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Effective Christian Outreach to Minority Communities: What Does It Take?

Nathan Rinne

“Only the church, entrusted with the message of God’s reconciling Gospel, can bring ultimate resolution [to this problem]. . . . The opportunity to share Christ with as many people as possible, celebrating diversity and fostering unity by the power of God’s Spirit, is the finest expression of Christian identity and purpose.”

– CTCR, *Racism and the Church*, 28, 39

Abstract: As Lutherans in America look at their past interactions with people from minority groups, particularly American blacks, they are greatly challenged. We are challenged even more when we realize that it is not only overt racism that makes it difficult to recognize and rejoice in the familial bonds that we share with all the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. The issues of “in-group preference” and “auto-segregation” also present themselves to us as well, even as these are challenges which Christians are uniquely equipped to address through God’s Word. As we look forward to the full reconciliation that Jesus Christ will bring in the life to come, we can also work even now with hope—within the two kingdoms that God has established—to know a more “heavenly culture” in our present.



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Introduction

In his 1977 book, *Roses and Thorns: The Centennial Edition of Black Lutheran Mission and Ministry in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* (CPH), Richard Dickinson writes the following:

The priceless treasures and riches of God’s grace in Christ Jesus our Savior are the roses which the Lord has entrusted to the Lutheran Church. . . .

The thorns appear when Black people strive to partake of these precious jewels of salvation, these priceless riches of God in Christ Jesus. If one views the Lutheran Church as a ship carrying this precious cargo and the world as the raging sea, the picture becomes clearer when Blacks are seen as the unsaved, in the water and pleading for help. Lifelines are thrown overboard, but they are rose vines with many thorns. Some persons, with guilty consciences, perhaps, throw some lifeboats overboard, and many Blacks climb into them . . .

The people on the ship sing cheerful songs to the people who are in the lifeboats and hanging on the lifelines. They also pass down to them choice portions of the riches on board, but they will not lend a hand to help them on board. If they want to come aboard, they must climb the vines, striving to avoid the dangerous and deadly thorns.”¹ (Dickinson 1977, 11–12).

After quoting this in his 1989 book on missions, *Joy to the World*, Phil Bickel went on to say:

Is this illustration an overstatement? There are too many cases which prove its truthfulness. Many white congregations in changing neighborhoods have dragged their feet in reaching out to blacks, for fear that the whites would leave. In the end, most of them fled anyhow, leaving a once thriving congregation decimated and ill-equipped to minister in its changed community.²

Clearly, when we intentionally and deliberately speak about reaching out to neighbors of other racial and ethnic backgrounds with the love of Christ, *we must become those who really listen to the hopes and concerns of those not just like us—both as individuals and congregations.* This is particularly true when it comes to the painful racist history that our African-American brothers and sisters have endured.

We must become those who really listen to the hopes and concerns of those not just like us—both as individuals and congregations.

How can such things not challenge us Christians?!

It Is Not Only Racism That Matters Here!

In the 1994 LCMS CTCR (Commission on Theology and Church Relations) document on race, we read: “biological homogeneity and/or cultural uniformity—often more implicitly than explicitly—become a justifying rationale for not proclaiming the Gospel to certain individuals and groups, or at least not proclaiming it with equal fervor.” It goes on to state that “in its more subtle form, racism may also manifest itself in the limited focus of Christian mission activities.”³

The CTCR document is certainly correct to say that, in some circumstances, racism is the most reasonable explanation for this. At the same time, most people also prefer to be with others who are like them in race, ethnicity, or culture and find it easier to be with them, “spend time” with them, etc. This inclination is something “systemic” and is called “in-group preference” by sociologists.⁴ Furthermore, this phenomenon is also connected with what sociologists call “auto-segregation.”⁵

This is precisely why the major “church growth” proponents of the 1970s and 1980s, C. Peter Wagner and Donald McGavran, believed that each ethnic and racial group should “evangelize within their own group for the greatest effectiveness!”⁶ It is easy to see why Wagner’s and McGavran’s ideas were so incredibly popular, and appeared to be such a good idea.⁷

On the one hand, the “in-group preference” is simply natural and “built in” to a large degree. It is an undoubtedly good thing that we have a special disposition to prefer our own family members, exercising a kind of discrimination in their favor when it comes to expressions of love.⁸

On the other hand, this kind of “discrimination” can become something that does us little good when it comes to creating, repairing, restoring, or even just recognizing familial bonds with all the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve!

Hence the sadness we might experience when reading David Lawrence Grant’s essay, “People Like Us.” In it he recalls the pain he felt when he recognized why, in a news reporter’s words, so many Minnesotans had reacted much differently to the murder of a suburban white woman than they did to the many “poor and black or brown folks” who had been murdered up until that point: “This time,” the reporter said, “it’s someone like us.”⁹

We are all too human; or, to be more scripturally specific, we are fallen. Is the unity

Is the unity of all God’s offspring (see Acts 17:29), all people groups, in a godly harmony something that we will know only in the future (for this will no doubt happen)—or can real progress actually be made on earth now that we can know and experience . . . as it is in heaven?

of all God's offspring (see Acts 17:29), all people groups, in a godly harmony something that we will know only in the future (for this will no doubt happen)—or can real progress actually be made on earth now that we can know and experience . . . as it is in heaven?

