

Neither Jew nor Gentile: The Musings of a Modern Covenanter on Racial Reconciliation

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Introduction

Several months ago, I was at a large Christian university. I was there for a conference, and a campus tour was offered during an afternoon break. On the tour, the guide pointed out the significant racial diversity of the student body. Indeed, there were students from many different ethnicities on that campus. But they were mostly huddled together in ethnically monotone groups.

Another conference participant on the tour noted that trend, and he later made a comment that stuck with me. But I need to explain one further detail about my fellow conferee before I relate his comment. This fellow conferee was an orthodox Jew. His remark reflected his view of the situation as it appeared through the lens of his Jewish theology. Viewing the ineffective effort, as he saw it, to integrate the races on that campus, my conversation partner simply observed that this was further indication God designed the races to live separately.

I share that anecdote¹ because it illustrates one of the foundational controversies between a Christian and a Jewish view of ethnicity that goes all the way back to the conflicts between the New Testament Apostles and the Jewish rulers of that day. Racial integration was the first, social revolution which the Gospel brought to the New Testament world. And the New Testament presents interracial communion as one of the hallmarks of the redeemed in Christ.

Prior to the ascension of Christ, all the religions of the world were ethnically defined. Each nation had its own religion. Even Yahweh, the God of Israel, was a national deity; but, as the only true God, Yahweh always promised more. To Abraham, he promised, “I will make of you a great nation,... and in you all the families of earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:2–3). To David and his heirs, the Lord said, “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage...” (Psa. 2:8; cf., 2 Sam. 7:9). Elsewhere in the Psalms, our Old Testament forefathers sang, “All the nations you have made shall come and worship before you, O Lord” (Psa. 86:9). The Prophet Zechariah, standing in the rubble of Jerusalem, boldly declared, “Peoples shall yet come, even the ... nations shall come ... to entreat the favor of the LORD...” (Zech. 8:20–23). Prior to Christ’s ascension, only Israel worshiped Yahweh. But when Jesus rose to his heavenly throne, all those old promises came to pass. That was the day when Jesus announced, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...” (Matt. 28:18–19). For the first time in world history, religion was decoupled from race. The communion of

¹*This article is based on the text of a talk originally presented on January 14, 2017, at the College Winter Conference in Converse, Indiana, hosted by the Lafayette Reformed Presbyterian Church.*

As is the nature of anecdotes, this experience is offered merely as a picture—in this case, a window into a traditional distinction between Christianity and Judaism. Further attention to actual Jewish teaching on the topic would be required before offering a critique of modern Judaism.

Jews and Greeks as one in Christ has been—since the ascension of Jesus—a defining tenet of the Christian faith. Racial reconciliation is not, itself, the Gospel; but it is fairly close to the heart of the Gospel.

Paul shows us how central racial communion is to the Christian faith in his letter to the Galatians. Reporting on an occasion when even Peter fell into the segregation mindset of the age, Paul wrote, “When [Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face... For ... he drew back [from eating with Gentiles] and separated himself [to eat with Jews]... But when I saw that their conduct was *not in step with the truth of the gospel*, I [confronted Peter] before them all...” (Gal. 2:11–14).

“*Not in step with the truth of the Gospel*”—those are Paul’s words to describe racial prejudice. Jesus “himself is our peace ... and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” between Jews and Gentiles, and he has united them “before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named” (Eph. 2:14; 3:14–15).

In this article, I want to encourage racial reconciliation in two ways. First, I want to review some history. The Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA) has a great and honorable heritage opposing racism. In the early centuries of this country, our Covenanter forefathers were active opponents to the slavery of Africans and the forced removal of Native American Indians from their lands. Our Covenanter heritage on racial issues is one we can look back upon to encourage us to take up the torch, today.

The second thing I want to do is to offer five steps to take toward racial reconciliation. I readily admit that I am not an expert on racial issues. But, actually, one of the things we need is for more of us who have not been attentive enough to racial reconciliation issues in the past to make it, now, a point of active attention.

Early American Covenanters on Racism

For my review of history, I must acknowledge the work of Joseph Moore, a historian with Gardner-Webb University. In 2015, Moore published a book called, *Founding Sins: How a Group of Antislavery Radicals Fought to Put Christ into the Constitution*. It is the best resource, to date, on the American Covenanters and their witness against two sins at the foundation of our country.

