A Gospel-Centered Approach to Race and Ethnicity

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Introduction

"I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one" (John 17:20–21a, NRSV). This prayer by Jesus for his followers continues to ring in our ears as a dream, an "elusive dream" (Edwards 2021) we have yet to see fulfilled here on earth. There has been an awakening in the American church to the racial evils of the past, yet it seems evangelical Christians are farther apart than ever when it comes to discussing racial matters. I can envision two twenty-five-year-old American Christian men, one White and one Black, discussing race as follows:

> David: *We have unity in Christ, and we just need to look forward to the day we are gathered around the throne of grace!*
>
> John: *Yes, we have theoretical unity, but many theologians you admire, like Jonathan Edwards, owned slaves. How can you respect a man like that?*
>
> David: *Why do you want to focus on the sin of the past when Christ has forgiven us? We're now one in Christ.*
>
> John: *One in Christ? Are you kidding me? You think the historic Black church I grew up in is "liberal" 'cause you heard the pastor criticizing your favorite president!*

While David and John read the same Bible, hold to the Apostles and Nicene Creeds, and attend evangelical churches, their approach to race is so different they seem to be talking past each other. For some White American evangelicals, the best approach is to avoid talking about race since there are so many relational landmines associated with these conversations. While the "colorblind theory" might seem a sensible path forward, for many American minorities this approach feels dismissive of their individual and community pain. According to sociologist Woody Done, "Color-blind racial ideology is based on the assertion that race no longer 'matters' as an obstacle to social and economic success in the United States" (2017:975), and therefore denies the reality of America's racialized society. Emerson and Smith explain that "A racialized society is a society wherein race matters profoundly for differences in life experiences, life

opportunities, and social relationships" (2000:7). Color-blindness can also function as a denial of our distinctive phenotypes and cultures in which "God displays his goodness and creativity. We are made well (Gen 1:27, 31) in our specific and God-given backgrounds, not in spite of them" (Shin 2017:29).

Additionally, much of the evangelical conversation about race and ethnicity centers around the American story which can overlook the reality that ethnic sins are on full display across our world. Tribal conflicts in Africa, the unjust nature of the caste system in South Asia, and the remnants of the Casta System in Latin America all testify to a global problem.

The church would benefit from a comprehensive framework for race and ethnicity that recognizes the unity Christians have, addresses the suffering of the past, and forges tools for the present. Many of the proposed solutions to the historic divisions focus on one aspect of reconciliation at the expense of others. For example, it is true that Christ's followers are all part of God's family, but if the discussion ends there, we may miss the cultural and ethnic diversity that God has created. What follows will present a broad approach to race and ethnicity with talking points that can be helpful in developing a gospel-centered approach which breaches racial and/or ethnic boundaries. It is not meant to provide concrete solutions to racial or ethnic problems, but to offer a framework that can guide discussions among Christians in local churches, non-profits, or anywhere God brings people together.

Important Definitions

Healthy conversations across racial and ethnic lines are contingent upon a common understanding of the terminology employed. We typically use various identity markers, such as *African American* or *Hispanic*, to identify groups of people, with the assumption that their meaning is self-evident, but "these terms have been fluid and lack solid foundations" (Branson and Martínez 2011:85). Accordingly, we must take care to clearly define the terms we use in conversations which are often fraught with misunderstandings.

Race

Dutch academic Hans van der Jagt commented, "We have to keep in mind that racism has its etymological origins in colonialism of the seventeenth century" (2017:50). The racial categories that we so commonly use in America were not employed before the development of chattel slavery (Golash-Boza 2016:131) and are much less common around the world today. As my Kenyan wife frequently jokes, "I didn't know I was Black until I moved to the States!"

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School's Board of Regents has produced a helpful explanation of how race functions in contemporary society as part of their statement, "A Biblical Theological

Foundation of Racial Reconciliation":

> The terms race and racial, although giving the appearance of being scientific, are not biologically based and instead represent human, social constructs; biologically, all human beings are the same species, although culturally humans evince great diversity. Thus, race confuses biological and cultural categories. The terms race and racial, however, have tangible consequences for how "others" are viewed and treated. (TIU 2017:1)

America is a racialized society, meaning that race is a key factor in how we function and has profound consequences in day-to-day life (Emerson 2000:154). "Although racial categories were created during the time of slavery, genocide, and colonialism, they have taken on their own meaning over time. We still use categories, such as White, Black, Asian, and Native American, to make meaning of our social world" (Golash-Boza 2016:135). While these racial categories hold great significance for individual and community identities in the United States—especially for racial minorities—many White people fail to recognize their importance. For White Americans, thinking about or ignoring race constitutes a discretionary choice. For those with darker skin, especially those with African ancestry, this choice is not an option.