The answer is “yes,” but there are some relatively specific things that are necessary to reach this destination.

Addressing the Matter of Racism, In-Group Preference, and “Self-Segregation”

First and foremost, Christians must deliberately and explicitly address these issues by means of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and good Christian theology.

Looking again to the 1994 LCMS CTCR document, we note that, “the apostles’ solution to this problem [of uniting Christian Jews and Gentiles] was not the removal of differences, but the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ who through his work on the cross made Christians one.” And when it goes on to say that “no one particular group is the best or more effective medium through which God can communicate to his creatures,”¹⁰ there is little in this that we should find objectionable.¹¹ God means for all races, ethnicities, and/or cultures to be transformed by the message of Jesus Christ and to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth.

Our very big elephant in the room, of course, is racism. As I noted in a recent blog post,¹² Benjamin Isaac argues that a kind of racism or a kind of “proto-racism” (falling short of the “scientific racism” which took hold in Western nations in the eighteenth to twentieth centuries), which holds that certain people groups are “born to be slaves,” has been with us since early antiquity in empires such as Greece and Rome. In any case, in our American context, the elephant is particularly big, given our nation’s blight of race-based chattel slavery, even among those who appeared to be Christians by any other external evaluation. The CTCR document chooses to bring to our attention that racism has been defined as “the theory or idea that there is a causal link between inherited physical traits and certain traits of personality, intellect, or *culture and, combined with it*, the notion that some races are inherently superior to others” (italics mine).¹³ On page 16 it is further explained that:

Racism also has a certain coherence to it. It draws conclusions about the nature, purpose, and/or destiny of the human family that are based on the theory that because of biological, hereditary, or cultural differences, other members of the human family are socially or morally inferior . . . inferior in human or social value.¹⁴

The critical point is that by making comments such as, “honor and esteem for all people will be reflected in the church’s public witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:17; Gal. 6:10; 2 Cor. 6:3),” and adding a battery of other strong statements, as

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well,¹⁵ the CTCR makes it clear that racist attitudes declaring some human beings to be of inferior worth are utterly unacceptable before God.

Jesus Christ destroys the barriers of separation (see Ephesians 2)! Knowing this, and also having Paul's description of the Body of Christ, as well as the picture of Revelation 7 vivid in their minds,¹⁶ who among the redeemed will not say "Amen!" to this?¹⁷

At the same time, just what does this mean for our lives now? What should this look like on the ground? How should damage done be repaired? Here, opinions and strategies will differ, and we also must get more deeply into issues of "in-group preference" and "self-segregation."

As with all things in the "Kingdom of the Left," where we must enter the political realm—where boundaries, force, and coercion are part and parcel of our actions and considerations—these matters can be very complicated. One need only look at how the influential twentieth-century Lutheran theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, handled issues of ethnicity and culture in the Christian church.¹⁸ In the *Bethel Confession*, largely written by Bonhoeffer to counter the Nazis in the early 1930s, we obtain a strong measure of clarity: "[Christians] must reject all attempts to place the natural phenomenon of race on the same level as the institutional orders that are grounded in a direct divine commandment to man." Furthermore, the church does not belong to nations (think here of various ethnic groups), nor is it really there for the nations, but *it exists for Christ*.¹⁹ It is precisely for reasons like these that it is never acceptable for churches, for example, not to welcome any human being who comes through its doors and, in repentance and faith, seeks formal membership in the Body of Christ.²⁰

The church does not belong to nations (think here of various ethnic groups), nor is it really there for the nations, but *it exists for Christ*.

From this understanding, all kinds of truly good practices will follow: a genuine desire to respect all those whom God has made in His image, a desire to talk with them and get to know them, and a desire to walk side-by-side with them, to help and even be helped, as the Lord grants the opportunity. We will be ready to continue to listen, think, learn, grow, and act when we hear or read hard words like these from Darryl Scriven:

The black church position amounts to a call for solidarity externalized and enacted. This imminent demand emerges from the empirical data of the past. It is easy to chastise black people for holding onto the pain of history but appeals for blacks to release this pain will not do. Black Christians understand this well. So, first, the rhetorical black questions to white evangelicals are:

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Where were you? Where were you when Emmett Till was killed? Where were you when Martin Luther King was slain? Where were you when Sixteenth St. Baptist Church was bombed, and four baby girls were killed in the blast? Where were you when Amadou Diallo was shot forty-one times and murdered at the hands of a brutal abuse of police power? Where were you when it was proven though DNA evidence that scores of innocent black inmates have been falsely accused and sent to death row or life in prison? Where were you when Klan activity led to lynchings, and vituperative speech in white circles targeting poor black and brown people as lazy, shiftless, and immoral? Where were your bodies and where were your voices crying against the demonic being perpetrated on your black brothers and sisters? Where were you, where are you now, and where will you be in the future?²¹

Really Loving the Neighbor Means Avoiding Marxist Types of Thought

Christians desire unity and oneness for all in Jesus Christ (see Eph 1:10–11). At the same time, what might happen if there were a teaching that imitated Christian concern for the poor and/or marginalized while seeking to undermine the natural institutions of marriage and the family?

