HOW TO HEAL OUR RACIAL DIVIDE

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS, AND THE FIRST CHRISTIANS KNEW, ABOUT RACIAL RECONCILIATION

DERWIN L. GRAY

FOREWORD BY ANNIE F. DOWNS

The question, "Are we experiencing a racial divide?" is easy to answer. How to heal this divide is a conversation we should all be interested in right now. Derwin pastors each of us with his words as he shows us why this all matters and what God's Word says about it all. With every word of this book, I felt pastored, encouraged, and enlightened.

JAMIE IVEY, bestselling author and host of *The Happy Hour with Jamie Ivey* podcast

When I want to learn about healing, I listen to someone who has been a healer. That's one of the many reasons I listen to Derwin Gray. He has not just advocated for racial justice and reconciliation, he has worked toward it and demonstrated it in his life and ministry.

ED STETZER, executive director of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College

Derwin Gray is a trusted voice for looking at what the Bible has to say about one of the most divisive topics of our day. In *How to Heal Our Racial Divide* Dr. Gray sets us up by looking into both the narrative arc of Scripture as well as its explicit commands (orthodoxy) and then moves us to the application of the Scriptures in our disciple-making (orthopraxy). There are many books on this subject but few that deal with it as biblically and hopefully as this one.

MATT CHANDLER, lead pastor of The Village Church

America's racism is not so much its original sin as it is the church's scourge. In this book Derwin Gray, block by block, slowly and carefully, lays the foundations and begins to build the Bible's own house designed by God for all people. Racism's scourge has always had a biblical prophetic word (sin) and a biblical prophetic vision (the multiethnic church), but many have walked away from God's design.

We need fewer people criticizing and more pastors like Derwin Gray creating solutions to the problem. This book can help heal our nation. Be Tov!

SCOT McKNIGHT, professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary

This book is an inspiring and timely grace-driven manifesto from one of the world's most respected preachers. Avoiding both simplistic answers and despairing cynicism, this book shows us why racial justice and reconciliation are not distractions from the gospel but a central theme of Jesus' call to repentance and life together. Read this book and pass it along to a friend. We need it right now.

RUSSELL MOORE, public theologian at *Christianity Today*

Dr. Derwin Gray is not an author with a big social media following that he leverages to talk about things he's not personally invested in. Derwin is all in on God's multiethnic family in every sphere of his life. *How to Heal Our Racial Divide* is a hopeful offering which pours out of a life committed to healing the divide.

DR. BRYAN LORITTS, author of *Insider Outsider* and teaching pastor at The Summit Church

Why are you always talking about racism? Just preach the gospel! Derwin Gray says he hears this a lot—so do I. I love Gray's answer: because it's a part of the world's story of sin, because it was on Jesus' heart, because reconciliation and unity are a part of God's beautiful gospel, and because Scripture casts a vision for a many-colored church family living as one. I encourage you to read this book with an open Bible and an open heart. Gray will help you see the racially divided church and world through God's eyes, and he will equip you to hear the call to become a faithful reconciler in the name of Jesus.

NIJAY K. GUPTA, professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary

How to Heal Our Racial Divide by Pastor Derwin Gray has given me a new category—"color-blessed." In the body of Christ, it is a sacred *blessing* for us as diverse people to stand together as one in him. Thank you, Pastor Gray, for helping us embrace this blessing so that everyone can see Jesus really is the Prince of Peace.

RAY ORTLUND, president of Renewal Ministries, Nashville

In a world where we can't even agree on how to talk about racism or why it matters, pastor and theologian Derwin Gray takes us back to the heart of God. From Abraham to Jesus, from Babel to Pentecost, Gray unpacks the biblical vision of God's plan to create a single, worldwide, multiethnic family in Jesus Christ. Full of theological depth, personal vulnerability, and pastoral guidance, this book is a Spirit-breathed manifesto for our cultural moment, a clarion call for the church to be, by the grace of God, all that we were called and redeemed to be.

REV. DR. GLENN PACKIAM, associate senior pastor of New Life Church, Colorado Springs, and author of *The Resilient Pastor* and *Blessed Broken Given*

Derwin Gray has been a trusted teacher and guide for me on my journey toward understanding racial unity and reconciliation. His prophetic voice is needed now more than ever, and I trust these pages will bring healing and clarity to a divided world.

