



Josh Clemons and Hazen Stevens—one white, one black, both brothers in Christ—invite you to start toward racial reconciliation and justice. Unity comes from spiritual kinship in Christ. Every page seeks to honor Him, pointing believers back to Jesus as the one who is reconciling all things to Himself.

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On Earth as It Is in Heaven

We sat across from a young African American man who served as the associate pastor of a church we were inviting to join OneRace Movement. He was there to vet our sincerity and wasn't shy to challenge us. He wanted to know if we were serious about seeing through the hard work we were proposing. At one point in the conversation, with intensity, he pointed his finger at me (Hazen) and asked, "When this racial reconciliation work gets hard and messy, you will have the luxury of walking away. But"—he pointed at Josh—"he won't, because what is a choice for you is what we live with daily. So what are you going to do when the work gets hard?"

The question hung in the air as he stared at me. In that tense moment, the answer that came to me is one I have clung to ever since. His strong but appropriate challenge presented me the gift of giving voice to a conviction I held but had never expressed.

“You’re right,” I told him. “My being White does afford me the privilege to quit when this work gets hard. But being a disciple of Jesus demands I deny myself to follow Him. So I won’t quit, because I am committed to obey.”

As believers, living in allegiance to Jesus is the highest purpose. So we strive to fulfill Jesus’ prayer in John 17: “that [we] may be one” (v. 11). As Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He made the desire of the Father’s heart known: May “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10).

Diversity is not a result of the fall. Rather, it is the desire of God’s heart.

Ultimately, we do this reconciliation work because Jesus is worthy of a beautiful bride, adorned in holiness, whose worship is rapturous and whose love is evident.

We received a foretaste of that glory, of what the church was designed to be, when OneRace brought together a solemn assembly at the nation’s largest Confederate monument in August 2018. That day five hundred pastors and twenty-five thousand believers gathered at Stone Mountain of Georgia on the fifty-fifth anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech. We met together to renounce racism and to call for reconciliation. We prayed to see the stronghold of racism broken over America and for the church to be reconciled. We rallied around the cross of Christ to lament, repent, heal, and worship.

As I (Josh) stared out into the crowd and witnessed the beautiful mosaic of diversity, two things hit me acutely.

First, the sound of prayer, worship, lament, and repentance overwhelmed me. This moment represented redemption; it was a token of a glory in the age to come. “This is what You want,” I prayed. “A bride pursuing unity together.” It was a picture of Revelation 7 reality:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (vv. 9–10)

This throne room scene shows us that diversity is not a result of the fall. Rather, it is the desire of God’s heart. Multiethnic worship and multiethnic beauty surrounding the throne of God communicate the importance that God places on diverse expression. But it doesn’t stop there. The innumerable multitude is unified in its worship. Though different languages, rhythms, and cadences are being sung, the worship experience is unified nonetheless. This is what God desires here and now—a bride composed of uniqueness, diversity, and beauty all standing in unity.

The second thing that hit me was that we still have so much work to do! This gathering was but a moment that paled in comparison to the centuries of racial terror, oppression, and trauma so many people had experienced. We must never underestimate the stronghold of racism. It has been fortified by centuries of transgressions, right up to the present day.

What exactly is racism? We define racism as the sin of having power over another resulting in partiality that impedes the flourishing of individuals and ethnic groups. This sin can be committed through intentional and passive actions. It is evinced on both an individualized and structural basis, affecting individuals and the systems of society.

Individualized racism occurs between individuals. It might be as subtle as an unconscious bias that is held about a person or a

group. Or perhaps it could be as overt as outright hatred for a person or people group. Whatever the case, our held beliefs about a person or persons, whether conscious or unconscious, informs our actions toward them. This is as subtle as a passing thought or an unconscious action, such as clutching one's purse while on an elevator with a person of color or the assumption that persons of Hispanic heritage can't speak English. The extreme of individualized overt racism is prejudice that hinders the flourishing or diminishes the imago Dei in an individual. An example would be the Charleston church massacre in 2015 that cost nine individuals their lives.

Many have pursued the work against racism and for reconciliation—heroes such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frederick Douglass, Dr. John Perkins, Dr. Brenda Salter McNeil, Dr. Michael Emerson, and countless others. Many quietly engage in reconciliation in their neighborhoods and communities, known only to God. And we can see the results of their labors of love.

But just because we have come so far doesn't mean we rest on the laurels of others' hard work. We still have work to do. God is calling us to engage in that work.