There are popular teachings, such as those of Karl Marx, that borrow concepts from Christianity while excising faith in Jesus Christ and the Scriptures. In fact, it is important to note how many of today's contemporary movements share ideas with the Marxist worldview.²² These have also affected the church.

Surely, a great and awful challenge confronts us here, and yet we must be careful about how we talk and about the ideas that have currency among us. Clearly, few today dispute that systemic/structural/institutional racism was once endemic to wide swathes of American culture. At the same time, is there not room for caution when it comes to contemporary accusations of the same?

Should not demonstrable social injustices (not just powerful individual anecdotes, along with vague insinuations about systemic, structural, or institutional racism) be meticulously identified and clearly shown²³ so that those against racism can address matters with concrete plans and actions? In noting the great difficulties of reconciling races in America, Scriven understandably notes that “from the black church perspective, Sunday morning interracial worship is mostly a symbolic gesture if not combined with mutual cooperation in the face of injustice.”²⁴

The point is well-taken, even though I would respond in the following way: When Christians today hear about the white LCMS Lutherans who, back in 1957, wanted to deny a burial plot in the church cemetery to a young black boy from one of their congregations,²⁵ their disapproval, sadness, and great ire will rightly be aroused. This is important, and it is an indication of where things were at one time and how far things

have come. And yet, note an incident like this is a clear injustice in a very concrete and particular circumstance, where the conscious intent to exclude (for whatever reason) was not in dispute and was clearly discernible to all. It is for this reason that righteous indignation arose among some at that time, and today arises among most all of us!

Letting the Heavenly Culture, with God’s Eternal Law, Form Our Cultures

At this point, it will be helpful to look at how the CTCR document handles the issue of culture. It states that “culture consists of a group of assumptions about the world and according to which one organizes that world, defines, values, manipulates, and responds to that world,” raising this point because “racist thinking often diminishes or even rejects altogether the role of culture in defining the differences between human groups.”²⁶

Culture therefore finds its way into the CTCR understanding of racism: “Racism, as we have seen, is a *belief system* founded on the supposition that inherent, biological differences (or, in some cases, ethnic or cultural differences) among various human groups not only determine social or human achievement, *but also the value of individual members of the human family*”²⁷ (italics mine). Hence, on page 32 we read:

Racism in the church poisons and cripples all sincere efforts “to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). Physical characteristics *or cultural customs* are made to serve as “a dividing wall of hostility” that separates brothers and sisters in Christ—to which the only appropriate response must be “Is Christ divided?” (1 Cor. 1:13). (italics mine)

We note that the definition of racism offered by the CTCR certainly has the potential to confuse.²⁸ Why? Because in many cases it is, in fact, *cultural* differences that will most certainly influence social and human achievement.

As the CTCR document later points out, “all cultures, of course, contain structures and practices that are evil.”²⁹ Such cultural practices, of course, will inevitably create hostility and strife between groups *or even within groups*. In order to overcome the confusion here, it is helpful to argue for, in a sense, a “heavenly culture”³⁰ (including an “alien politics”!³¹) that must trump every earthly culture. It is precisely because each member of the human family, “God’s offspring” (Acts 17:29), is valuable and someone God intends to save (and hence make a member of the Body of Christ) that the church must “challenge all those aspects of culture that express the demonic and dehumanizing forces of evil, while affirming and celebrating the positive values of that culture.”³²

One must go beyond the culture that God creates in the church (the “Kingdom of the Right,” where forgiveness rules through God’s Word and Sacraments) to discuss

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the questions of the wider culture that the church inhabits and the politics thereof (the “Kingdom of the Left,” where coercion is always a factor, culminating in the wielding of the sword, literal or metaphorical, by the rulers of a society).³³

Is it simply wrong for a dominant culture—even a culture that many find highly attractive on a number of levels—to attempt to maintain and sustain itself though time? Can this necessarily be the case?³⁴ This is one reason why I think that the contemporary focus on the victimization of minorities, “institutional racism” on the part of “white culture,” and even the sin of things like “white flight” (which the CTCR document also decries) are often, in the final analysis, unhelpful. In order for true reconciliation and peace to take hold, one must, while calling for realistic assessments in the communities of others, also acknowledge the problems in one’s own communities.