Ethnicity

Wheaton College anthropologist Brian Howell states that ethnicity "is generally used to refer to a group that shares a common cultural heritage, but at the same time, it often is used interchangeably with 'race,' referring to a supposed biological or genetic connection between individuals" (2006:307). Ethnic groups have common ground in language, religion, nationality, and heritage, which is important in distinguishing themselves from other groups. "Perhaps the most important trait is that persons of an ethnic group can tell a particular narrative or learn a narrative that encompasses them" (Branson & Martínez 2011:87). These narratives may or may not be true, but they bind the group together as a common people with a common story.

Culture

The words "culture" and "ethnicity" are often used interchangeably (see for example Branson and Martinez 2011). For example, "that's their culture" and "that's their ethnicity" have equivalent meaning for some. Although the terms overlap, most social scientists agree that they are not the same. Culture may include the notion of phenotype, but is more associated with how a group of people lives and what they believe gives meaning to life. Edgar Schein, considered by many to be the founder of the study of organizational culture, states that "culture is both a dynamic phenomenon that surrounds us at all times, being constantly enacted and created by our interactions with others and shaped by leadership behavior, and a

set of structures, routines, rules, and norms that guide and constrain behavior" (2017:1).

In the Christian context, missionaries are usually aware that the gospel must be contextualized as it enters a new culture. What the average Christian is less aware of is that every church contextualizes the gospel as people seek to worship and serve God in their local cultural context. Congregations must make decisions about what language to speak (or not to speak), when to sit or stand, where and when to meet, and so on. These decisions can be seen as part of the process of contextualizing the gospel for a particular setting. There is no "normal" way of doing church, for we all bring ourselves and our cultures into the tapestry of congregational life. People in majority groups are frequently blind to their role in the social construction of reality, and take their "normal" to be "natural" or inevitable.

Gospel

Contemporary theologians are beginning to take greater care in answering the question, "What is the gospel?" Without addressing the complexities of this theological task, there is little doubt that the "good news" is centered upon who Jesus is and what he has done through his coming, living, dying, rising, and reigning. Michael Bird, an Australian theology professor, describes the gospel as follows: "The gospel is the announcement that God's kingdom has come in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Lord and Messiah, in fulfillment of Israel's Scriptures. The gospel evokes faith, repentance, and discipleship; its accompanying effects include salvation and the gift of the Holy Spirit" (2013:52). Furthermore, the gospel contains both personal and global dimensions. Consider:

- Personal—The gospel is a call to personal repentance and faith, which leads to Spirit- empowered deeds, following in the footsteps of Jesus (Mark 1:14–15).

- Global—The gospel includes the glorious announcement of all that God has done, is doing, and will do to reconcile people to himself and to each other. It also points to the restoration of God's Creation to its intended order (Col 1:19–20).

Beyond these core dimensions, there is no unacculturated gospel—pure and undefiled—that we proclaim to others. Our gospel presentations always reflect ourselves, our identities, and the cultures we have internalized. We can either pretend that the gospel functions in a de-cultured (or transcultural) way, or we can embrace the challenges of contextualization and work to better understand the ways in which "our" culture and the cultures of others interact with the gospel. This means that understandings of truth are culturally relative, especially on matters where scripture is not clear. Nevertheless, as much as possible, we must always seek to disentangle our culture that "carries" the gospel from the

truth God has revealed to us.

Six Talking Points

As we develop a gospel-centered understanding of, and approach to, race and ethnicity, we should remember that just as we cannot apprehend an unacculturated gospel, we cannot talk about race and ethnicity without the messiness of culture entering in. Any cross-cultural interaction or conversation we initiate includes our race, ethnicity, and cultural leanings. This reality should not discourage us from trying, but it should humble us before brothers and sisters who do not share our race, ethnicity, or cultural meanings. Even—and perhaps especially— amidst cultural murkiness and uncertainty, the Spirit of God can work to build unity in the church locally, regionally, and globally, as sensitive and caring conversations penetrate racial and ethnic barriers.