To be sure, we put in work. We practice relationship building, repentance, forgiveness, prayer, and even justice pursuits. Yet lasting reconciliation isn't established through any single efforts. Reconciliation is the convergence of all of these things, sustained over time, in a spirit of sacrificial love for neighbor. We join the work of God and advance the cause of horizontal reconciliation in our city and across our nation. We live to see God's kingdom and will done on earth as it is in heaven.

That's why gathering at Stone Mountain that day to take back what the sin of racism has stolen from us was so important. We gathered to know, own, and change the story. Because there can be no reconciliation without first a great reckoning.

THE REBIRTH OF THE KU KLUX KLAN

Engraved into the side of Stone Mountain are Generals Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Jefferson Davis—a massive shrine dedicated to the Confederacy. These men were professed “Christians.”¹ Yet all were slave owners and battled to maintain this atrocity.

But Stone Mountain is more than an engraved monument. It represents a dark hour for the church. On Thanksgiving night in 1915, William Joseph Simmons, a Methodist Episcopal minister, led a group of fifteen men to the top of Stone Mountain. There they built an altar and placed a Bible and an American flag on it. Then they erected a sixteen-foot-tall cross and set it ablaze. Just weeks earlier this same group gathered to lynch Leo Frank, an innocent Jewish man.²

After watching one of the first feature-length films, *Birth of a Nation*, Simmons was inspired to fan the flames of the KKK, which had physically disbanded in the 1870s when Jim Crow laws secured white supremacy throughout the country.³ The film, also viewed at the White House by then-president Woodrow Wilson, presents racial terrorism as a means to preserve the American way of life through domination, intimidation, and violence against primarily Black people. Notorious for menacing and terrorizing people of color, Catholics, and Jews, the KKK, explains historian Jemar Tisby, “crafted a vision of a white America and, more specifically, a white Christian America.”⁴

Let us not be quick to rush past the fact that Rev. Simmons led the way in the rebirth of the KKK. These men who stood with him were “Christians” who lynched Frank. And their actions led to the lynching of countless others. As historian Kelly Baker notes in *The Gospel According to the Klan*, “The Klan [of the early twentieth century] was not just an order to defend America but also a campaign

to protect and celebrate Protestantism. It was a *religious* order.”²⁵

It is stories like this one that begs the question, where was the church as a whole in response? Where was the institution that is supposed to preach brotherhood and make it a reality in its body? Where was the credible representation of Christ to a watching world?

To be sure, there were advocates of racial justice, working to fight against this kind of sin. However, it takes the complicity of the majority to produce such a catastrophic narrative.

This is the problem with American church history. The prophetic voice of the church has been largely silent. We have been complicit and absent. We have lagged in places in which we should have been leading. We have been negligent regarding things that offend God, and that harm brothers and sisters of color. Sadly, throughout American history, the church corporately and Christians individually have often participated in championing violence and evil, living antithetical to our calling.

RACISM THAT LINGERS INTO THE PRESENT

In the fall of 2013, I (Josh) was living in Dallas, Texas, while working on my Masters of Divinity in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I had to commute weekly through several small towns to get to classes. On one occasion, a police officer in one of those towns pulled me over. Thinking that perhaps I’d unintentionally been caught speeding, I readied myself to present my license and car registration. What I didn’t expect, however, was the officer to greet me by telling me to get out of my car. Without another word or explanation, he escorted me to the back of the police car. Based on his actions and demeanor, I got this feeling that if I were to resist or inquire or even act in any way that may indicate a failure to comply, I could surely lose my life.

Within moments another officer arrived and began questioning me. “You’re from Texas?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What are you doing here?”

I answered each question, though I was still unsure why I was being questioned or what I had supposedly done.

After being held on the side of the road in the back of that police car for an hour, I finally was told, “You fit the description of someone we’ve been looking for. But you are free to go.”

Sigh of relief. No ticket. No arrest.

I would write this off as a fluke, but the same thing happened twice in the same town. Was it just that my black skin was the target?

This, or much worse, is the experience of many people of color. Whether it’s overt, covert, or systemic racism, it wounds us just the same. It prohibits people from flourishing.

The reality is that we live between two Americas, or as sociologist and civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois put it, we exist with a “double consciousness”:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁶

I know this pain all too well. The trauma of *otherness* is indescribable and can be understood only by those who have traveled the way.

To be sure, racism isn't merely individualistic and white supremacy isn't relegated to hoods, robes, and burning crosses. No, it's bigger than that. The dark past is, too, a dark present. It impacts the lives of millions of people of color. We call this *systemic racism*. It is the ingraining of racism culturally that informs laws and impacts peoples of color's ability to flourish.

Systemic racism occurs in the systems of society that accommodate one group while disadvantaging another. This can be overt or covert. Some examples of overt systemic racism include the stop-and-frisk laws that targeted ethnic minorities, Jim Crow policies that relegated Blacks to an inferior status in society, and red lining that restricted homeownership by Black people to particular areas.