Conclusion

Hopkins and Koschmann encourage us with the words that “It might be a surprise to some, but how to do effective urban ministry is well-established” . . . “love the people and build trusting relationships . . . [going] everywhere the people [go, live, work, or play].” This would not necessarily include a fervent activism, but it would undoubtedly include the need and desire to confront systemic injustices that God throws in one’s path, that one’s congregation, for example, may encounter in its own neighborhood and particular circumstances.³⁵ Indeed, there are all kinds of examples that we can look to and learn about that assure us that this is a hopeful and not futile route.³⁶

Beyond the issue of racism, effective cross-cultural outreach is, above all, a matter of commitment and real sacrifice—of time (including family time or time with those one generally desires to associate with!), treasure, and talent—that will not flag.

The church must also always proclaim the critical importance of the natural family, even as it offers help, including all kinds of other “social services,” to carry out the will of the Lord, as well as to gain friends, brothers and sisters in Christ. There is no need of any secularized “social gospel”; rather, what is needed are advocates who will counter all sin and injustices from deep Christian love. This means fighting injustice and hatred because it’s the right thing to do—not something that needs to be done for the sake of an abstract and Christ-less “social justice” or even just for the church to “survive and thrive” in its neighborhood and beyond.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it in the *Bethel Confession*, decidedly against the currents of our contemporary world: “Struggle is not the basic principle of the original creation, and a fighting attitude is therefore not a commandment by God established by the original creation.” Indeed. We need not doubt that the good fruit will come in God’s time, as Christ grants it.

Endnotes

¹ Quoted in Philip M. Bickel, *Joy to the Word: God's Global Mission for Local Christians* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989), 11–12.

² Bickel, *Joy to the Word*, 69. Interestingly, I am sure that it is statements like this from LCMS pastors that contributed to the disappointment I felt years later when reading about how those who started the LCMS had come to America so that they and their children could receive the Word and Sacraments. I thought: “*How could they not be thinking about Christ's love for all people?*” I think at this stage in my life, I had fallen off the other side of the horse, as Luther had discussed.

³ Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Racism and the Church: Overcoming the Idolatry* (St. Louis: LCMS, 1994), 31.

⁴ In CTCR, *Racism*, 22, footnote 53 and 26, footnote 71, an author is quoted who speaks about “white supremacy” in the context of “assimilation”; see page 39, as well, which speaks of persistent “institutional and cultural racism.”

I think that this conversation is lacking in not also treating these concepts in light of other universally recognized phenomena, such as “auto-segregation” and “in-group preference.” On the other hand, I think statements such as the following found on page 41 are more immediately helpful:

great sensitivity must be exercised so that certain people and/or groups are not categorized as people to be continuously “acted upon” by others in a way that implies that they are second-class members of the kingdom of God. Similarly, when we approach members of “minority” or “majority” groups with the Gospel of Christ, we must view them as people who are being called to full participation in the life and mission of the institutional church at all levels—local, national, and international.

⁵ See: Wikipedia contributors, “Auto-segregation,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Auto-segregation&oldid=912266259> (accessed September 12, 2019). This and similar subjects are also discussed a good deal by George M. Fredrickson in his book *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁶ Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Michael O. Emerson, George A. Yancey, and Karen Hwee Kim Chia, *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 130. These authors also state “while local congregations may in fact be basically homogenous, in no case whatsoever should their doors be closed to those of other homogenous units, either for worship or membership” (124).

The perspective of the authors of *United by Faith* is well encapsulated in the following quote:

To become an integrated multiracial congregation, the members must consider the main barriers that congregations face. Even for a willing congregation, a fundamental barrier is that multiracial churches labor against sociologically natural leanings. A church that does not aim to become multiracial almost never does. Churches that aim to do so fail most of the time. Those that become multiracial often revert to being uniraical. As discussed in detail in *Divided by Faith*, even apart from racism, a number of sociological factors—such as the need for symbolic boundaries and social solidarity, similarity principles, and the status quo bias—constantly drive

religious congregations to be racially homogeneous. These factors work similarly regardless of the racial group that predominates in the church. (170)

⁷ To get a sense of how compelling the Church Growth movement led by these men was for many mission-minded Christians, one need only consult this short article from the more liberal *Christian Century* praising this “conservative” movement: C. Wayne Zunkel, “Countering Critics of the Church Growth Movement,” *The Christian Century* 98, no. 31 (1981): 997–98.

⁸ See, e.g., 1 Timothy 5:9 and Romans 9:1–5. While uniting all persons in Christ, Christianity also counters the extreme cultural and political left, which would downplay the natural family and things like male headship, for example. These texts also leave us with a very positive picture of what we call ethnicity—a term that has both culture *and family ties* in mind. The fact that mothers have a natural inclination—and equipment—to nurture their young, that we might speak of our “fatherland,” and that “Nature produces a special love of offspring” (Cicero)—*these are all good things*. Men like Karl Marx, on the other hand, saw the natural family—and hence nations—as something to be overcome. I think that Marxism seeks to do these things to the family for the same reason it seeks to eliminate natural marriage: these are *living icons of the church*.

