

A Pastoral Letter on Racism and the Gospel

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May 4, 2016

Just after 3 o'clock in the afternoon on Tuesday, May 3, 2016, in French Camp, Mississippi, the The Presbytery of the Mississippi Valley – PCA[<https://www.facebook.com/www.presbyterymvalley.org/>](https://www.facebook.com/www.presbyterymvalley.org/) (PMV) unanimously approved an overture to the PCA General Assembly “Confession of the Sin of Racism, and Commitment to Christian Unity,” an official correspondence to the churches of the Presbytery entitled “A Pastoral Letter on Racism and the Gospel,” and a bibliography called “Suggested Resources on Race and our History for the Presbytery of the Mississippi Valley.”

A number of folks have asked to see this material, which the presbytery has wholeheartedly approved for general distribution. This is not an “official” version (the Clerk of Presbytery will make that available in PDF, and probably place it on the presbytery website and elsewhere) but it’s close.

A Pastoral Letter on Racism and the Gospel

To the churches of the Presbytery of the Mississippi Valley (PCA)

Dear Friends,

Last year, the 43rd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) considered a personal resolution dealing with the sin of racism as it pertains to our church, both in history and in the present. Though action was deferred on it until the 44th General Assembly (which will be held in Mobile, Alabama in June), our presbytery felt it wise to give careful consideration to this matter ourselves. So a committee was appointed to report to our presbytery on the issue.

Your presbytery, having received that committee’s report and recommendations, and having thoroughly discussed this issue in three different presbytery meetings, adopted an Overture to the 44th General Assembly of the PCA on “Confession of the Sin of Racism, and Commitment to Christian Unity” and now writes to you this pastoral letter.

As a presbytery, we not only want to address the past, we especially want to speak to the present and give biblical counsel and encouragement to our people and churches so that we may “all attain to the unity of the faith” (Ephesians 4:13). During our long discussions, there were moving testimonies of hearts changed, confessions of and repentances for racist language, attitudes and actions, expressions of brotherly forgiveness, and admissions by some that they are reticent to even talk about the issue of racism in the church for fear of the controversy that might ensue. In short, it became ever more clear to us that racism remains a current and ongoing pastoral issue, and that truly pursuing biblical racial reconciliation is not merely a matter of acknowledging the

wrongs of the past but of endeavoring to “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly” with our God (Micah 6:8) in the here and now.

Your presbytery addresses the issue of racism in the same spirit as the PCA Pastoral Letter on the Gospel and Race (2004):

... we do so not because it is politically correct, or out of any pressure from outward society, but simply because it is our desire that the convicting and restoring power of God’s grace in the Gospel be applied to the manifestations of racial sin of which we ourselves are guilty, and that those who experience the negative effects of these sins might know the healing power of God’s grace – that we who have been reconciled to God through Christ might become together a holy temple in the Lord, reconciled to one another by His Spirit (Ephesians 2:20-22).

Because racism is a loaded term, and some suspect an unbiblical agenda when it is invoked, we want to say precisely what we mean by racism. Racism is the denial of the image of God (Genesis 1:26, 27) and its implications to someone of another ethnicity. Racism in the church is a contradiction of the visible unity of all believers in Christ (Ephesians 2:11-22, Revelation 5:9, 7:9). Racism inside and outside the church is a contradiction of Jesus’ command to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:31, Luke 10:25-37, esp. 29, 37), and of God’s creation of all people in his image (Genesis 1:27, Acts 17:26). So theologically, racism entails a denial of the biblical doctrines of creation, man, the communion of saints and is disobedience to the moral law. We will not mince words. Racism is not only sin, serious sin, it is heresy.

