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THE MULTIETHNIC MINDSET AND THE BELOVED COMMUNITY: ADDRESSING THE INFLUENCE OF RACE AND RACISM ON THE CHURCH THROUGH LAMENT

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ABSTRACT

The Church of the Nazarene is an international denomination. Yet, in the United States, the church is mono-ethnic, mainly in membership and mindset. The influence and practice of racism throughout history have directly affected the formation of our current church structure. Consequently, ministry to the minority ethnic culture in local faith communities is lacking. For example, Phoenix First Church of the Nazarene, the faith community I currently serve, is ethnically White, while our community is ethnically diverse. This project addresses the following questions: (1) How does the church begin to break down the barriers and biases caused by racism and the formation and reproduction of racial ideas? (2) How do these barriers keep the local church from moving to a more multi-ethnic model of ministry that reflects the diverse neighborhoods and cities where God has planted us? (3) Is it possible for local communities of faith to be intentionally anti-racist and to reflect the Kingdom of God in all its diversity truly? One possible path forward is educating church communities about racism by utilizing the rich theology from Dr. Martin Luther King's vision of the beloved community. This new knowledge fostered can provide space for communities to work towards honest repentance and biblical lament. To address these questions, we will explore the history of racism in the United States and its influence on the church. We will uncover how the church has been complicit with and complacent to racism and discrimination. Lastly, we will address how the local church can intentionally address racism and racist ideas to reflect better the ministry and mission of the Kingdom of God. Through the biblical practice of lament and the kingdom vision of the beloved community, as given to us through Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., this project seeks to carry on the church's imagination to become a more beautifully diverse community through education, honest reflection, and lament

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THE DIVERSITY OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The identity of the church in the United States is at a crossroads. In the racialized society by which the church has been shaped, there is a direct correlation between the lack of diversity within local congregations and the racist past of the United States. Identity is everything. Who we are and to whom we represent will be revealed in how life is lived in and through the community. The Church of the Nazarene is a small representation of the vast array of Christian expression across this nation and worldwide. This small denomination was founded in the early 1900s to be a church for the outcast and marginalized, for those that no one else welcomed or wanted. One of the principal founders of the Church of the Nazarene was Phineas Bresee, a former Methodist Episcopal Church pastor, and abolitionist who cared about those on the margins. The identity of this small denomination was shaped by a desire to be Jesus to those with their backs against the wall throughout the urban centers of our cities. Dr. David Busic writes concerning the founding of the Church of the Nazarene, "Holiness was both the motivation for compassion and the remedy for human misery. Thus, holiness-minded people were inexorably drawn to the urban poor. Dissatisfied with internal dissensions, overly controlling ecclesiastical hierarchies, and controversies over doctrinal differences, Holiness leaders and laities turned their focus and energy toward those whom they deemed neglected at best and forgotten at worst."[1] The identity of the church at its beginning found its roots in the mission of God and its place on the margins of society.

As we will uncover through this project, the church in the United States broadly and the Church of the Nazarene specifically has not fully lived into the diversity of the Kingdom of God

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[1] David Busic. *The City: Urban Churches in the Wesleyan Holiness Tradition* (Kansas City, MO: The Foundry Publishing, 2020), 23.

as expressed through Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of the beloved community. He envisioned, as many before him, that integration throughout the various sectors of society was more in line with the Kingdom of God that valued the sanctity of human life and fostered unity in and through diversity rather than segregation. This vision was a far cry from the discrimination and racism that was on display from the founding of the United States throughout the civil rights movement and that still rears its hateful head today. This project addresses the following questions: (1) How does the Church begin to break down the barriers and biases caused by racism and the formation and reproduction of racial ideas? (2) How do these barriers keep the local church from moving to a more multi-ethnic model of ministry that reflects the diverse neighborhoods and cities where God has planted us? (3) Is it possible for local communities of faith to be intentionally anti-racist and to reflect the Kingdom of God in all its diversity truly? One possible path forward is educating church communities about racism by utilizing the rich theology from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's vision of the beloved community.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Identity is everything! This project was inspired by the search for identity I have experienced and am still experiencing as I faithfully shepherd God's people so that the church can be a place the next generation wants to be a part of. I have always struggled with identity or, better yet, where I belong. It has haunted me from very early in my life, growing up on the "wrong side of the tracks" to drug-addicted parents and no natural way out. Statistically, there was no hope for me. My parents had dug the road deep enough that I could not see another direction for my life. That was until I became a follower of Jesus during my first year of high school, and as a result, my outlook on identity changed drastically. As my new identity in Christ started to take shape, I noticed something that followed me into adulthood. There was an

apparent disparity surrounding the fact that those I worshipped with on Sunday morning looked and lived a lot differently from those I lived with in my neighborhood. Although I would not have described it in these terms back then, the church was not as ethnically diverse or rich as the neighborhood where I lived. The church was mono-ethnic, while the rest of my life was multi-ethnic.

In 2016, I was invited to be a part of the first of many Southwest regional convocations for clergy development in the Church of the Nazarene; the conversation primarily focused on diversity and the formation of clergy. Those invited represented the diversity we were seeking as a region. The room was full of brilliant minds, including the administration of Point Loma Nazarene University, professors, and district leadership from across the region. During one of our breaks, I was asked, "Why are you here?" There wasn't enough time to answer this question in its fullness, but that initial question struck me and stuck with me: "Why am I here?"

Another question worth asking is, what gives us credibility to speak in this or other conversations ahead of those who might be more qualified? Is it because of gender? Skin color? Authority? Privilege?[2] I began to wonder if I was there because of any of those characteristics and not because I had something to add to the conversation. This is where the insecurity of my youth tends to take over; do I truly belong, or should my seat be vacated for someone more qualified or who doesn't look like me? Grounded in my belief in Jesus, the apostle Paul reminds me that I have something to offer. Even though I represent the stereotypical privileged white mono-ethnic church that, over time, has become ignorant, silent, or oppressive to women and people of color, I believe that when I am faithful to my identity being rooted in Christ, I do have

[2] Guy D. Nave Jr., "Challenging Privilege through the Preaching and Teaching of Scripture." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 47 (2020): 15–18.

something to offer. But the question remains, did I have a particular advantage that resulted in an inequitable disadvantage for someone else, and if so, what does that mean for me now?[3]

To get to the root of this question and understand my identity as a follower of Jesus, it is helpful to see the cultural shifts I experienced when I became a Christian. The diversity of my youth helped shape me in a particular way. When I started attending a majority ethnically White church in high school or attending a majority ethnically White university[4], there was a sense of culture shock until I acclimated to the new landscape. What I mean by a majority ethnically White church or university is an organization structured where over 80% of the congregation or student body is made up of one racial group—namely Caucasian.[5] When opportunities became available, I always trusted that God would guide me through, whether the result was success or failure, and whether there was a sense of confidence or not. And here I was, representing an entire district in a conversation about clergy development when I felt I was still in the process and had a lot to learn.[6] Now, at the time of this gathering, I was serving as the district coordinator of the course of study. I oversaw the development of ministers as they pursued ordination across the district. So, on paper, my presence was validated at this convocation, but it did not solidify my participation as someone who could add to and contribute to the conversation.

This was part of the process of maturation and understanding. Why are any of us given opportunities to foster change within the structures and systems we find ourselves? Why are any of us asked to follow in the footsteps of Jesus? Why are any of us given authority? What makes

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[3] Nave, "Challenging," 15.

[4] Point Loma Nazarene University.

[5] David W. Swanson, *Rediscipling the white church: From cheap diversity to true solidarity* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity, 2020), 27.

[6] The Clergy Development Convocation held at Point Loma Nazarene University was initiated as an effort to unite the university and the church and to restore relationships between the two, surrounding the development of clergy. It was intentionally ethnically diverse to represent the constituency of the region.

any of us unique or worthy, or privileged? The answer is complicated yet straightforward—absolutely nothing apart from Jesus Christ. This doesn't excuse the fact that some authority or advancement did come because I was a male and White.

I am currently a lead pastor at Phoenix First Church of the Nazarene. This predominately mono ethnically White church desires to reflect better the multiethnic and multicultural community in which we reside.[7] "Why am I here?" That is a good question and one that must be asked by all of us who follow in the footsteps of Jesus. The hope is that we are where we are for such a time as this—to bridge the gap that has grown ever so wide between 'us' and 'them,' to make room at the table for differing voices and faces that have something to add to the conversation; and to help the church better navigate the new terrain of ministry as we endeavor to connect our diverse communities to Jesus one relationship at a time. We can learn much from the saints who have gone before, from their lives and stories as sojourners of truth. Dr. King was one such example, as he fought for the rights of all people throughout the civil rights movement with the Kingdom vision of unity through the beloved community. According to the King Center, "Dr. King's Beloved Community is a global vision, in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood."[8]

Theologian Howard Thurman suggests in his transformational book, *Jesus and the Disinherited,* that the religion of Jesus, and not that of any particular denomination or church,

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[7] Phoenix First Church of the Nazarene was founded in 1916 and was initially located in downtown Phoenix until they moved to the suburbs of North Phoenix in 1979, where it is still today.

[8] The King Center, "The Beloved Community," accessed August 11, 2022. https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/

should be seen in the context of a "common humanity." He says, "the religion of Jesus makes the love-ethic central."[9] The love ethic of Jesus breaks down the walls and barriers that strip away identity and creates a new humanity that will transform the world. Thurman writes concerning the story of the Good Samaritan, "With sure artistry and great power he depicted what happens when a [man] responds directly to human need across the barriers of class, race and condition. Every [man] is potentially every other [man's] neighbor. Neighborliness is non spatial; it's qualitative. A [man] must love his neighbor directly, clearly, permitting no barriers between."[10] The love ethic of Jesus calls every man, woman, and child to embrace the reality that we are all created equal, with dignity and worthy to be called sons and daughters of God. The problem is that we are spot on in theory but, for the most part, fail in practice when it comes to living out the love ethic without prejudice or bias.

As a White male growing up in an ethnically diverse area of the United States, I didn't understand then the advantages and privilege my skin color and gender would provide me above others. That's maybe why I was asked, "Why are you here?" at a convocation envisioning a new future for the church and clergy preparation. As a result of my desire to walk in the direction of the one who calls, qualifies, and sends out to make a difference by ushering in His Kingdom ethic and not that which is generated from resting in the comfy confines of the way things have always been. The gospel of Jesus Christ, as found in Scripture, challenges the status quo of a majority mono-ethnic model of any dominant culture for ministry that we see in most of our churches and stretches us beyond our ability to think, adapt, change, and embrace the reality of a

[9] Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 79 and 88.

[10] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 79.

reoriented Kingdom that is inclusive of all regardless of race, gender, or class. Identity is everything.

The church in the United States (contextually within the Church of the Nazarene) is predominately White. For example, a 2014 Pew Research survey shows that the Church of the Nazarene is 88% White and 12% Black, Asian, Latino, or other.[11] Ranking toward the bottom of religious groups in the U.S. on the diversity scale. The Church of the Nazarene throughout the United States values multiculturalism or internationalism, but that is not the reflection of our local bodies of faith, even when we are fortunate enough to live in ethnically diverse neighborhoods. Our prejudices and preferences as Christians often make the church unapproachable or uncomfortable. This is primarily because of our White evangelical roots that have either been silent to or in denial about the systemic oppression of minorities and the privilege of the majority.

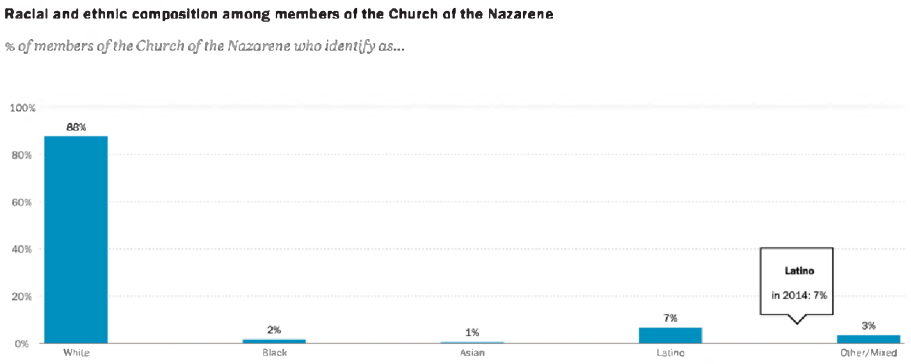

Figure 1 – Religious Landscape Study 2014[12]

[11] Pew Research Center, "Religious Landscape Study," accessed December 1, 2020. https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-denomination/church-of-the-nazarene/#beliefs-and-practices.

[12] Pew Research Center, "Religious Landscape Study," accessed December 1, 2020. https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-denomination/church-of-the-nazarene/#beliefs-and-practices.

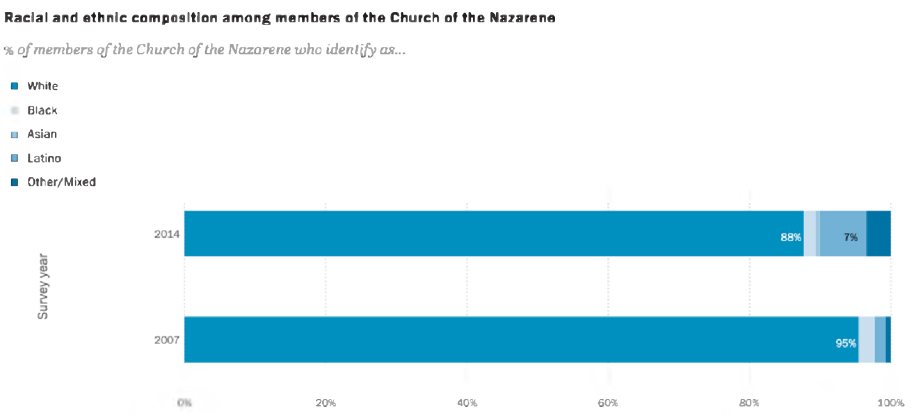

Figure 2 – Religious Landscape Survey 2014 Comparison from 2007

The mission and vision of the church to and for the marginalized of society require that we stand arm in arm with the oppressed, listening to their stories and addressing a past that has distorted the Kingdom vision of the beloved community. Rob Muthiah in his small study guide on Lamenting Racism states that "Racism is an evil that touches all our lives one way or another." And then he asks this thought-provoking question, "Will the church have the courage and commitment to engage the struggle to undo the sin of racism?"[13] The following section will address the sin of racism and the courage needed as the church begins to bridge the gap between the racial disparity that has been widening within the church. We will also address the need for an intentional response to the question of how the church can begin to break down the barriers and biases caused by racism and the formation and reproduction of racial ideas.

[13] Rob Muthiah, Abigail Gaines, Dave Johnson, Tamala Kelly, Brian Lugioyo, Anthony Powell, John Ragsdale, and Jessica Wong, *Lamenting Racism: A Christian Response to Racial Injustice, Leaders guide* (Harrisonburg: Herald Press, 2021), 12.

CHAPTER 1

RESEARCH AND LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Bridging the gap between the racial disparity within the church will require the openness to listen to a history that will require honesty and truth-telling. A brief examination of the racialized history of the United States of America and the majority ethnically White church that was shaped under that racialized system will be addressed. Educating or re-discipling majority ethnically White congregations and denominations within the United States about racism and discrimination will serve as a launching pad for intentional actions of confession, repentance, and lament. When uncovering our racist past, it will be essential for us to define racism. Racism, as defined by Dr. Jemar Tisby, is "*Prejudice plus power*. It is not only personal bigotry toward someone of a different race that constitutes racism; rather, racism includes the imposition of bigoted ideas on groups of people."[14] On the journey of honesty, careful attention will be given to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's vision of the beloved community and how that vision can transform the church today. Lastly, through intentionally choosing to be anti-racist, the Church of the Nazarene in the United States can boldly fulfill its mission of holiness by making Christlike disciples of the nations. This will require a re-discipling of the majority ethnically White church that has failed to keep up with the neighborhood's changing demographics.

THE CHANGING DEMOGRAPHIC OF MULTIETHNIC PARTNERSHIP

[14] Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth About the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2019), 16.

In his book, *The Next Evangelicalism*, Soong-Chan Rah asserts that the White church in the United States is in decline while the immigrant/ethnic/multiethnic church is flourishing.[15] This reality is hard to accept, especially when it is glaringly evident. This may be why the ethnically White church is sometimes so defensive, unable, or unwilling to address the matter. Rah details the need to address the next stage of evangelicalism. The American church needs to face the inevitable and prepare for the next phase of church history—we are looking at a nonwhite majority, multiethnic American Christianity that has already become a reality but has not been fully embraced. Unfortunately, despite these drastic demographic changes, American evangelicalism remains enamored with an ecclesiology and a value system reflecting dated and increasingly irrelevant cultural captivity disconnected from a global and local reality.[16] As a result of this cultural shift, we can see that the ecclesiology and value system that the evangelical church clings so tightly to is fundamentally at odds with God's mission and the gospel's work.

To truly embrace a multiethnic partnership, a great deal of intentionality will be required to honor multiple cultures that may speak different languages and worship with varying expressions of faith. The ethnic and socio-economic makeup of the United States is changing. Therefore, the *ekklesia* of God must break free from the captivity of the mono-ethnic church.[17] This will require an intentional re-focusing on the diverse mission field in which we have always

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[15] Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 12.

[16] Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism,* 12

[17] Rah suggests, "We need repentance from our cultural captivity and a willingness to reform our church in the next era of North American evangelism." Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 20.

existed; the suspicion and stereotypes must give way to a genuine unity and expression of faith that looks more like Jesus and less like the microcosm of a racialized and hierarchical society.[18]

UNITY THROUGH DIVERSITY

Social psychologist Christina Cleveland in her book, *Disunity in Christ,* outlines a scenario where the "right Christian" is more like us, and the "wrong Christian" is more like them. This is often the case in homogenous churches across cultural groups. She suggests that cultural diversity should be the goal of God's church because discipleship is cross-cultural. She writes, "When we meet Jesus around people who are just like us and then continue to follow Jesus with people who are just like us, we stifle our growth in Christ and open ourselves up to a world of division. However, when we're rubbing elbows in Christian fellowship with people who are different from us, we can learn from each other and grow more like Christ."[19] The cultural homogeneity of the church often keeps us from rubbing elbows with those who are different from us and consequently growing in faith as a result. Cleveland calls this "group polarization"—the more time spent worshipping and living life with those who are identical to us leads to strong convictions that create tension and indifference in harmful ways toward different cultural expressions of worship.[20]

The homogenous church in the United States has gotten stuck in what author David Swanson calls a community of "racial sameness." Our racial assumptions and blind spots cultivated an approach to ministry that embraces the fact that we "have more in common with

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[18] Drew G. I. Hart, *Trouble I've Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2016), 23.

[19] Christina Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces the Keep Us Apart* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity, 2013), 21.

[20] Cleveland, *Disunity in the Church,* 27.

those who share our race rather than those who share our faith."[21] This state of "racial sameness" is where the church has found itself and, in doing so, has remained comfortable. The desired path for most monoethnic churches is the path of least resistance through racial sameness. The shift from a monoethnic to a multiethnic community takes time and energy. Diversity is a gift and a God-given reality, not simply a token opportunity or situation to solve the problem within our churches surrounding a lack of diversity. Addressing the more significant issue of discipleship within the church is an excellent first step in addressing suspicion and authentically embracing the mission of God to reach all people regardless of the color of their skin or cultural background.[22] Instead of casting a veil of suspicion on the experience of others, there needs to be an authentic understanding that the "racial sameness" the church has grown accustomed to would not be what propels us forward; the church's future depends upon it. White cultural Christianity must become authentically Christian such that our "desires are oriented toward the kingdom of God."[23] This will create an openness for the culturally mono-ethnic church to embrace each cultural expression of faith in God's beloved community and, as a result, embrace the unity that diversity requires.

INTIMACY WITH GOD AND EACH OTHER

There have been instances where the biases and prejudice of good-meaning Christians dictated the decisions being made for the church's life. For this example, we will investigate the Christian imagination articulated by Willie Jennings in his assertion that the original intent of

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[21] Swanson, *Rediscipling the White Church,* 6.

[22] "The segregation within white Christianity is not fundamentally a diversity problem: it's a discipleship problem. Addressing white Christianity's lack of diversity without first reckoning with our discipleship would be like redecorating a house built on a failing foundation. Before white churches pursue racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity as the solution to our segregation, we must first address the discipleship that led to our segregation in the first place." Swanson, *Rediscipling the White Church*, 8.

[23] Swanson, *Rediscipling the White Church,* 19.

intimacy has been sabotaged by a religious life that thwarts the imaginations of God's people. He says modern Christianity suffers from a distorted, deformed, and "diseased social imagination."[24] Although this dream of restored intimacy is not living on the surface of Christianity's White existence in America, there is hope if only we can unearth the rich soil of intimacy that comes from God. Jennings suggests that "Christianity marks the spot where, if noble dream joins hands with God-inspired hope and presses with great impatience against the insularities of life, for example, national, cultural, ethnic, economic, sexual, and racial, seeking the deeper ground upon which to seed a new way of belonging and living together, then we will find together not simply a new ground, not simply a new seed, but a life already prepared and offered to us."[25] The origins of race and the majority The White culture that has shaped the church in the United States often misleads us to believe that our way of doing things is the right way. Living with this mindset means the church is intentionally led to be inhospitable when we set out to reach those around us with the gospel. Our hearts are often in the right place regarding outreach, but the execution tends to be harmful when looked at through the lens of anything but White American Christianity. This has undoubtedly been the case when the inside of the building doesn't look like the outside—when the church looks nothing like the community in which it exists.