Figure 1

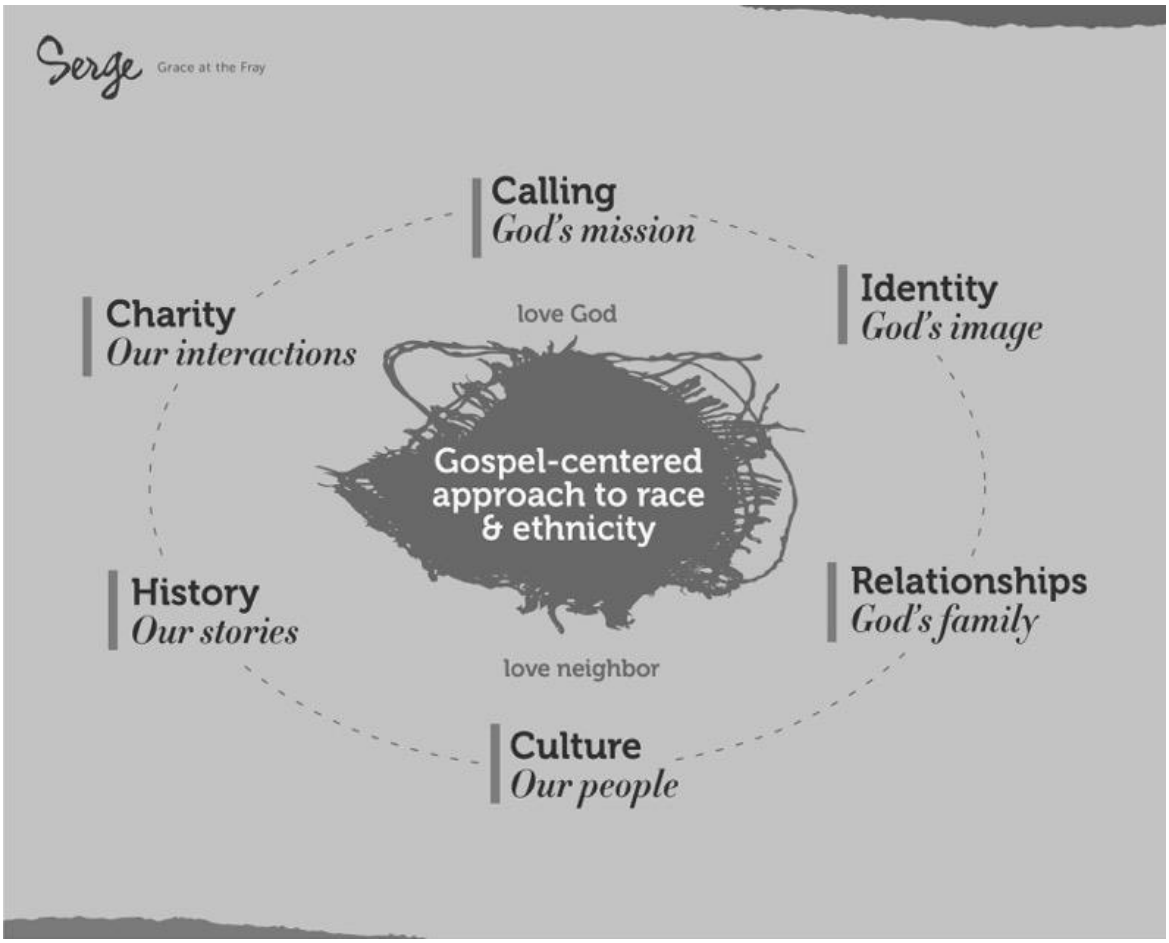
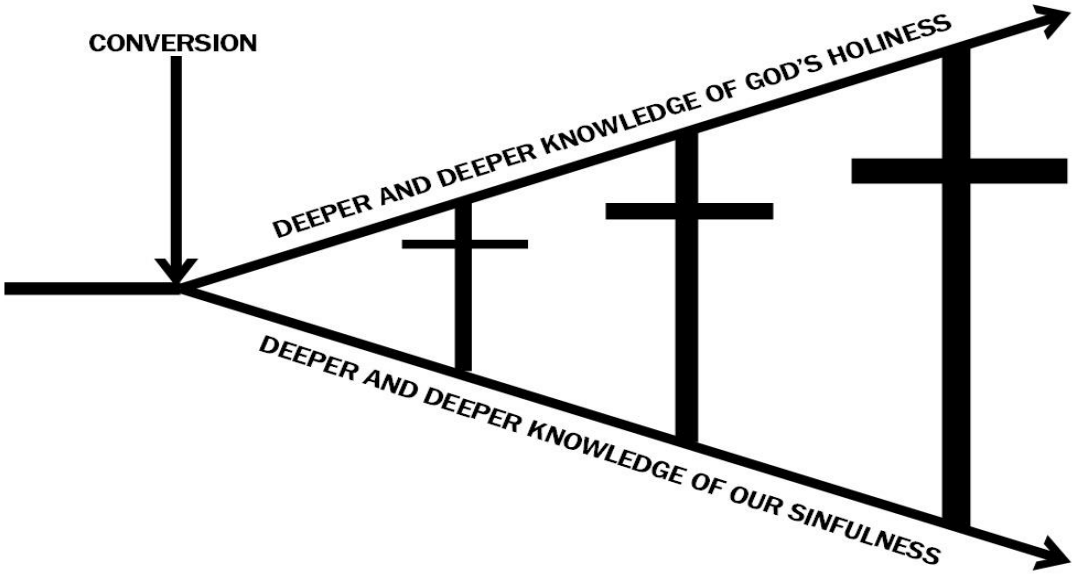