Our final rule of faith and practice, the Holy, Inspired, Inerrant Word of God, The Bible and our subordinate doctrinal standard, The Westminster Confession of Faith, ground our treatment of all people with dignity, justice and kindness in **the doctrine of our creation in the image of God**. God created our first parents in his own image (Genesis 1:26, 27, WCF 4.2), and therefore all human beings are of the same race. Scripture says: “The God who made the world and everything in it, . . . gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth” (Act 17:24-26). Because of this, Christians are to treat every human being with equal dignity as made in the image of God. So both the biblical doctrine of creation and the biblical doctrine of man inform the Christian’s treatment of everyone, including people of other and minority ethnicities.

The Bible and our Westminster Confession of Faith also ground our treatment of all people with dignity, justice, impartiality and kindness in **the moral law and Jesus’ command to love our neighbors**. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament explicitly command love for our neighbor. Moses is very specific about what love of neighbor entails: “You shall not oppress your neighbor You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. . . . You shall not hate your brother in your heart, . . . lest you incur sin because of him. . . . but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD” (Lev 19:13-18). Neighbor love, then, according to God’s moral law, exemplified in the

fifth through tenth commandments, calls for impartial kindness and justice to be shown to all, an equal concern for the well-being of others. Moses grounds this behavior in God's character (Leviticus 19:3, 4, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18) and our responsibility as believers to imitate him "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). And this neighbor love was not reserved for Israelites only. Moses explicitly extends it to foreigners: "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 19:33-34).

Jesus reiterates this command in the New Testament (e.g., Mark 12:31, Luke 10:25-37). After summarizing the ethical requirements of the moral law of God for the believer's life by saying: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27), Jesus is met with the self-justifying question: "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). In other words, the lawyer who queried Jesus was seeking a delimitation of the demands of neighbor love. Jesus answers with the story of the Good Samaritan, and makes it clear that the better question is "Am I a good neighbor?" Jesus' application of the story shows that those who obey God's command to love neighbor don't attempt to delimit the obligation of neighbor love, but rather show mercy indiscriminately and even at significant personal cost (Luke 10:36-37). On this basis, Christians are enjoined by the moral law and by Jesus' direct exhortation to show love, care, concern for the well-being of, justice, mercy and kindness to all people, with impartiality.

The Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC) exposition of the moral law, from Question 91 to 152, has much to teach us about this current discussion, and especially Questions 122-152. We daresay that if the commands and prohibitions of this section of the Westminster Larger Catechism had been but applied to our relationships with other and minority ethnicities, it would have meant a death knell for racism among us. WLC 131 tells us of our duty "to regard the dignity and worth of each other." WLC 130 warns against an "inordinate seeking of" ourselves and our "own glory, ease, profit, or pleasure." WLC 132 condemns as sin "the undervaluing of the worth, . . . and usurping pre-eminence one over another." Racism is rooted precisely in the failure to obey in these areas. WLC 135 and 136 especially speak to our treatment of one another.

What are the duties required in the sixth commandment? The duties required in the sixth commandment are all careful studies, and lawful endeavors, to preserve the life of ourselves and others by resisting all thoughts and purposes, subduing all passions, and avoiding all occasions, temptations, and practices, which tend to the unjust taking away the life of any; by just defence thereof against violence, . . . by charitable thoughts, love, compassion, meekness, gentleness, kindness; peaceable, mild and courteous speeches and behaviour; forbearance, readiness to be reconciled, patient bearing and forgiving of injuries, and requiting good for evil; comforting and succouring the distressed and protecting and defending the innocent.

If Bible-believing Presbyterians had carefully studied and lawfully endeavored “to preserve the life of ourselves and others,” including mistreated ethnic minorities, “by resisting all thoughts and purposes, subduing all passions, and avoiding all occasions, temptations, and practices, which tend to the unjust taking away the life of any” and defending others against unjust violence as WLC 135 enjoins, the history of Presbyterianism in U.S. culture from Reconstruction, through Jim Crow and the Civil Rights era would read differently. If we today will relate to other and minority ethnicities with “charitable thoughts, love, compassion, meekness, gentleness, kindness; peaceable, mild and courteous speeches and behaviour; forbearance, readiness to be reconciled, patient bearing and forgiving of injuries, and requiting good for evil; comforting and succouring the distressed and protecting and defending the innocent” our testimony will adorn God’s sanctifying work in us and display true love of neighbor. And WLC 136 furthermore forbids the “hatred,” “oppression” and “whatsoever else tends to the destruction of the life of any.”