Once we can reclaim the intimacy that is lost because of racism, reconciliation is then "retrievable," according to Jennings. And for reconciliation to be effective, there must be a confession. The corporate sin of racism in the United States that separated those with White skin from those with Black and Brown skin in an unjust system is inherited and perpetuated through silence or inaction and requires corporate confession and action. "This corporate confession must

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[24] Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 9.

[25] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination,* 11.

be led by those with a spiritual understanding and a biblical conviction—namely, the body of Christ in America."[26] The prejudicial biases and racial systems passed down from generation to generation and have helped to define who we are as the church and American citizens have created a barrier between who we are and who we should be. To break down this barrier, the church on mission can move from a prejudiced approach to ministry to one that resembles the intimacy of a Creator toward His creation. Silence and inaction can no longer be the norm when the way forward is faithful discipleship.

A DIVERSE TABLE WITH AN OPEN SEAT

To highlight the disparity in diverse leadership within the Church of the Nazarene in the United States, the District Advisory Board (DAB)[27] is intentionally made up of influential leaders across the district, both lay and clergy, who have a voice in the critical decisions of the district. The only problem is that there is often little room to diversify when the majority White delegation nominates and then elects only those who fit within a specifically White ethnic demographic. For example, in one district made up of majority White ethnic churches with a growing number of Hispanic churches, the leadership was solely White. When a perfectly qualified Hispanic candidate received a nomination, they often failed to get elected over their White counterpart. In this district, there was much opportunity to embody the next evangelicalism as former predominately White churches provided intentional space to Spanish-speaking congregations growing in formerly predominately White neighborhoods and cities. Although there were evident changes to the district's demographic amongst its churches, the elected leadership of the DAB remained predominately, if not wholly, White. This created

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[26] Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism,* 71.

[27] The governing board elected to guide and advise the District Superintendent in making decisions that affect an entire district.

problems when the White majority church made decisions for the growing ethnic minority church that it had failed to understand and include. The Spanish-speaking churches suffered because leaders within that demographic were not invited to use their voice or share their experiences on equal ground with their White colleagues. The Spanish-speaking leaders in the district wanted to be included and understood; as anyone of us in the body of Christ would desire, they wanted to be seen, known, and valued.

The table was set, but there was not a seat intentionally set for those who looked, spoke and were culturally different from those who held power. Author Jonathan Walton writes about this: "White American Folk Religion[28] demands devotion to its goals and conformity to its perspective. And both of these demands—devotion and conformity —are dismissive, dishonest, destructive, and woefully inadequate to address humanity's deepest needs."[29] The problem is that the church often looks at leadership from a mono-ethnic majority culture perspective. Filling the pulpit of a mono-ethnic majority White church without a pastor was the priority over the ever-growing minority culture church because it was harder to supply pastors to churches that couldn't pay their pastors a salary. There wasn't fair representation on the DAB because the primary one majority dominant White culture delegation of the district assembly consistently voted for familiarity and racial sameness. Moreover, during the proceedings of the district assembly, the Spanish-speaking pastors and lay leaders were expected to be present but were kept on the margins through inadequate translation. For there to be progress in the way of inclusion, there needs to be an intentional change of the system—the status quo—the way things have always been done. There needed to be a deliberate place at the table every night for the

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[28] Jonathan P. Walton, *Twelve lies that hold America captive and the truth that sets us free* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity, 2019), 7-8.

[29] Walton, *Twelve Lies,* 178.

racial minority so that the one culturally dominant White church could understand and embrace the multiethnic makeup of our demographic.[30]

Drew Hart suggests, "Our society is structured by a racialized hierarchy that results in racial gazes. These racial gazes can operate differently in different spaces…If we are to better interpret racialized situations and moments, we must begin to look for widespread patterns through history and society and to listen attentively to the voices of those at the bottom of the racial hierarchy in America."[31] The unneeded barriers that segregate instead of integrate needed to be broken down to truly understand those ethnically and culturally different from the majority culture. This is required, not just to better equip, empower, and encourage them but to be humble enough for them to equip, empower, encourage, and educate us in the majority culture White church. The birth of the church in Acts 2 finds its roots in Pentecost as the Spirit moves in and among this diverse group of people, giving them the ability to understand the languages of each. As the church, we have been included in God's story; therefore, we must avoid the exclusionary practices that deny this fundamental reality to others.

CONCLUSION

What can be offered to a church that seems stuck in reverse instead of pressing on toward the diversity that characterizes the gospel message of inclusion, love, and the *Shalom* of God? The problem isn't a lack of diversity. The problem is a lack of discipleship. For the church to shed the unwanted skin of a racialized society and its consequences within the church, there needs to be an intentional effort to break down the embedded assumptions that make up our identity as followers of Jesus in the 21st-century United States. There will be a need to confront

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[30] Jonathan Walton says, "Every true follower of Jesus must renounce this system (race-based scale) and recognize every person as being made in the image of God and worthy of inclusion in the family of Jesus and a seat at our tables every night." Walton, *Twelve Lies*, 177.

[31] Hart. *Trouble I've Seen,* 55.

"an interlocking system of values that is intertwined with society" to name the evil of racism, prejudice, and bigotry.[32] It is hard to break down these walls; the church remains predominately mono-ethnic-segregated. However, it must be done— "Discipling white Christians away from racial segregation and injustice and toward solidarity must begin at the beginning, with how we invite white people to follow Jesus as his disciples."[33] Is it possible to push the boundaries to break down the walls of racial sameness and to reflect the Kingdom of God truly? This is possible through discipleship, or instead, a *re*-discipleship of the White majority culture church and other churches of racial sameness so that the church can be transformed to reflect the ethnically diverse community beyond its walls. This is characterized by the image of the great multitude of witnesses in Revelation 7:9, "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands."[34]

The unity of the Kingdom of God and the diversity of those worshipping reveal a God who is not defined by race, color, gender, or creed but rather by love. A love that breaks down the structures that the church has created to elevate some and suppress others because of a false privilege. This isn't just a picture of what happens in heaven; it should reflect the Kingdom breaking in through the Body of Christ today. It is not enough to be an international body of believers in name only – the church must become a multicultural and multiethnic community of faith in the United States that is intent on partnership, authenticity, intimacy, and inclusion as a matter of faithfulness to best exemplify the love ethic of Jesus to a diverse world. How does the

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[32] Rebecca Cohen, "Framework for Understanding Structural Racism: The Cult of Purity." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 55 (2020): 47.

[33] Swanson, *Rediscipling the White Church*, 155.

[34] Revelation 7:9, NRSV.

church do this? By coming to grips with inbred bias and discrimination directly resulting from our racist past.

CHAPTER 2

LAMENTING THE RACIST IDEAS THAT HAVE SHAPED A NATION

INTRODUCTION

The history of racism and racist thought in the United States has an ingrained history of repeating itself repeatedly. This repetitive nature of history has caused immeasurable harm in the process of racial reconciliation between the majority and minority ethnic cultures in America. What is the responsibility of the majority culture church in understanding and then addressing race and racism from the perspective of the oppressed and not from the majority culture experience and privilege? This will require an intentional act of lament over the past, repenting for the collective complicity of the church throughout history, and seeking reconciliation as we build a better future for the church in the United States.

This chapter seeks to show the history of the complicity of the White church in North America that has helped to perpetuate racism in the form of injustice, racism, discrimination, and segregation. This will not be a comprehensive overview but a brief outline of a few historical realities in the United States that have helped to shape the church amid a racialized society that tends to segregate rather than integrate. The brief outline follows these historical realities: (1) Colonialism, (2) Slavery, (3) Reconstruction after the Civil War, and (4) The Civil Rights Movement. Jemar Tisby writes, "One of the reasons churches can't shake the shackles of segregation is that few have undertaken the regimen of aggressive treatment the malady requires. Some Christians in the U.S. don't know how bad racism is, so they don't respond with the necessary urgency."[35] Will our response today be any different from the response or lack thereof of those who have gone before? How will the church respond so that the evil of our racist past

[35] Tisby, *The Color of Compromise,* 15.

will not repeat itself so that God's glorious future can be ushered in? As the history of racism is explored, it will be essential to understand that the definition used for racism is "Prejudice plus power." Meaning that the majority culture group that holds power and displays prejudicial discrimination toward a minority culture group both in society and the church is considered racist. On that same line of thinking, racist ideas and actions would both fall under the umbrella of racism.

With that in mind, the church must ask this question, how has the White church in the United States responded to the injustice of racism that has plagued our nation from its inception, and how has that response affected the multiethnic makeup of the church today? Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning." This statistic is appalling. The direct result of a racially, politically, and socially divided nation results in the divided church in America. Although the church might not overtly discriminate, it is part of a racist system that privileges the dominant White culture and suppresses those who belong to ethnic minority groups. The systemic nature of racism is defined in this way by Christina Barland Edmondson, "When people in some racial groups are given advantages or disadvantages through social systems, e.g., economic systems, political systems, educational systems, criminal justice systems, etc."[36] Jemar Tisby writes,

> Christian complicity with racism in the twenty-first century looks different than complicity with racism in the past. It looks like Christians responding to 'black lives matter' with the phrase 'all lives matter.' It looks like Christians consistently supporting a president whose racism has been on display for decades. It looks like Christians telling black people and their allies that their attempts to bring up racial concerns are 'divisive.' It looks like conversations on race that focus on individual relationships and are unwilling to discuss systemic solutions. Perhaps Christian complicity in racism has not

[36] Christina Barland Edmondson and Chad Brennan, *Faithful Anti-Racism: Moving Past Talk to Systemic Change* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2022), 218.

changed after all. Although the characters and the specifics are new, many of the same rationalizations for racism remain.[37]

The complicity of the White North American church throughout our young history has caused a tremendous moral injury that is still affecting the effectiveness of the church today. The moral injury as understood here is defined by theologian Larry Kent Graham, "as the failure to live in accordance with our deepest moral aspirations and as the diminishment that comes from our own actions as well as the actions of those against us."[38] Clinical psychologist Chanequa Walker Barnes describes the moral injury caused by slavery as the loss of the ability to process other human beings' treatment morally. She writes, "At its most basic level, slavery was enabled by the beliefs that White people were superior to all other peoples, that Black people were inferior to all others, and that human beings could be treated as property to be exploited, bought and sold…In the midst of this vicious cycle, the entire cognitive structure of White Americans was distorted."[39] The elaborate cultural system that supported and justified a slave economy was morally injurious to the Christian imagination.[40] It reduced humans created in the image of God to property and ignored the fact that we have all been grafted into the story of God. We will now turn our attention to historical realities in the shape of people and places that have shaped a nation and, consequently, the church.

THE INEQUALITY OF COLONIALISM

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[37] Tisby, *The Color of Compromise,* 190-191.

[38] Larry Kent Graham, *Moral Injury: Restoring Wounded Souls* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2017), 24.

[39] Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *I Bring the Voices of My People: A Womanist Vision for Racial Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2019), 127.

[40] Walker-Barnes points out that the term "Moral Injury" was first used by Jonathan Shay in 2002. He says that "Moral Injury" becomes reality when three conditions are met, 1) "A betrayel of what's right" 2) "by someone who holds legitimate authority" 3) "in a high stakes situation." Walker-Barnes, *I Bring the Voices of My People,* 126.

The United States was built upon the racist ideas and practices that have legislated racial discrimination because the country participated in colonialism and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. The colonization of this new nation required the early settlers to justify mass violence, genocide, and displacement of the indigenous population of North America. Acting under the principles of the Doctrine of Discovery[41], the colonists asserted themselves as superior in religion, economics, language, and culture as they encountered the indigenous peoples. This way of understanding White superiority held anyone who wasn't White expendable and subject to their authority. For example, in support of chattel slavery[42], the early Americans declared that Black skin made one less than human and destined to a life of slavery. In *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, Ibram X. Kendi argues that the popular idea that "ignorant and hateful people had produced racist ideas, and that these racist people had instituted racist policies" was a false narrative. Instead, he concludes that racial discrimination leads to racist ideas, ignorance, and hate. We see this as we look back on our history, "we often wonder why so many Americans did not resist slave trading, enslaving, segregating, or now, mass incarcerating…The principal function of racist ideas in American history has been the suppression of resistance to racial discrimination and its resulting racial disparities."[43] Those racist ideas were held by a majority of early Christians who believed that there was something wrong with Black people instead of seeing the discriminatory racial systems and policies of early

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[41] The Jesuit Post, "Catholic 101: The Doctrine of Discovery," accessed on January 12, 2023, https://thejesuitpost.org/2022/10/catholic-101-the-doctrine-of-discovery/. "The "Doctrine of Discovery" is the leveraging of the idea of discovery to argue for and put into law a claim on and right to Indigenous lands."

[42] Wikipedia, "Slavery," accessed on January 12, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery#Chattel_slavery. "As a social institution, chattel slavery denies the human agency of people, by legally dehumanizing them into *chattels* (personal property) owned by the slaver; therefore slaves give birth to slaves."

[43] Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), 9-10.

colonial United States that continued to enslave, oppress and confine all people of color, that is, non-whites.

In an article written by Willie James Jennings titled "Overcoming Racial Faith," he points out that this is true because the church is "up against a powerful racial faith."[44] The entanglement of both race and faith is deep and wide. He writes, "race has a Christian architecture, and Christianity in the West has a racial architecture."[45] This racial faith Jennings speaks about has four components:

> 1. Gentile Forgetfulness: The Christian faith grew from spoiled soil, from a way of reading Scripture and understanding ourselves as followers of Jesus that was distorted almost from the beginning.
>
> 2. The Principality of Whiteness: We live under the tacit agreement that white bodies may be carriers of our fantasies for a good life.
>
> 3. The Loss of Place and the Emergence of Race: Christians came to the new world and realized their unprecedented power over indigenous peoples and lands…the destruction of place and space in the minds and hearts of Christians.
>
> 4. Pedagogical Imperialism: European Christians saw themselves as the bearers of the true faith and therefore destined by God to be teachers of the world.[46]

Considering these four components of a racial faith, Jennings suggests that the injustice of a racial faith "will continue to live, breathe, and grow strong as long as we do not do what is necessary to overturn it." To overturn this racial faith, birthed from the beginning as a position of authority and power, will require humility, repentance, and a serious effort to recline at the feet of Jesus and hear the gospel again for the first time, the gospel of inclusiveness that will allow the church to take place and space seriously. Unfortunately, the foundation on which the White

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[44] Jennings, Willie, "Overcoming Racial Faith." *Divinity* 14, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 5.

[45] Jennings, "Overcoming Racial Faith," 5.

[46] Jennings, "Overcoming Racial Faith," 6-8.

church in the United States was established has been defined by race and racist ideas that have segregated and perverted the meaning of the Great Commission, which states, "Go therefore and make disciples of ALL nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."[47] As a result of the racist beginnings of the United States through colonialism and chattel slavery, will the all-inclusive message of the gospel that leaves no one in the trenches still have power moving forward? To answer this question, we must consider the White church in the United States' response to not only slavery but abolition, emancipation, reconstruction, and the civil rights movement. After over 400 years of history defined by racism and White supremacy, can the church take the posture of repentance as we lament the racist past of a nation and that of the Body of Christ?

RESPONDING TO CHATTEL SLAVERY AND THE SLAVEHOLDING ECONOMY

It is no secret that Black bodies were historically considered less than human, three-fifths of a human to be exact, and therefore were stamped from the beginning as inferior. One of the early theories of the origination of racist ideas coming from early explorers was the climate theory. From the age of exploration, this theory asserted that climate had a lot to do with the color of one's skin stemming from the climate or environment in which one lived.[48] Climate theorists believed that Black people were affixed to a temporary inferiority that could be fixed by moving to a more temperate climate.[49] Another early theory that segregated inferior Black skin

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[47] Matthew 28:19-20 (NRSV).

[48] Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning,* 31.

[49] "Even a lonely abolitionist, French philosopher Jean Bodin, found his thoughts bogged down by tales connecting two simultaneous discoveries: that of West Africans, and that of the dark, tailless apes walking around like humans in West Africa. Africa's heat had produced hypersexual Africans, Bodin theorized in 1576, and "the intimate relations between the men and beasts…still give birth to monsters in Africa."" Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning,* 31.

from superior White skin was the curse theory, which was believed to be rooted in Scripture. In their effort to defend slavery, English travel writer George Best used the story of Noah and his sons to rearticulate the curse theory that a Dominican Friar had articulated in Peru. Curse theory[50] states that blackness resulted from Ham, Noah's youngest son, deliberately having sex with his wife on the ark despite instructions from his father to abstain. In Kendi's retelling of Best's interpretation, he says, "When the evil, tyrannical, and hypersexual Ham has sex on the Ark, God wills that Ham's descendants shall be "so blacke and loathsome that it might remain a spectacle of disobedience to all the worlde."[51] In this line of thinking, Black people were descendants of Ham, were inferior, and became property to be owned and domesticated.[52]

Two early Puritan ministers, John Cotton, and Richard Mather, were influential in spreading the belief that White superior Christian people were to minister to Black souls without challenging the enslavement of their bodies. These two families would forever be connected through a grandson named Cotton Mather. Cotton wrote and released a pamphlet titled *The Negro Spiritualized* in the summer of 1706, saying that God had sent Africans into slavery and to Christian America so that they may receive the "Glorious Gospel" from their masters. His assimilationist view stated, "African people could become white in their souls."[53] And according to Cotton, "the Law of Christianity" allowed slavery.[54] He also noted a time when his church gifted him a slave to whom Cotton "kept a close racist eye on" because of the lie that enslaved Africans were sex-crazed criminals in need of being tamed and controlled.

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[51] Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning,* 32.

[53] Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning,* 75.

[54] Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning,* 68-69.

"From their arrival around 1619, African people had illegally resisted legal slavery. They had thus been stamped from the beginning as criminals...Africans were nearly always cast as violent criminals, not people reacting to enslavers' regular brutality, or pressing for the most basic human desire: freedom."[55] This is a desire or a striving associated with the American ideals of discovery, as many Europeans immigrated to America in hopes of acquiring the freedom they desired in Europe, especially the freedom of religion. Chanequa Walker Barnes notes that "it was not until after 1680, following the displacement and genocide of indigenous Americans and the institutionalization of African enslavement, that the term, "White" commenced. It was the need to justify and sustain the economy of slavery that led to the formalization of racial categories."[56] These different categories of being free or enslaved should have been on the collective consciousness of the Christian people. Instead of proclaiming the inclusiveness of the freedom we have received in Christ that has broken down all barriers and walls that might separate from God, the early church in the United States built those walls higher and broader.

Walker-Barnes points out that the church's response to slavery and White supremacy was not as a conscientious objector or an innocent bystander. On the contrary, she writes, "If anything, the church was the prime wielder of the slaveholding economy's hegemonic power, cultivating and disseminating the theology that undergirded White supremacy."[57] James Cone in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* notes that not only were White Christians silent when it came to the atrocities of racism and White supremacy, but shockingly, "White ministers sometimes served as mob leaders, blessing lynchings, or citing the stories of Ham and Cain to justify white

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[55] Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning,* 69.

[56] Walker-Barnes, *I Bring the Voices of My People,* 120.

[57] Walker-Barnes, *I Bring the Voices of My People,* 122.

supremacy as a divine right."[58] The false narrative proclaimed in early America around this concept of freedom based on the superiority of one race or class of people over another through chattel slavery has caused a tremendous moral injury, as noted earlier. "At the heart of whiteness," Barnes-Walker writes, "is a great moral injury. The justification and maintenance of a slave economy required the construction and defense of an elaborate cultural system…from laws, religious beliefs, and practices, educational systems—had to be carefully organized in order to maintain a brutal and utterly unnatural system."[59] This acceptance of an unnatural system that classified human beings in the early days of colonial America has continued and continues to get in the way of and prevent racial reconciliation centuries later.

Another critical event early in the formation of America was the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment empowered Europeans to embrace the learning and insight of Europeanness or Whiteness. One of the early American leaders, Ben Franklin, said, "Perhaps, I am partial to the complexion of my Country, for such kind of partiality is natural to Mankind." This racist thought made a "connection between lightness and Whiteness and reason, on the one hand, and between darkness and Blackness and ignorance, on the other."[60] According to Ibram Kendi, racial ideas were passed down through three distinct voices; segregationists, assimilationists, and antiracists— "they have rationalized racial disparities, arguing why Whites have remained on the living and winning end, while Blacks remained on the losing and dying end."[61] What does he mean by this? A segregationist promotes the separation of the races based on the superiority of Whiteness and the inferiority of Blackness. An assimilationist believes that the Whiter you

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[58] James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 76.

[59] Walker Barnes, *I Bring the Voices of My People,* 128.

[60] Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning,* 80-81.

[61] Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning,* 2.

become, the more human you are. The goal becomes education, sophistication, and cultural whitewashing. An antiracist promotes the equality of all humanity, no matter the differences. Slavery had become the springboard by which racist ideas and actions began to take shape, from the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, chattel slavery in America, the genocide of the Native American people, and White supremacy, all in the name of God and manifest destiny. These racist ideas and actions of the early United States have informed and formed the church today. They have created an obstacle to advancing the Kingdom ethics of liberation and freedom that Jesus proclaimed.