The first sin which our Covenanter forefathers protested was the failure to acknowledge Jesus as the king of nations. Our Reformed Presbyterian forefathers testified against the secular framing of the American Constitution from the start. The second sin our church forefathers protested was our nation’s hypocrisy concerning race: claiming that “all men are created equal” while simultaneously asserting the inferiority of the colored races, enslaving Africans and taking away the lands of Native American Indians.

There were, of course, other abolitionist movements in early America. However, in the words of Joseph Moore,

[The] Covenanters mounted a witness against the sin of slavery unlike any other in both North and South. First, their antislavery ideals antedated even the Quaker abolitionist movement; Covenanters were some of the first people in Britain or America to take a public stand against the institution. Second, they created a unique biblical interpretation that did what neither abolitionists in the North nor pro-slavery Christians in the South

were able to accomplish: they reconciled biblical literalism, with its clear sanction of slavery, and abolitionism...²

The Covenanter hermeneutic was powerful. Many of the biblically conservative churches in early America were pro-slavery. Many Old Testament texts affirm slavery, and the New Testament contains numerous exhortations for slaves to obey their masters. The pro-slavery movement cited Scripture on their side. For this reason, conservative churches committed to biblical authority were often pro-slavery. Meanwhile, abolitionists tended to build their arguments on the general spirit of the Gospel without engaging the Bible's pro-slavery texts. Abolitionists tended to be the so-called "liberal" Christians who felt free to dismiss the relevance of biblical references to slavery as antiquated. They pressed instead for the "ameliorating influences of the Gospel"³ to eclipse whatever else the Bible might have once endorsed. It was the Covenanters who managed to thread the needle, offering a unique argument that was both rigorously biblical and thoroughly committed to racial equality.

The most important statement of that argument was Alexander McLeod's 1802 tract, *Negro Slavery Unjustifiable*. McLeod begins that tract with the sober warning in Exodus 21:16, "Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death." From there, McLeod assembles a thoroughly biblical argument that ably addresses the objections and difficult Bible passages on slavery to show how the pro-slavery movement misconstrued key texts. The clear statement of Exodus 21:16 is consistently upheld throughout the rest of Scripture. "I plant myself upon the inspired Word," McLeod asserted. From that foundation, in the words of Moore, McLeod "argued that American slavery failed the biblical test, text by text. The Hebrew experience of servitude was dramatically different from the American institution of slavery."⁴

I will not review the detail of that Covenanter exegesis here, but Moore summarizes its unique power, noting, "biblical literalism ... [had become] the hallmark of southern pro-slavery arguments... [But the Covenanters] turned that hermeneutic on its head. Instead of occupying the high ground on biblical slavery, [McLeod] claimed, pro-slavery Christians actually were not literal enough."⁵ The Covenanter testimony in the time was unique and powerful.

The Covenanters did more than testify, however. They also worked. The Covenanters, while a small denomination, were nonetheless heavily involved in the Underground Railroad, helping move escaped slaves to freedom. Geneva College—at that time located in Ohio—served as a center for organizing RPCNA work in the Underground Railroad. Furthermore, unlike the pacifist Quakers—one of the largest groups behind the Underground Railroad—"the Covenanters held no reservations about employing firearms in a righteous cause."⁶ Those pursuing fugitive slaves knew this. As a result, according to Moore's research, runaway slaves were rarely recovered while under Covenanter protection.

The Covenanters also welcomed black slaves and free blacks into church membership. They baptized their children, and Moore even found an RPCNA minister's diary with several entries

² Joseph S. Moore, *Founding Sins: How a Group of Antislavery Radicals Fought to Put Christ into the Constitution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 89.

³ J. R. W. Sloane's expression, quoted in Moore, 96.

⁴ Moore, 96.

⁵ Moore, 93–4.

