes the point that Black Judaism and Black Islam were simply extreme forms of black Protestant Christianity, seeking “in non-European monotheism an authentic alternative to white-inflected American Protestantism” (270).

From Every Tribe and Nation: A Historian's Discovery of the Global Christian Story by Mark Noll

In his personal memoir, *From Every Tribe and Nation: A Historian's Discovery of the Global Christian Story*, Notre Dame historian Mark Noll traces his personal discovery of a universal reality: the good news of the incarnation, like Jesus Christ the God-become-man himself, can incarnate itself in any culture—a universal faith that shows up in innumerable expressions of particular faith.

Noll's journey begins with his Fundamentalist Baptist church in Iowa where, in spite of its propensity for an overemphasis on moral practice at the expense of the teaching of grace, Noll absorbs a missionary mindset awareness of the wider world and the import of cross-cultural faith. His time at Wheaton then rescues him “intellectually, theologically, existentially” by exposing him to the broader vision of the Reformation (12). Continued study (two MA's and one PhD) leaves him increasingly convinced that narrative has a profound power and that though the translation process is always difficult, translation itself is possible: “it was truly possible to communicate at least the substance of meaning from one language to another, and hence from one culture to another” (31). With this foundation under his belt, and with a career in university teaching established, shifts begin in Noll's understanding of the nature of faith.

Noll tells of discovering the experiential, visceral side of faith, known through life circumstances, as the inter-dependent partner of truthfulness. The Nicene Creed, for example, begins to emerge for him not simply as classic Christian dogma but also as story and reality. But not only are these two ways of knowing faith “marrying” in

a new way for him, but so, too, are the two larger ways of “being religious” (49). A professor of Christian history, Noll slowly recognizes that—embodied in Protestantism—is the religion of those “keen to define the divine-human relationship” while—embodied in Catholicism—are the “Christian communities marked more by sacramental practice than precise doctrines.” Both are manifested in Christian history (and current practice) and both are of value.

The next shifts comes in his discovery of Christianity in other cultures. Initially, his foray into the faith of Canada (primarily through his association with Canadian historian George Rawlyk) leads him to a simple conclusion: two cultures can be ostensibly quite similar and yet profoundly different. This, then, opens him up as a historian to other comparisons in Christian histories “far beyond North America” (72). Likewise, his multiple trips to Romania opened him up to the “great contrast” between the East and the West which he describes feeling at a “visceral, bodily” level (86).

But perhaps most influential is his encounter with the person and work of British theologian and missiologist, Andrew Walls. Walls articulates for Noll what he had been discovering along the way: God in Christ accepts people as they are, offering in Christianity, “A place to feel at home” while simultaneously leading people into a transformation towards Christ-likeness (the “pilgrim principle”) (94). Therefore, as the gospel travels to and settles within any people group, there is a continual dance between local indigenization and cultural critique. The tensions in this dance abound as every carrier and recipient of the gospel must sort through what is essential versus what is cultural in the message offered. But such tensions, if

locally grappled with in light of Scripture and the Christian tradition, can spark the flame of a theology that the rest of the world church needs for the fleshing out of a fuller vision of the incarnation (192).

And this missional gospel message has continued to spread. Noll goes on to show how the center of Christian gravity has “moved south” (126). The number of believers in the Global South has grown astronomically. Noll offers a host of statistics pointing out, for example, that in 1900, there were 60 million Christians in Latin America, and now that number is 550 million (138). Likewise, there are more Anglicans in individual countries like Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, or Uganda than in Britain and the United States combined. Meanwhile, while much of historic Christendom is fading¹⁹⁰, the burgeoning Global South, Noll explains, is being shaped by a very different emphasis than that of the historic Western world. God’s direct intervention, versus mediation through institutions or the state, is the emphasis.

Highlighting Christian growth in Latin America and drawing on the insights of sociologist David Martin, Noll points to the tensions that this more “Pentecostal” emphasis on the immediate presence of God and the related religious entrepreneurship (thriving particularly among people destabilized by economic modernization) has with longstanding Catholicism and its emphasis on territory, birthright, membership, and communal obligation lived under the broad church and

¹⁹⁰ Noll interestingly notes that a society’s shape when it was “comprehensively Christian” will deeply influence how secularization manifests itself when Christianity begins to wane. For example, he points out how Russia’s caesaropapism, “where the czar, aspiring to exert all power, ran the Orthodox Church as one part of its comprehensive regime” eventually gave way to a “Communist government that, again aspiring to be all-powerful, tried to eliminate the Orthodox Church as a dangerous rival to its comprehensive authority” (148).

its sacred canopy (149). The shift from the “place” church to the “choice” church is visible in living Latin American color.