BRADY BOYD, senior pastor of New Life Church, Colorado Springs, and author of *Addicted to Busy* and *Extravagant*

This book is phenomenal. Every Christian needs to read this, and every pastor needs to take their church through this book. Just *wow*! If you are going to read one book on healing the racial divide, read this book, and then give a

copy to everyone you know. In *How to Heal Our Racial Divide*, Derwin writes as both a theologian and practitioner, showing us that "gospel-shaped racial reconciliation and racial justice is the natural overflow of life in Christ."

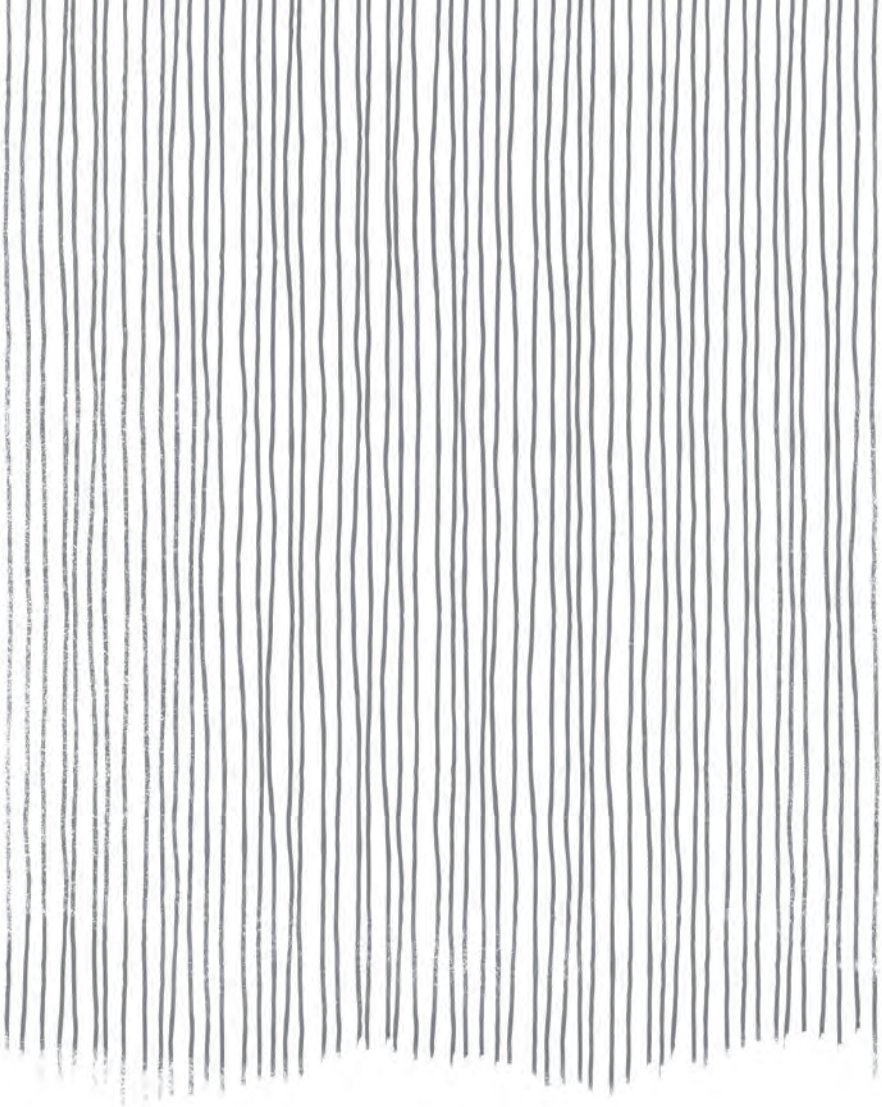
CHRISTINE CAINE, founder of A21 and Propel Women

Many in our society are ignoring the church's voice when it comes to the most important and divisive issues of our day. There are two reasons. First, many of the church leaders addressing these issues are merely echoing and amplifying angry culture war rhetoric. And second, far too many church leaders are afraid to say anything at all. Thank God for Derwin Gray. Driven by neither anger nor fear, he wisely draws from Scripture to show us both the evil of racism and the healing that is possible through Jesus Christ. With thoughtfulness born from pastoral experience, Dr. Gray's is a voice both the church and our society needs to hear right now.