⁶ Moore, 98.

in the 1780s indicating that he had conducted interracial marriages.⁷ Even though it was often illegal to do so, Covenanter churches developed Sunday school programs in slave-holding states that provided black slaves with both religious catechism and taught them how to read.⁸

The Civil War broke out in 1861. The Covenanters generally regarded the war as God's judgment on America for slavery.⁹ In the words of Reformed Presbyterian minister James Wallace early in the war, "That slavery is the immediate or proximate cause of the war, can hardly be doubted by any whose eyes are open... [And that] God intends to destroy slavery by this war, is almost equally certain."¹⁰ Many Reformed Presbyterians joined that fight to end slavery. According to Moore's research, "Geneva College ... saw most of its students leave in order to fight. Two of the sixty-seven students who served in the North rose to become generals, [and] twelve were killed."¹¹

During the thick of the war, a delegation of Covenanter ministers met with President Lincoln in the White House. They urged him to pursue corrections of both America's founding sins: to amend the Constitution to abolish slavery; and to amend the Constitution to acknowledge Christ's reign and the authority of his law. The abolition of slavery, of course, did eventually follow. Admitting the reign of Christ did not, though some effort was made. President Lincoln did include a Constitutional amendment to recognize the Lord's reign among the proposals in an early draft of his 1865 State of the Union address. However, according to the diary of Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy under Lincoln, the Cabinet universally opposed the idea, and Lincoln dropped it from his legislative agenda.¹²

For our Covenanter forefathers, those two causes were connected. Without submitting to Christ's reign and law, America is apt to adopt all manner of immoral laws—not just slavery and racial prejudice. The Civil War did bring an end to slavery; but not, unfortunately, a national commitment to the laws of King Jesus. In December of 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution was passed, abolishing racial slavery. That was a huge achievement. But, as one Reformed Presbyterian minister stated, even emancipation would not be enough without "[the] repeal of every enactment which is based upon a distinction of color" from American law.¹³ That struggle continued.

During the years following the Civil War, Reformed Presbyterian Missions invested in efforts to start schools for freed slaves in South Carolina, Florida, Mississippi, Washington D.C., and most successfully in Selma, Alabama. In 1874, the RPCNA founded Geneva Academy, later renamed Knox Academy, in Selma. The school grew to well over 800 students by the early 20th century,

⁷ Moore, 193 n. 17.

⁸ In an openly published 1847 article, South Carolina Covenanters wrote, "If the institution of slavery be so corrupt and brittle a thing as to be endangered ...[by making slaves] acquainted with the Scriptures ... then let slavery go to the winds... If to sustain and perpetuate the relation between master and servant it is necessary to keep the Bible out of the hands of the latter, and to hold him in spiritual darkness—then that relation must be radically wrong and utterly indefensible." (Moore, 105.)

⁹ Moore, 114.

¹⁰ Moore, 118.

¹¹ Moore, 115.

¹² Moore, 120.

¹³ Moore, 96.

and occupied a three-story school building.¹⁴ The school continued until 1937, when it was incorporated into the Selma Public Schools.¹⁵ A Reformed Presbyterian congregation was also planted in Selma in 1875—one year after the school was started. The first pastor of that congregation was also the first African-American minister in the RPCNA, Rev. Lewis Johnson.¹⁶

Arguably, the significant groundwork laid by Reformed Presbyterians—alongside Baptists, Methodists, and others laboring in Selma—provided the fertile soil that made it a leading center of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. At that time, under the pastorate of Dr. Claude Brown, the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Selma joined over a dozen other churches to support the Voting Rights March from Selma to Montgomery in 1965.¹⁷

The Covenanter testimony against prejudice focused primarily on relations with African-Americans. However, the Covenanters were also vocal opponents to President Andrew Jackson when he proposed measures to remove Native American Indians from their lands. Answering a direct petition from the RPCNA, President Jackson acknowledged “the zeal which animates your board on behalf of the Indians.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, Jackson’s policies were passed into law, leading to the now infamous Indian Removal Act of 1830 and the so-called, “Trail of Tears.”

Many Reformed Presbyterian Sunday School classes today teach the history of our Scottish Covenanter forefathers. But there is much to learn (and, much to critique) in our American Covenanter ancestors, as well—particularly in the matter of racial equality. Though a small denomination, the Lord has been merciful to grant us a noteworthy heritage testifying to the reign of Christ and to love for one’s neighbor across racial lines. But heritage is not enough. Racial prejudice still persists in America, today. In the current social climate, our Covenanter heritage encourages us; but it also convicts us. The testimony of history calls to us and charges us not to be silent, but to renew our testimony for racial equality.

As one minister who is, admittedly, a newcomer to this frontier, I would like to offer five proposals to promote racial reconciliation. My proposals will focus primarily on race relations between whites and African-Americans. Of course, racial issues are much broader than caucasians and blacks. But America is still laboring under the weight of our particular sins against the African heritage among us, and it is this racial dynamic which is at the nub of the issue.¹⁹

¹⁴ William Simons, “Centennial in Selma,” *Covenanter Witness* (Mar. 31, 1976), 14.