Winding his way then briefly through China and eventually back to his own doorstep at Notre Dame, Noll acknowledges that the “most effective Protestant missions of the last two centuries” have sprung up apart from questions of church order even as the visibly organized church remains intrinsic for “all Catholic conceptions of Christian faith” (184). This tension does not appear to be going away any time soon. However, Noll concludes, reflecting on global Christianity, both traditions, in their best expressions, draw “very close to each other” because each tradition “has drawn closer to Christ” (184).

Weaving its way through the tensions between cognitive and experiential knowledge, between dogma and sacrament, between indigenization and the pilgrim principle, and between the “place” and the “choice” concepts of church, the reality of the gospel story continues to be translated and take hold. In the end, what continues to emerge around the world are particular expressions of a faith characterized by the centrality of Jesus as the Son of God, the Scriptures as an ever-present template, and transformed (if also problematically imperfect) lives (165). For Noll, this discovery Global Christian history leaves him confident in God’s control over all human development even as he recognizes that history is being made at a “dizzying pace” demanding a more rigorous study than ever before.

God and Race in American Politics: A Short History by Mark Noll

In his book, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History*, Mark Noll argues that “race and religion make up not only the nation’s deepest and most enduring moral problem, but also its broadest and most enduring political influence” (1). Subdivided into five sections, Noll’s *Short History* surveys the territory between the religiously driven antebellum conflicts over slavery to the religious roots of the civil rights movement and its role as the “fulcrum” of recent, American political history (136). While Noll’s primary aim is to demonstrate how race and religion have influenced politics, his arguably more compelling point appears in his theological conclusion: “...the American political system and the American practice of Christianity, which have provided so much good for so many people for so many years, have never been able to overcome race” (178). Noll uses the word “race,” but it is the insurmountable problem of *racism*, which Noll demonstrates to be at root in the interplay of religion, and race, which has so, shaped American Politics.

From the beginning of America’s founding, the challenge in both the north and the south was to see black people as fully human and to treat black people accordingly. The antebellum debates that emerged around slavery, however, did not focus on skin color—“slaves” and “Africans” were from the outset taken by most as presumed synonyms (41). Rather, bypassing the fact that most slavery in the Bible had nothing to do with Africans, the debates focused more often than not on the Biblical justification (or admonitions) against slavery. The Civil War was in

many ways a religious war over “how to interpret the Bible and how to promote moral norms in national public life” (43).

Fought on both sides with a Calvinistic fervor for seeing one’s beliefs woven into every sphere of existence (including the nation’s political system), the Civil War revealed the limits of evangelical Protestantism to sufficiently address society’s regional and moral conflicts. As a result, post-War, national political power of evangelicals declined, but concurrently, a space opened up for African Americans to “create, direct, and manage their own churches and other institutions” (49).

Institutional creativity, intellectual deepening, and public impact (not unlike that which had characterized the rise of evangelical Protestants from the late 18th c. to the Civil War) pushed forward in this “journey of self-determination” (52).

The war to end slavery, however, had not become a war to conquer racism, and the War’s victory had not provided “the moral energy required for rooting equal rights into the subsoil of the American society...” (66). The early and powerful resistance from white southerners to Reconstruction (and their quest for “redemption,” aka. white supremacist rule of state governments), combined with the North’s propensity to look the other way for the sake of holding together the tenuous re-union of the country, conspired in the words of one turn of the century black novelist to realize “the systematic destruction of the Negro by every device which the fury of enlightened malevolence can invent...” (58). And so in a country where the Bible was no longer the moral authority (including in its cosmology about race) and where the commitment to national civil religion and the authority of

science were becoming givens, rationalization deepened for treating African Americans as “subcitizens and subhumans” (96).