CIVIL WAR, EMANCIPATION, RECONSTRUCTION, AND WHITE SUPREMACY

By the start of the American Civil War, the United States was politically, economically, and theologically at a crossroads. In 1865, the war had ended, and President Abraham Lincoln had penned the emancipation proclamation, but the fighting continued. Lincoln's address summed it up at the war's end: "Both [Union and Confederacy] read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other…The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully."[62] The conundrum over the fight for freedom and God's will hit a boiling point that never seemed to simmer down. Jemar Tisby points out two facts that are especially helpful to our conversation about racist ideas and Christianity in America: First, the Civil War was fought over slavery, and second, countless Christians sacrificed their lives to preserve slavery as an institution. To hit that point home, he writes, "the church, which prioritizes the love of God and love of neighbor, capitulated to the status quo by permitting the lifetime bondage of human persons based on skin color. A house divided against

[62] Abraham Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address," transcript of speech delivered at Washington, DC, May 4, 1865, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Lincoln%27s_second_inaugural_address.

itself—with conflicting ideals at its foundation—cannot stand."[63] That is the question we have been trying to address. How have racism and discrimination, born out of chattel slavery and the birth of racial superiority, handicapped the church throughout history? In the aftermath of the bloody Civil War, racist thoughts and ideas were emboldened, and the white supremacy movement in the divided states and the White church found itself fractured and on the wrong side of history.

Much like the divided northern and southern states, denominations split over the practice of slavery. After the Civil War and the realization that the nation remained fractured over the issue of slavery, the country and the church were forced to reckon with the realities of racism that would continue to guide and direct a racist society. It is observed that "the Civil War paints a vivid picture of what inevitably happens when the American church is complicit in racism and willing to deny the teachings of Jesus to support an immoral, evil institution."[64] After the Civil War, there was a sense of optimism that freedom had finally arrived through emancipation. That optimism, unfortunately, was short-lived. The fear that gripped the majority White population around what would happen with a free and liberated minority Black population, coupled with ingrained prejudice, made reconstruction and equality a pipe dream. With the positives of emancipation and reconstruction, another oppressive evil was on the horizon. This was the age of Jim Crow, "a system of formal laws and informal customs designed to reinforce the inferiority of black people in America."[65] It is also important to note that with many of these restrictive laws against Black rights, elevating the majority and oppressing the minority only heightened the

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[63] Tisby, *The Color of Compromise,* 71-72.

[64] Tisby, *The Color of Compromise,* 87.

[65] Tisby, *The Color of Compromise,* 89.

racial tension in the South. At the forefront of this reign of terror was the Ku Klux Klan. Their main objective was to cause mischief and thwart Reconstruction efforts. The sad truth for the church was that after the Civil War and into the early 20th century, the Klan was essentially a religious order in both the North and South. It is reported that 40,000 ministers were among the ranks of the Klan, which meant they were actively preaching this false gospel of superiority and recruiting church folks to join their ranks. This was a systemic problem that aided in the discriminatory practices and racist ideas of a complicit church; "The KKK's dedication to race and nation rose to the level of religious devotion because of its overt appeal to Christianity and the Bible. Many people believed that the KKK stood for the best of the "American way," and in their minds, that meant the Christian way as well."[66] This was not the case with all Christians, but the fact that the ties with the Klan were so close has left a dark stain on the protestant church in the United States. This racial mindset of White supremacy or superiority is the belief that White people are the superior race and are better in all aspects of respectable life than people of other racial groups, "Therefore, it is good and natural for them to be at the top of the social hierarchy."[67]

The terror of lynching fueled Jim Crow laws coupled with White supremacy after the Civil War as a means of control over Black people by White people who feared retribution for their racist actions. Whether the White church responded with complicity, avoidance, or participation in the terrorism of this era, the truth of the matter is that "the practice [of lynching] could not have endured without the relative silence, if not outright support, of one of the most

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[66] Tisby, *The Color of Compromise,* 102-103.

[67] Edmondson, *Faithful Antiracism*, 218.

significant institutions in America—the Christian church."[68] In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James Cone writes, "Both Jesus and blacks were strange fruit…Theologically speaking, Jesus was the 'first lynchee,' who foreshadowed all the lynched black bodies on American soil."[69] Recounting the church's complicity with racism in this era reveals the embeddedness of racist ideas in the church and the institutions that supported the oppressive laws against people of color to communicate the superiority of White skin. The racist ideas foundational to the nation through colonialization and slavery and the elevation of White skin over Black skin made it impossible to repent and move forward to be a nation that offers liberty and justice for all. We will now touch on the civil rights movement and the efforts of Martin Luther King Jr. and his contemporaries as they worked for equal rights in a tumultuous time in the history of the United States and the church.

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

In the period following World War II, from 1946 through 1963, America saw a second opportunity for reconstruction through the civil rights movement. In 1955, one of the tragedies that changed the trajectory of this movement was the death of 14-year-old Emmett Till. He was accused of whistling at a White woman in Mississippi and was brutally beaten and lynched by a group of White men. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said the Till lynching was "one of the most brutal and inhuman crimes in the twentieth century."[70] The public display of his body through an open casket at his funeral showed the world the brutality of White supremacy and the evil of racism. Lynching was intended to silence those being oppressed, but it had the opposite effect in this instance. The Emmett Till lynching served as a reminder of centuries of oppression and

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[68] Tisby, *The Color of Compromise,* 109.

[69] Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 158.

[70] Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 65.

violence toward the Black community, but it also stood for something far more significant. The father of Black Liberation Theology, James Cone, recalls how Till's mother responded to this tragedy: "When Emmett's body was brought back to Chicago, she insisted that the sealed casket be opened for a three-day viewing, exposing "his battered and bloated corpse" so that "everybody can see what they did to my boy." She exposed white brutality and black faith to the world and, significantly, expressed a similar meaning between her son's lynching and the crucifixion of Jesus. "Lord you gave your son to remedy a condition," she cried out, "but who knows, but what the death of my only son might bring an end to lynching."[71] In a way, the tragic death of Emmett Till gave the Black community a voice in a nation that had continually tried to silence them.

During this time, a young preacher and activist named Martin Luther King Jr. became the reluctant leader and symbol of the civil rights movement. Introduced to and trained in non-violent dissidence, he became known for his non-violent approach of sit-ins, boycotts, and marches to pursue equality and civil rights. King became the motivation for the movement. King believed that the goal for society was God's unconditional love or *agape* that would allow for a greater awareness of brother/sisterhood. King's singular vision, "the realization of the beloved community, " rooted deep within the agape of God."[72] The beloved community was God's original intent or "divine design" for all of humanity in community. King drew from the "peaceable kingdom" in Isaiah 11:6, where the wolf would lie with the lamb. Still, he envisioned

[71] Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree,* 66-67.

[72] C Anthony Hunt, "Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Quest for the Beloved Community." *American Baptist Quarterly* 37 (2018): 33.

that it was so much more. He envisioned the beloved community "as a transformed and regenerated human society."[73]

In 1965 after King successfully helped organize and lead the nonviolent protests of the Montgomery Bus Boycott against segregation, he summed it up in this way, "the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the heart of men."[74] He also said in another speech, "the aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community. The aftermath of nonviolence is redemption. The aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation. The aftermath of violence is emptiness and bitterness."[75] The Gandhian principle of nonviolence influenced Dr. King. After getting a favorable decision from the U.S. Supreme court ruling surrounding the unconstitutionality of the segregated bus system in Alabama, King said to a crowd in Brooklyn, New York, "Christ showed us the way, and Gandhi in India showed it could work."

King will forever be etched in the archives of history as a social activist fighting for civil rights and as a man of God with his back against the wall. Jemar Tisby notes, "King saw an indissoluble link between the Christian faith and the responsibility to change unjust laws and policies. But his emphasis on the social dimensions of Christianity, especially regarding race

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[73] Hunt, "Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Quest for the Beloved Community." 33.

[74] Martin Luther King Jr., "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," transcript of speech delivered at NAACP Emancipation Day Rally, Atlanta, GA, January 1, 1957, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/facing-challenge-new-age-address-delivered-naacp-emancipation-day-rally

[75] Martin Luther King Jr., "Birth of a New Nation," transcript of sermon delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, AL., April 7, 1957, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/birth-new-nation-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church.

relations, angered many white evangelicals in his day. Some Christians opposed King's activism because they considered race relations a purely social issue, not a spiritual one. They tended to believe that the government should not force people of different races to integrate…Some even thought that segregation was a biblical requirement."[76] The church's complicity leading up to and continuing throughout the civil rights movement resulted from racist ideas that had reached a boiling point.

Much good happened during this time and a great deal of evil. As a result of the efforts of Dr. King and his contemporaries, the civil rights act of 1964 was passed, making it illegal to discriminate. Unfortunately, this did not change the inbred racist ideas that continued to legislate racism and segregate the church. King was assassinated on April 4, 1968, because of the hate he peacefully protested. Tisby recalls, "During his lifetime and at the height of the civil rights movement, a large segment of the American church derided King and other activists and even resisted the efforts of the civil rights movement."[77] At the end of his last speech, adequately titled, "I Have Been to the Mountaintop," King said,

> Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live – a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*[78]

CONCLUSION

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[76] Tisby, *The Color of Compromise,* 148-149.

[77] Tisby, *The Color of Compromise,* 150-151.

[78] Martin Luther King Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop," transcript of speech delivered at the Mason Temple, Memphis, TN., April 3, 1968, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/ive-been-mountaintop.

The racist ideas that have shaped the United States and the church have left a lasting scar that is visible. Now is the time for the church to confront its scars by lamenting its part in perpetuating segregation, discrimination, and racist ideology. Therefore, we must ask, what is the church's place amid this continued pursuit of justice? Throughout history, the complicity, compromise, and cooperation of the White church in the racist ideas and actions of our society have short-circuited spiritual formation and diversity within the church. Ibram Kendi states that "there was nothing simple or straightforward or predictable about racist ideas, and thus their history…for generations of Americans, racist ideas have been their common sense."[79] The argument of what is or is not racist only fuels the divide between the majority White culture and the people of color who make up the minority population of the United States. Kendi writes, "Both segregationist[80] and assimilationist[81] ideas have been wrapped up in attractive arguments to seem good…And in wrapping their ideas in goodness, segregationists and assimilationists have rarely confessed to their racist policies and ideas…All these self-serving efforts by powerful factions to define their racist rhetoric as nonracist has left Americans thoroughly divided over, and ignorant of, what racist ideas truly are."[82] This is the same argument that Jemar Tisby writes about concerning the church's complicity in racism throughout history, "When faced with the choice between racism and equality, the American church has tended to practice a complicit Christianity rather than a courageous Christianity. They chose comfort over

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[79] Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, 4.

[80] A segregationist is someone who believes like Senator from Mississippi, Jefferson Davis as he gave a speech on April 12, 1860 on the Senate floor saying, "The inequality of the white and black races was stamped from the beginning." Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning,* 3.

[81] "Assimilationists constantly encourage Black adoption of White cultural traits and/or physical ideals." Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning,* 3.

[82] Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, 4-5.

constructive conflict and created and maintained a status quo of injustice…As if Christianity were merely a boat languidly floating down the river of racism."[83]

The injustice of the complicit and compromised past of the majority church does not have to be our projected future. It is apparent with a brief overview of the history of the racist ideas that have shaped a nation that these ideas have infiltrated and formed the church in a way that has taken us down a path of complicity and not courage in the face of injustice. Although we cannot change the past, we cannot ignore it either. The church can be a voice for God's justice in the present, like many who have gone before us. The church's participation in the march for justice and equality for all people, starting with those who have their backs against the wall, must be an intentional and unified effort to usher in the beloved community that lives within the gospel of Jesus Christ and the dream of Dr. King that all people are created equal and therefore are entitled to equality. We will now turn to Dr. King's vision of the beloved community as a discernable image of what is possible when God is at the center of the life of His church in pursuit of justice through unity and diversity.

[83] Tisby, *The Color of Compromise,* 17.

Chapter 3

A VISION OF THE BELOVED COMMUNITY: MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

INTRODUCTION

"But the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends. The type of love that I stress here is not eros, a sort of esthetic or romantic love; not philia, a sort of reciprocal love between personal friends; but it is agape which is understanding goodwill for all [men]. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. It is the love of God working in the lives of [men]. This is the love that may well be the salvation of our civilization."[84]

The beloved community is not simply a reference to the peaceable kingdom where the predator lies with the prey and where weapons of warfare are turned into agricultural tools. The beloved community is a vision of the upside-down Kingdom of God where there is justice and dignity for all. There is great beauty in honestly coming to grips with the past atrocities and immorality of racism, discrimination, and hate that have impacted the kingdoms of this world, namely the United States and the American church. When the story of the past is truthfully told, it will show how racism and racist ideas have, in many ways, adulterated the church's witness. When the past is confronted, the church will begin moving toward bringing systemic change into the broken spaces of society. In reflecting on John 8:31-32, author Chad Brennan writes, "The truth gives us freedom. Lies, denial, and willful ignorance keep us trapped in bondage."[85] He continues, "Millions of individuals have played a role in creating and sustaining the racial hierarchy in the United States for over four hundred years. Racial injustice is built and sustained by people, and it must be dismantled by people."[86] Just as the systemic problem of racism has

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[84] Martin Luther King Jr., "The Role of the Church in Facing the Nation's Chief Moral Dilemma," transcript of speech delivered at the Conference on Christian Faith and Human Relations in Nashville, TN., April 25, 1957, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/role-church-facing-nation-s-chief-moral-dilemma-address-delivered-25-april.

[85] Edmondson, *Faithful Anti-Racism, 14.*

marred the Kingdom vision of the beloved community. The process of dismantling racism and racist thought to bring about the beauty and grace of God's beloved community begins with people. It starts with you and with me.

Throughout history, there is no more excellent way to understand God's Kingdom than justice being possible for all people regardless of age, race, gender, or socio-economic status. In Micah 6:8, the prophet proclaims, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Unfortunately, these Biblical requirements to "do justice," to "love kindness," and to "walk humbly" have been altered, deformed, and largely ignored in large part because of racism. This is not to say that all Christians or churches have been complacent or complicit in stifling justice, withholding kindness, or even not walking in humility. However, it does communicate that there is still much work for the Church today to bring about God's already and not yet Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. In the quote above, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. asserts that the end of the hard work of fighting for equality and civil rights is reconciliation, redemption, and the beautiful manifestation of the beloved community. The prophet Micah communicates a vision that corresponds to the many who have invested in the work of the civil rights movement in the American context. The primary responsibility as followers of Jesus is to follow in His work of justice for the oppressed and marginalized, to value human life through kindness and love, and to walk in step with God's Spirit. Suppose the church neglects someone in need or selfishly manipulates another person for ill-gotten gain. In that case, injustice persists, and the beloved community, in the end, is used and deformed into something that it is not. Many saints have gone before who have given the church a light to follow and a mantle to assume as we pursue God's Kingdom. This is not simply a societal problem. It is a problem within the church

[86] Edmondson, *Faithful Anti-Racism,* 25.

as segregation, racism, and racist thought were supported, denied, or ignored by most majority mono ethnically White Christian churches.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was the most influential voice during the civil rights movement in the United States. He wrote much and influenced many as he fought for equal rights for all humanity, precisely his dream of unifying what had been broken because of racism and prejudice at the hands of the majority White culture toward the minority Black culture. King took a nonviolent approach that found its roots in the *agape* of God and the pursuit of the Kingdom vision of God's beloved community, "a transformed and regenerated human society."[87] According to the text above, an excerpt from the speech King gave at the Conference on Christian Faith and Human Relations in Nashville, the end goal was not to shame the proud and arrogant but to bring about a social justice that benefited all and, through understanding would undo unjust systems. The end was King's dream of the beloved community. The church's responsibility, according to King, was to be a prophetic witness, proclaiming peace in the pursuit of reconciliation, redemption, and the beloved community. Social transformation and spiritual growth resulted from a genuine relationship with God grounded in love. For King, "if the church were to be the church, it would engage in prophetic witness that would bring its spiritual, social, economic and political resources to bear in ways that would affirm God's love, and be truly reconciling, redeeming, liberating and transforming, leading to the realization of the beloved community."[88]

In pursuit of the beloved community, living in God's peaceable kingdom was not only possible for King but also the end goal, his dream, and the reward for his sacrifice and

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[87] Kenneth L. Smith, and Ira G Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1974), 130.

[88] Hunt, "Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Quest for the Beloved Community," 37.

commitment. The spirit of unity and peace coupled with the unconditional love of God would do something transformative for a society that would allow opposers and enemies to be friends. Or, as King proclaimed in his famous "I Have a Dream" speech on August 28, 1963:

> I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood…I have a dream that one day down in Alabama with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, one day right down in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today.[89]

There is no denying that King's dream lives on today as we continue to pursue the *agape* (unconditional love) of God that is inclusive, freeing, and unifying. But, unfortunately, the goodwill of all humanity that the *agape* of God through Jesus Christ proclaims is still challenged by oppressors through discrimination, racism, and bigotry. Although these unjust systems still exist today, the beloved community of God persists in overcoming and toppling that which opposes progress. This is evidenced when the church actively pursues the love ethic of Christ. Not just selfishly receiving but selflessly offering God's love through reconciling and redeeming ways, "it is the love of God working in the lives of [men]."[90] In this vision, God's love compels the church to act in ways that build up instead of tearing down, to act in ways that unite instead of segregate, and to act in ways that challenge the status quo of the way things have always been and to live into God's beloved community.

According to Dr. King, the love of God should be evident in the lives of believers, which he says will be "the salvation of our civilization."[91] King believed in the kinship of all persons and that we are all interrelated. He said, "If you harm me, you harm yourself. Love, *agape*, is the

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[89] Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 219.

[90] King Jr., "The Role of the Church in Facing the Nation's Chief Moral Dilemma."

[91] King Jr., "The Role of the Church in Facing the Nation's Chief Moral Dilemma."

only cement that can hold this broken community together. When I am commanded to love, I am commanded to restore community, to resist injustice, and to meet the needs of my brothers."[92] What Dr. King did in connecting the agape love of God and the belovedness of individuals reveals the identity of people beyond our exterior descriptors. It places all humanity on the same playing field, reaching toward the same goal. A goal that looks a lot like God's divine peaceable Kingdom and less like the destructive discriminatory ways of the past and present. Just as the overflowing love of God through Jesus was freely given by no merit of our own, the love we offer as an outflow of our hope should be given freely until one day we achieve that which King and others before and after him have given their lives to. According to Dr. King, the beloved community and God's agape is "the salvation of our civilization."[93] This Biblical imperative must be pursued until it is realized.

Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp Jr., in their book *Search for the Beloved Community,* write, "The vision of the Beloved Community was the organizing principle of all of King's thought and activity. His writings and involvement in the civil rights movement were illustrations of and footnotes to his fundamental preoccupation with the actualization of an inclusive human community."[94] The transformed and regenerated society that Dr. King emphasized was not evident before, during, and after the civil rights movement. For King, the end goal of the work that needed to be done and was being done was not desegregation but rather integration. He envisioned an integrated society that found its foundation in the Kingdom vision of the beloved community that could not come about through political legislation but through Godly love. Smith

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[92] Martin Luther King Jr., *"Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" in Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1958), 106.

[93] King Jr., "The Role of the Church in Facing the Nation's Chief Moral Dilemma."

[94] Smith, *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King*, 129.

writes, "Integration, as King understood it, involves personal and social relationships that are created by love."[95] These relationships, shaped by integration, created out of the love of God and the foundation of Christian identity, required an interdependency and an interrelatedness that not only brought people from different backgrounds together but was a glimpse of what was possible. This was evident in the events of the civil rights movement, and King viewed them "as a microcosm of the Beloved Community." Smith writes, "Every social class and every age group was represented. The educated and the illiterate, the affluent and the welfare recipient, white and black—people who had heretofore been separated by rigid social mores and laws—were brought together in a common cause."[96]

For King, the beloved community was already underway but needed to be fully realized. There were glimpses of what could be when people of differing backgrounds—racially, socioeconomically, and educationally came together to fight racism and discrimination. In his book, *Church in Color,* Montague Williams describes King's vision of the beloved community as his "most consistent language for eschatological hope" of the world.[97] The eschatological hope in the days of the civil rights movement was that equality and integration were not only a dream but intrinsically possible. This hope in what the beloved community offered was referring to a "realization of the society of love, justice, peace and freedom for which human beings were created and toward which all of creation is heading…participants of the Beloved Community embrace the very love of God that invited and embraced them, and they let this love shape the

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[95] Smith, *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King*, 131.

[96] Smith, *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King*, 132.

[97] Montague R. Williams, *Church in Color: Youth Ministry, Race, and the Theology of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2020), 128.

way they relate to God, and one another."[98] This realization was not only for those with their backs against the wall fighting for civil rights in the past but also a reality check for those who associated themselves with Jesus Christ and His church, both past and present. In a sermon, he often preached on Romans 12:2 about being a transformed nonconformist King writes, "As Christians we are a colony of heaven thrown out, as pioneers, in the midst of an unchristian world to represent the ideals and way of living of a nobler realm until the earth should be the Lord's and the fullness thereof."[99] He then articulates through an illustration that Christians will bring more significant change by being thermostats rather than thermometers. "The Christian," he writes, "is called upon not to be like a thermometer conforming to the temperature of his society, but he must be like a thermostat serving to transform the temperature of his society."[100]

King's eschatological hope for the beloved community meant that he and others were not intended to be inactive in their pursuit of justice, peace, love, and freedom. As a thermostat transforms the temperature of a room, those who would associate with Christ and His Kingdom ethic ought to transform society rather than sit idly by. At the same time, people suffer with their backs against the wall. This was not only true in the pre-civil rights era but also in what came before and what came after. Racism and racist thought have no place in God's church precisely because there is no room for prejudice or bias based on the color of one's skin in the beloved community of God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. That is the atrocity of what led to the civil rights movement and what came after. The church had conformed to societal

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[98] Williams, *Church in Color,* 128.

