

Denominational Diversity and Cultural Normativity

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I stole from my dad. It was a half-used bottle of hair-tonic called, Vitalis. Nasty brown stuff. But it was better than the alternative in his cabinet, which was Wildroot—a greasy lotion that was basically Soul Glo for middle-aged Asian men. But this was critical—critical for a twelve-year-old trying to do whatever he could to get his hair to look like Johnny Depp’s. Mind you, this wasn’t washed-up, dog-smuggling Johnny Depp. This was 21 Jump Street Johnny Depp. Who didn’t want to look like 21 Jump Street Johnny Depp?

But the thing that kept getting in between me and personal glory was my wirey, black, Korean hair—thick and unmanageable, not flowing and wavy like Johnny Depp’s. After months of attempt after failed attempt—I had poured so much of that junk on my hair that it started bleaching—I was forced to conclude that I must be biologically hair-impaired. I quietly despised the thick, black mop on top of my head. Because I couldn’t attain to those unarticulated standards of appearance and coolness and beauty that Johnny Depp embodied for me.

I didn’t have the words or categories for it yet. But that was an early encounter with a force I’d bump into the rest of my life, something I’ve come to describe as *White Cultural Normativity*.

Here’s another encounter: That time in the tenth grade when Jenna Gambaro, an athletic, blonde, 6’ 2” tall friend told me, “Well, you’re pretty good looking for an Asian guy.” She wasn’t trying to be mean. She was just putting words to White Cultural Normativity.

I understand these examples might seem petty; they might even sound like evidence of vanity. But they’re worth noting, I think, for the same reasons that Rev. Dr. Kevin Cosby reminded us at Muhammad Ali’s funeral: “Before James Brown said, ‘I’m black and I’m proud,’ Ali said, ‘I’m black and I’m pretty.’” With those words, Ali infused African Americans with “a sense of somebodiness.” Because there’s something profound, and profoundly disfiguring, about being unsure that *your* reflection in the mirror is the *right* one.

By “normativity,” of course, I mean both *what already is* as well as *what ought to be*. I’m talking about assumed norms, standards of correctness. “Normativity” implies what’s acceptable; it defines what’s right. And it’s weaved into the very fabric of our relationships, our practices, and our traditions. White Normativity is that set of unwritten cultural precepts that serve as a source of minority alienation in a majority culture—yes, even in the Church.

Dismantling White Normativity

White Normativity is what my family and I recently encountered when visiting a PCA church, where a friendly gentleman asked us where we were from. When we answered, “Washington, DC,” he responded, “No, you’re suppose to say China or Japan or South Korea”—and then enthusiastically invited us to their missions night to do a reading in the Korean language. You see, White Normativity isn’t just racial insensitivity. It’s seeing a non-white individual and only thinking about your global missions ministry.

White normativity is defining ministry to certain communities and contexts with qualifiers—“*ethnic* ministry,” “*urban* ministry,” “*international* ministry,” or “*outreach* ministry”—while calling ministry to the majority culture simply, “Ministry.” It’s savoring the doctrine of justification in Galatians—which we should do, yes—but while overlooking the original context in which the Apostle points to cross-cultural fellowship as one of *the* preeminent fruits—and proofs—of our justification. It’s embedded in an ecclesiology that habitually warns against the dangers of *emotionalism* in worship, yet ignores entirely the spiritual dangers of *joylessness*. When was the last time you heard a workshop or read an article that warned against *intellectualism* in worship?

White normativity is moral silence on social issues that are ancillary to white communities but core concerns of black and brown communities. It’s dismissing as “political” what is in fact personal and pastoral and practical theological for brothers and sisters of color. White Normativity is desiring diversity without discomfort. It tries to add diversity without subtracting control. It’s the preservation of dominant culture authority in the name of theological purity. It’s what makes so many young seminarians of color that I’ve spoken to nervous about entering the PCA, as they all-too-often feel forced into a false choice between *ethnic identity* and *theological fidelity*.