The Bible and our Westminster Confession of Faith ground our treatment of fellow Christians as brothers and sisters, joint heirs, as blood-bought family in **the doctrine of the communion of the saints**. Jesus commissioned his church to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). The language of “all nations” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη [panta ta ethnē]) highlights the connection of Jesus’ great commission to the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4) and the Gentile mission of the church. The command to make disciples from “all nations” indicates that Jesus intended us to go to all the peoples of earth with the Gospel, and that he intended his church to include disciples from all peoples. “Don’t just go to the Jewish people, but to all the Gentile peoples,” Jesus is saying. He reiterates this in Acts 1:8 when he tells his disciples that they will be his witnesses “to the end of the earth.”

The New Testament repeatedly celebrates the fact that Jesus’ redemptive work has brought believing Jews and Gentiles, once separated by the ceremonial law, into one body, the church. No passage states this more clearly than Ephesians 2:11-22

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows

into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Paul indicates here that Christians of all ethnicities have been made heirs of the covenant promises, have been brought into one body with all other believers, are members of the family of God and part of the one holy temple that the Lord is building. All of this is the result of the work of Christ. To deny the multi-ethnicity of the church is to deny an accomplishment of the atoning work of Jesus Christ. It is a contradiction of what the Gospel does in reconciling all believers “to God in one body through the cross” (Ephesians 2:16). A policy of segregation in the church, or indifference to it, is thus inimical to the Gospel and to the purposes of the saving work of Christ, since all who are united to Christ are united to all who are united to Christ, no matter their ethnicity. The work of Christ creates the communion of the saints, and the church visible is to bear witness to the reality of that communion.

WCF 26.1-2 speaks directly to this

All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head, by His Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with Him in His grace, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory: and, being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other’s gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man.

Saints by profession are bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities. Which communion, as God offers opportunity, is to be extended unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus.

Racism in the church denies the reality of this communion of the saints, disrupts the unity of Christ’s body, resists one of the purposes of his redemptive work, tarnishes the witness of the church, harms members of the body for whom we are called on in WCF 26.1 to perform “such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man,” and refuses to extend communion “unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus.” Can you imagine the members of the Assembly of Divines hearing that people who had subscribed these words (from WCF 26.1-2) as a statement of their faith and theological commitments had argued for segregating the church on the basis of race, had refused Christians from different ethnic minorities admission to worship services, and were indifferent to the well-being (in church and society) of fellow Christians who are ethnic minorities? They would have been horrified.

In sum, Racism fails to affirm, explicitly or implicitly, in belief and/or practice (1) that all people, of every ethnicity, are fully human and made in the image of God, (2) that no ethnicity is inherently superior to another, and (3) that the Bible provides no grounds for the forced or institutional

segregation of ethnicities. Racism is, of course, the sin of persons, but it can become endemic to cultures and societies. When it becomes so, very often those who are dominant in those cultures and societies are blind to its presence, pervasiveness and consequences.

Racism may manifest itself in belief, prejudice and practice. Racist belief asserts the superiority of one ethnicity over another or others, and hence attempts to segregate the “superior” from the “inferior” ethnicity/ies. Racist prejudice makes sweeping negative assessments of ethnicities from the standpoint of condescension and based on stereotypical, preconceived and uncharitable opinion. Racist practice treats people inequitably and unjustly because of ethnicity. Racism is condemned by our sole final authority in faith and practice, the Holy Scriptures, and by our subordinate standards, the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms.

