

Hope for the Reconciliation of the Church
That Sets Us Free to Advance the Kingdom

I would like to begin my time today with a very honest, basic question: Is there ever a way for Christian blacks and whites and all other Christian minorities in our culture to move forward together without the sins of the past defining our relationships in a negative way? Is it possible to come to a place where the mistrust is removed and there is a new relationship emerging; where healing, restoration, unity and deep, substantial maturity in being the reconciled body of Christ at work in this world for his glory, can actually be achieved?

My answer, my deepest held belief based on the love and the Sovereign promises of God given to us through the grace of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, and even my present experience in these things, all tell me the answer is an absolute, unequivocal yes!

This is the promise of the work of Christ on the Cross- not for some time when we get to eternity, but for now:

Ephesians 2:13-18 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

What do we need, in 21st century America, given all our past history, to see this become a reality?

I will mention three very simple, basic, but profound things, that if we embrace them, can surely greatly help us see the movement of God in bringing the desire and longing we have to be united as the church across our long standing racial and economic boundaries and failures actually come to expression.

Three of things we must embrace are a genuine repentance, and a genuine obedience, and a genuine forgiveness.

First, there must be a genuine repentance in the white church.

We have been talking about the “sins of our fathers” and our connection to those sins during the Civil Rights movement, but what does that practically mean for our repentance? Do we have anything of our own to repent of in relationship to the sins of our fathers?

As we talk about federal headship, or imputation, or corporate guilt I think it is critical we make some distinctions that the Scriptures themselves make.

First, the connection with Adam’s sin as our representative isn’t some abstract legal relationship- or some notion of responsibility that has nothing to do with our day to day lives. The point is we actually sin the same sins of Adam. The reason we are told we are connected to him is to help us understand that the umbilical cord to our first representative is real, and the manifestation of that reality is not that “we never sinned like Adam and so the connection is unfair,” but that we have sinned his sin as well, and it came out of us because of our connection to him and because it is in our own hearts.

We have to ask the same type of question about the “sins of our PCA fathers.” Have we sinned “their” sins?

We can proclaim from Scripture the truth that God does not unjustly hold the children responsible for the sins of their fathers-

Ezekiel 2:3-5 And he said to me, "Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. ⁴ The descendants also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD.' ⁵ And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them.

Ezekiel 18:1-4 The word of the LORD came to me: ² "What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'? ³ As I live, declares the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. ⁴ Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die.

Ezekiel 18:14-20 ¹⁴ "Now suppose this man fathers a son who sees all the sins that his father has done; he sees, and does not do likewise: ¹⁵ he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor's wife, ¹⁶ does not oppress anyone, exacts no pledge, commits no robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, ¹⁷ withholds his hand from iniquity, takes no interest or profit, obeys my rules, and walks in my statutes; he shall not die for his father's iniquity; he shall surely live. ¹⁸ As for his father, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother, and did what is not good among his people, behold, he shall die for his iniquity. ¹⁹ "Yet you say, 'Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?' When the son has done what is just and right, and has been careful to observe all

my statutes, he shall surely live. ²⁰ The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.”

So where does that leave us as members of the PCA in relationship to the historical sins of our forefathers?

If the sins of our fathers are our sins as well- if we have not repudiated and disavowed the sins of our fathers and by our actions have turned away from those sins and replaced them with the pursuit of righteousness- if we are still practicing them- we have something to repent of.

How do we know? Is there anything we can point to in our lives that connects us to the sins of our fathers? Otherwise it is an empty, meaningless repentance.

I want to address at least one area of sin the white church, almost as a whole, can repent of that is a repetition of the sins of our fathers and therefore one part of the genuine, substantial forgiveness and healing we need as the body of Christ.

Although this might sound strange, let me start by saying what we cannot repent of:

We cannot repent of the horrible crimes of lynching black men or women-unless we participated in some way either by assent, participation or turning a blind eye and refusing to act for righteousness where we had the opportunity.

Likewise, we cannot repent of the practice of banks red lining communities to shut off loans to blacks so the community we live in could be segregated, or police brutality or of wearing sheets and burning homes and crosses, or of justifying slavery and the practice of separating families from one another and de-humanizing African slaves or of owning slaves, or deciding the Dred Scott Case or enacting Jim Crow laws unless we participated in some way either by assent, participation or turning a blind eye and refusing to act for righteousness where we had the opportunity.

Perhaps we have in our history had some participation in these sins and perhaps not. But however we see ourselves in relation to these sins, there are other clear and unmistakable sins we have committed and continue to commit; actions that are major sins and failures against God and major sins and failures against our cultural minority brothers and sisters that have been hurtful, damaging, disheartening and deeply painful and bewildering.