[99] Martin Luther King Jr., "Transformed Nonconformist," transcript of sermon delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, AL., November 1954, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/transformed-nonconformist

[100] King Jr., "Transformed Nonconformist."

norms and was largely complicit with and complacent to racism and, in doing so, was less than the image of the beloved community.

Author Charles Marsh in reflecting on the beloved community and the work of John M. Perkins, writes, "The habits and practices that sustain beloved community are the gifts of the church."[101] He further proclaims that "Discipleship to Jesus Christ requires us to reevaluate our political preferences, personal desires, prejudices, opinions, and economic policies in the light of God's moral demands. Christians in North America must be known as people with a burden for the poor and oppressed."[102] This was not the position of the church in the era leading up to and immediately preceding the civil rights movement. The theology of beloved community was not new to the fight for civil rights or King himself, but the unifying marker gave the movement a more excellent vision rooted in faith. Marsh writes, "The Civil Rights movement teaches us that faith is authentic when it stays close to the ground. And it reminds us of faith's essential affirmations: showing hospitality to strangers and outcasts; affirming the dignity of created life; reclaiming the ideals of love, honesty, and truth; embracing the preferential option of nonviolence; and practicing justice and mercy."[103] He also reiterates that in the latter half of 1964, the biblical vision of beloved community began to crumble, "Removed from its home in the church, the work of building beloved community withered and died. Unanchored from its animating vision of beloved community, the Civil Rights movement lost its spiritual and moral focus."[104] King was the guiding light who organized and embodied this vision during the

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[101] Charles Marsh, and John M. Perkins, *Welcoming Justice: God's Movement Toward Beloved Community* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press Books, 2018), 42.

[102] Marsh, *Welcoming Justice,* 42.

[103] Marsh, *Welcoming Justice,* 28-29.

[104] Marsh, *Welcoming Justice,* 33.

turbulent and empowering movement toward civil rights and beyond. It could also be suggested that this vision is still needed today because God's action in this world has not changed. John Perkins writes, "The next great awakening that I see coming is a renewal of what it means to be the church."[105] The church in the United States must rediscover the beauty, grace, humility, and love of King's vision of the beloved community. This vision has been distorted by racism and racist thought throughout our history. Dr. Martin Luther King's dream is as natural for us today as it was for him then. May we not give up pursuing the Kingdom vision of the beloved community as we seek spiritual growth and social transformation in the church and throughout our world today. May it be so.

DISTORTION OF THE KINGDOM VISION OF THE BELOVED COMMUNITY

The Kingdom vision of the beloved community that King dreamed about and pursued during the civil rights movement centered around the somebodiness[106] of all people across race, class, or gender lines. In a speech delivered six months before his assassination, King spoke these words to a Barrett Junior High School group on October 26, 1967, "Number one in your life's blueprint, should be a deep belief in your own dignity, your worth and your own somebodiness."[107] Montague Williams writes, "In the Beloved Community, all participants are aware of this God-given dignity and worth in themselves and one another, and they encourage

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[105] Marsh, *Welcoming Justice*, 88-89.

[106] The use of the term "somebodiness" by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is to affirm that we are all somebodies. All people have been created in the image of God and can find their identity as the beloved of God. I will use this term in the same way that King used it, to affirm personhood and the treatment of persons across racial, gender, political and socio-economic lines. As opposed the sense of nobodiness as King used it in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. King Jr., *A Testament of Hope*, 289-302.

[107] Martin Luther King Jr., "What is Your Life's Blueprint," transcript of speech delivered at Barrett Junior High School in Philadelphia, PA., October 26, 1967, https://projects.seattletimes.com/mlk/words-blueprint.html.

mutual awareness of somebodiness."[108] All humanity is made in the image of God. That image has been distorted or marred by sin, which has shown itself throughout history in many life-taking ways. The evils of White supremacy, injustice, and racist thought have distorted this vision of the beloved community. These distortions were perpetuated by action but were equally perpetuated by inaction on behalf of the church. These life-taking distortions brought oppression and terror upon people of color because the majority ethnically White church was unwilling to speak up or stand up. This next section will lay out critical foundations for King's vision of the beloved community: (1) Every person is made in the image of God, and (2) Every person is beloved.

In many ways, these distortions take away the dignity and worth bestowed upon humanity by God through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This is what King was pushing back against. The evil of hatred found its home on the hallowed ground of the United States and in most churches that littered the landscape. Somebodiness was stripped away from folks because of the color of their skin or their socio-economic status, or even gender. King's dream of the beloved community returned dignity, worth, and personhood to those oppressed under unjust laws and systems. It was a call to life as it should have been all along instead of what it had become.

Catholic priest Henri Nouwen writes, "To be chosen as the Beloved of God is something radically different. Instead of excluding others, it includes others. Instead of rejecting others as less valuable, it accepts others in their uniqueness. It is not a competitive, but a compassionate choice. Our minds have great difficulty in coming to grips with such a reality. Maybe our minds will never understand it. Perhaps it is only our hearts that can accomplish this. Every time we hear about 'chosen people', 'chosen talents', or 'chosen friends', we almost automatically start

[108] Williams, *Church in Color,* 128.

thinking about elites and find ourselves not far from feelings of jealousy, anger, or resentment. Not seldom has the perception of others as being chosen led to aggression, violence, and war."[109] This reality of belovedness in the eyes of a loving God is what the world needs. It is the somebodiness of our identity as sons and daughters of God. It is what King proclaimed in his vision of a beloved community, and it is undoubtedly what Nouwen reveals here as the heart becomes the center that moves us from perceiving others as superior or inferior and allows us to see others the way our loving God sees them.

So, just as sin has distorted the beauty of God's original creation, sin has distorted how we have treated and continue to treat people who are different from us. The Kingdom vision of the beloved community has been distorted through White supremacy, injustice, racist practices, and inaction. All these categories, it can be argued, are interrelated and interconnected and have a torrid history in our nation and within God's church. In the very place and amongst the same people who should have understood the intrinsic value, worth, and dignity of all human life better than most. We will now discuss these distortions further.

THE DISTORTION OF THE BELOVED COMMUNITY THROUGH WHITE SUPREMACY

The first of those distortions can be found in the American story. Author Robert P. Jones, in his book, *White Too Long*, addresses the church's silence regarding White supremacy and the racist thoughts that have permeated history while distorting the reality of God's mission to seek and save the lost. He writes, "It is time—indeed, well beyond time—for white Christians in the United States to reckon with the racism of our past and the willful amnesia of our present…They [the white Christian church] have been responsible for constructing and sustaining a project to

[109] Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (New York: Crossroad. 1992), 55-56.

protect white supremacy and resist black equality."[110] In fact, he goes a step further and gives a harsh indictment on the church's protection of white supremacy. He continues, "While charges of complacency and complicity are accurate as far as they go, they overlook the proactive role white religious leaders and white churches played in creating a uniquely American and distinctively Christian form of white supremacy."[111] According to Jones, White supremacy isn't evil White men in robes but rather how a society functions and orders itself around its values. It is "a set of practices informed by the fundamental belief that white people are valued more than others."[112]

In Martin Luther King Jr's famous "I Have a Dream" speech delivered at the Lincoln Memorial as the march on Washington was underway on August 28, 1963, he declared that America had defaulted on its promissory note to give value and dignity upon all people, specifically toward its citizens of color. He laments that one hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation that the "Negro is still not free." He continues, "The life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination."[113] One example of the crippling effect of racism was when White supremacists planted a bomb at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four young girls. King offered the eulogy over this tragedy with these words, "They have something to say to us in their death. They have something to say to every minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of stained-glass windows. They have something to say to every politician who has

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[110] Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 5-6.

[111] Jones, *White Too Long,* 33.

[112] Jones, *White Too Long,* 16.

[113] King Jr., *A Testament of Hope,* 217.

fed his constituents the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism…They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about WHO murdered them, but about the system, the way of life and the philosophy which PRODUCED the murderers."[114] History reveals that White supremacy infiltrated all sectors of human life from the inception of the United States to today.[115] White supremacy's distortion upon the beloved community of God's Kingdom is the devaluing and dehumanizing of those who are not White or who are not like us. This is unsettling primarily because the Jesus the church says it represents did not and would not stand for racial inequality.

Jones suggests that unless the White church comes to grips with its past and is honest about its support of White supremacy, whether implicitly or explicitly, there can be no real change throughout its history. He does this by challenging the White church to see our current moment, to remember the past, to believe the truth of the gospel, to mark that which is good and uplifting, to map a new foundation by confronting the past, to tell a more truthful story, and to reckon with the influence of White supremacy so that racial justice can take place both within the church and throughout the greater landscape of the United States. Jones states, "the question today is whether we white Christians will also awaken to see what has happened to us, and to grasp once and for all how White supremacy has robbed us of our own heritage and of our ability to be in right relationships with our fellow citizens, with ourselves, and even with God. Reckoning with white supremacy, for us, is now an unavoidable moral choice."[116] The moral choice is to honestly reckon with the systemic indoctrination of White superiority that directly resulted from colonization in America.

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[114] King Jr., *A Testament of Hope,* 221.

[115] The Doctrine of Discovery aided in providing a false superiority to a white population in the colonizing of the new world.

[116] Jones, *White Too Long,* 236.

THE DISTORTION OF THE BELOVED COMMUNITY THROUGH INJUSTICE

To come to terms with systemic racism and White supremacy, we must also be empathetic with and for those affected by centuries of racial violence and discrimination. Dr. King understood that his mission during the civil rights movement wasn't just desegregation but integration in pursuit of the beloved community. His was a nonviolent campaign for human rights that many within the church thought were better left to the courts. In one instance, King was arrested in Birmingham, Alabama. While in jail, he penned his "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" as a recourse against the apathy of White clergymen who were aware of the injustice in their town but failed to see their role in the fight. He tells them, "I am in Birmingham because injustice is here…There can be no gainsaying of the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community."[117] His appeal was a call to arms for those who failed to see the legislative nature of the discrimination against those with their backs against the wall. When the injustice of slavery, Jim Crow laws, redlining, lack of civil rights for all humanity, and so forth are blindly overlooked by clergy and the church, the unity that is supposed to define the church is marred. The beloved community is not a White or Black construction. It is a divine initiative to show the world that they can be reconciled to one another. In God, there is life, liberty, justice, and somebodiness for all. All are created equal in the image of God and are worthy of dignity.

John Perkins speaks of the dignity that is inherently ours through Jesus, "I really believe that the first truth God wants every one of us to know is that we are created in his image and therefore have inherent dignity. The Klan offered poor white people a sense of self-worth, but they still had to cover their faces with a hood when they paraded in public. The dignity that comes from terrorizing people will never last. True dignity can't be about anything you do to

[117] King Jr., *A Testament of Hope*. 290.

prove yourself, even though we do have to stand up and affirm dignity when it is denied. In the end, dignity is a gift all of us receive from God."[118] In Dr. King's "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," we see that the injustice he so boldly stood against through nonviolent action means that it does us no good to proclaim the beloved community and not usher it into the present.

Racism and discrimination produce unjust systems of oppression based on one's skin color. Jemar Tisby, in *How to Fight Racism,* claims the injustice of racism and our part in it. King exemplified during the civil rights movement that there was an urgency to stand with the oppressed and against injustice. He writes, "Everyone is either fighting racism or supporting it, whether actively or passively."[119] The injustice that plagues the church today is a denial that we have a part to play in the fight against racism, just as we had a role to play in institutionalizing racism through segregation, violence toward Black and Brown bodies, and inaction. The past doesn't have to define the future. We exist in a world full of injustice. King saw injustice happening, and he walked toward it boldly and confidently. He and others suffered with dignity because they were inherently dignified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Injustice mars and destroys how people may view the beloved community, but there is hope in the reality that God is still working.

In speaking of the civil rights movement, Perkins writes, "It was exciting to be a part of a movement where people were learning that they had dignity and could stand up on their own two feet…We glimpsed the beloved community, but we also watched it slip away because the movement lost its foundation in God's greater movement."[120] Perkins points out that after King

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[118] Marsh, *Welcoming Justice,* 52

[119] Jemar Tisby, *How to Fight Racism: Courageous Christianity and the Journey toward Racial Justice* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2021), 4.

[120] Marsh, *Welcoming Justice,* 94.

was assassinated, the movement began to lose vision, especially when pursuing the beloved community. There was still a continuing fight for justice, but the foundation moved away from God's more excellent restoration, redemption, and reconciliation plan. The fight against racism must continue to be fought on all fronts. When it comes to the church's place in fighting racism and declaring the dignity of all persons, we must not remain silent and inactive as we pursue the somebodiness and dignity of all persons regardless of race, color, gender, socio-economic status, or creed.

THE DISTORTION OF THE BELOVED COMMUNITY THROUGH RACIST THOUGHT AND RACIST ACTION/INACTION

King's dream of the beloved community did not just appear out of thin air. It resulted from many centuries of discrimination toward people of color from the earliest days of colonization in the United States, where personhood and citizenship were defined by who was enslaved and who was not. Those who were free held all the rights and privileges. This fight for freedom and somebodiness has been fought for many decades by those with their backs against the wall. Unfortunately, within the church in the United States, there has been a sense of apathy and denial surrounding the role of racism and racist thought in the formation and function of the church. Kristin Du Mez tackles White evangelical masculinity in her book *Jesus and John Wayne.* She asserts, "Across two millennia of Christian history—and within the history of evangelicalism itself—there is ample precedent for sexism, racism, xenophobia, violence, and imperial designs." Yet, she also can see that all is not lost, "But there are also expressions of the Christian faith—and of evangelical Christianity—that have disrupted the status quo and challenged systems of privilege and power."[121] The unjust acts of racism and discrimination have

[121] Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 14.

and continue to distort the Kingdom vision of the beloved community within the church to the point that unless we address the injustice at hand and challenge systems of privilege and power, history is bound to repeat itself.

This is evident through blatant support by the church of racist legislation from the Jim Crow era to today. It has already been mentioned that Dr. King was a social activist, theologian, and pastor with deep roots within the church. His work toward integration revealed the great chasm between White and Black because of decades of unrestrained and unchallenged racism disguised in political garb. Du Mez writes, "Although white evangelicals like to point to the existence of black "evangelicals" to distance their movement from allegations of racism and associations with conservative politics, black Christians themselves have attempted to draw attention to evangelicalism's "problem of whiteness." And to white evangelical's inability or unwillingness to confront this problem."[122] Many White evangelicals find it hard to accept the reality that there is a problem with racism today, which is not surprising because many White evangelicals during the civil rights era either believed they were right or that the church should not interfere in what was a government issue. This concession on behalf of many White evangelicals comes from the belief that the United States was and continues to be a Christian nation. Because this was the case, "many evangelicals found it hard to accept that the sin of racism ran deep through the nation's history. To concede this seemed unpatriotic."[123]

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the distorted vision of the beloved community because of racism and racist ideas has created an alternate reality where we are unaware of the distortions caused by

[122] Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 6.

[123] Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne,* 38

segregation, discrimination, and White supremacy in our pursuit of justice. This is important because justice is a necessary part of the beloved community. Peace is not possible without unhindered or untethered justice. Injustice in society has long been overlooked or ignored by those who should have been ushering in the Biblical justice and freedom we so adamantly proclaim from our pulpits week in and week out. The church's complicity and participation throughout history regarding racism and racist ideas are unjustifiable and immoral and, therefore, must be addressed to confront the problem head-on. The beloved community envisioned by Dr. King and lived out by so many others should give the church a sense of holy boldness that can transform a society where multitudes of people from varying ethnic and cultural backgrounds can embody the love that King so eloquently spoke about as "the salvation of our civilization." King writes in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" this profound statement to a group of White clergymen, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."[124] Gary Simpson writes that the love of God in Christ ignites the beloved community and is alive and well today in the way Christians love. As noted in the quote from King's speech at the beginning of this chapter, "It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends." Simpson writes, "Love changes the face of three enemies: the face of the oppressed, the face of the oppressor, and the face of the oppressive system."[125]

The time is now to not only acknowledge or rediscover the Kingdom vision of the beloved community so brilliantly painted by Dr. King but to urgently and actively participate in the rolling out of God's justice and freedom in real-time. Simpson writes, "When King's nonviolent oratory brings the beloved community near, white Americans likewise get integrated

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[124] King Jr., *A Testament of Hope,* 290.

[125] Gary M. Simpson, "'Changing the Face of the Enemy': Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Beloved Community." *Word & World* 28, no. 1 (2008): 60.

into the spiritual field of African American community. When so integrated, thank God Almighty, we are free at last."[126] In addressing the church from the Birmingham jail, King expresses his disappointment with a glimpse of hope, "In deep disappointment, I have wept over the laxity of the church. But rest assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love."[127] It is out of this disappointment over the racist complacency and complicity within the church throughout history that real change is possible.

[126] Simpson, "Changing the Face of the Enemy," 65.

[127] King Jr., *A Testament of Hope,* 299.

Chapter 4

THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE, MLK, AND THE BELOVED COMMUNITY: RECOVERING, REDISCOVERING, AND REDEEMING THE KINGDOM VISION

INTRODUCTION

The church in the United States today has been significantly influenced by the racism and racist thought of our nation's past. From colonization, the atrocities of slavery, the injustice of reconstruction, and the pushback against civil rights, to racial injustice today, the majority White church has primarily remained complacent to and complicit with the unjust systems built on race and racist ideas. Thankfully much has changed throughout history, but the truth remains that we have not done enough to address the injustice that exists because of the unjust systems that have elevated and benefited some while suppressing others. These oppressive systems have and will always stand as a stark contrast to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Church of the Nazarene in the United States has not done enough to address the injustice of these unjust systems that have shaped a nation and, subsequently, the church. So how might we address racism today in the Church of the Nazarene? This chapter aims to address racism present on a denominational scale and to seek to demonstrate the ways that as a denomination that professes to be committed to the mission of making Christlike Disciples in the nations has contributed to racism and racist ideas through silence or even participating in practices that promote segregation over integration. Martin Luther King Jr. famously declared on April 17, 1960, in an interview on NBC's Meet the Press after being questioned about the racial make-up of his congregation, "I think it is one of the tragedies of our nation, one of the shameful tragedies, that 11 o'clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most

segregated hours in Christian America."[128] Although a lot has changed since 1960, we still have some ground to travel if we wish to truly embrace the kingdom vision of the beloved community that is welcoming to all people regardless of race, gender, class, or anything else that may promote any segregation or discrimination.

It is essential to point out that the sin of racism and the systems that perpetuate it in our society do not have the final word regarding who we should be as Christians. For far too long, the racial systems of our society have perverted the beloved community of the Kingdom of God that was introduced to the world through Jesus and passed on to the disciples and to us through the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."[129] This mission of the Christian church is universal. It should drive us to a truly multinational, multicultural, and multiethnic church that looks more like the beloved community and less like the kingdoms of this world. As the mission initiator, Jesus casts a vision for a uniquely diverse community. Unfortunately, this vision has been adulterated by unjust systems that dehumanize instead of evangelizing. With that in mind, how do we make room for Jesus in our churches for the work that should be done to redeem what has been lost because of racism and racist ideas?

How do we go about this reclamation work? Mark Vroegop suggests that the starting point is speaking with a common language, the language of lament. He writes, "I'm not so naïve as to think that learning to lament will fix all the problems connected to racial divisions in the

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[128] Martin Luther King Jr., "Meet the press Martin Luther King jr. (civil rights leader)," transcript of interview moderated by Ned Brooks, April 17, 1960, http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/Vol05Scans/17Apr1960_InterviewonMeetthePress.pdf

[129] Matthew 28:19-20, NRSV

church and the culture. I merely believe this biblical language is a helpful starting point."[130] Lament is the act of weeping with those who weep. It is the language of grief throughout Scripture. Soong-Chan Rah defines lament this way: "Laments are prayers of petition arising out of need. But lament is not simply the presentation of a list of complaints, not merely the expression of sadness over difficult circumstances. Lament in the Bible is a liturgical response to the reality of suffering and engages God in the context of pain and trouble. Lament hopes God would respond to human suffering wholeheartedly communicated through lament."[131] Rah suggests that lament is mainly absent from the liturgy of the American church because there is so much emphasis put on the language of praise. The problem with the language of praise or celebration, without finding proper balance with the language of lament, is that it does not challenge unjust systems and is comfortable with the status quo. Although praise is necessary, we need to lament for proper balance. He writes, "Lament recognizes the struggles of life and cries out for justice against existing injustices. The status quo is not to be celebrated but instead must be challenged…Lament and praise must go hand in hand."[132] Kathleen O'Conner writes, "The voices of Lamentation urge the readers to face suffering, to speak of it, to be dangerous proclaimers of the truths that nations, families, and individuals prefer to repress. They invite us to honor the pain muffled in our hearts, overlooked in our society, and crying for our attention in other parts of the world."[133] The language of lament is a great starting point on the road to recovering, rediscovering, and redeeming the kingdom vision of the beloved community that Dr.

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[130] Mark Vroegop, *Weep with Me: How Lament Opens a Door for Racial Reconciliation* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2020), 22.

[131] Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 21.

[132] Rah, *Prophetic Lament,* 23.

[133] Kathleen O'Conner, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 95.

Martin Luther King Jr. and others fought valiantly for during the civil rights movement in the pursuit of integration and equality for all.