¹⁵ Patricia C. Stumb, “Reformed Presbyterian Church on Pilgrimage Schedule,” *Selma Times-Journal* (Mar. 22, 1990).

¹⁶ Simons, 15.

¹⁷ National Park Service, “The Civil Rights Movement in Selma, Alabama, 1865–1972” (United States Department of the Interior, 2013), 37.

¹⁸ Moore, 95.

¹⁹ Cf., for example, the starkly lower rates in white-black interracial marriages contrasted with other interracial marriages, as reported by Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 11–12.

Five Proposals

1. *Do not be content defending orthodox doctrine*, In the opening verses of his epistle, Jude wrote: “Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). In those words, Jude tells us that the letter he wrote was not the one he wanted to write. He wanted to write a letter about “our common salvation”—the common fruits of our life together in Christ.²⁰ But, in the crisis facing the church, he found it necessary to write “appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” There is a tone of regret in that line, although a clear note of priority as well.

Contending for the orthodoxy of our faith is clearly the apostolic priority for the church. Yet, it ought to grieve us when we are so consumed with doctrinal orthodoxy, we are at a loss to devote attention to our shared experience of salvation’s fruits. In this light, we ought to cherish the holy contention for orthodoxy that is the heart and soul of our Reformation heritage. But we ought never be content to end our work there.

Today, Roman Catholicism and the so-called “liberal” protestant churches have captured the high ground in most social issues—though not always asserting a biblical position for those issues. It ought not be so. We must hold fast to the Reformed heritage that prioritizes contention for doctrinal orthodoxy, but we must add the heart of Jude which longs to do more than that.

Do not be content defending orthodox doctrine: pursue godly social justice as well.

2. *Listen ... in order to learn*. The 18th and 19th chapters of Genesis recount the Lord’s judgment against Sodom and Gomorrah. Before he judged the sins of those cities, he sent two angels to investigate the petitions of their victims. The Lord said to Abraham, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me...” (Gen. 18:20–21). That was not an angelic survey looking for holes in the petitions of the oppressed, but a demonstration of the Lord’s commitment to fully hear out their complaints and to judge accordingly.

It is a fundamental principle of justice to give full attention to the cry of the oppressed. The underprivileged are often dismissed, discounted, or disqualified. Yet it is to their voice that our God turns his ear of compassion. Those of us who live in white, privileged communities cannot pretend to understand what it means to grow up black in America—until we take time to listen to the voices of those who do, because it is their life experience.

In a 1992 interview with *Christianity Today*, Pastor Tony Evans remarked, “The concerns of black Americans are not of dominant concern, by and large, to white evangelicals.”²¹ White Americans (and white evangelicals) generally do not understand what African-Americans are talking about when they raise concerns about race—unless they give full attention. There is a desperate need to stop assuming we understand the issues, and instead to open our ears to listen.

There might be many reasons—especially as Christians—to be critical of movements like Black Lives Matter. However, we must not let critiques of what is wrong in such organizations justify

²⁰ Cf., Gene L. Green, *Jude and 2 Peter* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 54–5; Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians: A Soci-Rhetorical Commentary on Hebrews, James and Jude* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 602.

²¹ Hiawatha Bray, “Evangelical Racism?,” *Christianity Today* 26 (1992), 42.

ignoring the genuine voices of appeal they carry. Sign up for email newsletters from racial justice organizations. Read books that amplify the charge of racial injustice.²² Have the charity to look past what is theologically troubling in some of these movements, and turn your ear to hear the cry of the oppressed.

3. *Do not just lose your prejudice, reverse it.* The American Founding Fathers were courageous men of vision and principle. They had flaws—many quite serious.²³ Nevertheless, our society holds their memory with honor. But we Christians ought to let the words of Jesus further instruct us as we remember the great men and women who built this nation: Jesus said, “whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve...” (Matt. 20:26–28).

The great men and women who, quite literally, *built* this nation were broadly men and women of color. It was, quite literally, on their backs that many of the rocks and stumps of the wilderness were removed for agriculture, and that bricks were laid to build cities. Rather than simply removing racial prejudice, we ought to reverse it and hold our African-American neighbors in high esteem as descendants of our nation’s builders.