So, if racism is sin, serious sin, heresy and not merely an issue of the past but a matter that needs our current and ongoing attention, what should we do? What practical steps can we take? An issue this controversial, a problem this big, can seem daunting and can leave us feeling like there is nothing we can do. But there are important, simple things that any and every believer can do to begin engaging this significant challenge.

As believers, we can learn, pray, acknowledge, relate and commit. Here is what we mean by those five things.

Most of us in the PCA churches of the Presbytery of the Mississippi Valley are white, though we live in a state with a population that is 37% black (and the Jackson metropolitan area is about 50% black). Denominationally, less than 2% of PCA pastors are black. We don't have statistics on the ethnicity of our church membership in PMV, but ethnic minorities are probably in the low single digits percentage-wise. One of the things that this means is that we will have to make a deliberate effort to gain another perspective on this issue outside of our own “bubble.” Relatively few of us have close friends of other ethnicities, especially in the context of our local churches. That means that understanding the perspective of fellow Bible-believing Presbyterians, who are of a different ethnicity, and with whom we have an actual relationship, on the issue of racial reconciliation, is a challenge.

This means that the very first thing we have to do is want to learn. We don't know what we need to know about this issue.

Learn

Read the PMV overture on “Confession of the Sin of Racism, and Commitment to Christian Unity.” Keep up with the other overtures on this issue coming to the PCA General Assembly. Especially take the time to read the PCA General Assembly's “The Gospel and Race: A Pastoral Letter” (2004).

Read the material mentioned in the PMV “Suggested Resources on Race and our History for the Presbytery of the Mississippi Valley.” This will take a while. There is a lot to chew on.

Seek to learn from Reformed, African American perspectives on these issues. Talk to black PCA ministers, elders and members. Tell them you want to learn from them. Listen. Go online and listen to their sermons. Read Reformed, black writers on the internet. Here are four places you can go online to do this.

Ellis Perspectives <http://www.ellisperspectives.com/> Dr. Carl and Karen Ellis. Dr. Ellis is a black PCA minister, teaches for RTS, and his wife Karen is an expert in the persecuted church.

The Front Porch <http://thefrontporch.org/> Where black Reformed ministers talk about the Bible, the Black Church, Culture/Ethnicity, Family, God, the Gospel, Leadership, Missions, Preaching, Salvation, Shepherding, Theology, Women and Worship.

The Reformed African American Network

<https://www.raanetwork.org/>

Here you will encounter the voices of many younger, black, Reformed people (and others committed to a multi-ethnic church) talking about the Bible, church, race, culture and current events.

Pure Church

<https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/thabitianyabwile/>

This is the blog of Thabiti Anyabwile, a black pastor of Anacostia River Church in southeast Washington, DC.

For pastors, elders and church members wanting to dig deep into a biblical understanding of race and to get perspective on how racialized our society has been and is, three books would provide a huge help.

Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race* in *New Studies in Biblical Theology*, edited by D.A. Carson (IVP Academic, 2003).

This is a book written by a conservative, Bible-believing scholar and edited by a renowned evangelical theologian. It is a study of the Bible's teaching on ethnicity in the sweep of redemptive history (from Genesis to Revelation) and it convincingly shows that God's grand saving plan finds its culmination in the one people of God, at the consummation of history, depicted as a multi-ethnic congregation, gathered together in the worship of the one, triune God, around his throne. When you realize that this is where the history of the people of God is going, it changes your understanding of the here and now.

Jarvis J. Williams, *One New Man: The Cross and Racial Reconciliation in Pauline Theology* (B&H Academic, 2010).

Dr. Williams is a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY and teaches for Reformed Theological Seminary as well. In this book Dr. Williams, who is African American,

argues that Christ's death for our sin is God's only solution to racial hostility and the only provision for racial reconciliation. This is precisely what most of the founding fathers of the PCA thought and taught. This book will help you understand what the gospel says about race and race relations, which is hugely important since we often allow cultural prejudices to shape our understanding of race instead of scripture.

Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford University Press, 2001)

Dr. Mike Campbell, former Senior Pastor of Redeemer Church (PCA), Jackson, MS recommended this book to the faculty of RTS to read a few years ago. The RTS Jackson faculty read and discussed it, with much profit. It attempts to explain why white evangelicals in general don't view racism and racial reconciliation the way black Christians do. It is very illuminating on that front. Emerson and Smith are respected sociologists and are fair-minded in the way they present their case. You don't have to agree with everything in the book to benefit greatly from its perspective. For instance, if you don't understand the difference between "racist" and "racialized" you are probably blind to important presuppositions you are bringing to this discussion.

In all of this, we should aim to better understand our presuppositions, our history and our context. If we are unaware of our presuppositions, lack knowledge of the history of racism in the churches, and have failed to scrutinize how our context may have unwittingly influenced our attention to and understanding of how the Bible speaks to this issue, we will be hampered in our consideration and discussion.

Pray

There is nothing more important we can do than to pray. Racial reconciliation is impossible in our own strength. Only God and the Gospel can avail. And that means we need to pray. In prayer we acknowledge our own powerlessness, but at the same time acknowledge God's power to act, save and change.

The following prayer suggestions assume our social and geographical location, in Mississippi and Louisiana, in the Southeastern United States in the early years of the 21st century, with all the history of racial conflict that entails. Hence, these suggestions will focus more on black-white relations in our churches, than on other ethnicities (though much will be transferable to prayer in other situations and for other peoples). These prayers also take into consideration that most of us in PCA churches in Mississippi and Louisiana are white, and they ask us to bear in mind fellow believers who are not.

Praise God as the one true God, creator of all humanity, maker of every person of every tribe, tongue, people and nation, in His own image.

Praise God for his saving plan to make out of all peoples and nations, one people, a people for himself.

Praise God that at the consummation of human history, men and women and boys and girls, from all the world in every corner, from every tribe, tongue, people and nation, who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, who have believed the Gospel and trusted Christ, who have been saved by sovereign grace, adopted into God's household, made members of Christ's body, will worship God and the Lamb, forever,

Praise God that in some measure the church visible now bears witness to that future reality.

Thank God for your African American brothers and sisters in Christ, and for every ethnicity that is part of the church visible. "Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight."

Thank God that there is a reawakening of Reformed Theology in the African American community.

Thank God that he is raising up outstanding African American Reformed preachers in our generation.

Thank God for the increasing ethnic diversity in the PCA that has grown up because of the power of the Gospel, the work of the Spirit and our union with Christ.

Thank God that our denomination's founding fathers wanted a church for all peoples and that as the PCA approaches fifty years old we are closer to that aspiration than we were in 1973.

Confess whatever your own personal and congregational sins and failures may be, whether by omission or commission, pertaining to loving our African American brothers and sisters in Christ.

Grieve and lament that the evangelical branch of the Presbyterian tradition from which we come fell so short of the Bible and Reformed Theology in our treatment of people of different ethnicities, especially African Americans, even in the church: barring them from worship attendance and church membership, misusing and twisting the Bible to support racial segregation; failing to show solidarity with and support for African American brothers and sisters in Christ as they endured various kinds of discrimination and duress in the Civil Rights era.

Grieve the consequences of this for our own day and ask the Lord to open your eyes to blindspots and behavior that continue to cause us to fall short of our biblical duties towards fellow believers of different ethnicities, especially African Americans.

Ask that God, by grace, would grant an extraordinary work of racial healing and reconciliation among believers, and that our past failures would not hinder present ministry.

Ask God that by the Holy Spirit he would break down barriers that separate us from one another and create the unity that ought to be exhibited within the body of Christ.

Ask God that the real, biblical, Gospel, Holy Spirit-wrought, racial reconciliation in our church might be a powerful witness to the culture around us that would cause even unbelievers to say: "surely God is among them."