The Church of the Nazarene has a rich history of intercultural ministry worldwide. Still, it has only made minimal attempts to address the sin of racism and racist thought in the United States. Unfortunately, this has only perpetuated the chasm between reconciliation and trust between the majority White culture church and the minority other culture church. During the pandemic of 2020, at the height of racial tensions over the brutal and unjust death of a black man named George Floyd at the hands of the police, the Board of General Superintendents of the Church of the Nazarene re-emphasized our position on discrimination:

> **Discrimination.** The Church of the Nazarene reiterates its historic position of Christian compassion for people of all races. We believe that God is the Creator of all people, and that of one blood are all people created.
>
> We believe that each individual, regardless of race, color, gender, or creed, should have equality before law, including the right to vote, equal access to educational opportunities, to all public facilities, and to the equal opportunity, according to one's ability, to earn a living free from any job or economic discrimination.
>
> We urge our churches everywhere to continue and strengthen programs of education to promote racial understanding and harmony. We also feel that the scriptural admonition of Hebrews 12:14 should guide the actions of our people. We urge that each member of the Church of the Nazarene humbly examine his or her personal attitudes and actions toward others, as a first step in achieving the Christian goal of full participation by all in the life of the church and the entire community.
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> We reemphasize our belief that holiness of heart and life is the basis for right living. We believe that Christian charity between racial groups or gender will come when the hearts of people have been changed by complete submission to Jesus Christ, and that the essence of true Christianity consists in loving God with one's heart, soul, mind, and strength, and one's neighbor as oneself.
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> *Therefore, we renounce any form of racial and ethnic indifference, exclusion, subjugation, or oppression as a grave sin against God and our fellow human beings. We lament the legacy of every form of racism throughout the world, and we seek to confront that legacy through repentance, reconciliation, and biblical justice. We seek to repent of every behavior in which we have been overtly or covertly complicit with the sin of racism,*

both past and present; and in confession and lament we seek forgiveness and reconciliation.

Further, we acknowledge that there is no reconciliation apart from human struggle to stand against and to overcome all personal, institutional and structural prejudice responsible for racial and ethnic humiliation and oppression. We call upon Nazarenes everywhere to identify and seek to remove acts and structures of prejudice, to facilitate occasions for seeking forgiveness and reconciliation, and to take action toward empowering those who have been marginalized.[134]

Although this statement in and of itself speaks to the fact that the Church of the Nazarene has held a "historic position" when it comes to "Christian compassion," equity, and inclusion of all people regardless of "race, color, gender or creed," there is still so much more that needs to be addressed when it comes to demonstrating what a life shaped and characterized by holiness looks like in a racially, politically and economically divided society. The majority culture church in the United States has emphasized a form of the beloved community by proclaiming all people's dignity while remaining relatively silent or inactive when it comes to the tragedies of racial violence and discrimination in our world. As a result, those attitudes and behaviors have weaved their way into our unintentionally racially segregated churches and districts. Most definitely a development of a broken nation built on the ideals of racism and racist ideas. There is hope that what has been distorted within the church and the Kingdom vision of the beloved community because of the sin of racism can be restored through the hard work of recovering what has been lost, rediscovering God's gift of ethnicity, and redeeming the beauty of racial diversity. Where do we begin? We can, together, through the shared and honest language of lament, "lament the legacy of every form of racism throughout the world, and seek to confront that legacy through repentance, reconciliation, and biblical justice."

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[134] Church of the Nazarene, *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene* (Kansas City, Mo: Nazarene Publishing House, 2017), Article 915.

RECOVERING WHAT HAS BEEN LOST

In my attempts to uncover a church that has challenged the status quo of the way things have always been and has not remained silent in the face of racism and racist ideas, there was not a whole lot of evidence in recent history that the Church of the Nazarene in the United States has done much to stand with the oppressed and the marginalized apart from doctrinal statements about discrimination. Although there is not much visible evidence of the denomination to illustrate supportive actions of the doctrinal statements, some instances have not been recorded or discovered. Even so, not enough has been done to declare that we are an anti-racist denomination, which is reflected in the unintentional segregation in many of our churches and the apathy that many of our members have when confronted with the possibility that the church has perpetuated racism and discrimination. This might be a result of that inaction. Dr. Ivan Beals, in his book, *Our Racist Legacy,* writes about racism and the burden of bridge building, "Common white Christians evade building a bridge of brotherhood with the blacks. Churches seem too busy to understand the woeful heritage of the blacks and their ensuing viewpoints. In dealing with slavery and racism, the blacks remain assigned to sub-human status. Most whites do not learn about black culture, to accept them as equal human beings—or as equal Christians."[135] Being ethnically aware is more than acknowledging that all people matter to God. It is admitting that my ethnic viewpoint is not the only ethnic viewpoint. Author Sarah Shin writes, "Instead of being colorblind, we need to become ethnicity-aware in order to address the beauty and brokenness in our ethnic stories and the stories of others."[136] When we ignore the unique expressions of the Kingdom of God that shines through our ethnicities, we fail to understand and

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[135] Ivan A. Beals, *Our Racist Legacy: Will the Church Resolve the Conflict?* (Notre Dame, Ind., U.S.A: Cross Cultural Publications, 1997), 152.

[136] Sarah Shin, *Beyond Color Blind: Redeeming Our Ethnic Journey* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2017), 10.

grasp the Great Commission and the God who sends us out to make Christlike disciples of the nations.

Shin writes, "When it comes to ethnicity, our world needs Christian voices to call for change and reform with Jesus as the transforming center of it all…If we avoid this topic now, we withdraw into ineffectual witness in word and deed. And we leave a broken and hurting world, friends and strangers, in chaos."[137] This is a powerful statement concerning the fact that we might have avoided this topic for too long and left a hurting and broken world in chaos. Even amid the social justice issues today, we must move past the liberal versus conservative debate to see God's vision for the Christian community. Our God is a God of justice and demands that we stand with the oppressed and against the oppressor. Therefore, as a Christian community, we work toward change and reform through words and actions. The faith community encourages Christians everywhere to "stand against and to overcome all personal, institutional and structural prejudice responsible for racial and ethnic humiliation and oppression."[138] Recovering the Kingdom vision of the beloved community that has been adulterated because of prejudice and racial division is no easy task, even today. Still, it is a necessary step forward if we wish to see a church united, with Jesus at the center of it all.

A great example of a Nazarene pastor who lived through the civil rights movement as an African American is Dr. Charles Johnson from Meridian, Mississippi. He was a pioneer of social justice work within the Church of the Nazarene when it was far more popular to promote personal holiness instead of addressing systemic issues of racism. Discrimination was felt and

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[137] Shin, *Beyond Color Blind,* 8.

[138] *Manual*, Article 915.

experienced by the oppressed in society and the church.[139] Author Chet Bush writes about Dr. Johnson's witness to the beloved community of God's Kingdom in Meridian, Mississippi, "Charles Johnson dignified a people by demanding justice *for* them. Dr. Johnson dignified another people by demanding justice *from* them. This is the nature of prophetic speech and the effect of justice restored."[140] In sharing Dr. Johnson's story, the hope is that his pursuit of justice in a place and time where justice was reserved for some and not for others might help the church today to see what can be done if the call of God is authentic. Upon graduating from the West Virginia African American Nazarene Bible College, Charles did not want to go to Meridian, Mississippi. That is where God had called him to go in the early 1960s and where he remained for the rest of his life and ministry. Bush writes, "The One who called Charles to the fire is calling each of us to pursue justice and righteousness and to live a life that is whole. It is a call that summons forth courage from the heart of the fearful, redeemed relationship for the socially broken, and trust in the One who is always faithful."[141] Although Dr. Johnson didn't set out to be a civil rights activist that is precisely what he became. As an African American pastor in a thriving church on the Gulf Coast District serving in a predominately White denomination, he not only encountered racism from the community but racial and social structures from within the denomination. Bush writes, "Each week Charles had to deliver his offering to the home of a white pastor and, due to the "appropriateness of the arrangement," was instructed to walk around the house to knock on the back door of the parsonage. Whenever his church wanted to use the resources of the offerings they had raised, Charles had to petition the white pastor who held their

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[139] Brandon Winstead, *There All along: Black Participation in the Church of the Nazarene, 1914-1969* (Lexington, Kentucky: Emeth Press, 2013), 50.

[140] Chet Bush, *Called to the Fire: A Witness for God in Mississippi: The Story of Dr. Charles Johnson* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2012), viii.

[141] Bush, *Called to the Fire*, ix.

account and mediated between Fitkin's Memorial Church and the bank. This practice only hardened the very racism Charles was fighting to overcome."[142]

Unfortunately, the hierarchy of White leadership over that of minority leaders continues to perpetuate the racism and discrimination Johnson fought to overcome. Dr. Oliver Phillips, former minority executive within the Church of the Nazarene, shares why he left the Nazarene denomination, which he intimately describes as the place where his umbilical cord had been tethered. He writes that out of the moral conviction of his negative experience, "pastors of color in the COTN are trapped in institutionally abusive relations on districts whose leaders are culturally incompetent."[143] Phillips quotes Dr. C Warren Jones in a statement to the General Board of the Church of the Nazarene in 1940, "When it comes to the Negro race, we have done nothing…We would not do less for Africa, but do you think we should do something for the black [man] in our land?"[144] Why would it be that we value internationalism and multiculturalism but fail to address the glaring issue of cultural ineptitude, primarily through one-culture leadership that does not listen to or appreciate the ethnically diverse neighborhoods that we reside in and minister to? Phillips suggests that one way to recover the beauty of the Kingdom of God is to be culturally intelligent. Not only have a cursory understanding of ethnicity but intentionally become a functioning bridge builder across many cultural contexts. The hard work of cultural intelligence as individuals and as a denomination is going to be hard work that will require great sacrifice, especially on behalf of the homogenous one-culture church. Here are the cultural assumptions that must be dismantled, according to Phillips:

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[142] Bush, *Called to the Fire,* 96-97.

[143] Oliver Phillips, *Enough Is Enough: A Former Black Executive Quits the Church of the Nazarene* (Independently Published: 2021), 11.

[144] Phillips, *Enough is Enough,* 21-22.

1. All people within a particular culture are the same.

2. We could live in a colorblind society.

3. America is a melting pot.

4. Cultural Intelligence cannot be learned.

5. People from other cultures act randomly and stupidly.

6. We have a mandate to transform other people's culture and eliminate unethical practices.[145]

The work of recovering the Kingdom vision of the beloved community only happens with humility and sacrifice. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. believed that racial integration was possible only if we were willing to work toward that end. In his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, he wrote about the injustices in America: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly."[146] If we do not dream and stand against injustice like Dr. King, if we are not called to the fire like Dr. Charles Johnson, if we are not seeking cultural intelligence as Dr. Phillips suggests, then the church may never live up to its Kingdom purpose of making Christlike disciples of the nations. Recovering what has been lost because of centuries of racial violence and injustice will require a common language to build bridges instead of erecting walls. The recovery work within the Church of the Nazarene begins with general and district leadership, who are serious about addressing the issues of implicit and explicit ignorance regarding cultural and ethnic differences between the majority and minority cultures within the United States. Dr. Phillips suggests that it is not simply about being multicultural but intercultural. He writes, "The path to effective intercultural leadership is long

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[145] Phillips, *Enough is Enough*, 212-214.

[146] King Jr., *A Testament of Hope*, 290.

but not hard. Essentially it is about opening your mind, with which comes greater flexibility and creativity. You will soon see results in your new leadership approach, as you become able to communicate naturally with all manner of cultures in your sphere of work."[147]

For the Church of the Nazarene in the United States to see measurable results in its bridge-building work today, there must be greater ethnic awareness regarding how we function on a general, district, and local level. Recovering what it means to be the church without the trappings of racial hierarchy will require sacrifice and hard work. Ivan Beals writes, "Bridges of friendship can be built with patience and respect for others, by God's uniting love. As individuals and peoples are reconciled to God, they become reconciled to one another. God calls the Church as a whole, and every person to turn from selfishness, to renounce the racist legacy, resolve the conflict, and build the peace."[148] The recovery of the Kingdom vision of the beloved community will require the resolve of Martin Luther King Jr., who, when questioned on whether he had any White members in his congregation in Atlanta, said, "I definitely think the Christian church should be integrated, and any church that stands against integration and that has a segregated body is standing against the spirit and the teachings of Jesus Christ, and it fails to be a true witness. But this is something that the Church will have to do itself. I don't think church integration will come through legal processes. I might say that my church is not a segregating church. It's segregated but not segregating. It would welcome white members."[149] King resolved to recover God's intention for unity and the church.

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[147] Phillips, *Enough is Enough,* 248.

[148] Beals, *Our Racist Legacy,* xvi.

[149] King Jr., "Meet the press Martin Luther King jr. (civil rights leader)."

The church has had much influence on what America has become by not being more vocal about the injustices of slavery, racism, discrimination, and segregation. King merely wanted the church to be open to the change possible when all humanity was viewed as created in the image of God and treated as such. Taking ownership of the past, building bridges, and recovering a new way forward will require a shift in how we have always done things. We must no longer rely on the tainted history of the status quo to move us forward; we must lean into Jesus as we pursue a new, more faithful way.

REDISCOVERING THE KINGDOM VISION

The hard work of recovering what has been lost because of racism and racist ideas must also include a rediscovery of the Kingdom vision of the beloved community that has been misplaced, if not lost, in the church's attempts to color within the lines as not to lose favor with the majority culture. Although it would be unwise to label the church as racist, it wouldn't be much of a stretch to say that it has veered off course because of racism and racist ideas. The process of rediscovery takes an initiative that supersedes the superficial in pursuit of honesty and truth-telling. Diane Chandler suggests that racism undermines spiritual formation, weakens the church's witness, and contributes to racial division within the culture and the church.[150] Her process of rediscovery looks like this:

1. White Christians need to *listen and learn*.
2. To listen and learn leads to *lament.*
3. The deep sense of lament leads one to *confess and repent.*
4. Genuine confession and repentance posture one to *repair and relate*.

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[150] Diane J. Chandler, "Spiritual Formation: Race, Racism, and Racial Reconciliation." *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 13, no. 2 (November 2020): 156–75.

In summary, she concludes, "When we listen, learn, lament, confess, repent, repair, and relate, we place ourselves in a posture of humility before God and others…racism is a formidable hindrance to advancing into Christlikeness on an individual, church and educational level."[151] The process of re-discovering God's intent for Christlikeness and mission in a culture tainted by racism will require an anti-racist posture that allows the church to be honest about the past and open to truth-telling in the present. Antipas Harris writes, "The church cannot change what it does not admit."[152] If we cannot be honest about what is wrong with society and the church because of the divisions ingrained in our way of life, rediscovery will not be possible. The Church must find a way forward that looks more like the Kingdom vision of the beloved community and less like the divided kingdoms of this world. Iris de Leon Hartshorn suggests, "Change can't be sustained without agreement by the whole, commitment to spiritual formation and learning, follow through, monitoring, and evaluation."[153] Her approach to seeking this change is simple yet profound. Be honest with where we have been and where we are, address the problem, and do what is necessary to educate and make space for others. For the Church to rediscover God's Kingdom vision for creation, it must always look forward toward the new instead of living in the past and clutching the old. The church should ask the question: Are we moving forward, or are we stuck in the past?

Where is the church when it comes to acknowledging its racist past and embracing God's glorious future? Is the church open to the honesty that will be required to bring about change in the church? Throughout society as a whole? This is the question that Elizabeth Conde-Frazier

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[151] Chandler, "Spiritual Formation: Race, Racism, and Racial Reconciliation," 174-175.

[152] Antipas Harris, *Is Christianity the White Man's Religion? How the Bible Is Good News for People of Color* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity press, 2020), 45.

[153] Iris de León-Hartshorn, "Signposts on the Journey toward an Antiracist, Multicultural Church," *Vision (Winnipeg, Man.)* 11, no. 1 (2010): 36–44. 38.

asks in her book, *A Many Colored Kingdom*: *Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation*. How culturally aware is the church of the unfolding drama of God's Kingdom vision that "embraces people from every nation, tribe, and tongue as he establishes and extends his glorious and eternal kingdom."[154] They assert that serious attention is needed by everyone, especially those who align themselves with Jesus, to the glaring realities of race, ethnicity, and culture.[155] In the footsteps of Jesus, the church must be positioned on the path to encounter people who are not like us culturally, socially, ethnically, and economically. They write, "Ultimately, exposure to another culture at the relational level helps us to realize that politics, education, and history are culturally influenced. This awareness or consciousness raising will help us to develop a more balanced approach to cultural diversity that involves a healthy curiosity about other cultures and appreciation, true valuation, and respect of cultures and people from those cultures."[156] Rediscovering the beauty of diversity within the church and across faith communities will require honesty and truth-telling about where we have been, where we are currently, and where we are heading. In this process of honesty, "the church of Jesus Christ must remember the terror Christians have perpetrated on one another."[157] This path of reconciliation, especially in the majority culture church's response to racial strife today, requires an understanding of the church's past sins toward racial minorities. To understand this history, we must do the needed work of truth-telling.

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[154] Elizabeth S. Conde-Frazier, Steve Kang, and Gary A. Parrett, *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 15.

[155] Conde-Frazier, *A Many Colored Kingdom,* 17.

[156] Conde-Frazier, *A Many Colored Kingdom*, 171.

[157] Conde-Frazier, *A Many Colored Kingdom*, 215.

Jemar Tisby uses the acronym ARC in fighting against racism: awareness, relationships, and commitment. First, awareness is the willingness to dig deeper and learn more about the racial majority's past and present attitudes and actions toward the racial minority. Second, authentic relationships with people who do not look like us, do not live like us, and have different stories or perspectives are critical to true racial justice. Lastly, the commitment to dismantle the old structures that promote racism and racist ideas will help rediscover the biblical mandate to love God and neighbor.[158] He writes, "The destination is racial equity and justice for all people of every racial and ethnic background. The endpoint is harmony, where unity in the midst of diversity prevails. But viewing racial justice as a journey encourages us to think about fighting racism as an ongoing series of steps rather than a final point of completion."[159]

This is the same sentiment Nazarene leaders Danny Gomis and Carla Sundberg shared in their book *Color: God's Intention for Diversity*. They write, "Throughout her history the church has not always succeeded at reflecting diversity. Far too often a desire for uniformity, or conformity, has prevailed. Sadly, this can paint a rather dull picture, one that can hardly compare with what God has intended. The only way the church can reflect the beauty that God planned is for brothers and sisters to come together in fellowship and conversation, allowing the Holy Spirit to weave them together into a divine reflection of the kingdom of God."[160] It is encouraging to be a part of a church that recognizes where we have been and are currently and what needs to be discovered for the church to be a part of God's intended future. It's not about creating something new but embracing what has been true all along. Diversity is not only good for the church but

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[158] Tisby, *How to Fight Racism,* 5-6.

[159] Tisby, *How to Fight Racism,* 7.

[160] Dany Gomis and Carla Sunberg, *Color: God's Intention for Diversity* (Kansas City, MO: The Foundry Publishing, 2021), 8.

also essential. Gary Parret writes, "It is not something to be sought or tolerated; it is a reality we must obey and endeavor to preserve."[161]

REDEEMING THE BEAUTY OF RACIAL DIVERSITY

In the necessary work of recovery and rediscovery, we can see how God can redeem the value of racial diversity in beautiful ways. The majority culture church in the United States must be a part of God's redeeming process through awareness, relationship, and commitment. This is the beauty of the beloved community and being Kingdom citizens created in the image of God. Danny Gomis and Carla Sunberg write, "God's children, the world over, are invited to embrace their true identity, which can only be found in Christ…We must be willing to examine ourselves critically and release any identities, or any dominant cultures, which may hold a brother or sister in Christ in bondage."[162] In the intentional act of embracing ethnic diversity within the church as part of God's original creation, we must also realize that we have not always acted in ways that have brought glory to God and dignity toward His diverse family. Although we may not associate ourselves individually or corporately as racist, we must realize that the church hasn't always been on the right side of history. This is where we are called to repentance, maybe not for our actions but for the actions and attitudes of those who came before and the systems we inherited. This is typically easier said than done because you admit that something is wrong by confession or repentance. Instead, the church in the U.S. would make excuses as to why we do not need to be honest with the church's complicity in and complacency with the racial divisions that exist in our world today.

None of us deserve the unmerited grace offered to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We have all fallen short of the life God has called us to, but our story

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[161] Conde-Frazier, *A Many Colored Kingdom*, 76.

[162] Gomis, *Color,* 85-86.

doesn't end there. Through Jesus, redemption is possible. Those - no matter race, color, creed, gender, ethnicity, or social class - who follow in the footsteps of Jesus are considered redeemed. The same is true when it comes to systems that promote injustice. The racist legacy of the church in the United States must be acknowledged. Once acknowledged, reconciliation begins through relationship and commitment in how we see, listen, and live. The Japanese art of *Kintsukuroi* is a powerful illustration of the redemption possible individually and communally. In *Kintsukuroi*, a broken pottery vessel is pieced back together with golden or silver lacquer. Sarah Shin calls it "The art of restoring and reclaiming." She writes, "This method highlights each piece's unique history by emphasizing the fractures instead of hiding them. Often the final work is even more beautiful than when the piece first came into being."[163]

She suggests that *Kintsukuroi* helps the pottery tell a new story rather than denying its brokenness.[164] This is also true of the racist legacy of the United States and the church shaped by the country's sins of slavery and racial division. The brokenness of ethnic division within the church, racist systems that oppress the minority culture and lift the majority culture, and even racism within the church's walls, past and present. This brokenness has contributed to the segregation that still exists or is felt today in the church, intentionally or unintentionally. Shin asserts that when Jesus redeems our ethnic stories, there is a significant impact. She writes, "We need to recognize what we are meant to be in our ethnic stories and identities to ask Jesus to restore us…Knowing and owning our ethnic narratives helps us understand the real issues of injustice, racial tension, and disunity. Ethnicity awareness helps us ask the question of how to

[163] Shin, *Beyond Color Blind,* 10.