Figure 1 offers a framework containing six primary talking points, each of which should be discussed in detail in a local context. Conversations in St. Louis will be different from those in Nairobi, and conversations in London will be different from those in Seoul. In the center of the image are two important concepts which need to be kept in mind throughout the discussion. First, above and below the title in the center of the diagram are two phrases, “love God” & “love neighbor,” which point to a summary of the law that Jesus gives us as we consider how to live our lives in the diverse world he has created. Jesus tells us, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37–40). Love must be the motivator and the guide as we enter cross-cultural discourse. Winning an argument or convincing someone to join us in our thinking is not the goal. Our prayer is that the words we speak would be a fountain of life (Prov. 10:11) for those with whom we interact.

Second, the frayed edge in the middle of the diagram, reminds us that even well-intentioned people will continue to have problems, for it is impossible to properly love God and our neighbor. The most devoted followers of Christ still struggle against sin. We may understand that we should love our neighbors, but this knowledge, however robust, is insufficient. We need the Spirit of God to give us wisdom and life-giving words in discussions with culturally different neighbors. In addition, we have an enemy who seeks to destroy the unity we have in Christ despite our differences.

Figure 2



The international mission organization Serge has produced a well-known discipleship course called *Sonship*, which uses the "cross chart" (Figure 2) as an illustration. This graphic visually explains that as we grow in sanctification over time, our knowledge of our sin grows, as does our knowledge of God's holiness. This process expands our understanding, and we learn to see the glory of Christ's work in progressively larger ways. We often think of our own sinfulness in individual terms: Am I lusting after my neighbor? Do I have anger toward others building up within me? While we do sin individually, it is important to expand our understanding of how sin has impacted us. God has placed each of us within a cultural group. Every culture contains sin patterns that have a devastating impact upon its people, and likewise patterns that hurt other ethnic groups with whom they interact. As we grow in grace over time, the Lord reveals to us a deeper knowledge of our personal sin and our cultural sin. At the same time, we should also see the cross occupying greater space as we realize that the Lord is bringing healing to every aspect of society and to people from every cultural background. God is going to save "those people" and use them to help me and "my people" bring glory to Himself. As we respond in repentance and faith, the Spirit guides us into a proper response to bring healing and restoration. As the people of God, whatever our racial, ethnic, and cultural identity, we must continue to pray that the Spirit would open the eyes of our hearts (Eph. 1:18) to see the complex ways that human sinfulness has corrupted relationships across racial and ethnic barriers.