Though no longer "legal," their effects linger. Consider the ways this systemic racism continues to impact people of color:

Wealth⁷

- On average White families have \$188,200 of accumulated wealth.
- On average Black families have \$36,100 of accumulated wealth.
- On average Hispanic families have \$24,100 of accumulated wealth.

Poverty⁸

- 10.1 percent of White people live in poverty. Approximately 21.3 million people.
- 20.8 percent of Black people live in poverty. Approximately 8.3 million people.
- 17.6 percent of Hispanic people live in poverty. Approximately 9.3 million people.

Crime and Imprisonment

- Nearly 1.5 million people incarcerated as of 2018.
- 30 percent of the prison population is White (about 436,500 people)—despite the fact that White people make up 64 percent of the US population (approximately 211 million people).
- 23 percent of the prison population is Hispanic (about 336,500 people)—despite the fact that Hispanic people make up 16 percent of the US population (approximately 53 million people).
- 33 percent of the prison population is Black (about 475,900 people)—despite the fact that Black people make up 12 percent of the US population (approximately 40 million people).⁹
- Hispanic people are two times more likely to be killed by police than White people.
- Black people are three times more likely to be killed by police than White people.
- Black people have been 28 percent of those killed by police in 2020 despite being only 13 percent of the population.¹⁰

Employment¹¹

- 3.3 percent of White people unemployed.
- 6.6 percent of Black people unemployed.
- 14 percent of White people underemployed.
- 24.9 percent of Black people underemployed.

Gender¹²

- Asian women earn \$.90 on the dollar of White men.
- White women earn \$.79 on the dollar of White men.

- Black women earn \$.62 on the dollar of White men.
- Hispanic women earn \$.54 on the dollar of White men.

This data tells us one of two things: The White race is the superior race, and all others are inferior. Or it tells us that the racial events of our past have significantly impacted our present. It could tell us that the trauma of racism in the West has diminished minorities' ability to flourish in America. The data helps us to measure the impact of systemic racism and its residual effects. And it reminds us of the work we all still need to do.

DISCIPLESHIP DEMANDS LOVING OBEDIENCE

Stepping up and into the work of reconciliation doesn't come easily. It is a journey of increasing resolve and deepening conviction that Jesus has called us to love our neighbors as ourselves. And in order to do this, we can't selectively care only for the neighbors who look like us. We can be tempted toward living in apathy because, frankly, it's easier—even in the church. We have seen many organizational

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boards and leadership teams that are leading multicultural businesses and ministries, but their decision-making bodies are homogeneously White and male. That leads us to ask the hard question, "Why is that?" Many of the economic, political, and social structures of our society favor the majority's preferences, and historically

have systematically elevated Whites into positions of power over other races.

It can be more comfortable to simply remain neutral, ignorant, or even callous and deny the challenges minorities face in America. However, if we are Christians who have given our allegiance to Jesus, if we believe what we pray when we say the Lord's Prayer—that God's kingdom come and God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven—then we have laid down our right to remain indifferent toward the plight of our neighbor. Jesus is leading His church into oneness, so we must be resolved to discern and do our part to follow Him there.

Yes, I (Hazen) follow Him as a leader in a reconciliation movement, but I also follow Him as a pastor in a local church, a neighbor, a husband, and a father. I may move in life from one assignment to another, but by God's grace I won't ever *quit*. Loving our sister or brother and living reconciled to them is not an option; it is a kingdom prerogative that He has called us to obey.

Furthermore, real love demands that my neighbors' challenges have now become my own. Scripture teaches this truth plainly. Paul wrote in Galatians 6: "*Carry each other's burdens*, and in this way you will *fulfill the law of Christ*. . . . Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, *let us do good to all people*, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (vv. 2, 9–10 NIV). This is what it means to obey the second commandment, "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31) and to follow Christ's law: "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 7:12 NIV).

GETTING CLEAR ON THE BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF RECONCILIATION

As Hazen and I have journeyed in the race space, we have noted multiple times to each other that we have yet to find two people who would define “reconciliation” the same way. In fact, when I am at seminars, conferences, or in conversation, I often wonder what each person means by the term. I have heard everything from reconciliation being strictly about preaching the gospel to being strictly about pursuing justice and action. One thing is clear: we are unclear about the biblical concept of reconciliation.

Generally, we agree that something is fractured and in need of repair. We also agree that we, the church, play a role. Where the descent begins is: How fractured are we really? What does the gospel have to say about said fracture? And what does God require *me* to do about this prevailing problem?