Because what keeps folks of color out of our churches, friends, is *not* public racial hostility. And the greatest hindrance to racial harmony in our denomination is *not* crass bigotry. *It’s our shared, institutional blindness to the exclusivity of a white normativity that is protected by plausible deniability.* Indeed, insofar as it devalues, subordinates, and excludes minority culture members—even against our best intentions—and as it *overvalues, supra-ordinates, and preferentially includes* majority culture members, *White Normativity is the passive racism of our beloved denomination.*

I call you tonight, dear friends, not simply to repent corporately for past, overt acts of racism—which we *must* do, and Lord willing, which we *will* do. *I call you to commit to the dismantling of White Cultural Normativity in the PCA.* And I call you to the establishment of a new norm—a new vision for our denomination that might be called *Multicultural Normativity.*

Establishing Multicultural Normativity

Multicultural Normativity is when the Church confesses racial integration as the biblical *norm*—and the cross-cultural family of Christ as the way things *ought to be.* Multicultural Normativity means your congregations’ worship and relationships and ministries are so *defined by* the presence of ethnic minorities—so built from the ground up on a racially integrated foundation—that if your members of color were to leave one day, *nothing* about your church or denomination would ever be the same. It’s seeking creative ways to express your cross-cultural convictions not just on Dr. Martin Luther King’s birthday, but every Sunday. It’s when everybody in the church is a little uncomfortable—Red and Yellow, Black and White—but everyone in the church is richly cared for.

Multicultural Normativity is when the Church is a resurrection Banquet Hall more than a Lecture Hall—and, occasionally if you dare, maybe even a Dance Hall. Multicultural Normativity rejects “racial reconciliation” as a pursuit of interpersonal harmony *unless* it also seeks interracial equity and mutuality. Because it’s about *inclusion*, not just “diversity.” It’s placing men and women of color in positions of influence and leadership. It’s inviting Irwyn Ince to serve

as chair of the Overtures Committee one day again, not because we're debating racial reconciliation but simply because he's a Bad Man! Because diversity is about who's on the team, but inclusion is about who gets to play.

Again, Multicultural Normativity is being deliberate and public about hiring staff members of color. Because it's time we begin to collectively recognize the ability to navigate multiple cultural contexts not as a soft skill but as a vital ministry competency. And it establishes these things without denying the value of the Black Church and Immigrant Church, because Multicultural Normativity never closes its eyes to our broken racial history.

For those who are tempted to be discouraged and daunted by what can feel like an impossible task, please remember this: The book of Acts is nothing less than the story of a Church that itself was deeply entrenched in cultural normativity—*Jewish* normativity. And take a look around you tonight, and just notice in the multicolored faces of your sisters and brothers the *amazing* work that the Spirit of Jesus has since done!

What Can We Do?

So what *can* be done? We can we *do*? Institutional change is slow and gradual, no doubt. But it must be punctuated with deliberate advances. So, let me suggest a few things we can do. Many of you are stronger thinkers and better strategists than I, so I offer these really as conversation starters.

1. *Priority*. Are we convinced that racial justice and cross-cultural harmony is a gospel priority? I could remind you of the global purview of the Abrahamic Covenant, the pan-ethnic mission of the Suffering Servant, the counter-cultural cross-cultural ministry of Jesus, the grand drama of Gentile inclusion in Luke's early church narratives, the major theme of reconciliation found across the Pauline epistles, or the apocalyptic vision of the Lamb, forever adored by people who don't look the same or talk the same or sing the same.

But tonight what's especially on my mind is Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17. It's there that Jesus prays for his followers, "that they may all be perfectly one." Think about it. Jesus is about to suffer the misery of hell itself. He's has the cup of wrath already pressed up against his lips. Of all possible things, what is on his mind? Our unity! Of all possible things, what was Jesus' intercessory and missional priority? That *you*, Chinese sister, that *you*, Black brother, that *you*, White brother, that *you*, Indian sister, that *you*, Puerto Rican brother, that *we* might be *one*.

So here's the question: Will our churches reflect Jesus' priority of multicultural normativity? Some of us need to go home after this week and make your church's commitment to racial reconciliation explicit and public. Write it into your Vision statement. List it as a Core Value. Shepherd your people into a corporate re-prioritization of racial reconciliation.

2. *Liturgy*. Our Sunday liturgies also reflect our ecclesial priorities, don't they? Yes, our stated worship must be biblical and remain "true to the Reformed faith." But that very confessional commitment can guide us to make our liturgies more culturally adaptable. Of course, this relates to music. But it also includes our style of praying, manner of preaching, seasons of celebration and lamentation, the range of physical and emotional expressiveness that is "permissible" in our

service. Some of us should go home and give our worship liturgies a “cultural audit.” That might involve asking a leader of color to give their input. But are you, in the first place, willing to explore culturally flexible forms of worship as part of your commitment to multicultural normativity?