The Six Points

We now move to the six broad talking points referred to earlier. This section offers a brief overview, and can be adapted to a variety of cross-cultural conversations around the globe. The first three points are theological in character and therefore more universal in scope. The last three lean upon the social sciences and are thus more context-dependent. All the points are interconnected and needed, although there is frequent overlap. Troubles arise when we overemphasize one at the expense of the others. For example, it is true that we are all part of God's family, but if the discussion ends there, we will miss historical and collective sin that impacts contemporary relationships. Likewise, if we divorce cultural issues from theological analysis, we may fail to recognize the hope that God brings.

1. Calling: God's Mission

We start at the top of Figure 1 with our calling rooted in the mission of God, who is committed to reconciling us to himself through the finished work of Jesus *and* reconciling us to each other as the Spirit indwells our lives. The Father calls us to himself and then into the "family business" of Kingdom advancement (Eph. 2:10). Because the Lord is Lord of all, no aspect of our lives falls outside his care. Abraham Kuyper, a former Prime Minister of the

Netherlands, famously stated, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!" (Kuyper and Bratt 1998:461). The wall between the secular and sacred aspects of life must be broken down, for all truth is God's truth. Consequently, we should understand that all aspects of study—history, sociology, biology, anthropology, jurisprudence, and others—are worthy subjects for the Christian to investigate and may provide helpful insight in thinking about race and ethnicity.

Our mission as Christians is intimately connected with God's mission in seeing the gospel spread across cultures and around the world. For the church to bring the gospel to the nations, Christians must interact with those who are racially, ethnically, and culturally different; cross-cultural interactions are core to the calling God has for the church. As we do this, we bring our lives as well as our words and our deeds into the equation. Missiologist Michael Goheen writes, "Mission is witness in life, word and deed. Putting 'life' before 'word' and 'deed' is intentional: the gospel is first of all communicated in the lives of believers, both in their communal life together and as they are scattered in the world" (2014:26). Our collective witness to the goodness of God and the glory of the gospel comes from both our words and our lives lived in harmony together, which point to the new heaven and new earth, where every tear will be wiped away (Rev. 21:1–4).

2. Identity: God's Image

Even though God is calling us on mission together, our identities as individuals are not lost. Each person is made in the image of God (Gen 1:26), no matter their appearance or state of brokenness. If we truly believe this, then "to interact with someone who has been created in Christ's image demands that we see the face of God in his or her face, regardless of the color of skin" (DeYmaz 2007:156). Every person is unique and of inestimable value to our Creator, and at the same time, each person is part of a cultural group in which God has placed them. Understanding humanity's unity in diversity is key to understanding who we are as human beings.

Keep in mind that sin has impacted us individually and corporately so that unity in diversity naturally works for destruction. Until the Spirit renews our hearts, we are "slaves to sin," and as we gather with others, evil infiltrates our social systems. The Calvinistic teaching regarding "total depravity" means that every aspect of our lives has been tainted by sin—not that every area is ruined, but every area is impacted. This means that every person and every culture is a mix of good and evil.

3. Relationships: God's Family

Repeatedly in the Old Testament, we hear the refrain, "I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jer. 31:33). The Lord is drawing a people to himself from every race, every ethnic group, and every culture. We see hints of this in the Old Testament as a "mixed multitude" (Ex. 12:38) joins the Israelites in the exodus from Egyptian slavery. There were other individuals along the way who joined in the worship of Yahweh, such as Ruth the Moabite and Bathsheba the mother of Solomon.

In the New Testament, we see an explosion of ethnic groups drawn into the family of God. Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles; Peter's dream from God challenged his ethnocentric views (Acts 10:9–16); and in Antioch—modern-day Turkey—the first non-Jewish church was founded (Acts 11:19–30). In Revelation, we read about a "great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" (Rev 7:9–10).

4. Culture: Our People

With the fourth point we begin to draw on frameworks from the social sciences. Every culture contains elements of both good and evil that are passed from generation to generation, connecting our past with our present. As we interact cross-culturally, our posture should be one of humility as we learn from those whose storylines are different from our own. Taking the time to observe art, music, and literature can open windows of understanding to one another's cultures. This requires intentionality that is well worth the effort if one hopes to build bridges across racial and ethnic lines.