[164] Shin, *Beyond Color Blind,* 11.

prophetically engage in pursuing justice, racial reconciliation, and caring for the poor while we give the reason for our hope: Jesus, the great reconciler of a multiethnic people."[165]

Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream of integration reveals the hope he held tightly to as he pursued the beauty of diversity and human dignity. The Kingdom vision of the beloved community, the priesthood of all believers in their pursuit of peace in the presence of Almighty God, will require the active pursuit of justice through seeing, listening, and being. In his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," Dr. King details what a nonviolent campaign for justice looks like after receiving criticism from a group of White pastors: "(1) collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive, (2) negotiation, (3) self-purification, and (4) direct action."[166] He writes, "Here we are moving toward the exit of the twentieth century with a religious community largely adjusted to the status quo, standing as a taillight behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading [men] to higher levels of justice."[167] He goes on to express his love for the church with the caveat that repentance is needed for the blemishes and scars that have weakened the church's witness because of social neglect and silence when it comes to injustices for fear of being labeled as a non-conformist. He writes, "The contemporary church is often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch-supporter of the status quo."[168]

CONCLUSION: BROKEN YET BEAUTIFUL

Can the church redeem the witness to which it was created? Can the church recover its voice after being quiet for so long? Is the church comfortable not covering up her cracks in the

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[165] Shin, *Beyond Color Blind,* 19.

[166] King Jr., *A Testament of Hope,* 290.

[167] King Jr., *A Testament of Hope,* 299.

[168] King Jr., *A Testament of Hope,* 300.

hope of healing and bridge building? The answer is simple and will require much sacrifice—with God's help! With sacrifice and God's help, the church can be honest about the past by seeing the racial scars that have been covered up, ignored, or denied by the majority one-culture White church for far too long. Becoming ethnically aware, embracing diversity, and living into the Kingdom vision of the beloved community will open the door for courageous honesty and truth-telling. It will help the church move beyond just issuing statements against discrimination to heartfelt grief and mourning over what has been done with the hope of seeing a fuller and brighter future. This is where Biblical lament is needed now more than ever. Sarah Shin writes, "Lament is the invitation to come before God and say, "This should not be!" We were made for life, not death, and all signs of sin and death should make us say, "No, this is not the image of God."[169] Mark Vroegop, in advocating for the common language of lament, says, "Racial reconciliation is a process. Lament can be redemptive."[170] There are five steps to lament: love, listen, lament, learn, and leverage.

1. Love— "Our common relationship with Jesus, regardless of our ethnicity, creates a new spiritual identity

2. Listen— "If we can commit to a posture of listening without speaking quickly or getting angry, irritated, or frustrated, there's hope for progress."

3. Lament— "Lament supplies a biblical voice that allows us to talk to God and one another about the pain we feel and see."

4. Learn— "A commitment to learn from one another."

5. Leverage— "The goal of racial reconciliation is not merely to pray about what's wrong or to express our empathy. Our minority brothers and sisters grow weary of efforts that stop here."[171]

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[169] Shin, *Beyond Color Blind,* 57.

[170] Vroegop, *Weep With Me,* 41.

[171] Vroegop, *Weep With Me,* 41-43.

Awareness, relationship, and commitment. For the Church to recover, rediscover and allow God to redeem us from the cracks of racism and racist ideas; we must learn to speak a common language. Vroegop suggests that "A church can't be Christian without empathy. Empathy is essential to Christianity and racial reconciliation…It's the ability to understand and care."[172] He also writes, "When it comes to racial reconciliation, weeping with those who weep needs to be our first step. Lament can be a helpful, biblical language because empathy is uniquely Christian."[173]

As a recipient and participant in the racism and racist ideas that have shaped our nation and, consequently, the church, we must repent of the ways we have been complacent to and complicit with the racial divisions, discrimination, and segregation of our past and present. We must come to the topic of racism with empathy and not denial. Vroegop writes, "without empathy on the part of the church, the divide will deepen. One way to grow as majority Christians is realizing that empathy—weeping with those who weep—should be our first step…Emphatic lament will change you."[174] Being honest about where we have been and doing all we can to make room for God's redemption will help us get to where we are going. Becoming who God created us to be and doing what God created us for is the goal. To reclaim its witness, the church must be honest with where it has missed the mark and stop covering up its scars. As illustrated with the Japanese *Kintsuguroi* pottery mentioned earlier, the church has the potential to express the beauty of the beloved community that will be more attractive and sought after than the original. Just as the gold redeems the brokenness of the pottery and allows it to tell a new

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[172] Vroegop, *Weep With Me,* 81.

[173] Vroegop, *Weep With Me,* 83.

[174] Vroegop, *Weep with Me,* 86-87.

story, the church must embrace the beauty found in the cultural and ethnic diversity of God's Kingdom. Shin reflects on this by highlighting that after Jesus' resurrection, He didn't attempt to hide his scars: "Often, the final work is even more beautiful than when the piece first came into being…When the various pieces come together as one body and share the stories of healing, reconciliation, and sacrificing for the other, we are a visibly powerful vessel of kingdom witness."[175] Through the shared language of lament, we can better articulate how, through Jesus, we can recover, rediscover and redeem the Kingdom vision of the beloved community.

[175] Shin, *Beyond Color Blind,* 10-11.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION: THE FAITHFUL ART OF TRUTH-TELLING AND THE COMMON LANGUAGE OF LAMENT

For all the progress in breaking down the barriers of racial division and segregation, there is still much work to be done to integrate the church to reflect the beloved community. We began this work with the simple yet complex question, "Why am I here?" As a privileged White male serving as a pastor within the Church of the Nazarene, what is my role in fostering an anti-racist mindset within the local church shaped by race, racism, and racist ideas? My responsibility and calling are to advocate for the oppressed, marginalized, and downtrodden. That advocacy requires action through acknowledgment, relationship, and commitment. No longer can I or the church that represents Jesus here in the United States and beyond stand idly by in ignorance, praying the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," without truthfully and honestly coming to grips with how far we have veered from that reality because of the racist ideas that have segregated God's people rather than integrating them around a shared mission and community. How might the church acknowledge and embrace diversity's complexity and beauty as God's beloved community? As suggested throughout this project, Dr. King has given us a dream and a vision of the beloved community where everyone, regardless of ethnicity, color, gender, socio-economic status, or creed, can experience the dignity and respect of somebodiness. The image of God, which is a reality for all people, does not discriminate, segregate, or alienate. Instead, the Kingdom vision of the beloved community is all-embracing as it takes the church out of its comfort zone and into its destiny as bringers of justice and proclaimers of peace.

When the church in the United States can be honest about where it has been, cracks and all, it has the potential to move forward with an immeasurable amount of grace. The beloved

community's vision and pursuit reveal the cracks within the church caused by the racism and racist ideas of the past that must be overcome so that the future Kingdom of God can break through. As the Japanese art of *Kintsukuroi* illustrates, the visible veins of brilliant color that were once cracks and imperfections are now more beautiful than before. The church should reflect the beautifully broken reality of life on this side of glory healed by the grace of God. This will take honesty and a common language on the part of the church collectively, but more importantly from the majority ethnically White church because "Truth telling and historical reflection are a powerful way we can help to promote growth and the building up of one another in love."[176] The common language of lament that leads to faithful anti-racism will not only speak against the injustice of racism, but it will also help us move forward as the beautifully broken people of God ushering in the Kingdom of God and embodying the beloved community. The artifact connected to this project is a small group curriculum focused on honesty and truth-telling through the practice of lament. Mark Vroegop suggests that lament's language opens the door for racial reconciliation. He states, "lament can be helpful in the loaded conversations or the temptation toward silence. Whether the lament is expressed directly to God, to a friend at a coffee shop, to a living-room small group, or to a congregation during a pastoral prayer on Sunday, it can be a starting point."[177] Learning to lament with a shared voice helps us to acknowledge the brokenness in the world and the church, it allows us to refuse to be silent intentionally, and it helps as we seek God's help by keeping our eyes and hearts on Him.[178] Lament gives the church a voice amid pain, suffering, oppression, and brokenness. Lament is not only for the oppressed but also for the oppressor and those who stand with the oppressed.

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[176] Edmundson, *Faithful Antiracism,* 84.

[177] Vroegop, *Weep With Me,* 102.

[178] Vroegop, *Weep With Me,* 102-104.

When the majority ethnically White church can recognize and be honest with how our racist past has shaped our present, we can be overjoyed by the reality that it doesn't have to define our future. We must lament over the past, over our recognized or unrecognized prejudice and bias', with and for those with their backs against the wall. The way to move forward for the church is to become truth-tellers and not truth deniers. For the truth to set us free, the church must recognize that being silent or ignorant when it comes to injustice toward another person or group of persons because of the color of their skin is not only unchristian but overtly racist. Christians and the church must also embrace cross-cultural relationships where we listen to one another not to prove those with differing opinions wrong but to understand their experience and possibly grieve or celebrate with them. Those who identify with Jesus must be committed to building bridges by speaking against racism and standing with those who have been or are being oppressed. The beauty of the beloved community and what Dr. King envisioned for the church and society was a restored integrated humanity where justice, dignity, and somebodiness were available for all, not just those who hold power. The majority ethnically White church that has traditionally held power because of a tainted history of injustice toward people of color through slavery, racism, segregation, and discrimination must be honest about the past to tell the truth about the future. The future is the inbreaking of the beloved community, where reconciliation and redemption are possible. The church cannot get there without repentance, accepting where the church (past and present) has grievously marred the image of God by treating others as less than God's children while also acting less than God's children ourselves. The sin of racism can be overcome. Our racist past can be overcome. Jesus has overcome. May we stand in solidarity with Martin Luther King Jr. and the many who dedicated and lost their lives in pursuit of

equality and justice rooted in the Kingdom vision of the beloved community where sisterhood and brotherhood are not homogenous but beautifully diverse.

Where do we begin? We begin by discovering our identity in Jesus. When we find our identity in Jesus, we can indeed come to the end of ourselves and repent because the Kingdom of God is at hand. Many in the majority culture church today did not implicitly contribute to the racism of the past. Still, it has been taboo to address the racist systems and structures that have continued to shape our actions and structures. Although most within the church would not identify as racist, we are guilty of not doing enough, not speaking up when needed, and not standing with and for people of color within our community. For those missteps, we repent and commit to discipling those we have the privilege of serving within the Church of the Nazarene and beyond to be an integrated and integrating body of believers who embody a multiethnic mindset when it comes to being the church to, for and with the community that Jesus died for. With this in mind, we will learn to lament, to weep with those who weep, as a starting point to being faithfully anti-racist as we live in the racially and ethnically diverse beloved community of God.

For this project, we have intentionally addressed the atrocity of racism as an unfortunate shaper of the ethnic make-up of the Church of the Nazarene today and discussed why there needs to be an intentional effort to invoke change, starting with the majority culture church in the United States. I've also asserted that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's vision of the beloved community is the necessary end the church should be working toward, focusing on racial integration as the church promotes a multiethnic partnership in our stand against racism and segregation. I have also suggested that the shared language of lament is an honest and good place to start. There are undoubtedly other action steps in the church's effort to repent of its ugly and

hateful past and move forward into its God-ordained future, but for the intentions of this project, we will start with lament. As a result of this project, a multi-week intentionally integrated small group study that focuses on learning the common language of lament has been formulated. This study will help the participant explore Biblical lament and discover why it is a necessary and good practice to seek racial reconciliation in the church and society. The participant(s) will be challenged to look at the past honestly so that in community, the church can be faithfully anti-racist as we minister to the changing communities in which we live. The hope for the church is not that it would merely become multicultural or multiethnic as a novelty without genuinely grappling with the atrocities of the past and the discrimination of the present but to truly embrace the vision of the beloved community of God where dignity and equity are honored. This will require the Church of the Nazarene in particular and the church universal in general (general superintendents, district superintendents, pastors, board members, lay people, etc.) to first stop and listen for the voice of God as He calls us to love mercy, to promote justice and to walk humbly. Derwin Gray writes, "Racism and racial injustice are sins so deeply embedded in our culture that it is going to require disciples of Jesus who thoroughly rely on the Holy Spirit and who passionately inhabit Jesus' love to change things…By our love for one another—especially those from a different ethnicity and social class—we become a foretaste of God's Kingdom."[179] Then we must listen to others, particularly those who do not share our cultural and ethnic experiences. This is where Jemar Tisby's ARC of racial reconciliation is helpful. We begin with awareness surrounding racial injustice in the past and present, we do that through intentional and genuine relationships with people of color, and then we commit ourselves to the hard work of reconciliation and redemption in the pursuit of the beloved community.

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[179] Derwin L. Gray, *How to Heal Our Racial Divide: What the Bible Says, and the First Christians knew about Racial Reconciliation* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2022), 3.

A small group curriculum on the Biblical language of lament is a starting point to take steps toward pursuing the beloved community where God is glorified and humanity is sanctified. Where does the church go from there? Derwin Gray writes, "The hard, gospel work of healing the racial divide in the church and in our nation is going to cost you something personally. But whatever the cost, Jesus and his glory are worth it."[180] The church today must be on the front lines of racial reconciliation as we pursue King's vision of the beloved community. This will not be easy, there will be some difficult days ahead, but the cost will be worth it because, as a result, there will be some rewarding and beautiful days on the horizon. Both for the church and for all of creation. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. envisioned an integrated society where racism would no longer be tolerated and allowed, where every human being possesses dignity and equality as a natural human right, and where the church imaginatively paved the way for racial reconciliation. This dream of beloved community is still alive today and within our reach.

[180] Gray, *How to Heal Our Racial Divide,* 20.

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Learning to Lament: The Faithful Art of Honesty and Truth-Telling

Small Group Discussion Guide

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS LAMENT?

Welcome, and thanks for taking the initial steps in exploring the faithful art of honesty and truth-telling through lament as we bear witness and, as a community, invite God into those spaces of grief and suffering in our lives. For this truth-telling exercise, we will explore the beauty of Biblical lament, the language of suffering, and how this sacred art of truth-telling might bear fruit in our lives, churches, and communities. We will also discover how learning the spiritual practice of lament can change how we understand justice and reconciliation. What is lament, and why is it necessary for

Christians today? In the Bible, "lament is a prayer in pain that leads to trust."[181] It is the cry of the afflicted over the atrocities of the past and the disturbing trends of the present. At its foundation, lament should lead to reconciliation with God and others. "The goal of lament is to recommit oneself to hoping in God, believing his promises, and a godly response to pain, suffering, and injustice."[182] Professor Kathleen O'Conner suggests that the Old Testament book of "Lamentations urges us to do the difficult work of reclaiming our passion for life, justice, and empathy. Without such work, we will never be able to hear the cries of the poor in our neighborhood or around the globe."[183] Lament for her brings about the freedom for renewal and hope. She continues, "Our own wounds, hidden and festering, will continue to enslave us, absorbing all our energies in fruitless denial that blocks our ears and blinds our eyes."[184] We discover that we can stand with others as witnesses to their suffering and pain through lament.

The church, set apart by God, given new life through Jesus, and filled with power by the Holy Spirit, has a part to play in faithfully standing with and for the oppressed and marginalized throughout history. Unfortunately, this has not always been the case. With an honest look at human history, we can see that the egregious injustices of the majority culture toward the minority culture have influenced the church in ways that have perpetuated the racialization of society. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. referred to this change through his Kingdom vision of the beloved community. To fully realize the beloved community, it is essential to acknowledge and learn about these acts of prejudice, discrimination, and bias across racial, socio-economic, and gender lines. The Kingdom vision of the beloved community that Dr. King gave his life to is an image of an integrated rather than segregated church and society where equality and justice are not only acknowledged but were part of the very fabric of personhood or somebodiness (as opposed to nobodiness). Unfortunately, this has not always been the case. The majority ethnically White church in the United States has often been complacent to and complicit with the racism, racist ideas, and racist actions that have degraded human history and the Kingdom vision of the beloved community. Much work still needs to be done to bridge racial, socio-economic, and gender divides across the United States.

Fuller Theological Seminary Professor Soong Chan Rah writes that "the American church avoids lament. As a result, the power of lament is minimized, and the underlying narrative of suffering that requires lament is lost."[185] As the people of God, learning to suffer again with and for others through lament is a necessary faithful first step. Lament will help recognize the Christian call to weep with those who weep, to suffer with those who suffer, and to mourn the injustices that have continued to oppress and promote inequality.

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[181] Vroegop, *Weep with Me*, 37.

[182] Vroegop, *Weep With Me*, 37.

[183] O'Connor, *Lamentations*, xiv.

[184] O'Conner, *Lamentations*, xiv.

[185] Rah, *Prophetic Lament,* 22.

Lament could be a unifying language that brings about healing and reconciliation. Here are the basic steps of lament:

1. Turn to God – Laments talk to God about pain, even if it is messy.
2. Complain – Biblical complaint vocalizes circumstances that do not fit God's character or purpose.
3. Ask – Godly lamenters keep asking even when the answer is delayed.
4. Trust – Confidence in God's trustworthiness is the destination of all laments.[186]

These steps may give us the pathway to faithfully articulate the Biblical spiritual practice of lament as we commit ourselves to reconciliation in our Christian pursuit of the beloved community. To reach this end, it is essential to note that "Lament is not despair. It is not whining. It is not a cry into a void. Lament is a cry directed to God. It is the cry of those who see the truth of the world's deep wounds and the cost of seeking peace. It is the prayer of those who are deeply disturbed by how things are. We are enjoined to learn, see, and feel what the Biblical authors see and feel and to join our prayers with theirs. The journey of reconciliation is grounded in the practice of lament."[187] Kathleen O'Conner beautifully and graphically articulates lament in this way, "Laments are prayers that erupt from wounds, burst out of unbearable pain, and bring it to language. Laments complain, shout, and protest. They take anger and despair before God and the community. They grieve. They argue. They find fault. Without complaint there is no lament form. Although laments appear disruptive of God's world, they are acts of fidelity. In vulnerability and honesty, they cling obstinately to God and demand for God to see, hear, and act."[188] This study will require honesty, openness, and vulnerability in your small group's pursuit of peace as you learn to lament past tragedies, come to grips with the inconsistencies of the present, and embrace God's glorious future.

SUGGESTED GROUP MODEL AND FORMAT: MUTUAL INVITATION

Mutual Invitation allows everybody to participate in the conversation. This model can be effective in multiethnic and homogenous groups as we learn to give and receive permission to speak and participate. However, the hope is that this would be a multiethnic group (if possible) that would be allowed to learn together the shared language of lament in the church's pursuit of healing and reconciliation. The length of your group's time together is entirely up to you but spend at least an hour studying the Word of God and mutually inviting one another to answer the discussion questions.

How does mutual invitation work? You start by stating upfront the topic or

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[186] Vroegop, *Weep With Me*, 38-40.

[187] Emmanuel Katongole, and Chris Rice, *Reconciling all Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing* (Downers Grove: IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008), 78.

[188] O'Conner, *Lamentations*, 9.

Scripture passage to be discussed (This can be projected on a screen, written on a medium and posted on a wall, or copied and given to each participant). Next, introduce mutual invitation by saying/reading: "To ensure that everyone who wants to share has an opportunity to speak, we will proceed in the following way—The leader or a designated person will share first. After that person has spoken, they then invite another person to share. Whom you invite does not need to be the person next to you. After the next person has spoken, that person can invite another to share. If you don't want to say anything, say "pass" and invite another to share. We will do this until everyone has been invited."[189] After all participants have been allowed to share, return to those who have passed and give them another opportunity to respond, as hearing from others may have evoked something additional to offer. The objective is to create a shared space where everyone involved has an opportunity to contribute if desired. Therefore, it is crucial to lay out the ground rules and stick with them to use this small-group study model effectively.

SUGGESTED SCRIPTURE STUDY FORMAT: MANUSCRIPT BIBLE STUDY

Manuscript Bible study is an inductive form of Scripture discovery that follows the pattern of observation, interpretation, and application. Intervarsity Christian Fellowship states, "In manuscript Bible study, leaders act as facilitators who pass out printed passages. Members engage in communal discovery—generating questions together, sharing what they see and think, and discovering Scripture's meaning for themselves."[190]

For resources on how to order an inductive Bible study, visit www.howto.bible.com to learn the process of observation, interpretation, and application.

For our work in this series, we will use the manuscript Bible study format by following these "Moves":

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[189] Eric H. F. Law, *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1993), 113-114.

[190] Intervarsity, "Bible Study," accessed on December 1, 2022, https://intervarsity.org/bible-study.

Move 1—The facilitator reads the passage aloud

Move 2—The group reads the passage in unison

Move 3—Each group participant will spend 5-10 minutes personally reflecting on the passage using the manuscript Bible study method of observation, interpretation, and application

Move 4—Invite a participant to read the passage aloud

Move 5—Using the group model of Mutual Invitation; each group member will share their insights or takeaways from the passage

SERIES OUTLINE:

Series Introduction – What is Lament?

Session 1 – Crying Out: Learning the Language of Lament

Session 2 – Pleading for Pardon: Lament and Mercy

Session 3 – The Patience of Lament: How Long, Oh Lord?

Session 4 – Weep With Me: Lament as Grief

Session 5 – When Wailing Turns to Dancing: Lament as Praise

Session 6 – Practicing Lament: Silent No More

SERIES INTRODUCTION

This introductory session will help to establish ground rules and set the stage for learning lament and using the group model of Mutual Invitation.