SKYE JETHANI, cohost of *The Holy Post* podcast and author of WithGodDaily.com

This is the book I've been waiting for on racial reconciliation. Not written by an activist, historian, or sociologist but a pastor who sees it all through the lens of the gospel. He writes as he lives and preaches—to the whole body of Christ. Nothing is left out. Would to God that I'd had this book when we started intentionally integrating Northwood Church.

BOB ROBERTS, global senior pastor of Northwood Church, founder of Glocal.net, and cofounder of Multi-Faith Neighbors Network



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I dedicate How to Heal Our Racial Divide *to my son, Jeremiah. Son, the sincerity of your faith in Jesus, your love for people, and your disciplined, beautiful life have always inspired me to be a better man. Thank you for the gift of your friendship. I love you. I am so proud of you.*

Contents

Foreword

It was the murder of Ahmaud Arbery for me.

I can't quite pin down why it was that particular story, the death of that young black man, that broke open my heart in a way that it hasn't ever recovered. And God willing, it never will.

Maybe it is because I grew up in Georgia and know the town well where that story happened. Maybe it is because they always show Ahmaud's senior picture when they talk about his death, and it's the same senior picture we all took. I remember my senior portraits well—I wore soccer shorts and tennis shoes, even though my hair and makeup were done. The photographer draped a black cloth over my shoulders, so it looked like I was wearing a dress. Spoiler alert: I wasn't. And so when they show that picture of him, I imagine Ahmaud, in that tuxedo top, maybe athletic shorts and running shoes just out of frame. Maybe it's that. Or maybe it was the civilian nature of the whole thing, with no law enforcement involved.

It is probably all of that combined, with my own journey and upbringing and friendships speaking into it too.

But what I know is when someone asks, "What made you start really learning and listening and wanting to be a part of the racial reconciliation story?" I say, "Ahmaud." May he rest in peace.

I bet we all have an answer to that question, because I don't think you'd pick up this book by my friend Derwin if you didn't. If you weren't already hoping things could be different, if you weren't already burdened or saddened by the social injustice that is apparent in our churches and schools and neighborhoods and restaurants and homes and hearts, you wouldn't even be trying.

So before you turn the page, whether you feel late to this conversation or just on time, whether you feel convicted or convinced or concerned, whether you picked this up yourself or it was handed to you, I just want to say, Well done, friend. No matter your skin tone or family history or faith story, you're doing a good thing learning and growing and pursuing peace with your brothers and sisters who do not look like the face you see in the mirror.

I hope Derwin is okay with me saying this, but it's all right if some of his words prick you or make you put the book down for a minute, or a day. It's okay if you struggle with some of it as you are learning and listening and turning the pages.

As I read, I had a few moments, a few sentences, where I felt that too. So I'm with you. It's what makes us human

and healthy—to read and think and digest for ourselves and to be real about what it does in our hearts and minds and bodies as we read.

I think it's what makes relationship with Jesus really good, being honest and being willing to grow and change. Also, Jesus is all over this book because he deeply cares about all tribes, tongues, and nations being together as one.

So do you. I know you do. You picture it, like I do. A sea of people worshiping God, literally every shade of peach and tan and brown and black that you can think of, hair of every shade and texture and length. Who knows how we'll be dressed or how old we'll be, but we'll all be there and be so blessed to be surrounded by the world. Every tribe. Every tongue. Every nation.

I was moved by what I read in the pages you are about to experience. I saw things in Scripture I'd never seen before. I saw truths about God and humans and injustice and myself that were new to me but radically important. So might I just encourage you, as you start this book, to finish it. Read to the end. Learn, repent, grow, and share. You're doing a good thing here. And when you finish, you'll be different. And you'll be glad you didn't give up.

Annie F. Downs
New York Times bestselling
author of *That Sounds Fun*

INTRODUCTION

THE NEW NORMAL

We are born into conflicts that we did not create. These disputes existed long before we arrived on Planet Earth. But we still have to live with their aftermath.