Unfortunately, when we meet someone who is racially different from us, we often revert to familiar stereotypes to predict how this person will act. "The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete" (Adichie 2009). Stereotypes are sometimes rooted in fact and sometimes rooted in slanderous ignorance, so we need to be careful how we use them. Because each person and every culture is wonderfully unique, we must take care to listen to and learn new stories.

5. History: Our Stories

We cannot understand a person and the culture they inhabit without understanding our own cultural history. This is the importance of exploring where we were raised, our family histories, conversion stories, and so on, in the process of building neighborly trans-racial and cross-cultural relationships that serve the Kingdom of God. In addition to probing our own

stories, we should gain a general understanding of our neighbor's ethnic background. For example, to function in the broader culture, all American ethnic minorities benefit from understanding the history of European immigration and culture which developed into the majority culture in North America. White Americans in particular should make an effort to learn the history of other minority ethnic groups. Unity and neighborliness between racial and ethnic groups is severely hampered if the majority group shows little interest in learning about neighboring minority groups. Conversations with majority group members may be painful, especially for those from historically oppressed cultures, and the importance of attentive, empathic listening cannot be overstated.

6. Charity: Our Interactions

Finally, our day-to-day interactions with people who are different from us racially or ethnically must be examined. Just as we think about various personal interactions across gender lines, so we should carefully consider how we interact across ethnic lines. Grace and charity should characterize our discourse with those of other races or ethnicities. We will undoubtedly make mistakes as we work on communicating cross-culturally, but we can learn to give others the benefit of the doubt. Just as the Lord has shown kindness to us, so we must show deference and kindness to others as we aspire to relationships with greater depth.

There are practical lessons and skills to be learned as we venture beyond our own ethnic groups. Before moving from the United States to London, I had little interaction with Muslims. Early in my time there, I was serving in a charity shop—the British term for what Americans call a thrift store—that our mission operates and met a woman wearing a hijab. I naturally stuck out my hand for a handshake, and she just looked at it until I slowly pulled it back. I learned my lesson: Muslim women, especially if covered, do not shake a man's hand. This little relational lesson made my future interactions much less complicated as I learned to adapt to the complex cross-cultural environment of urban London.

"Where are you from?" is not a welcoming question to a person from a non-majority background in most contexts. It can imply, "You're not one of us; you don't belong here." Rather, asking questions such as "Where did you grow up?" or "What's your story?" affirms that you want to hear about their life, their experiences, and their personhood" (Reyes 2022:3). Sometimes these questions will prompt longer conversations and sometimes they won't, but they offer the other person the option to open up about their ethnic and cultural background. An individual from a different ethnic group may not be ready to provide immediate answers to all questions. But I've found that if there's a humble curiosity, most people are willing to talk about their stories and their culture.

There is much more that could be said about this issue, but it should go without saying that ethnic jokes and questions about people's bodies should be avoided. These only feed our insecurities or curiosity and tend to hamper a mutually respectful relationship. I would like to think that some of the skills needed in cross-cultural relationships are simply common courtesy, but I have learned through experience that what is "common sense," or more accurately culturally normative for one person may not be for his or her ethnic neighbor.

Conclusion

The work of God in our world continues despite the discouraging disunity evident in the evangelical church. Some may view what has been said here as encouraging more talk but offering little in the way of action. I hope that is not the case. Communication across ethnic lines is, arguably, the most important form of action in our collective efforts to help the church of Jesus Christ exemplify the "beautiful community" (Ince, 2020) that the church should manifest. The people of God will never move forward together to right the wrongs of the past and build just and God-honoring societies in the future if we avoid deep and difficult conversations.

We need to listen to each other—really listen to people's stories—to gain insight into their perspectives on the various issues at hand and to build trust across racial and ethnic lines. Harmony and understanding will not happen overnight, but I remain hopeful. I remain convinced that, despite our setbacks, the Spirit of God journeys with us as we struggle to realize a unity in Christ without glossing over the pains of the past. May each of us reach out of our comfort zones to engage with those Christians in our communities who look, think, and act differently from us. And may we work together to see God's will done, on earth as it is in heaven (Matt 6:10).

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