Ask God to bless the ministries of faithful, Bible-believing African American pastors, especially PCA pastors, as well as those of other ethnic minorities.

Ask God that your words, actions and attitudes would be encouraging to your African American brothers and sisters in Christ, as well as to other ethnic minorities.

Ask God to grant his heart and help to the PCA and other solid biblical churches so that we would do a better job of reaching out to African Americans, and other ethnic minorities, with the Gospel.

Ask God to so work in us congregationally by his sanctifying Holy Spirit that ethnic minority attenders and members of our churches will feel welcome, loved, at home and part of the family.

Ask for God to raise up more African American (and other ethnic minority) pastors, missionaries, church planters, seminary and college professors, campus ministers, elders, deacons, women in the church leaders, and ministerial candidates in the PCA. Pray for minority leadership at the congregational, presbytery, and denominational levels.

Our Father,

You are the one, true God who made the world and everything in it, Acts 17:24-26

You are the Lord of heaven and earth,

You give to all mankind life and breath and everything.

And you made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth

You made us to seek you and worship you, Acts 17:27 John
4:23

But we sought ourselves instead and worshipped the creature rather than the Creator,

And so we were estranged from You, Romans 1:25 Genesis 11:8-
9

And estranged from one another, like the people of the plain of Shinar.

Yet in your grace, you not only created, called and saved your people Israel,

but also promised that your covenant with Abraham would mean blessings for all the families of the earth.

Genesis 12:3

Through Jesus Christ you brought the blessings of Abraham to the Gentiles, Galatians 3:13-14

And you made Jew and Gentile into one new man, your people, your church.

Ephesians 2:11-22, 3:6

And at the end of time, a multitude none can number,

from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation

will all be your people

Revelation 7:9-12

in one body worshipping the one true God,

through one savior, Jesus Christ,

by the power of one Holy Spirit.

Grant that we would long for that, and look like that more. Now.

In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Acknowledge

If we do not acknowledge that racism is a problem and we do not aspire to racial reconciliation and Gospel unity, it won't happen. We can learn all we want, but if we don't see our sin and need in this area, if we don't buy in to its importance, if we aren't ready to make changes, it won't matter much whatever else we do.

Acknowledgement not only means owning up to our part of the problem, and that a problem exists, and that it is important, but also recognizing how big the challenge is. Racial reconciliation has not been, is not, and will not be an easy thing. Only the Gospel is big enough to address it.

And acknowledgement doesn't come easy for many evangelical Christians, for a variety of reasons. As we have already noted, many evangelical Christians view today's discussions of racism as just another example of political correctness being foisted on the church. Sociologists Emerson and Smith noted in their book *Divided by Faith* that most evangelicals think of racism as a thing of the past. Hence, when the subject is introduced some respond by saying "It's time to move on."

But we also need to realize and acknowledge how hard this discussion is for our African American brothers and sisters in the church. They too, are often "tired" of this conversation, but not for the same reason many white evangelical Christians are. Black Christians are "tired" of having to justify the validity and relevance of the conversation in the first place, and are often deeply discouraged by how little their white brothers and sisters seem to have thought or cared about it, or to have realized the dramatic effect racism has had upon their lives.

Let's be honest and admit how big a challenge all this is. All you have to do to show how difficult the discussion is is to bring a group of black and white Bible-believing Reformed Christians into a room and say the words: social justice, systemic racism, white privilege, mass incarceration, police brutality, racial profiling, gentrification, spirituality of the church, – and prepare for the whirlwind! The point is not that there is one right view of these things (one quickly learns that there is not one "black view" of these things, even among PCA African Americans). The point is this: even among people with shared Reformed theology, our social and cultural experiences are so different, and our perspectives so varied, that constructive conversation is very difficult on many subjects, especially at first, and requires a long season of trust-building and personal relationship (which leads to our next point).

The problem is real. The solution is not easy. Only God and the Gospel can prevail.