According to the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, and its assessment of period data,

It is inconceivable that European colonists could have settled and developed ... America ... without slave labor. Moreover, slave labor ... produce[d] the major consumer goods that were the basis of world trade during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: coffee, cotton, rum, sugar, and tobacco. In the pre-Civil War United States, ... slave-grown cotton, provided over half of all US export earnings..., [and] the North developed a variety of businesses that provided services for the slave South...²⁴

Slavery was a crucial component of the American enterprise.

There should be no room in the church or in civil society for racism. But there is much room for honor. We ought to retrain ourselves as Americans to regard our African-American neighbors with particular honor as another category of our nation’s Founding Fathers and Mothers: the builders of America.

4. *Cross-cultural friendships are important, but not enough.* In a study published in 2000 called *Divided by Faith*, Michael Emerson and Christian Smith document the different perspectives of white evangelicals and African-American Christians on the nature of America’s racial problems.²⁵ When white evangelicals are asked about prejudice, they typically define the

²² One book which I recommend as a good starting place for Christians concerned about this issue is, Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²³ Contrary to the popular proposition of the Religious Right that America was founded as a Christian nation, Reformed Presbyterians have consistently testified that our nation was not founded as a Christian nation, nor were the Founding Fathers all pious, God-fearing men as popularly remembered.

²⁴ “Was Slavery the Engine of American Economic Growth” (www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/slavery-and-anti-slavery/resources/was-slavery-engine-american-economic-growth; accessed Jan. 9, 2017).

²⁵ Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

problem in individualistic terms. For most white Christians, the racial breakdown in our culture is one of individuals failing to respect other individuals. Thus, the solution is thought to be, as one major Christian ministry (Promise Keepers) framed it, “One man getting to know another across racial lines, establishing an honest friendship.”²⁶

Of course, friendships are an essential aspect of racial reconciliation. But that is not all. White evangelicals often suppose that, so long as we can point to our own friendships with a few neighbors of color, they have done their part. But African-Americans generally see the problem differently. Cecil Murray, senior pastor at First African Methodist Episcopal Church in Los Angeles, explains, “White evangelicals need an at-risk gospel... Calling sinners to repentance means also calling societies and structures to repentance—economic, social, educational, corporate, political, religious structures... The gospel at once works with [the] individual and the individual’s society: to change one, we of necessity must change the other.”²⁷ In other words, interpersonal friendships are very important; but friendships must be joined with a reformation of institutions.

The term “systemic racism” is often used to make this point.²⁸ There are two ways in which racism goes beyond a personal vice and takes on a systemic dimension.

Legalized racism. The most obvious form of systemic racism is when there are actual laws in place that legally privilege one race over the other. Legalized slavery and legalized segregation are examples. Thankfully, it is no longer legal in this country to have separate water fountains, separate schools, or separate seating areas based on race. It is no longer legal to hinder African-Americans from registering to vote. However, it would be naive for us to assume that changing the laws is the end of the process for recovery from legalized racism. Even after removing racist legislation, we need to further support efforts toward restitution from its long-term damage.

For one example of the long-term impact of legalized racism in America, consider the federal Homestead Act of the 1860s, which continued in effect until the 1930s. Under that act, “the U.S. government provided about 246 million acres of land (much of it taken from Native Americans ...) at low or no cost for about 1.5 million farm homesteads... Those [households] who gained access to these wealth-generating resources were almost entirely white.”²⁹ According to one study published in the year 2000, roughly 46 million Americans today are the descendants of those homesteaders, the heirs and benefactors of the “leg up” start which that Homestead Act provided for families taking root in the New World.³⁰ Now consider the opposite: those whose introduction to America was on slave plantations, and the multi-generational impact of that impoverishment exacerbated by generations of additional legal constraints. Centuries—literally centuries—of legalized racism has a much more tangled and long-term impact on the station of descendants than can be fixed simply by repealing the laws. Untangling the mess that follows from sin is always difficult. But it is our duty, as Christians, to insist on the effort since restitution is a fundamental principle of God’s justice in Scripture (e.g., Exod. 22:1, 18–19; Deut. 15:12–18; cf., Exod. 12:35–36).

²⁶ Emerson, 118.

²⁷ Cecil Murray, “Needed: An At-Risk Gospel,” *Christianity Today* 37 (1993), 20.