DISCUSSION STARTERS:

1. What do you know about lament? What comes to your mind when you hear the word lament?

2. How would you define lament?

3. How might the language of lament help the people of God to bridge societal and spiritual divisions?

LESSON:
Using the introductory material from pages 3-5 of this series, lead your group through the material to unpack the meaning and purpose of this series by uncovering the challenging yet necessary language of lament.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

1. How might learning to lament bring healing into our lives and relationships?

2. What does standing with others as witnesses to their suffering and pain look like?

3. Why do you think the church often avoids using the language of lament?

LEARNING TO LAMENT:
Practice reading this small prayer as a group replacing 'me' with 'us.'
"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."[191]

SESSION 1—CRYING OUT: LEARNING THE LANGUAGE OF LAMENT

DISCUSSION STARTERS:

1. How does vocalizing our pain, grief and suffering bring about healing and reconciliation?

2. Where does weeping or crying fit into the life of faith?

3. Is it okay to express our emotions? Why or why not?

SCRIPTURE: Habakkuk 1:2-4, 12-13 (Practice Reading Together)

[191] Psalm 139:23-24, NRSV.

2 O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?

3 Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.

4 So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous— therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

12 Are you not from of old, O Lord my God, my Holy One? You shall not die. O Lord, you have marked them for judgment; and you, O Rock, have established them for punishment.

13 Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, and you cannot look on wrongdoing; why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they? (NRSV)

Move 1—The facilitator reads the passage aloud

Move 2—The group reads the passage in unison

Move 3—Each group participant will spend 5-10 minutes personally reflecting on the passage using the manuscript Bible study method of observation, interpretation, and application

Move 4—Invite a participant to read the passage aloud

Move 5—Using the group model of Mutual Invitation; each group member will share their insights or takeaways from the passage

EXEGESIS:

As a leader, spend time in this passage and prayer before leading others through this lesson. Review the background material below, and if further resources are needed to exegete the passage, consider these commentaries:

1. *Nahum-Malachi: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*. NBBC: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2020 by Lauri J. Braaten and Jim Edlin.
2. *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*. NIVAC. Zondervan, 2004 by James Bruckner.
3. *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*. NICOT. Eerdmans, 1990 by Palmer O. Robertson.

Habakkuk was a prophet during the final decades of Israel's Southern Kingdom as the impending threat of the Babylonian empire was on the horizon around 600 BC. Habakkuk complains to God about life in Israel during a time of injustice and idolatry, asking the age-old question, is the Creator God still good when there is so much evil in the world? His poems of lament are similar to those we find in the Psalms. He had been

crying out and wrestling with God over the injustice of society and God's apparent inaction in addressing that injustice. He cries, "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?"[192] (Habakkuk 1:2, NRSV). This question points to the reality that the prophet had been a perpetual proponent of holding God to His word. Specifically, He would bless the righteous and cause the wicked to suffer (Deuteronomy 28; Leviticus 26). The first four verses indicate that despite his attempts to hold God accountable, "justice never prevails."[193] In his own words, Habakkuk shows that violence was widespread and that God's people had been the recipients of wrongdoing and trouble of all kinds at the hands of the Judean leaders. He uses words like "destruction," violence," wrongdoing," "strife," "contention," and "slack" to describe the cultural climate of the day. The amount of moral corruption was paralyzing to God's people. So, crying out for justice at the hands of God to counter the continual onslaught of evil and wrongdoing that Habakkuk is seeing and experiencing is not unwarranted. The rulers of Israel were perverting the law of God and were making life for God's people downright tricky. The ones who should have known justice aided in oppressing those the law protected (Micah 3:1). This is what Habakkuk calls the perversion of judgment and justice in verse 4.

As Habakkuk continues to lament the injustice of his day toward God's people in verses 12-13, he addresses the never dying God of old once again as the recipient of his cry of lament. Out of respect and honor, he calls God by standard divine titles "my Holy One" and "O Rock," which would have invoked a reverence for God while also questioning God's apparent inaction. The enemy was discriminately devouring the people God had committed to protect. His complaint does not represent a cursing of God or a turning of his back on God but rather a plea to the Holy One who would be able to bring about the justice that was desired by and for the righteous. If we read Habakkuk 2, we would see that God replies to the prophet's plea. In Habakkuk 2:3, the Lord responds, "For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay."[194]

The prophet Habakkuk's cry for help reminds God's people today that we do have a voice that puts us in direct contact with God but also gives us the ability to speak against injustice and promote the dignity and personhood of every human being. There will be times when it feels like God is not doing enough to establish his rule and reign in the world, and it is okay to cry out, but for how long? God's answer is "as long as it takes" or "there is still a vision for the appointed time" (Habakkuk 2:3, NRSV). God still hears our cries. He welcomes them. As the church learns to lament the past and present injustices of racism, we will begin to see the fulfillment of God's promise of restoration and salvation that is undoubtedly coming and has come in the person of Jesus Christ.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., during the civil rights movement and before his death, envisioned the Kingdom of God as a beloved community where every person

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[192] Habakkuk 1:2, NRSV.

[193] Habakkuk 1:4, NRSV.

[194] Habakkuk 2:3, NRSV.

experienced equity and dignity regardless of skin color or socio-economic status. On the eve of his assassination, he gave a speech adequately titled, "I Have Been to the Mountaintop." In this prophetic speech, King boldly proclaimed, "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live – a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any [man]. *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*"[195] This lament, a final breath of this civil rights leader, who had given his life to combating the injustices of racism and discrimination in his day under God's authority, was not a death gurgle but rather a battle cry. Although the evil of racism still raged on, his willingness to cry out to God with and for others prepared him for the slow and arduous journey to the mountaintop. The mountaintop is possible for us all in our pursuit of racial equality and God's beloved community today. Learning to lament is a necessary first faithful step in crying out to God, entering into the spaces of grief and suffering in our world, and honestly accepting our place in bringing about God's already and not yet Kingdom.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

1. How might lament be practiced in our context? What value does it hold today?

2. What are some things that are worth lamenting in our day?

LEARNING TO LAMENT:

Provide a copy of this lament to each participant to read and pray over the next week. Have one group member read this prayer aloud. Encourage group members to remain in this prayer even if it is difficult.

This is a lament written by Thabiti Anyabwile, pastor of Anacostia River Church in Washington, DC. Practice lament by reading this prayer and learning from it.

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[195] King Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop.".

How long, O Lord, will you leave us in our blindness? Won't you open our eyes and our hearts to each other? The minds of your people are not renewed as they ought to be. We cling to American cultural patterns and myths that ignore or deny the painful stories of others. We remain ignorant of how race and color have opened opportunities for some while closing it for others. We choose to reject the knowledge of these histories and injustices to protect our fragile identities and self-regard. We refuse to acknowledge the prejudice, bigotry, racism, and oppression that is obviously behind and before us. How long, O Lord, will you leave us in our blindness?

Father in heaven, enlighten the eyes of our understanding. Your church fails at times to live together in love and empathy. We fail to enter one another's shoes. We prefer the self-fulfilling prophecies of national narratives, the privilege of our protective cultures, the comfort of our cultural companions, the power of our political tribes. We count the risk of loving "others" too costly a gamble to make. How long, O Lord, before we practice the human and humanizing spiritual disciplines of sitting with and listening to each other?

O Lord, the pain of our many rejections, the wounds of our many withdrawals, the isolation of our many suspicions have weakened our unity, our witness, and our love. But you love us, and you have promised to finish the work you began in us. You have predestined us to be conformed to the image of your Son. Grant that same love with which Christ loved us might be shared abundantly between Christians of every hue, history, culture, class, and language. O great God our Father, fill your household with Christ's redemptive love![196]

SESSION 2—PLEADING FOR PARDON: LAMENT AND MERCY

DISCUSSION STARTERS:

1. How would you define mercy?

2. In what ways have you experienced God's mercy in your life?

3. In what ways have you extended mercy to those closest to you? Farthest from you? Those least like you?

4. How does learning to lament help in understanding God's mercy?

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[196] Vroegop, *Weep With Me*, 44.

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 51 (Practice Reading Together)

1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions.

2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.

5 Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

6 You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

9 Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

11 Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

14 Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

16 For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.

17 The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

18 Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem;

19 then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar. (NRSV)

Move 1—The facilitator reads the passage aloud

Move 2—The group reads the passage in unison

Move 3—Each group participant will spend 5-10 minutes personally reflecting on the passage using the manuscript Bible study method of observation, interpretation, and application

Move 4—Invite a participant to read the passage aloud

Move 5—Using the group model of Mutual Invitation; each group member will share their insights or takeaways from the passage

EXEGESIS:

As a leader, spend time in this passage and prayer before leading others through this lesson. Review the background material below, and if further resources are needed to exegete the passage, consider these commentaries:

1. *Psalms 1-72: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*. NBBC: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2015 by David L. Thompson.
2. *Psalms, Volume 1: 1–72*. NIVAC. Zondervan, 2002 by Gerald H. Wilson.
3. *Psalms*. 2 Vols. EBTC. Lexham Press, 2021 by James M. Hamilton Jr.

Psalm 51 is an individual lament Psalm used by the early church as a penitential psalm of confession. The psalmist recognizes his need for mercy because of the sin that has damaged his relationship with God by saying, "Against you, you alone, have I sinned" (v. 4). In his attempt to work toward receiving forgiveness and restoration; it wasn't an animal sacrifice that was being offered but his very life. The psalmist, throughout this lament, is searching for mercy or pardon "measured by his loving kindness"[197] in the form of cleansing or blotting out of transgressions. He begins with a plea for pardon, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love" (v.1). Out of guilt and shame, he desires what a ritualistic animal sacrifice could never bring about. He wants a "clean heart" and "a new and right spirit" (v. 10). The plea made by the psalmist is significant because he recognizes that although others can forgive transgressions, the Creator God is the only one that can cleanse one from their sin (v. 2).

The forgiveness and cleansing that being pardoned of past sin(s), brings about a response in the form of praise, but it must begin with lament. In verse 14, the psalmist writes, "Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance" (NRSV). This plea of deliverance is immediately followed by a song of restoration in verse 15, "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise" (NRSV). One commentator writes, "Stopped by guilt, silenced by fear, it will take an act of God for praise again to be on his lips."[198] The psalmist recognizes that the

[197] David L. Thompson, *Psalms 1-72: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2015), 242.

[198] Thompson, *Psalms 1-72*, 246.

bloodshed caused by his actions is, first and foremost, in direct violation of God's loving kindness and has affected all those around him. The posture of repentance is born out of a "broken spirit" and "a broken and contrite heart."[199] In his search for mercy, the psalmist cries out, "Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice" (v. 8, NRSV). It starts with a recognition that alone and left to himself, the psalmist is broken and crushed but with God and filled with the Holy Spirit there is a wholeness of intention that spills forth from his life in the form of a fragrant aroma or a song of praise. It is a fitting response to the unmerited mercy given to the psalmist and us.

Sarah Shin writes, "When it comes to ethnicity, our world needs Christian voices to call for change and reform with Jesus as the transforming center of it all...If we avoid this topic now, we withdraw into ineffectual witness in word and deed. And we leave a broken and hurting world, friends and strangers, in chaos."[200] This statement is powerful because we might have avoided this topic for far too long and left a hurting and broken world in chaos. Our God is a God of justice and demands that we stand with the oppressed and against the oppressor. Therefore, as a Christian community, we work toward change and reform through words and actions. The faith community encourages Christians everywhere to "stand against and to overcome all personal, institutional and structural prejudice responsible for racial and ethnic humiliation and oppression."[201] Recovering the Kingdom vision of the beloved community, adulterated due to prejudice and racial division, is no easy task, even today. Still, it is a necessary step forward if we wish to see a church united with Jesus at the center of it all.

A great example of a Nazarene pastor who lived through the civil rights movement as an African American is Dr. Charles Johnson from Meridian, Mississippi. He was a pioneer of social justice work within the Church of the Nazarene when it was far more popular to promote personal holiness instead of addressing systemic issues of racism. As a result, discrimination was felt and experienced by the oppressed in society and the church.[202] Author Chet Bush writes about Dr. Johnson's witness to the beloved community of God's Kingdom in Meridian, Mississippi, "Charles Johnson dignified a people by demanding justice *for* them. Dr. Johnson dignified another people by demanding justice *from* them. This is the nature of prophetic speech and the effect of justice restored."[203] He both dignified oppressed people by demanding justice for them and dignified the oppressor by demanding justice from them. The mercy received from the hand of the Lord is then extended to others. The honest lament of the psalmist results is the transformation of mind, body, and spirit. He cries out in verse 10, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me" (NRSV). The

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[199] Psalm 51:17, NRSV.

[200] Shin, *Beyond Color Blind,* 8.

[201] *Manual*, Article 915.

[202] Winstead, *There All Along,* 50.

[203] Bush, *Called to the Fire,* viii.

lovingkindness of God frees people to flee from their transgressions and sins so that they may freely lead others down the path of salvation (v.13, NRSV). After receiving mercy, the psalmist requests the Lord activate within him the spirit of mercy, "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise" (v.15, NRSV). Lament helps us move from those needing mercy to those extending mercy.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

1. How does pleading for pardon lead to mercy?

2. In thinking about lament as a song, how might the imagery of the Lord opening our lips bring about restoration?

LEARNING TO LAMENT:

Provide a copy of this lament to each participant to read and pray over the next week. Have one group member read this prayer aloud. Encourage group members to remain in this prayer even if it is difficult.

Christina Edmundson wrote this lament prayer in her book *Faithful Anti-Racism*.

"Please give us an accurate understanding of the past and present realities in our country. Help us to see the realities as you see them. Help us to discern truth from lies. We confess the many ways that Christians in the United States have not followed your will in regard to love, mercy and justice. Please forgive those sins and bring righteousness, justice, and restoration to our country and Christian communities. Please give us the faith, courage, love, and determination that are required to bring about racial justice in our society. Please show us the path we need to take and give us the strength we need to take it. Help us to shine your light to the world."[204]

[204] Edmundson, *Faithful Anti-Racism*, 106.

SESSION 3—THE PATIENCE OF LAMENT: HOW LONG, OH LORD?

DISCUSSION STARTERS:

1. How does patience help to shape the language of lament?

2. What do you know about the life of faithfulness and patience? Where do they intersect?

3. When thinking about God's timing and our expectations, why is lament helpful?

4. What kind of situations in your life or society have you been crying out, "How long, oh Lord?"

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 13 (Practice Reading Together)

1 How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

2 How long must I bear pain in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

3 Consider and answer me, O Lord my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,

4 and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed"; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

5 But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

6 I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me. (NRSV)

Move 1—The facilitator reads the passage aloud

Move 2—The group reads the passage in unison

Move 3—Each group participant will spend 5-10 minutes personally reflecting on the passage using the manuscript Bible study method of observation, interpretation, and application

Move 4—Invite a participant to read the passage aloud

Move 5—Using the group model of Mutual Invitation; each group member will share their insights or takeaways from the passage

EXEGESIS:

As a leader, spend time in this passage and prayer before leading others through this lesson. Review the background material below, and if further resources are needed to exegete the passage, consider these commentaries:

1. *Psalms 1-72: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*. NBBC: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2015 by David L. Thompson.
2. *Psalms, Volume 1: 1–72*. NIVAC. Zondervan, 2002 by Gerald H. Wilson.
3. *Psalms*. 2 Vols. EBTC. Lexham Press, 2021 by James M. Hamilton Jr.

This Psalm is commonly referred to as the "Prayer of the Distressed," as can be derived from the four "How long?" questions asked in the first two verses. These critical questions are being asked as the psalmist struggles with God's presence amid afflictions. In times of distress, the loudest presence is the only one noticed; therefore, the One capable of healing might be silent or absent. In verses 3-4, the psalmist asks Yahweh to reveal Himself as an answer through illumination. His question is in the either/or format, "Either Yahweh responds positively to the psalmist's plea and goes into action

on his behalf, or dire consequences will follow."[205] Either Yahweh will illuminate the eyes of the psalmist, or the enemy will prevail because he has been shaken. It is suggested in Psalm 13 that death is probably the enemy and that chronic illness is the psalmist's plight.[206]

The final two verses of the lament Psalm point toward the psalmist's anticipation for a song. It points to the unshaken faith that lies deep beneath the distress that demands time and attention. Deep beneath the surface of grief is a song just waiting to burst through pain and suffering. The psalmist recognizes his firm and secure trust in God as he awaits an answer from Yahweh. The song of salvation, even through adversity and heartache, is the only song that matters. The focus shifts with the final two verses from a change in circumstances to total dependence on the saving grace of Yahweh, who alone is the psalmist's deliverance.[207] Throughout history, especially amongst oppressed people groups, the song of salvation is sung even when the hand of the oppressor is still upon them. This pressure does not mean that the question of the distressed should not be uttered. It is fitting to ask, "How long?" in light of the radiance of our God, but there must also be a sense of patience as God responds, "just a little longer" (Revelation 6:10-11).

In Martin Luther King Jr's famous "I Have a Dream" speech delivered at the Lincoln Memorial as the march on Washington was underway on August 28, 1963, he declared that America had defaulted on its promissory note to give value and dignity upon all people, specifically toward its citizens of color. He laments that one hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation that the "Negro is still not free." He continues, "The life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination."[208] One example of the crippling effect of racism was when White supremacists planted a bomb at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four young girls. King offered the eulogy over this tragedy with these words, "They have something to say to us in their death. They have something to say to every minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of stained-glass windows. They have something to say to every politician who has fed his constituents the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism...They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about WHO murdered them, but about the system, the way of life and the philosophy which PRODUCED the murderers."[209] King was asking the world on behalf of the young girls who had died, "how long must we [Black Americans] continue to suffer under a suppressive and oppressive system of hatred and racism?" He believed change would come when those charged with the gospel stopped hiding behind the stained glass in their churches and started speaking up

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[205] Thompson, *Psalms 1-72*, 106.

[206] Thompson, *Psalms 1-72*, 106.

[207] Thompson, *Psalms 1-72*, 107.

[208] King Jr., *A Testament of Hope,* 217.

[209] King Jr., *A Testament of Hope,* 221

for and standing with the oppressed. In King's prayer of distress, he called out to those who remained silent instead of speaking up. Like the psalmist, He also wanted to see God act and move mightily to bring about justice so that the enemy would not prevail. This work was patient yet hard. We are still called to that hard work today.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

1. Can you relate to the psalmist's prayer of distress in Psalm 13?

2. Can you recall a time in history when God's people cried out, "How long?" but also kept singing the song of salvation?

LEARNING TO LAMENT:

Provide a copy of this lament to each participant to read and pray over the next week. Have one group member read this prayer aloud. Encourage group members to remain in this prayer even if it is difficult.

This prayer of lament was written by Jason Meyer, pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

"How long, O Lord? How long will your body be divided? How long will the stronghold of racial prejudice and injustice be raised up defiantly against the knowledge of God? How long will your blood bought bride keep building up the dividing wall of racial hostility you tore down? What will it take, Lord? How long must we wait for the gift of repentance to change the church from the inside out?

Look upon your church and see how she is plagued with both racial apathy and racial hostility. Why is empathy so rare and apathy so common among us? Instead of weeping

with those who weep, we are quick to judge the tears and slow to join them. We are too quick to become angry and argue and too slow to see biases and confess our blindness.

O Lord, move among us and move in us. We need a mighty rushing wind to blow away the poisoned air of prejudice. By the power of the Holy Spirit, turn our apathy into empathy and our hostility into unity. Break our hearts for our nations shameful sin of slavery. Give us grace to come to grips with our history of hate and oppression and segregation.

O God of sovereign grace, change our hearts so that the next chapter of the church's story will read like reconciliation, not segregation. May your reconciled children not tolerate each other as different but love each other as family. May the love of Christ compel us with fresh grace to love one another genuinely, stand up for one another boldly, and weep with one another tenderly.

In the mighty name of Jesus, we pray. Amen."[210]

SESSION 4—WEEP WITH ME: THE TEARS OF LAMENT

DISCUSSION STARTERS:

1. How might standing in solidarity with those experiencing hardship bring about strength and restoration?

2. What does comfort feel like? How have you been consoled when going through a challenging situation?

3. What are some ways you have wept with those who are weeping? How might you continue weeping with others?

SCRIPTURE: Lamentations 2:17-22 (Practice Reading Together)

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[210] Vroegop, *Weep With Me*, 92.

17 The Lord has done what he purposed; he has carried out his threat; as he ordained
long ago, he has demolished without pity; he has made the enemy rejoice over you and
exalted the might of your foes.

18 Cry aloud to the Lord! O wall of daughter Zion! Let tears stream down like a torrent
day and night! Give yourself no rest, your eyes no respite!

19 Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the watches! Pour out your heart like
water before the presence of the Lord! Lift your hands to him for the lives of your
children, who faint for hunger at the head of every street.

20 Look, O Lord, and consider! To whom have you done this? Should women eat their
offspring, the children they have borne? Should priest and prophet be killed in the
sanctuary of the Lord?

21 The young and the old are lying on the ground in the streets; my young women and
my young men have fallen by the sword; in the day of your anger you have killed them,
slaughtering without mercy.