I remember going to a restaurant with my mom when I was about eight years old. As soon as we sat down, a disheveled White man started spewing hate-filled words at the Black people present. He screamed, "I remember a day when n—s were not allowed to eat at restaurants with us good White folk!" A Black man stood up to deal with the situation, but his wife stopped him, saying, "Baby, he's not worth it." My little-boy brain was confused, and my heart was afraid. Sadly, my mother grew up in a time when Black people could not eat at restaurants with White people. She remembers drinking from "colored-only" water fountains.

In elementary school, nearly every day when I walked past the last house on the block that led to my school, a thirty-something Hispanic man would shout through his screen door, "N—, Blacky, Blacky!" Before writing this book,

I hadn't thought about that experience in years. I guess my brain buried this trauma in the "let's not remember this" file. Sadly, I had normalized these types of racial slurs. That same man and his adult friends who lived with him later threatened one of my teenage Black friends by putting a knife in his face after they stole his boom box.

My friends weren't always on the receiving end of these slurs. In my preteen years, my Hispanic friends who had been born in America would use racial slurs to disparage the undocumented Mexicans who came to America illegally.

I had normalized this senseless racism. I cringe at the thought that I allowed other human beings made in the image of God to be called such dehumanizing names in my presence. But this was my normal, everyday existence.

These memories are just a drop in the sea of the daily experiences of people of every sort who live with the reality of racism, sexism, classism, and hate. Sin is ugly, and it makes us ugly to one another. Our world is a battle zone that reeks of generational, institutional discrimination and personal contempt.

Time for a New Normal

You are probably reading this book because you want to make a difference. I wrote this book because I want to make a difference too. Like you, my soul is weary from the racial divide in the church and in our country. We want to heal the hurt, right the wrongs, and create trust where distrust exists.

As a person of goodwill, you want to see change, and I want to help you become the change you want to see. Racism and racial injustice are sins so deeply embedded in our culture that it is going to require disciples of Jesus who thoroughly rely on the Holy Spirit and who passionately inhabit Jesus' love to change things.

This love we are commanded to looks like the cross of Jesus. God's kind of love moves beyond words to actions, beyond sentimental feelings to a relentless commitment to the well-being of others, and beyond comfort to uncomfortable sacrifice. In learning to love people of other ethnicities and cultural expressions, we are forged into true disciples of Jesus. By our love for one another—especially those from a different ethnicity and social class—we become a foretaste of God's Kingdom. Jesus told his disciples, "I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35). The moment we say yes to Jesus as our Redeemer and King, we are enrolled in his school of love.

Jesus' disciple John writes, "The one who loves his brother or sister remains in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But the one who hates his brother or sister is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and doesn't know where he's going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes" (1 John 2:10-11). In Christ Jesus, your brothers and sisters are Asian, Latino, White, Native, and Black people. Your being "in Christ" means your inclusion into a redeemed, multicolored,

multiethnic family that God promised to Abraham.[1] Fighting against the sin of racism and racial injustice is not optional for those who call on the name of King Jesus. The apostle Paul—a Jew—proclaimed, "I am obligated both to Greeks and barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish. . . . For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:14, 16). Paul's passion to see the unity and reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles—distinct ethnicities with centuries of enmity between them—was an imperative of the gospel, even when it caused him great harm, persecution, and ultimately death.

Love that heals the racial divide is more than social-media posts or one-off events. This Holy Spirit–generated love forms us into "living sacrifices" at the altar of God's transformative grace (Romans 12:1). Only those willing to lay down their cultural power and privilege for the marginalized, oppressed, and disenfranchised will be able to love with a fierceness that unites brothers and sisters across ethnic and socioeconomic lines.

What Will You Experience?

As we walk together through the pages of this book, I am going to talk about Jesus, his gospel of grace, and his Kingdom a lot because he has a lot to say about how to heal our racial divide. You will learn that the gospel of King Jesus breaks down barriers that divide and builds up unity in God's

multiethnic family, and you will discover that this is not a peripheral issue but is at the very heart of the gospel. Bible scholar N. T. Wright writes,

> Paul is referring to the new reality, accomplished in the Messiah's death and resurrection, that, because the dark powers had been overcome and new creation launched, and because of the gift of the Messiah's Spirit, all believers of whatever background stood on level ground within the community. The theology and praxis of a church united across the traditional boundaries of ethnic, class, and gender distinctions was never for Paul a secondary matter: it was at the very heart. Otherwise, one would in effect be saying that the Messiah did not after all defeat (through his death) the powers of darkness that divide and corrupt the human race.[2]

You will catch the Bible's vision for a loving, unified church that comprises all ethnicities, and you will be equipped to love your brothers and sisters of other ethnicities or socio-economic classes. I will help you leverage your life on behalf of your brothers and sisters of another ethnicity in pursuit of racial reconciliation and racial justice.