²⁸ The term *systemic racism* was first coined and defined by Joe R. Feagin, *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

²⁹ Joe R. Feagin, *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.

³⁰ Trina Williams, “The Homestead Act—Our Earliest National Asset Policy,” cited in Feagin, 3.

In American society, debates about scholarships, employment quotas, and other forms of “reparations” are an effort to find ways to satisfy this duty of justice. Many white Americans are nervous about such measures for many reasons. Some fear the possibility of greed and abuse on the part of recipients of such benefits. Some react to the unfairness of such advantages, simply because they are blind to the unfairness of their own station that these measures seek to balance out. Others think that a single gesture of restitution ought to be enough; but the reality is, there have been many generations of cumulative white advantage in America that have gradually created the present advantages of white communities. It will similarly require many generations of reparative measures to accomplish something approaching just restitution.

As Christians, we must be sensitive to the complexities and huge challenges of social restitution; but, we also should be at the forefront of sacrifice and love supporting just and appropriate efforts in that process. Even if legalized racism has been largely eradicated by the Civil Rights Movement, restitution for its impact is far from complete.

Unchecked racism in office. A second form of systemic racism occurs when individuals bring their personal prejudice into official positions, and they are not held accountable for it. To cite one example often discussed in today’s news: when an individual police officer mixes *official* authority with *personal* prejudice, there must be avenues for recourse and accountability. When those avenues do not exist or are not working, institutional reforms are needed.

Consider a different personal sin as an analogy: suppose an individual caught up in the throes of greed becomes a police officer. That greed is a personal sin that needs personal sanctification; and it needs to be kept from impacting his or her work. If that officer, motivated by personal greed, were to use his or her authority at a traffic stop to require a bribe, there ought to be systems in place for the wronged citizen to obtain justice against the officer. If there is no effective system for that justice, the failure is no longer strictly the officer’s personal greed. It would be systemic injustice. The same holds true for prejudice—when it goes unchecked.

We don’t want to believe that such unchecked racism happens in 21st century America. We want to believe that the end of legalized racism in the 1960s was the end of racism, altogether. But King Solomon exhorts us not to be surprised by systemic injustice “under the sun.” Ecclesiastes 5:8 warns, “If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness, do not be amazed at the matter, for the high official is watched [that is, protected] by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them.” The Scriptures tell us not to be surprised or deny that it could be so, when the camaraderie of officials gets in the way of their duty to uphold the people’s justice.³¹ These things happen. But it is evil, and the voice of righteousness will seek its reform.

I have used the example of police officers, simply because it is a real example frequently in the press. The faithfulness, honor, and selflessness of the vast majority of American police officers is remarkable and must not be disparaged. But all leaders in government and businesses—and in the church³²—are sinful humans. Systems must be in place to keep various personal sins—such as sexual harassment and greed, as well as racial prejudice—from becoming institutional injustices. Both anecdotal testimony and statistical data indicate that too many systems of accountability are not working properly in our society.

³¹ Michael LeFebvre, *Ecclesiastes: Joy that Perseveres, A Devotional Commentary* (Leominster, U.K.: DayOne, 2015), 63–5.

³² On systemic racism in the church, consider, Joseph Barndt, *Becoming an Anti-Racist Church: Journeying toward Wholeness* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 115–31.

There is a rising cry in our day—backed by prison population statistics, wealth gap numbers, employment and housing studies, and a host of other data³³—that systemic racism of both kinds persist in America. Sadly, some forms of this outcry have turned violent. We must not let the injustice of certain expressions of this anger lead us to dismiss the petition altogether. There are no easy answers. Let the mess following in the wake of America’s founding sins remind you that it is always simpler to avoid sin in the first place. Cleaning up the mess afterward is always costly and complicated. But biblical repentance, redemption, and social reconciliation require our commitment to pursue that effort.

Christians must continue to pursue personal friendships across racial lines, but we also need to do more than make friends. We need to support institutional reforms.

5. Pray for more pastors, elders, and deacons of color in the RPCNA. The racial character of a church congregation ought to reflect the diversity of the community in which it ministers, and we should pray for a day when the Reformed Presbyterian Church is much more diverse than we are now. There are a number of congregations in the RPCNA, today, that are leading the way into greater interracial ministry. We should promote those efforts and learn from them. We can also learn a key lesson for expanding multi-ethnic ministry from the Apostles in the Book of Acts.