⁹ David Lawrence Grant, “People Like Us,” in *A Good Time for the Truth*, 196. Grant’s pain is also seen in his frustration regarding Minnesotans’ attitudes towards immigrants: “the unspoken rules that the newcomers are supposed to intuit include these: ‘Assimilate, and do it quickly; understand that, if you’re still having problems after you’ve had a couple of years or so to settle in, then we’re going to start seeing your very presence here as a problem’” (199).

¹⁰ CTCR, *Racism*, 31, 33.

¹¹ Even if one might argue that this is not the case now, there is nothing in nature that would make this intrinsically so.

¹² See <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/justandsinner/is-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador-the-moral-shakedown-artist-of-mexico-city-or-is-he-right/>.

¹³ CTCR, *Racism*, 10. Italics mine. Note that the second part of the definition is critical, as evidenced by this further comment by the CTCR in a footnote on page 15 of that document:

Not all stereotypes, of course, are false, nor do they necessarily have a negative function or purpose. Blacks may well jump higher than Asians and Norwegians are probably taller than Mexicans, but such generalizations are harmless as long as they involve no judgment as to the relative worth or merit of groups being so compared.

Elsewhere, on page 29, we helpfully read, “in racist ideology the worth or value of an individual or group is determined principally, if not solely, by genetic origin and/or biological characteristics.” By way of contrast, note this definition from [dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com): “a belief or doctrine that inherent differences among the various human racial groups determine cultural or individual achievement, usually involving the idea that one’s own race is superior and has the right to dominate others or that a particular racial group is inferior to the others.” The word *usually* is important here—in *this definition it is not necessary for there to be racism*. This is clearly wrong, given that persons are glad to talk about the prevalence of certain natural, inherent, intrinsic characteristics in different racial and ethnic groups—of course usually positive ones!—in certain contexts. For example, outside of the context of discussions of racism, most are usually happy to admit that things like intelligence, personality, temperament, etc., appear to run in families.

¹⁴ CTCR, *Racism*, 16, 17. For more thoughts about this important definition, see Cameron A. MacKenzie, Norman E. Nagel, Ken Ray Schurb, and James W. Voelz, “Racism and the Church: A Minority Report” (April 9, 1994), [St. Louis]: [publisher not identified], 1994, and George Frederickson, *Racism: A Short History*, 1–12, 154–155.

¹⁵ CTCR, *Racism*, 39. Also: “Racist lines of demarcation between human beings declaring some to be lesser members of humankind are . . . a blasphemous affront to our Creator” (28); likewise, “if anyone should claim superiority over others and treat them as inferior because of racial origin or characteristics, we may add, that person, too, has a god, but not the one true God” (9); “Self-indulgent pride in ‘race,’ . . . must be regarded as idolatry in one of its crassest forms. It is an attempt to be ‘like God’” (30); “Deeply problematic . . . is any claim that one particular culturally shaped response to God’s goodness and grace is in and of itself superior to others” (34); “The unity of the church transcends every race and culture and is to be manifested in the full acceptance and inclusion of all peoples” (38); “No one particular group is the best or more effective medium through which God can communicate to his creatures” (33).

¹⁶ See also Rev. 5:8–9; 7:9, 10; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15 (verses noted in the CTCR document).

¹⁷ It is not only Christians who want to create a picture like this, *or at least find some utility in promoting it*, but many non-Christians as well. In the works of Tacitus (Annals 11.24.1) from the first and second century AD, we pick up on his statement in the debate over whether or not to allow men from Gallia Comata to attain public office and hence membership in the Senate. According to Tacitus himself, the emperor Claudius held the following position, which I have the impression was rather unique in its day:

The oldest of my ancestors, Clausius, was originally a Sabine. He was adopted at the same time into the Roman state and into the patrician class. These ancestors encourage me to follow similar ideas in governing the Republic, by relocating here anything of excellence. You are not, of course, ignorant of the fact that the family of the Julii come from Alba, the Coruncanii, from Camerium, the Porcii, from Tusculum, and—to pass over ancient history—men have been accepted into the senate from Etruria, Lucania, and the whole of Italy. Then, the very expansion of the state to the Alps united not just individual men but whole lands and tribes under our name. There was a firm peace at home and our influence abroad was strong at the time when the people living beyond the Po were given citizenship, when we accepted the strongest provincials to support our weak empire under the pretext of spreading our legions over the world. Are we truly sorry that the Balbi have come to us from Spain? That no less remarkable men have come from Gallia Narbonensis? Their descendants are still with us and their love of our country is no less than ours.

¹⁸ For a very thoughtful article from a pastor of an ethnic church, see the following: <https://veritasdomain.wordpress.com/2018/08/30/ethnic-churches-a-more-better-way-than-bashing-them/>.