What are those clear sins that we need to repent of? They take many forms, but at the core they all come to expression from one root sin: the simple, basic failure to love our brothers and sisters who are a part of the one family of God with the compassionate love of Christ in their times of need. We have desperately failed to bind ourselves to our minority brothers and

sisters as an intimate part of us, so that together, we would only live as the one body of Christ; the one family of God; the one Covenantally bound community of the kingdom of God walking together through the oppression and brokenness in the culture around us. We have in practice segregated ourselves and justified it, and therefore in practice also segregated ourselves from compassion and justice.

Our own spiritual family members, who are together with us, part of the flesh and blood of our one Lord Jesus Christ- these family members have suffered greatly and often from the oppressive powers of the world around them, and we have chosen to not suffer with them. Paul says when one member of the body hurts, the whole body feels the pain. But the white majority-connected church has almost always found ways to anesthetize ourselves so we haven't had to share our brothers' and sisters' pain. While they have been mistreated by many in the white majority culture throughout most of the history of this country that does not know God or bend the knee to his justice and compassion, we have stood idly by and did nothing and turned our face and our hearts of compassion away.

We found ways to not only ignore their cries, but we also convinced ourselves we could still honestly pursue great things for God, develop great theology, engage in great evangelism and build great churches- while shutting out the reality that our own spiritual flesh and blood were many times and in many ways strangers in their own land, sometimes in prison, sometimes hungry and naked and sick, and even sometimes killed, but we convinced ourselves that we did not have to help them. We talked ourselves into believing we could do all kinds of things for God and not have to enter into compassion and justice for his children, our brothers and sisters, these fellow members of the church.

And that is what has hurt our brothers and sisters the most. It has hurt them physically because we did not come to their rescue, and it hurt them emotionally and relationally because while we said we all knew the same love of God, we said we all had the same forgiveness of sins, we said we all had the same God and Father and the same King and Deliver Jesus, we acted like we had no need or demand or compelling reason to show them God's brotherly love in their hours of need.

To receive mistreatment from the world as it stands opposed to God is a hard thing for any man or woman. To be ignored in your distress by your family who is meant to love you and embrace you and walk with you – is far more unbearable and discouraging.

Listen to the words of Martin Luther King in this letter he wrote from the Birmingham jail to his fellow white pastors:

“I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian... brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride

toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice;Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

Let me take note of my other major disappointment. I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership. Of course, there are some notable exceptions.But despite these... I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.

In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: "Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern." And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely other worldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.

In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church. How could I do otherwise? ...Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists."

If we, today, talk about repenting over the sins of our forefathers in a way that does not acknowledge we ourselves have still deliberately sinned against God and our brothers and sisters in the same way by not coming to their aid- then all the talk about repenting over things 50 years ago means nothing.

My dear brothers, for there to be a deep, true reconciliation and unity between the black and white church in our culture, God's true white children must repent where we have failed to love our black brothers and sisters.

The second thing the white church must do is commit ourselves to genuine new obedience.

If we recognize and repent of our genuine failure, and that repentance is true, it always carries with it a desire and a commitment by the grace of God to replace the sin with true righteousness.

Let me highlight a few key areas of what that new obedience must include:

First, we must spend time humbly listening to our brothers and sisters so we can genuinely understand their trials and mourn with them the injustices they have had to endure. As white evangelical Christians we actually have had some experience from time to time of knowing what it is like to be scoffed at, ridiculed and rejected by those in positions of power. What we have not experienced in our culture, are the depth of evil deeds that that kind of rejection can and has brought to so many of our minority brothers and sisters, simply because of the color of their skin. We need to listen to the pain and cries of our family and weep with those who weep.

Secondly, we need to humbly ask God together with our brothers and sisters for the power and wisdom of the Spirit to live out a very different reality in the church- the reality of the loving, compassionate, justice-filled kingdom of God expressed in the body of Christ. I say “humbly” asking for “power” and “wisdom” because this is what it will truly take to change our ways.

Where our African-American and other minority brothers and sisters experience prejudice or animosity or indifference or indignity or lack of value or hateful despising in the culture, we need the power and the wisdom of the Spirit to see the polar opposite reality in the family of God:

That means we need to see a full, complete, honoring and respect and affirmation and embracing of one another as men and women of God; equally loved, equally gifted, equally needed, equally valued, equally cherished, equally cared for in the one family of God. If there is “safe space” needed for anyone, the church, the body of Christ has always been intended by God to be that “safe space” where we can together experience the restored humanity God always created us to be.