The New Testament church had its earliest roots in the immigrant and refugee communities of Jerusalem. Luke tells us this in Acts 2:8–11: at that time “there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven... Parthians and Medes and Elamites and [many other lands]...” These were not visiting pilgrims, but diaspora Jews who had immigrated from abroad.³⁴ The first explosion of growth in the Jerusalem church was among the Jewish immigrant populations—speaking different languages and having different cultures—than the native Jews of Jerusalem. But this also led to a context where prejudice was likely.

In Acts chapter 6 we read about such prejudice: “Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution” (Act 6:1). This was “systemic racism” in the church that needed new structures to hold it in check.³⁵ The Apostles’ solution is remarkable.

New officers were elected to oversee the ministries where this prejudice was appearing. We generally recognize this event as the initial ordination of deacons. What is most remarkable is the cultural identities of the officers elected. Luke names all seven of them beginning with Stephen. Without exception, all seven are Hellenistic names. The last one is especially striking: “Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch” (v. 5). Nicolaus was a Gentile who had converted to Judaism, prior to becoming a believer in Jesus.

John Polhill writes, “The twelve apostles convened the community and ... they select[ed] seven representatives from the Hellenist group to meet this need. Seven men, all with Greek names,

³³ For an overview of these statistics, see, www.raceforward.org/videos/systemic-racism.

³⁴ Martin Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 1983), 1–29; Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 1.833–5; Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 135.

³⁵ Technically, they were all Jews—but it was an intercultural conflict. The term “Hellenists” refers to the Greek-speaking, immigrant populations. The “Hebrews” were those who, as natives to Judea, would have spoken Aramaic (a form of Hebrew). Luke reports that there was a conflict that arose over a neglect of the Greek-speaking widows in the church’s care ministries.

were chosen.”³⁶ Craig Keener adds, “[Now] the food distribution program is assigned to seven Hellenists. Because they belong to the offended minority, they have special sensitivity to both the minority’s needs and perceptions... Because they are genuinely people of the Spirit, they can be trusted not to treat the Hebrews or others unjustly.”³⁷ The Jerusalem Church ordained new leaders from among the previously marginalized community: the Hellenists.

This appointment not only brought an end to the previous prejudice, it also had a surprising impact on church growth. In the very next verses, we read, “Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen” (Act 6:9). The appointment of Hellenistic leaders within the Jerusalem church not only resolved the immediate racism crisis, but it also led to an advance of the church’s ministry into the Greek-speaking world—beginning among the Greek-speaking immigrant synagogues in Jerusalem.³⁸

These measures undertaken by the Jerusalem church provide an inspiring pattern for our prayers and labors, today. Historically, the RPCNA had a strong ministry among the African-American communities of the pre- and post-Civil War period. Sadly, like many American churches today, we have developed into a largely “one color” denomination. But as racial tensions rise, there can be no better time than the present for us to re-assert our Gospel testimony against prejudice—and to pray for the Lord to raise up more pastors, elders, and deacons of other races to take up leadership within this branch of Christ’s church.

Conclusion

Covenanters have always had a commitment to address, biblically, the issues of the day. As one Reformed Presbyterian minister, J. R. W. Sloane, stated to his fellow pastors in the abolitionist era, “rebuk[e these] great national and political sins... This kind of preaching is not only legitimate, but the very kind which, in this age—when national iniquity is coming in like a flood—is especially demanded.”³⁹

Many Reformed Presbyterians have been active in pro-life efforts. We have undertaken, in recent years, to speak to pressing sexual issues like homosexuality and gender confusion. But another leading issue of our day—racial prejudice—is a topic very close to our heritage as Covenanters. Compassion for the immigrant and the refugee, and true restoration and honor for our neighbors of color, ought to be a preeminent feature of the testimony of the RPCNA in the coming years.

May the emerging generation of Covenanters hear this call and help the church walk “in step with the truth of the Gospel” in this matter of racial reconciliation.

³⁶ John B. Polhill, “The Hellenist Breakthrough: Acts 6–12,” *Review and Expositor* 71.4 (1974), 478.

³⁷ Keener, 2.1279.

³⁸ “These subsequent chapters ... provide ... a transition between the Jerusalem church and the beginning of the Gentile mission. [That transition begins with] the bicultural Hellenist faction in the church...” (Keener, 2.1247.)

³⁹ Moore, 114.