22 You invited my enemies from all around as if for a day of festival; and on the day of
the anger of the Lord, no one escaped or survived; those whom I bore and reared, my
enemy has destroyed. (NRSV)

Move 1—The facilitator reads the passage aloud

Move 2—The group reads the passage in unison

Move 3—Each group participant will spend 5-10 minutes personally reflecting on the passage using the manuscript Bible study method of observation, interpretation, and application

Move 4—Invite a participant to read the passage aloud

Move 5—Using the group model of Mutual Invitation; each group member will share their insights or takeaways from the passage

EXEGESIS:

As a leader, spend time in this passage and prayer before leading others through this lesson. Review the background material below, and if further resources are needed to exegete the passage, consider these commentaries:

1. *Ecclesiastes * Lamentations: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2010 by Stephen J. Bennett.
2. *Song of Songs, Lamentations*. WBC. Thomas Nelson, 2004 by Duane A. Garrett and Paul R. House.

3. *Lamentations.* OTL. Westminster John Knox Press, 2002 by Adele Berlin.

Lamentations is, hands down, the instruction manual for the language of lament. This entire book in the Old Testament is a lament over the fall of the city of Jerusalem. It recalls the covenant disobedience that caused the city's downfall. The author paints a clear picture of recovery through honesty and obedience. In chapter 1, the stage is set for the narrative of the situation, and then in chapter 2, we hear about God's anger, the cause of the situation.[211] One thing that is made evident throughout the book of Lamentations is that many voices are represented, and author Soong-Chan Rah asserts that all voices are heard. He writes, "Lament requires the full and honest expression of suffering; that experience must encompass the full breadth of suffering. In contrast, American evangelical Christianity often only presents the story of the dominant culture. So often, the stories from the ethnic minority communities are not deemed worthy."[212] It is reassuring that the voices of the many are heard and held together in the call or cry for justice.

In verse 17, the author reminds the many that God has kept His word even though it has been to the city's detriment. We often think of God as faithful, saying He is faithful to do what He has purposed, which is undoubtedly the case here. It is essential to see that God is faithful in giving us reason to celebrate and in the consequences of covenantal disobedience. What is the response when God's anger is the cause of destruction? We cry aloud together. We weep with those who weep. Our hearts break for the things that break God's heart. We get angry over the things God gets angry about. In verses 18-19, a shift occurs from highlighting God's anger to asking for God's help. They ask for God's help because He is the only one able to bring about help, partly because the demolition has come from God. Therefore, the immense grief shown by the "torrent" of tears and the inability of the afflicted to find rest and respite is the proper response for the people seeking praise through prayer. One commentator wrote, "The people must weep day and night as Jeremiah wept for his people."[213]

In the final three verses of Lamentations 2, it is abundantly clear that not only was the city's destruction the result of God's anger over their covenantal disobedience, but it also revealed that no one was exempt from God's wrath. In verse 20, the city's inhabitants cry out collectively, "Look, O Lord, and consider!" Pleading with God to take notice and act over the injustice because of His wrath. When one can see the injustice of the people, it is hard to turn away and not act. The devastation and loss of the city's inhabitants were evident, and so was the reason behind it. The author, through lament, brings to the forefront the genuine penitence required to acknowledge the wrongdoing of one's past or present actions to step into God's future faithfully.

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[211] Stephen J. Bennet, *Ecclesiastes * Lamentations: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2010), 219.

[212] Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism,* 101.

[213] Bennet, *Ecclesiastes * Lamentations*, 225.

Throughout history, the atrocities of racism and discrimination have destroyed cities and lives. The church has always had a role to play in the restoration of the city to bring about not only spiritual but societal change. When Dr. Charles Johnson received a call to pastor in Mississippi, he knew that God had called him to the fire. "Charles Johnson did not intend to be a civil rights activist. He was just being a good pastor. He had no desire to move to Mississippi during the volatile 1960's. He did not set out to stand down the unjust systems of a segregated south, or get tangled up in a national civil rights case, or take up the mantle of activism for the African American community of Meridian. His passion flowed from a center more fiery than the furnace of racism. Charles Johnson knew that in order to be called to the fire one must first be called by the Fire. The One who called Charles to the fire is calling each of us to pursue justice and righteousness and to live a life that is whole. It is a call that summons forth the courage from the heart of the fearful, redeemed relationship for the socially broken, and trust in the One who is always faithful." So powerful! Dr. Johnson was called to a Church he did not want to go to (Fitkin Memorial Church), in a state he did not wish to be in (Mississippi), in a city that did not want him there (Meridian). He prayed, "Lord, I'll go anywhere but Mississippi. Father, have Thy way...but don't have it in Mississippi."

Not only did God call Charles to Mississippi in 1961, but He kept him there for the rest of his life. In the summer of 1964, 3 civil rights activists with whom Dr. Johnson knew and worked with were viciously beaten and murdered unjustly by white supremacists, which included police officers, clergy, and many others. Three years after their murder, he was called to be the only black witness to testify. Those charged with the crime were found guilty and would spend many years in prison. One of those found guilty was named Alton Wayne Roberts. Upon his release from prison, he made his way back to Meridian and to the doorstep of Dr. Johnson. Upon recognizing the once terrorizing figure, the pastor thought, "Is he comin' to finish off his job? Is he comin' for me?"

"Reverend Johnson, can I talk with you?" Roberts asked with a large object under his arm.

"Okay," stammered Charles.

"Reverend Johnson, I don't know what to say, I was young and all mixed up. I didn't know what I was doing."

Alton then gave the pastor a painting he had painted in prison of a snowcapped mountain and a string of freshly caught trout.

"Please forgive me," asked the ex-convict.

"For a long time, this man had been a caricature of racism, the epitome of hate. In his reckless abandon, Alton was a figure of fear. Here on the street, he was a shadow to be pitied."[214] Dr. Johnson remembers the interchange like this. "Charles reached out

[214] Bush, *Called to the Fire*, 181-184.

to accept the meager expressions of penance. He looked the man in the eyes. "I forgive you, Alton." The trembling Roberts broke with greater emotion. Wrapping his arms around the black man in the middle of the African American neighborhood, Alton clutched Charles back, weeping uncontrollably. Charles wept too. The two stood there for a long moment, wrapped in painful embrace, thoughts barraged by images; a federal courtroom, a dirt road, a sunken station wagon, and three tattered bodies exhumed from the raw Mississippi mud. It is the unseen image of the civil rights fight. It is the front-page photo that Time magazine never ran. Charles knows that Alton got off light. He knows that mothers mourn their sons. A wife grieves her husband. A community demands justice. A nation is embarrassed and angry. But for a moment the Meridian face of white supremacy and the Meridian face of black activism reconciled on 29th Avenue."[215]

Charles never talked to Alton again after the interchange, but he chose to believe that he was genuine in his apology. Charles continued to tell the story of the three slain activists for years to come. "We must also let others know the story of a man who wanted nothing more than to minister in obedience to God's call, who marched straight into his greatest fears, who served unwaveringly amidst adversity, who offered love to the forgotten and a voice for the acquiesced, all with the single aspiration: to help the whole man (or person)."[216]

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

1. Where might our tears today bring about healing in the destruction and devastation of our cities?

2. How does recognizing God's anger over the church's disobedience today bring restoration and salvation to cities, communities, and societies?

LEARNING TO LAMENT:

Provide a copy of this lament to each participant to read and pray over the next week. Have one group member read this prayer aloud. Encourage group members to remain in this prayer even if it is difficult.

Lift Every Voice and Sing (National Negro Anthem) by James Weldon Johnson

Lift every voice and sing,
'Til earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on 'til victory is won.

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[215] Bush, *Called to the Fire*, 184-185

[216] Bush, *Called to the Fire*, 186.

Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed.
We have come, over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past,
'Til now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who has brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who has by Thy might
Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet, stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;
Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
May we forever stand,
True to our God,
True to our native land.[217]

SESSION 5—WHEN WAILING TURNS TO DANCING: LAMENT AS PRAISE

DISCUSSION STARTERS:

1. Where does praise fit into lament?

2. How does learning to lament lead to dancing or celebration? Does that eliminate pain, grief, and sorrow?

3. In what ways is grief temporary and joy permanent?

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 30:1-12 (Practice Reading Together)

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[217] Roger E. Bowman, *Color us Christian: The Story of the Church of the Nazarene Among America's Blacks* (Kansas City, MO: Nazarene Publishing House, 1975), 11-12.

1 I will exalt you, Lord, for you lifted me out of the depths and did not let my enemies gloat over me.

2 Lord my God, I called to you for help, and you healed me.

3 You, Lord, brought me up from the realm of the dead; you spared me from going down to the pit.

4 Sing the praises of the Lord, you his faithful people; praise his holy name.

5 For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.

6 When I felt secure, I said, "I will never be shaken."

7 Lord, when you favored me, you made my royal mountain stand firm; but when you hid your face, I was dismayed.

8 To you, Lord, I called; to the Lord I cried for mercy:

9 "What is gained if I am silenced, if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness?

10 Hear, Lord, and be merciful to me; Lord, be my help."

11 You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,

12 that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. Lord my God, I will praise you forever. (NRSV)

Move 1—The facilitator reads the passage aloud

Move 2—The group reads the passage in unison

Move 3—Each group participant will spend 5-10 minutes personally reflecting on the passage using the manuscript Bible study method of observation, interpretation, and application

Move 4—Invite a participant to read the passage aloud

Move 5—Using the group model of Mutual Invitation; each group member will share their insights or takeaways from the passage

EXEGESIS:

As a leader, spend time in this passage and prayer before leading others through this lesson. Review the background material below, and if further resources are needed to exegete the passage, consider these commentaries:
1. *Psalms 1-72: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*. NBBC: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2015 by David L. Thompson.
2. *Psalms, Volume 1: 1–72*. NIVAC. Zondervan, 2002 by Gerald H. Wilson.
3. *Psalms*. 2 Vols. EBTC. Lexham Press, 2021 by James M. Hamilton Jr.

This Psalm is an excellent example of how the language of lament goes hand in hand with the language of praise. The psalmist begins with an exaltation directed toward the Lord for keeping him from death (lifting him from the pit). He also points to the Lord's help in keeping his enemies from gloating or making sport of his illness/adversity. This lament song is full of praise, pointing to the reality that "worship flows from life experience."[218] The psalmist was obviously on the brink of disaster, seeing himself as already dead and in the pit. There was little hope left in him until Yahweh raised him from death to new life. In verse 4, the covenant-keeping people of God are invited to sing along, "Sing the praises of the Lord, you his faithful people; praise his holy name." These praises must be sung in times of jubilation. Still, the people of God must also find a reason to sing in the brief periods where covenantal disobedience leads to God's anger. Verse 6 illustrates the short periods of displeasure with a lifetime of God's favor. Putting life experience into perspective is challenging, but seeing how the adversity experienced by the psalmist and us is, like the night, permanently eliminated by the dawn, makes room for joyful celebration.

In the next section (vs. 8-10), the psalmist makes a plea for mercy, recognizing that the Lord Yahweh is the only one who can grant mercy amid afflictions. He contrasts the silence of death with the praise of life, "What is gained if I am silenced, if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness?" Therefore, his plea for mercy is a song of deliverance from that which is dragging him down to a God who, by His immense mercy, can miraculously lift him out. One who can bring him from the brink of death to a new and glorious life of faithfulness (Covenant keeping). The last two verses (vs. 11-12) give us an image of what is possible when God's people honestly and humbly come before Him, repenting of their past to embrace His glorious future. He continues to sing, "You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. Lord my God, I will praise you forever." The transformation that comes through salvation causes the psalmist a reversal of fortunes and attitude, "Yahweh took him from mourning over the dead to dancing with the living...Yahweh took him from wearing sackcloth signaling sadness and mourning to joy and gladness."[219] As the psalmist honestly comes before God, his heart sings with gladness over what is possible because of the mercy and blessing of God. This joy and jubilation are not transient expressions of appreciation but have the potential to last forever. If there is breath in his lungs, he will praise God. Mark Vroegop writes concerning the silence of resignation versus the power of voice, "Laments protest against the brokenness of the world by seeking God's help. They refuse

[218] Thompson, *Psalms 1-72*, 161.
[219] Thompson, *Psalms 1-72*, 163.

to allow the effects of sin to create a state of resignation."[220] Like the psalmist, he asserts that lament is better than silence.

Throughout history, there is no other way to understand God's Kingdom than justice being possible for all people regardless of age, race, gender, or socioeconomic status. In Micah 6:8, the prophet proclaims, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Unfortunately, these Biblical requirements to "do justice," to "love kindness," and to "walk humbly" have been altered, deformed, and largely ignored as a result of racism. Jemar Tisby defines racism as "Prejudice plus power. It is not only personal bigotry toward someone of a different race that constitutes racism; rather, racism includes the imposition of bigoted ideas on groups of people."[221] This is not to say that all Christians or churches have been complacent or complicit in stifling justice, withholding kindness, or even not walking in humility. However, it does communicate that there is still much work for the Church today to bring about God's already and not yet Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. asserts that the end of the hard work of fighting for equality and civil rights is reconciliation, redemption, and the beautiful manifestation of the beloved community. The prophet Micah communicates a vision that corresponds to the many who have invested in the work of the Civil Rights movement in the American context. As followers of Jesus, our primary responsibility is to follow in His work of justice for the oppressed and marginalized, to value human life through kindness and love, and to walk in step with God's Spirit. Suppose the church neglects someone in need or selfishly manipulates another person for ill-gotten gain. In that case, injustice persists, and the beloved community, in the end, is used and deformed into something that it is not. Many saints have gone before who have given the church a light to follow and a mantle to assume as we pursue God's Kingdom. This is not simply a societal problem. It is a problem within the church as segregation, racism, and racist thought were supported, denied, or ignored by most majority ethnically White Christian churches throughout the civil rights movement and beyond.

Dr. Martin Luther King was the most influential voice during the civil rights movement in the United States. He wrote much and influenced many as he fought for equal rights for all humanity, precisely his dream of unifying what had been broken because of racism and prejudice at the hands of the majority White culture toward the minority Black culture. King took a nonviolent approach that found its roots in the *agape* of God and the pursuit of the Kingdom vision of God's beloved community, "a transformed and regenerated human society."[222] According to the text above, an excerpt from the speech King gave at the Conference on Christian Faith and Human Relations in Nashville, the end goal was not to shame the proud and arrogant but to bring about a social justice that benefited all and, through understanding would undo unjust systems. The end was King's dream of the beloved community. The church's responsibility,

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[220] Vroegop, *Weep With Me*, 104.

[221] Tisby, *The Color of Compromise,* 16.

[222] Smith, *Search for the Beloved Community,* 130.

according to King, was to be a prophetic witness, proclaiming peace in the pursuit of reconciliation, redemption, and the beloved community. Social transformation and spiritual growth resulted from a genuine relationship with God grounded in love. For King, "if the church were to be the church, it would engage in prophetic witness that would bring its spiritual, social, economic and political resources to bear in ways that would affirm God's love, and be truly reconciling, redeeming, liberating and transforming, leading to the realization of the beloved community."[223]

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

1. Why is it difficult at times to live in the jubilation of the morning when the sorrow of the night seems to overwhelm our lives?

2. Why is it essential to see lament as a bridge to praise?

LEARNING TO LAMENT:

Provide a copy of this lament to each participant to read and pray over the next week. Have one group member read this prayer aloud. Encourage group members to remain in this prayer even if it is difficult.

Holy and Merciful God,
Your scripture tells us that weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes in the morning. Yet how long is this night, O Lord? How long will this dark night of the soul be? We have no explanation for what brings us here tonight. We can do nothing else than endure in this deepest and most painful of mysteries. We believe in you, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and resurrector of Jesus Christ. We also believe, with equal and perhaps even greater conviction, that we have experienced some things that have been truly traumatic and disturbing.

We are at a loss. We cannot explain nor justify why you would allow these things to happen to us, and when we hear these justifications they do not solve the mystery, or

[223] Hunt, "Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Quest for the Beloved Community," 37.

take away the pain. They say that a true friend is one who is willing to tell you the truth. Our truth is a question, God, to which we do not know the answer. Our question is this: why God? Why? Why would you allow such a thing to happen? And why would you allow us to be wounded?

Like Job, we can find no fault in ourselves for this suffering, though many voices inside and outside want to blame us. Like Israel, we cannot simply put our tragedy behind us, but we have to tell the story of when it happened, where it happened, how it happened. Like you ... You know this darkness, Lord, for you allowed it to have its way with you on the cross. You prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that it might not be so. And yet you faced it, for our sake. You not only died, but descended into hell.

Lord Christ, you know our suffering deeper than we know it. You rose from the dead, but you still carried your wounds. You asked Thomas to come and touch them, so that he might believe. Can you teach us how to bear our wounds to you? We do not want our pain to close us off from you or from others any longer.

Your presence is the only thing that sustains us, and so allow us to be present to you in our pain. Your strength was shown in weakness, and so we come to you in our weakness. And so our weeping tarries for this night, but may joy come in the morning. Death and destruction come for us all, we cannot deny them or the wounds they have left. But we shall not let them have the last word, because you did not let them have the last word.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.[224]

SESSION 6—PRACTICING LAMENT: SILENT NO MORE

DISCUSSION STARTERS:

1. How might lament fit within our worship practices today, both as individuals and as a faith community?

2. What are some things/reasons we need to lament? Where do we start?

SCRIPTURE: Luke 19:41-44 (Practice Reading Together)

41 As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it,

42 saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.

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[224] re-Worship. "Prayer of Lament: How Long is the Night," Accessed January 31, 2023, ://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/11/prayer-of-lament-how-long-is-this-night.html

43 Indeed, the days will come upon you when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you and hem you in on every side.

44 They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God." (NRSV)

Move 1—The facilitator reads the passage aloud

Move 2—The group reads the passage together aloud

Move 3— Each group participant will spend 5-10 minutes personally reflecting on the passage using the manuscript Bible study method of observation, interpretation, and application

Move 4—Another participant will read the passage aloud

Move 5—Using the group model of Mutual Invitation; each group member will share their insights or takeaways from the passage

EXEGESIS:

As a leader, spend time in this passage and prayer before leading others through this lesson. Review the background material below, and if further resources are needed to exegete the passage, consider these commentaries:

1. Luke 9-23: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition. NBBC: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2013 by David A Neale.
2. Luke for Everyone. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004 by N.T. Wright.

This lament over Jerusalem from the mouth of Jesus was not only a remembrance of the covenantal disobedience that led to the destruction of the city to which the prophet Jeremiah lamented. It was also a reminder that their lack of faith in receiving the "Son of David" would lead to their destruction. Jesus wept over the city because He knew their fate, considering what He came to accomplish. One commentator writes, "Jesus' lament here has the force of a prophetic denunciation of the city. Jerusalem will reject God's Son and be destroyed as a result. As he enters the city,

readers have no hope that anything but sorrow awaits him."[225] Jesus' tone is not cold and calculated but caused by deep grief. N.T. Wright suggests that "The terrible judgment that has been pronounced, and will shortly be executed, proceeds not from a stern and cold justice but from a heart of love, that wants the best for, and from, the people, and so must now oppose, with sorrow and tears, the rebellion that had set its own interests and agendas before those of the God who had established them there in the first place."[226]

Jesus' anguish over Jerusalem's rejection of him as the long-expected Messiah did not immediately lead to anger but tears. He wept over the city before he even had the chance to challenge the religious malpractice that was taking place in the temple when he flipped the tables of the money changers. He recognized and prophesied their inability to see all God was doing in and through the Son. Their pursuit of godliness blinded them, and they were kept from seeing the peace that had entered the city in the person of Jesus. As a result, God's people, Israel, "had already missed its chance to respond."[227] Now, we know that condemnation and judgment toward those who rejected Jesus would not be the outcome, but through Jesus, salvation would finally reign because of resurrection. Jesus said in Luke 4:18, at the beginning of his earthly ministry, that the Holy Spirit sent him to help the blind recover their sight, amongst other transformations. He would help those unable to see to lament over their intentional blindness to recover what has been rejected by or kept from them.

What about us? Where might we be blind to how Jesus reveals Himself to us, our church, our community, and the world? How might we intentionally embrace and recognize "the things that make for peace" mentioned by Jesus in verse 42? What enemies are buildings ramparts on every side ready to crush and devour? Is Jesus weeping over his church today? How might his tears radically change our lives and help our hearts be broken for the things that break his? In this way, the tears of Jesus become our tears as we cry out to God for help with, for, and in our community.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

1. What does lament look like today? For you? In your community?

2. Practice writing a lament prayer where you turn to God, complain, ask, and trust. Spend ten minutes writing a lament prayer and then share it with the group.

LEARNING TO LAMENT:

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[225] David A. Neale, *Luke 9-24: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2013), 191.

[226] N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 232.

[227] David A. Neale, *Luke 9-24*, 192.

Provide a copy of this lament to each participant to read and pray over the next week. Have one group member read this prayer aloud. Encourage group members to remain in this prayer even if it is difficult.

"O thou Eternal God, out of whose absolute power and infinite intelligence the whole universe has come into being. We humbly confess that we have not loved thee with our hearts, souls and minds and we have not loved our neighbors as Christ loved us. We have all too often lived by our own selfish impulses rather than by the life of sacrificial love as revealed by Christ. We often give in order to receive, we love our friends and hate our enemies, we go the first mile but dare not travel the second, we forgive but dare not forget. And so as we look within ourselves we are confronted with the appalling fact that the history of our lives is the history of an eternal revolt against thee. But thou, O God, have mercy upon us. Forgive us for what we could have been but failed to be. Give us the intelligence to know thy will. Give us the courage to do thy will. Give us the devotion to love thy will. In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen."[228]

[228] Stanford University, "Prayers" accessed December 21, 2023, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/prayers, CSKC-INP, Coretta Scott King Collection, In Private Hands, Sermon file, folder 97.