That also means we recognize the leadership and sound judgement and wisdom and understanding of righteousness our brothers and sisters already have, through what God has already been teaching them - and that we need to learn from them. This is not a leadership that we confer on them because they have adapted to our cultural standards; it is a leadership that we humbly learn to recognize God himself has already given them through all the toils and hardship and enduring faith they have had to embrace on their long journey.

That in turn means we need to learn together from their worship experiences, their understanding of what justice for the oppressed needs to look like, their understanding of the power of the Spirit to endure. We have some knowledge of these things that are true and certain and have been real for us in our times of need, but many of our brothers and sisters who have endured these hardships even more, have even more insight to share, and we need

the humility and freedom to listen and learn from them and gain even more wisdom and joy in the kingdom of God than we have experienced so far.

As we re-learn in the 21st century to imitate the church of Acts where we are told in chapter 4:

“Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.

and in chapter 13 “**Acts 13:1** Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.”

-as we re-learn that way of being church where the poor and oppressed are cared for and where the glory of God in the gifting of the nations is embraced, we will and can see this kind of unity and restoration and healing and glory of God we all long for and that God himself has promised.

The third necessary element for reconciliation that I want to address this morning is the need for genuine forgiveness from the black church and what that means for both white and black Christians.

The only way the practical expression of restoration and reconciliation that God wants to bring about can take place, is if there is forgiveness. And that forgiveness must flow from the power of the Cross that is the source of our peace and healing.

Paul says it this way:

Colossians 1:18-23 And (Jesus) is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. ²¹ And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, ²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Ephesians 2:14-16 ⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

For every act of racism, for act of indifference, for every failure to show compassion and justice, there is only one place for the remedy of God to fully take place and come to expression- and that is at the Cross of Christ. Every sin- whether it is a sin committed maliciously or a sin caused by failing to do what is right –all sin has a price tag, a cost attached to it. Someone must pay the penalty and the cost for all the emotional and spiritual and physical fall out. And for there to be the freedom to replace death with life, for there to be a freedom to genuinely forgive, to genuinely embrace one another, to genuinely be set free from the past consequences of failure forever limiting and controlling the present, for there to be freedom to move forward in new obedience, that cost must be paid; the debt cannot simply be overlooked. General human forgiveness has its place in this world as it reflects the remaining image of God in man. And the price that is always paid is for the one who has been sinned against to absorb the pain. And men can do that on a limited basis- and thank God they can. But the freedom to forgive failure that destroys a relationship, and kills, and allows killing to go unnoticed, and not once, but repeated many times over, can only be forgiven by the power of God himself paying the cost in his own Son's work on the Cross.

The good news for all of us, to quote a mentor of mine and many others, is that indeed- our sins have been worse than we realized; but having been exposed for what they are, the greater good news is that the free gift of God's forgiveness and grace in Christ is greater still.

What I would like to focus on in closing is what walking in that forgiveness practically means for the church in reconciliation.

To start, forgiveness does not mean all the practical expressions of full healing and unity have arrived. That will take a lot of good, hard but delightful work. But here is what it does mean:

Forgiveness means relationship is restored. It means we can genuinely take delight in the goodness of God in the other person and we can, because of that, *begin to trust*. And when that trust happens, it means the foundation for building our unity and healing is securely in place. We can wrestle, we can disagree, we can humble ourselves before God and one another and learn together.

Forgiveness also means the consequences of the past failures no longer determine our relationship or our direction of hope for the future. It means, even when our memories vividly recall the failings, that we will intentionally remember the work of Christ on the Cross and not hold those sins against our brothers and sisters, but look for and work for the expression of righteousness and love to grow.

Forgiveness means that when related patterns of the old sin arise, we will remember that God's promise is to root out sin through more grace and by the same promise of the Spirit, to bring new righteousness and life to expression.

Forgiveness means a freedom to forever delight in one another because God so loved this other brother and sister that despite their sins he gave his only Son to bleed, die and rise again to break the bondage that sin once had over them- and over us.

A restored relationship based on continued forgiveness and a continued call for the righteousness that comes in a context of grace is the most critical final and ongoing step in restoring the kind of deep, genuine reconciliation, justice and compassion we all want to see.

And with Paul and Peter and John and all the church leaders throughout the generations, we must insist, proclaim and learn to walk in the forgiveness and reconciliation and healing that is ours through the death and resurrection of Christ.

May the Lord help us to walk with all our trust in the redeeming power of Jesus Christ.