You and your friends will discover unique and innovative ways to implement what you are learning from my book, as each chapter includes a section for you to marinate in the ideas of the chapter through prayer, thoughts, discussion

questions, and practices. This holy pursuit of gospel-shaped racial reconciliation and racial justice is the natural overflow of life in Christ. This is a vital aspect of your spiritual formation, which is why I spend the second half of this book exploring what color-blessed discipleship looks like today. Jesus came to forgive and reconcile humanity to his Father so we can be reconciled to and unified with one another as siblings by the Spirit's power and presence. We are the Jesus-indwelled family that brings heaven to earth as the temple of God the Holy Spirit. We are the Spirit-enabled family that is to be salt and light, glorifying our Father in heaven.

You are going to discover that God has always wanted a multiethnic family to serve as a sign and foretaste of his Kingdom on earth. The Father's Kingdom has Black kids, White kids, Asian kids, Indigenous kids, Latino kids, and all-kind-of-mix kids in it. God's multicolored family is indwelled by Jesus, so his ministry and mission of reconciliation, justice, and love will continue through us by the Holy Spirit's transformative work.

Thank you for walking with me. Let us become the change that we want to see in the church and in the world. Through the gospel, may we heal our racial divide as bridges of grace.

CHAPTER 1

"WHY DO YOU TALK ABOUT RACE SO MUCH?"

Have you ever had a good day turn into a bad day?

One Sunday afternoon, I was marinating in my home office, reflecting on the epicness of our Sunday service at Transformation Church, where I am lead pastor and cofounder, along with my wife, Vicki.

The music was doxological.

Jesus was exalted.

I preached my guts out.

I was faithful to exegete the text.

The gospel was proclaimed.

I was feeling good when I heard the notification that I had gotten a new email. I just knew it was going to be from

someone whose life had been changed by Jesus through the ministry of Transformation Church. I opened the email, and the first thing I read was "Why do you talk about race so much in your sermons? You need to stop it!"

My heart sank. That empty pit feeling entered my stomach. Doubt crept into my mind. I had to take a step back and remember who I am in Christ and whose I am in Christ.

Over the years of shepherding people, I have learned through much prayer and reliance on my wife's and other elder-pastors' wisdom to always respond to critical emails with love, patience, and theological integrity. Sometimes hostile emails are ways for professing Christians to cuss me out and say slanderous, ugly things. But other times they become pathways to understanding, reconciliation, and unity.

As Jesus' blood-purchased people "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9), we must hold people's hands and walk with them into the promised land of unity.

So I wrote the gentleman back and requested a meeting with him to discuss his email. As we sat down, I opened in prayer and assured him of my love for him and my desire to answer his question.

And as we talked, I gave him my answer. I talk about race so much because the Bible talks about it. A lot.

Many of my White siblings in Christ that join us from homogeneous churches are surprised, caught off guard, and uncomfortable with how much the Bible talks about race. Many have never seen a connection between the gospel and

racism. They've been discipled to think that the gospel is only about saving souls and sending people to heaven when they die.

But I contend that racial reconciliation in Christ is not peripheral to the gospel, an optional "nice to have" or a fad issue, but central to Christ's mission and God's plan.[1] God has always promised a multicolored, multiethnic family to Abraham, and that family was given to him in Jesus Christ.

History Informs the Present

Most followers of Jesus have no idea of the ethnic tension, division, and hatred that existed in the world in which Jesus lived. Sociologist Rodney Stark describes this environment. He writes that "one of the major reasons why Greco-Roman cities were so prone to riots" was deep-seated racial conflicts and hatred.[2] Racism and racial injustice are diseases that have plagued humanity since sin entered the world and dark power proved evil. Ethnic conflicts leading to riots are not just modern phenomena.