But while the possibilities of a racially just society were being repeatedly subverted, the post slavery African American religion was becoming the foundation for the civil rights movement. The white, theologically liberal desire for this equal rights was strong, but their view of evil was too thin and their reliance on education and “social managers” to “overcome the entrenched antipathies of a racially riven society” was profoundly inadequate (130). African American religion, however, had more power. When African American religion at both elite (typically post-critical with an emphasis on social justice, free will and non violent resistance) combined with populist levels (emphasizing the supernatural, miracles, conversion and “immediate consolation from an active God” (115)) a “prophetic religion,” emerged, blasting “loose the log-jam of restricted rights for black Americans” (130). The limited white populist religious resistance (unsupported by white elite authority) could not stop it. So, in tandem with the Federal government, this force gave way to a deeper, stronger American vision of individual rights for all.

In the years since the explosion of Civil Rights, American citizenry has taken up this *individual rights enforced by Federal power* paradigm in multiple arenas—be it in questions of free speech, rights for women, rights for the unborn, equal employment rights, gay rights, etc. The supremacy of individual rights is now a given. Only one problem remains. Just as the Evangelicals who shaped the antebellum culture “faltered” around the question of slavery, this “new political culture” of rights has not proven itself able to conquer the remaining and tenacious

wide-ranging social problems of a culture still divided “between black and white” (173). And as a result, concludes Noll, the United States continues to pay daily for our seemingly insurmountable bent towards racial injustice.

Bloodlines: Race, Cross, and the Christian by John Piper

In his book *Bloodlines: Race, Cross, and the Christian*, John Piper demonstrates how the gospel of Jesus Christ actively undermines the sins (be they individual or corporate) that spawn a world of ethnic and racial hatred, while opening the possibility for the vast and diverse bloodlines of humanity to come into one bloodline—that of Jesus Christ. In this very comprehensive work, Piper is attempting to tackle all the questions that many in an American, conservative, Protestant (and sometimes callously indifferent) world might have, or should have, about race.

In the book's first section, *Our World: The Need for the Gospel*, Piper lays out personal, national, and global realities—historical and current—concerning race. In short, he was raised as a racist. Of his own home state, South Carolina, he writes that it was not until 1998 that the state removed from its constitution language prohibiting “the marriage of a white person with a Negro or mulatto or a person who shall have one-eighth or more Negro blood” (203). (Interestingly, in his latter section, Piper goes on to argue that *opposition to interracial marriage is one of the deepest roots of racial distance, disrespect, and hostility in the world*” (213).)

Moving beyond the personal, however, Piper outlines the current tension in the U.S. around race, including the fundamental national debate about the source of solutions: structural change or on individual responsibility. Piper also paints the picture of world wide Christianity, which includes the burgeoning numbers of believers in the global south. And these global southerners, believers and not, are

moving in droves to the United States. We have in this nation deeply unresolved tensions around black and white relations, and these Piper argues, can and must be attended to by the power of the gospel for their own sake, as well as for the sake of the kingdom of God's flourishing among all diverse peoples, at this moment, in—by implication—this nation.

With this undercurrent of prophetic urgency, section one culminates in chapter six with God's remedies for the "deadly realities that lie at the root of racial strife" (14). Satan, guilt, pride, hopelessness, feelings of inferiority and self-doubt, greed, hate, fear, and apathy all drive racial and cultural strife. Piper outlines how Jesus' work on the cross and his resurrection make a way for each of these to be dismantled. As well, there is empowerment for believers to search out *both* individual and structural (justice-oriented) changes.

Section, two, *God's Word: The Power of the Gospel*, picks up the idea of empowerment and goes further. In this section, Piper offers the hope that in fact the power for breaking down racial barriers actually stems from God's vision for the nations (or ethnos). The bulk of this section is biblical exposition on the consummate, worth-dying-for importance of every tribe, language, people, and nation (Rv 5:9). Piper points out that Jesus' mission was intrinsically about the end of ethnocentrism, replacing Jewish ethnicity with a universal faith in him characterized by disciples from all the nations (Mt 28:19). Focusing on Paul's letter to the Ephesians, Piper zeroes in on the mystery of Christ, which opens the way for Gentiles to share as fellow heirs in the promises in Jesus Christ (Eph 3:4-6). Christ has broken down in his flesh "the dividing wall of hostility...that he...*might reconcile*

*us both to God in one body through the cross” (2:14-16). The blood of Christ brings us all, who are in him, near to God and one another. Religious, cultural, or racial differences—even “bloodlines going back to Jacob”—do not get to divide those who are in Christ through *his* blood (127).*

Piper recognizes that this, however, is not how the believers (let alone the those yet to believe, who are not in Christ) live. However, highlighting the negative example of Peter with the Jewish leaders from Jerusalem (Gal 2:11-13), Piper calls the reader to jettison fear of one’s larger communities’ potential reactions and live out of what is true about a shared identity in Jesus Christ (Col 3:1-3, 9-11). But it does not stop there. Across the board, partiality on the basis of riches or poverty is prohibited (Ja 2:1), and as God himself categorically refuses to judge based on ethnicity (Ro 2:11), obviously, so should we.