3. *Money.* Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. That’s true of individuals; it’s also true of local churches and denominations. Some of us need to return to our Sessions and together look for ways our commitment to racial reconciliation can be reflected in our operating budgets. We talk about the importance of minority leadership, but you know as well as I do that recruiting, training, and installing leaders costs money—lots of it. What would it look like to create new funds—locally and denominationally—for the financial support of minority church planters, for cross-cultural churches, for majority minority campus groups and RUF campus ministers of color? So that in ten years we can *double* the number of minority teaching elders in the PCA—from 53 to 100 African Americans, from 100 to 200 English speaking Asian Americans, from 20 to 40 Hispanic Americans, and praying all the while for the ordination of our second Native American pastor in the PCA.

4. *Generosity.* I want to invite you to commit to stewarding whatever privilege you have—to employ your every social asset toward our growth in denominational diversity. Some of you are already doing this. It might be through your musical gifts or your financial gifts; it might be through your teaching gifts or your tweeting gifts. For *all* of us, this can be done through the gift of relationships. You cannot get around the PCA without knowing people. So, *share your relationships* with minority leaders around you. Introduce them to everyone you know, especially those in positions of influence.

I’d like to believe I’m a self-made ministry man, leaning on my own individual competence. But it’s simply not true. Here’s the truth: I wouldn’t be standing here today if others hadn’t gone out of their way to introduce me to people they knew. I only know Mike Khandjian because I was introduced to him by Iron Kim. And Iron himself, I know, has benefited from the relational generosity of Fred Harrell, Tim Keller, Dick Kaufmann, Terry Geiger, and others.

Be generous with your social assets, especially your ministry relationships. Let’s draw men and women of color deeper into the heart of the PCA.

5. *Party.* We need to celebrate every victory. We need to throw a party every time someone repents of racial sin, every time someone forgives another, every time someone has a reconciliation ah-ha moment. We need to do this in order not to give in to cynicism, and to refuel your tank for the long journey by eating the fruit of your patient labor.

Brothers and sisters, never stop sharing stories and testimonies of God’s transforming work. Read the race awakening stories of some of our pastors in the book, *Heal Us, Emmanuel*—and give God praise. Never stop being surprised when God shows up. And *thank* each other constantly for their faithful labor.

I want to thank our Black brothers and sisters. I cannot tell you how much I admire your humility, your winsomeness, and your long-suffering spirits. Your servant-leadership, the way you have *made space* for people to repent and forgive, has been the moral catalyst for the historic

transformation of our denomination. I love you guys.

And I also want to thank our White allies in this struggle for gospel reconciliation, whose tears of sorrow and sincerity of heart and teachable spirit so often outpace my own. When you stood on the floor of General Assembly last year, confessing your personal racial sins and rising to sign that protest, you didn't see it, but I was wiping tears from my eyes. You don't know how *healing* that was for me and how healing *you* have been to me and my weary and all too cynical and sinful heart. Your earnestness and your zeal to repent throughout this past year has been, quite simply, heroic. I love you guys, too.

For Jesus' Sake

I leave you with this final word: Fight for the dismantling of white normativity. Labor for the establishment of multicultural normativity. *But, dear friends, do all this for Jesus' sake, ultimately.*

As the story goes, two young Moravians heard of an island in the West Indies where a British slave owner had 3,000 slaves. Compelled to bring to them the gospel of freedom in Christ, on October 8, 1732, the first two Moravian missionaries, a potter and a carpenter, sailed out of Copenhagen harbor, ready to sell themselves into slavery in order to preach the gospel in the West Indies. And, as the ship slipped away, they linked arms and lifted up a cry: "May the Lamb that was slain receive the reward of His suffering!"

Don't you know, friends: *Jesus was slain to receive glory in our unity.* Isn't this the best of all motivations for this work? To know that in pursuing racial reconciliation, we are giving to Jesus the reward of His suffering. Hallelujah! Don't do this for your offender: He might not change. Don't do this for the offended, not ultimately: She might not thank you. Do it all ultimately for Jesus' sake.

That hard conversation you had about race? *That was for Jesus' sake.* That criticism you endured? *That was for Jesus' sake.* That testimony of repentance you shared? *That was for Jesus' sake.* That Overture you helped write? *That was for Jesus' sake.* It's *all* for Jesus' sake. Because Jesus died for this very moment in our denomination's history.

May the Lamb that was slain receive the reward of His suffering in you and in me.

Amen and amen.

June 22, 2016