Our friends with the Reimagine Group and Barna commissioned a study on varying beliefs regarding reconciliation. As we consider the above question, here are their findings:

- 94 percent of Christians believe the church plays a crucial role in the work of racial reconciliation.
- 87 percent of White Christians and 82 percent of Black Christians believe that hostility exists between the two racial groups.
- 84 percent of Black Americans state they experience social disadvantage, compared to 62 percent of White Americans who would agree that Black Americans are disadvantaged.
- 59 percent of White Christians believe racism is a problem of the past, compared to 39 percent of Black Christians who would agree with that statement.¹³

Barna's senior vice president, Brooke Hempell, speaks to this data on the sentiments of White and Black people in the church: "This dilemma demonstrates those supposedly most equipped for reconciliation do not see the need for it."¹⁴

There is a great dissonance between our believed theology (orthodoxy) and how we practice that theology (orthopraxy). This is a discipleship failure. We lack a clear understanding of what the gospel invites us into. Thus we have a shortsighted understanding of reconciliation work, which leads to bad outcomes. The reason we aren't experiencing reconciliation is due to our discipleship failure.

So how do we change that?

First, we need to understand that reconciliation is the process by which people across the spectrum of diversity are made right with God and each other through the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This process includes confession, lament, repentance, forgiveness, and restoration.

Reconciliation starts with God making the first move. As Paul explained: "God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved" (Eph. 2:4–5). We are then invited to move toward one another.

This is reconciliation: Jesus restores the possibility of relationship with us through His faithful and holy life, His obedience to the cross despites its shame, and His resurrection from the dead. Jesus rescues our story. But from what exactly? Sin. As a result of the fall, sin created a chasm between God and man, fracturing the relationship. Our relationship with God was once broken, in need of repair. But thanks be to God, while we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Jesus came to restore the broken relationship. He conquered sin, death,

hell, and the grave, so that whoever would believe in Him might have everlasting life. Jesus is the great Reconciler.

Why start with the cross? Why start with reconciliation to God? Because if God hadn't made the first move, we could never move toward one another. We must emphatically proclaim that it is because of Jesus that we are able to be reconciled to God and to each other: "He himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility" (Eph. 2:14–16).

There was this underlying tension present in the relationship. Ephesians 2:11–16 captures this tension through the temple court interaction. Gentiles were only allowed in the "court of the Gentiles." They were precluded from the other courts that only Jews had access to. In fact, signs were posted that stated if Gentiles left their area, they would be killed. The wall that divided the two was referred to as "the wall of hostility." Hostile because it was a wall of ethnic division that carried with it the penalty of death. To be sure, the Gentiles believed in the God of the Jews, but because they weren't ethnic Jews, they weren't allowed into the other spaces.¹⁵

Paul drew on this "wall of hostility" idea in describing what Christ had done for the Jews and Gentiles, and for us. Through Christ's obedience to the cross, He secured peace between the two groups. He has destroyed the wall of hostility and made the two groups one. In fact, it goes further than that: He has created a new humanity out of the two. Because of the cross, God has reconciled the fractured relationship between the Jews and the Gentiles.¹⁶

So what is God's goal in reconciliation? What is the mission of Christ in horizontal reconciliation? He desires to restore whole-

ness to broken relationships. His desire is to move people groups from being outsiders with one another to being family: “You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19). It’s wild to think that the Cross is able to take a tumultuous relationship and restore it, take a fracture and mend it, and take what’s divided and unite it. But that is the power of the gospel; it causes dead things to come back to life.¹⁷

Because of Jesus Christ reconciliation is possible. Reconciliation is possible across colors, classes, cultures, and gender. The history of Black and White relations would be hopeless to overcome but for the blood of Jesus and the power of the Cross. He is able to unite us. But we have to sign up for the journey.

We have to desire reconciliation. We have to long for a pure and spotless bride at Jesus’ return. A bride who is rid of the stain of racism and division, supremacy and unforgiveness. A friend and fellow reconciler Johnson Bowie said it to me this way, “When Christians live divided lives, we are saying to a watching world that the blood of Jesus is strong enough to save us, but not strong enough to unite us.” For far too long this has been the testimony of the church. It’s time for a new path forward. It is time for us to be more in love with the arduous work of reconciliation than we are with the mere idea of reconciliation. It’s time for us to fight for oneness.

If we are going to move forward, we have to see each other. We have to see the wall of hostility that exists between people groups. We have to see the chasm that sin wrought. We have to see our history and cultural norms. We have to grapple with racism and the trauma that needs healing.

Here’s the reality: there can be no reconciliation without a great reckoning. We must reckon with all that divides us that we might see reconciliation in our moment in history.

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