¹⁹ A more complete part of the quote from that document, was made possible by the author’s friend, Pastor Holger Sonntag, translator:

Christ is sent as the Redeemer of the *whole* world. This is why he commissions the church to bring the gospel to *all* nations. As it carries out this commission, it enters

into the forms and structures of the nations of their time. It can live among a multitude of nations as the *one* church regardless of political boundaries. It can be a national church within the boundaries of a realm regardless of ethnicity. It can be church within a certain ethnicity while transcending political boundaries. It can be church within a certain ethnicity without transcending political boundaries, but within the boundaries of this ethnicity. Its external form is not subject to duress, but is determined by the only rule, namely, “by all means to gain some” [1 Cor. 9:22]. This is why it becomes a Jew to the Jews, a Greek to the Greeks, a Chinese to the Chinese, a German to the Germans. The manner and extent of such entering into time can be determined only based on the commission of the church. The proclamation of the church always remains the alien grain of seed that is planted in the ground. Where the content of a specific time becomes the content of the proclamation the gospel is betrayed, because it is no longer said *to* the time, but absorbed *by* it. . . .

We reject the false doctrine that the church belongs to the nation, or that it is there for the nation. The church does not belong to the nation, but to Christ. He alone is its Lord. Only in intrepid obedience to him it truly serves the nation in which it lives. It is there for every member of the nation, to gain it for the congregation of Jesus. (italics in document)

²⁰ In an unfortunately high number of cases, this kind of core truth was not learned by many American Christian churches until the 1950s and 1960s. In our American context, what the 1994 CTCR document goes on to say makes the point effectively for this time and place: “There is no ‘Anglo-Caucasian,’ ‘African-American,’ no ‘Hispanic-American,’ no ‘Vietnamese-American,’ or other ‘hyphenated’ citizen in the sight of God, as if to imply that some are more worthy than others to join the company of those who call on his name” (38).

What about when one’s neighborhood changes? Christians really should have a desire to be a neighborhood congregation, whatever the community is (and, perhaps, when it comes to one’s national politics, supporting an approach of slower and more limited immigration in the Kingdom of the Left, if one thinks that is necessary). This is not an *adiaphoron*. The local Christian congregation should indeed be connected to its local community. There is nothing wrong with following members who leave the neighborhood, but, ideally, they should all be followed *with additional church plants*. Note that all of this also demonstrates, arguably, just how important it is to have theology and worship practices that are consistent throughout a church body so that members do not feel like they cannot attend their local, neighborhood church because of a “worship style” they find to be “beyond the pale.”

²¹ Darryl Scriven, “The Call to Blackness in American Christianity” in Hawkins, J. Russell and Phillip Luke Sinitiere, *Christians and the Color Line: Race and Religion After Divided by Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 257.

²² See, for example, the blog post that I wrote here: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/justandsinner/is-todays-christianity-increasingly-filtered-through-marxist-categories/>.

²³ This is not to insist that there is nothing to the idea that “the achievement gap in education, job equality, racial profiling, police brutality against people of color, and the U.S. prison system” derive from “institutional forms of racism in America’s cities” (Mark Koschmann, *Finding Their Footing in the Changing City: Protestant and Catholic Congregations Adapt to the New Urban Environment in Post-World War II Chicago* [dissertation, St. Louis: Saint Louis University, 2018], 37), but simply that for many, this is

hardly obvious and even *appears very wrong*. Therefore, *great* patience and a concern to present strong evidence may be required to convince many that this is, in fact, the case. One of the more recent and highly publicized attempts to do this is Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crowe* (2010), even as Jason Riley offers criticism versus Alexander in his book, *Please Stop Helping Us* (2016), pages 64–66. (See also pp. 70–74, where he also sums up Manhattan Institute scholar Heather Mac Donald's work, at odds with Alexander's, to that point.)

²⁴ Scriven, "Call to Blackness," 261.

²⁵ Koschmann, *Finding Their Footing in the Changing City*, 32–33.

²⁶ CTCR, *Racism*, 15.

²⁷ CTCR, *Racism*, 28. Italics mine.

²⁸ Again, the introduction of culture into the sentence above can certainly leave a very confusing impression. The CTCR goes so far as to say the following:

Racism may also manifest itself at the level of *culture*. This is the view that all cultures are inferior to one's own culture, and that those inferior cultures consistently produce inferior results. Viewed from a historical perspective, cultural racism is sometimes referred to as "cultural imperialism or cultural colonialism."
(17)

Concerns that a given community might have about the prevailing cultural customs of another group should not, and really *must not, necessarily* be related to racism in any way. More careful language, I think, is needed. After all, the apostle Paul is certainly not wrong to urge Timothy to confront the Cretans, whom he administers with a stinging, "politically incorrect," proverb.