The book concludes with a specific fleshing out of questions around interracial marriage, the nature of prejudice, and four appendices touching on terminology (is there such thing, actually, as “race?”), the “soul dynamic” of the black church and its relationship to the sovereignty of God, the church pursuit of ethnic diversity, and an exposition on Noah’s curse.

Lastly, perhaps because Piper is at heart a preacher, he ends with a plea to anyone who has taken the time to read his book and is willing to step into issues of racial harmony. The issues might repeatedly appear intractable, but racial harmony is God’s desire. And therefore, Piper admonishes: “Never quit. Step back. Get another strategy. Start over. But never quit” (232).

Summary

The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith by Andrew F. Walls

Andrew Walls' *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in Transmission of Faith* is a collection of his essays showing the broad sweep of the gospel's movement in the past two thousands years while also zeroing in on and magnifying examples at a granular level. He demonstrates that the good news of Jesus Christ always shows up embedded in a particular context (the indigenizing principle) while remaining stubbornly universal in its refusal to wed itself to only one culture, one language, one people, or one geography (the pilgrim principle). Understanding of the tension between the indigenizing and pilgrim principles, recognizing that the gospel can be both a prisoner and liberator of culture, is in Wall's work the implicit key to making theological sense of what a student of history would observe about the gospel's advance.

Transmission of the Christian Faith, the first section of Walls' book, establishes this indigenizing-pilgrim concept in the first chapter, highlighting not just the pattern of this tension, but demonstrating how the translation process itself—the re-languaging of the gospel that occurs as it moves from culture to culture—is a reflection of how God himself was translated into flesh in Jesus Christ. Believers, in turn, 're-translate' Jesus to others (29). This translation, of course, is always done by those who occupy a specific seat "in the theatre of life" even as conversion itself goes beyond the individual to nations (or peoples) themselves and that people's very understanding of its own history (53). In the process, certain cultural systems might stand "condemned" even as "elements of good" remain (65).

As this transmission process has happened repeatedly over the centuries, moving globally westward, northward, and now easterly and to the south, the center of Christian gravity continues to change. Section two, *Africa's Place in Christian History*, focuses on the nature of the missionary movement and evangelical revival within part of this new center, Africa. Looking closely at many of the tensions in Africa's 150-year vast and varied Christian history, Walls explores what translation of the gospel from a western European context to an African context has looked like. He digs deep, exploring how African concerns and interests in the course of conversion oftentimes have not matched those of the Western missionary priorities, even as, inversely, some Africans sought to pick up English cultural values, and some English missionaries were eager to shed them in favor of "native life" (108). Walls looks, too, at the African Independent Churches, offering an additional explication of primal religions (those with historic anteriority) and the Christian faith.

In his third section, *The Missionary Movement*, Walls tackles various issues facing the missionary enterprise as a whole. Questions about how to approach mission studies are followed by inquiries into the nature of the missionary vocation (voluntary and ordained), including the missionary's role as scholar, educator, and healer. As well, he offers a thorough exploration of the "American Dimension" in 20th c. missions, arguing in line with his thesis that while American missionaries are intrinsically "products and purveyors of American culture," the gospel still "crosses cultural frontiers [and] rapidly acculturates and takes new forms dictated by the culture in which it becomes rooted" (226).

He concludes this section and the book with a chapter entitled "The Old Age

of the Missionary Movement.” He asserts that while the “conviction that Jesus is Lord and the testimony that Christ is Risen cannot mean that much unless they are to be shared” (255), the breakdown of the historic concept of a territorial Christianity is rapidly changing the means of translation. In place of an “us from here” going to a “them over there,” we now live in something akin to a global web. Two-way, or multi-way traffic, “parallel presences in difference circles and at different levels, each seeking to penetrate within and beyond its circle,” now characterizes the movement of people and ideas (259). And while this will have many implications—some of which we can predict, some of which we cannot—one of them is that the global South and East now have the opportunity to re-evangelize the West. And this would be good news.

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