Relate

Make friends. Do not underestimate the power of friendship. This whole discussion will remain abstract until you meet and befriend a person whom you come to care about, who is different from you, and who can give you a perspective on this issue different from your own. For white PCA Christians, that is going to mean establishing interracial friendships.

Start with deliberately seeking to cultivate friendships with Reformed and PCA African American Christians. Then reach out to other Bible-believing black Christians. Then seek to be a better friend to African Americans in your neighborhood, work and community.

Maybe there's someone in your church who is of a different race. You know each other, but you've never spent significant time together or had a serious conversation. Why not invite that person out to coffee, or to breakfast or lunch, or have their family over for dinner? This is a natural, organic way to deepen a relationship you already have.

Be intentional. We don't naturally gravitate toward those who are different from us. We naturally gather in similar groups. We have to do something unnatural, or rather, supernatural to break the cycles of social sameness that hinder racial reconciliation. Think like a missionary or a church planter or a campus minister. All these folks are deliberately on the look out to try to make friendships and connect with people for the sake of the Gospel and ministry. Apply that attitude and approach to interracial friendships.

Pastors, consider entering into a friendship with a pastor of a different ethnicity. Get together for coffee and meals, and discuss substantial issues. Pray for one another. Get to know each other's families. Swap pulpits, where appropriate and possible.

Commit

Commit to this issue as a part of your personal and congregational sanctification. Determine to grow in your cultural intelligence regarding ethnic minorities. Learn from godly Christians who are already engaged in racial reconciliation and demonstrating Christian unity.

Pastors and elders may want to consider asking people from ethnic minorities in your community their impression of the reputation of your church regarding racism, neighbor love and impartiality.

Pastors and elders may want to examine patterns, language, and culture within our churches that erect barriers to other races.

With pastoral prudence and sensitivity, pastors and elders may want to consider preaching and teaching in our churches concerning racism, highlighting the biblical doctrines that inform the Christian view, but clearly anchoring the study in Scripture.

Establish a minority scholarship for those preparing for the Gospel ministry in the PCA, for both college and seminary education (since both are required for PCA ordination and since many ethnic minorities lack the resources for them).

Consider and cultivate interns from ethnic minorities to be disciplined for ministry, as you would any other ministerial candidate or person with potential for service in the church.

Be intentional with discipling minority members for church leadership.

Endeavor to prepare African American (and other ethnic minority) pastors, missionaries, church planters, seminary and college professors, campus ministers, elders, deacons, women in the church leaders, and ministerial candidates in the PCA.

Think carefully about the hiring practices of your church. For instance, is one type of employee typically from an ethnic minority? What message do you intend to send: to the employee, to the members, to visitors, to the watching world?

Deliberately reach out to and evangelize people of other and minority ethnicities within our communities, near our churches, and within the areas covered by our regional church, the presbytery.

Show church members what personal loving interracial friendship and hospitality looks like by hosting members, attenders and friends of all ethnicities in your home.

Read publications by authors of other ethnicities, especially Bible-believing and Reformed authors from other and minority ethnicities.

Don't exclude or discourage, on the basis of ethnicity, any person from membership, privilege or responsibility, including leadership, in any church or in the presbytery.

Don't discriminate, on the basis of race, against a Christian participant in worship services, or other services or functions of the church (including weddings).

Don't tolerate racist attitudes, language and practices among the membership of the church.

Don't expect that we will agree about everything (like church music!), with fellow Christians from ethnic minorities, even within the PCA.

So, learn, pray, acknowledge, relate and commit. These pastoral suggestions are offered in the spirit of "stirring one another up to love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24). Your presbytery writes as fellow elders, brothers and members of the congregations of PMV. May the Lord himself grant us Gospel unity, racial reconciliation and enable us to bear fruit in keeping with repentance (Matthew 3:8).

The Presbytery of the Mississippi Valley

May 3, 2016

French Camp, Mississippi

SHARE