In like fashion, minority groups certainly speak of cultural customs of dominant cultures, which they see as less than helpful. In fact, these customs are not superior to their own, *but are really and truly inferior*, producing as they do inferior results: real hostility between different groups. In the book *Aliens in the Promised Land: Why Minority Leadership Is Overlooked in White Christian Churches and Institutions*, editor Anthony B. Bradley speaks of a church that is "culturally captive to white Western norms" (16). Bradley also quotes Elizondo, maintaining that "Whites set the norms and project the images of success, achievement, acceptability, normalcy, and status" (24–25). Implicated along with racism are "white, Western, cultural norms" such as *individualism, consumerism, materialism, comfort, ease, professional success, and comfortable church buildings* (21, italics mine). This is "idolatrous worship" (21). Furthermore, there are those who do attempt to be "culturally white," who some call "sell-outs" or "tokens," participating in a system of "white privilege." They never really have any authority or power (23–25). Whether one considers this kind of talk a species of "cultural Marxism" or not, *the point here is that this particular criticism of "white culture" is not seen as coming from any racist impulse, but rather, it appears, from some kind of objective moral standard.*

²⁹ Nevertheless, these kinds of statements are in some real tension with the sociologically-based practice of "emic analysis" praised in CTCR, *Racism*, 14. This practice states "the principle that every culture must be analyzed and understood in terms of itself, not on the basis of another culture." This raises, for example, the following question: Do the Ten Commandments represent an aspect of a "heavenly culture" that is applicable trans-historically and trans-culturally or not?

³⁰ The phrase “heavenly culture” applied in this way, as far as I know, is mine. And far be it for a “heavenly culture” to be a “dominant group’s oppression” that includes “racism, economic exploitation, discrimination, and ethnocentrism,” (117) which the 2004 Oxford University Press book, *United by Faith*, mentions. To be sure, in the first three hundred years of the church, it was no “dominant group” in the Roman world! In describing the unique theology of Latin America, the book says in this view of “liberation theology,” “only dominant groups are in a position to say that faith and politics are unrelated, or should be” (116). Also, interestingly, the authors state that “according to liberation theology, the gospel must be contextualized to cultural groups and their situations. Ultimately, for each cultural group, the gospel must be liberated from dominant group interpretations” (117). All of this information is found in the chapter that puts forward the best case for uniracial or uniethnic churches, where cultural groups “self-segregate” in the midst of a dominant culture. One of the core arguments is that in these churches minority groups can find refuge and shared meaning, escaping the oppression and racism of the majority culture (the context for this discussion is America), and find positions of leadership and other means of exercising their God-given gifts. (Attaining some kind of status is particularly important here, as well as a more comfortable place to find relationships, including marital ones, and social connections.)

Interestingly, a highly regarded new book by a man whose parents were Bangladeshi-born immigrants, *Melting Pot or Civil War: A Son of Immigrants Makes the Case against Open Borders* (2018), argues that any immigrants brought to America should, in part, be, in short, assimilated as soon as possible. (He also argues that they should, generally speaking, be those who will be capable of becoming middle class). This means, for instance, that their opportunities to be around their own previous cultural groups should be more limited. Perhaps, if this were to be a nation’s policy, an exception could be made for immigrant group churches, which can also continue to maintain aspects of the immigrant’s previous cultural heritage. In fact, we read in *United by Faith* that “Illsoo Kim . . . sees the [Korean] churches as ‘the substitute for ethnic neighborhoods’ for Korean immigrants, who tend to be residentially assimilated” (119). Regarding “Asian Americans” in general, the authors note that “Latinos . . . are technically still able to worship together in Spanish-speaking monolingual congregations. Asian Americans, on the other hand, can claim no unifying common language other than English.” Indeed, “the large degree of ethnic separatism among Asian American congregations is simply due to the enormous number of internal differences,” (121) even as the longer one resides in the United States, the ethnic attachment weakens and “is replaced by a stronger racial identification” (122).

³¹ Theodore Hopkins and Mark Koschmann, “Faithful Witness in Wounded Cities: Congregations and Race in America,” *Lutheran Mission Matters* 24, no. 2 (2016): https://www.lsfm.global/uploads/files/LMM_5-16_HopkinsandKoschmann.pdf.

³² CTCR, *Racism*, 41.

³³ This culminates in the wielding of the sword, literal or metaphorical, by the rulers of a society. God works in both ways here, and we must call them both good, even if, to take the most extreme examples, things like the death penalty for those doing evil and even “just wars” could possibly be good only *in a fallen world*.

³⁴ In the section explaining “ethnocentrism,” we read these helpful words: “*The term ‘ethnocentrism’ refers to what may be a positive appreciation of and preference for one’s own culture. From birth human beings are generally led to believe that their own cultural ways are the best, if not the only way of going about life. People are not only aware of their native culture, but they are also emotionally attached to it. In fact, it is doubtful if any cultural system*

could survive without some degree of ethnocentrism” (13, italics mine). See also the remarks on page 38: “to affirm a particular race and culture does not imply separatism. Rather, such affirmation is a way of identifying those persons whom the Lord has given to his church, together with their special gifts, for the benefit of all.”

Immediately following these words, however, we read this:

But ethnocentrism may easily degenerate into that “view of things in which one’s own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it.” This way of thinking becomes problematic when *the standards of one culture become the basis for making selections and determining opportunities for people from a variety of racial, cultural, and ethnic groupings*. When institutions sanction and implement these standards, forced assimilation and/or exclusion result. (14, italics mine)

Page 26 speaks of “racial disadvantage” stating “often more difficult to recognize are the subtle and varied forms by which the heritage of racism continues to disadvantage members of minority groups.” The CTCR goes on:

By virtue of the historical realities of racism, racial minorities do not have the same legacy of advantage as do white Americans. Therefore, in our increasingly pluralistic and diverse society, to insist upon mere access to already existing institutions or to advance “equal opportunity” in those institutions may be only a way of perpetuating the disadvantage of a prior inequality. *Racial disadvantage becomes increasingly intense and offensive if access to society’s institutions demands conformity to ethnocentric norms unrelated to the common goods and services for which these institutions exist*. We may cite, for example, the case of the California judge who prohibited the use of the Spanish language anywhere in the courthouse, not only in the performance of official duties, but during coffee breaks. (27, italics mine)

Is this kind of thing necessarily racism? What has happened to the evidently valid concern that a cultural system will survive (perhaps with some of its evils purged?), as expressed earlier by the CTCR? Truly, all of the above examples leave more questions than answers. In my mind, being a part of a culture entails happily learning its language and its expected norms—at the very least so as not to tax and burden those opening up their doors to you! What, specifically, is wrong with “When in Rome do as the Romans do”?

See also the related discussion on pages 14 and 15 of the CTCR document of the different possible meanings of words like “majority” and “minority” when it comes to groups. Frederickson also notes that “the struggle against racism requires that stigmatized groups have . . . political empowerment in proportion to their numbers,” (147) which suggests that even as he identifies racism with power, any power a majority group holds over a minority group is not necessarily racism, and in fact, seems to be what he expects to be the case, even justifiably so.

³⁵ Hopkins and Koschmann, “Faithful Witness in Wounded Cities,” 248, 249, 251, 259.

³⁶ See the work cited in the previous footnote. Also, there are well-known books titled *Divided by Faith* (2001) and *United by Faith* (2004), where one can get some helpful ideas and practical examples, such as the importance of ethnic ministers and representation in other positions of leadership, visiting persons in homes, compromising in congregational decisions, and recognizing that there are strengths and weaknesses in each culture. Also, in *United by*

Faith, we read that “multiracial congregations need to embrace the important [social] functions provided in the context of uniracial congregations” (144).

I diverge a bit from the main thesis of *United by Faith*, namely, that Christian churches *should*, when possible, be multiethnic. “While racial separation may be sociologically comfortable, we do not accept it as ordained by God” (131). While I agree that it is not ordained by God, I also think we should nevertheless think critically about *the relative stability* of nations, which derive from the Greek word “*ethnos*” (see Acts 17) and prayerfully wrestle with the implications of this.

The authors make it clear that one of the main reasons they say what they say is that Christian churches can help reduce racial strife and division increasingly present in the country (see 1–3). Here, the church should lead in the process of cultural integration, not follow. At the same time, however, might not one also suggest that Christians might feel led politically to, for example, drastically slow the rate of immigration in their nation in such a situation? By way of contrast, the authors of *United by Faith* give every impression that the United States—or any political state or nation at all?—should not seek to preserve its basic cultural and ethnic heritage by requiring assimilation, i.e., by being “dominant.” This is exemplified in the fact that, while talking about ethnic churches, they say “some congregations can provide ways to meet the particular needs of these [ethnic] groups while *integrating* them into a multiracial community” (132; see 135), later even commenting that “people of color must effect social change *by working against all dominant group members* . . . [and that] structures must be created that give equal voice to nondominant groups” (137).

To clarify, I have no trouble with preparing persons for *assimilating* into the decidedly multiracial society that is America; however, when I read “dominant group” in this context, for example, I note that it gives every impression that something labeled “white culture” is being equated with “majority American culture.” The problem here is that “majority American culture” includes many minorities who, for the most part, align with it (for example, American ideals of small government and those freedoms outlined in the Constitution). What this means is that I do have real concerns about a “multicultural” or “multiethnic” society. Again, an honest and perhaps very difficult conversation about passages like Acts 17 needs to be had.

Getting back to churches, specifically, my own thesis is that multiracial churches are indeed a greater blessing than uniracial churches. As *United by Faith* says, multiracial congregations “possess the potential for drawing individuals who are comfortable with a multiracial social atmosphere and individuals from a uniracial social atmosphere who become interested in surrounding themselves with persons from other races” (86). Further, I agree heartily that this blessing is one that willing individuals and even congregations should be encouraged to vigorously strive after—but maintain that by introducing the word “*should*,” one can potentially introduce an unnecessary and unwarranted burden on churches free in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is one thing to say that they must welcome those who come in their doors *and another to say that they must take the path of extremely vigorous multicultural and multiracial outreach.* Again, see this article from a pastor of an ethnic church: <https://veritasdomain.wordpress.com/2018/08/30/ethnic-churches-a-more-better-way-than-bashing-them/>.

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