In the biblical language, anyone who was not Jewish or a descendant of the twelve tribes of Israel was a Gentile. For Jews in the time of Jesus, the pagan, Gentile Romans ruled Israel and most of the known world with an iron fist. Many of the Jewish people in Israel and throughout the Roman world would have felt like God had abandoned them.

When they saw Gentiles, the entire history of the Jewish people would have reminded them that the Gentile

Egyptians held their ancestors as slaves for four hundred years and that Pharaoh had ordered the murder of their male babies because their population was growing too fast.[3] In this case, fear of losing power and privilege drove Pharaoh to commit murder.

Similarly, Jewish history would have reminded a Jew of Jesus' time that the Gentile Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites, and Jebusites had waged war against them and tried to keep them from entering the land God had promised them. They would have been reminded of their ancestors' captivity in Assyria and Babylon and how the evil Gentile Haman wanted to wipe all Jews from the face of the earth.[4] If not for Queen Esther, who was a Jew, Haman would have carried out his genocidal fantasy.

History is never really history. It has a way of informing our present.

For the Jews of the first century, living under Roman rule, history voiced to them that the Gentiles were not to be trusted. For many Jews, Gentiles were their enemies and a threat to their religious life. The apostle Peter reflected a common Jewish attitude of the time when he told the Gentile Cornelius, "You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you" (Acts 10:28, NLT). In some aspects of Jewish life, it was normative that a Jewish man could not enter a Gentile home. Segregation also is not new to our modern world.

It was in this racially charged and divided world that Jesus created an alternative community of unity called the

Kingdom of God and that the gospel forged a path that led to healing. God can bring different groups of people together and bring healing to our racial divide today if we are willing to obey Jesus and live out his gospel. Ultimate unity will come in the new heaven and new earth; God's people point to that future by our unity in the present.

A Vision of Transformation

On August 2, 1997, I met Jesus in a small dorm room at Anderson University during my fifth training camp with the Indianapolis Colts. A teammate named Steve Grant had spent five years sowing seeds of the gospel in my heart. Every day after practice, he would take a shower, dry off, wrap a white towel around his waist, and ask my teammates, "Do you know Jesus?" His nickname was the Naked Preacher. God used him to bring me to faith.

I called my wife, Vicki, and said, "I want to be more committed to you, and I want to be committed to Jesus." For the first time, I knew that I was loved and forgiven. I knew that I was new.

Vicki had met Jesus a few months before I did through the love of one of her coworkers, Karen Ponish. Both of us fell in love with Jesus. We loved reading the Bible. We just wanted to know him more and make him known. If he could transform our lives, he had the power to transform anyone's life.

As we spent time diving into Scripture, we quickly became aware of how much the Bible talks about Jesus forgiving

people, loving people, and bringing people of different ethnicities together as a family. We were in awe as we read the words of the apostle Paul:

> In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope. But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.
>
> For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups. Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death.
>
> EPHESIANS 2:12-16, NLT

When Vicki (a White woman) and I (a Black man) read these verses, it was just so clear. Jesus cares about healing our racial divide. The God who makes us new is the God

who makes a new family that is colorful and diverse. But then reality quickly set in and dampened our excitement. We started looking for churches like the ones the New Testament describes. Unfortunately, we found that churches were divided over race! It was like we were forced to choose a Black church or a White church. Why was the nightclub more ethnically diverse than Jesus' club, the church?

That's why my wife and I began praying, dreaming, and preparing to plant a church where White, Asian, Black, Indigenous, and Latino people of diverse ages and economic backgrounds could find a community to belong to. We dreamed of a church united in Jesus through his gospel, embodying his Kingdom.

I envisioned CEOs being in small groups with elementary school teachers. I saw people who lived in trailer parks discipling people who lived in the suburbs. I saw White police officers and police officers of color leading a small group of ethnically diverse teens in understanding the gospel. I saw Black people who were suspicious of White people and White people who were suspicious of Black people becoming trusted friends and family. I saw a mosaic of people loving God and each other so beautifully that the world had to take note. I could see Transformation Church equipping people to be the healing they wanted to see in the world. I imagined a church that, if it did not exist, the community would miss because Jesus was present in us.

Jesus is the King of his Kingdom. And in his Kingdom are people of all ethnicities that bear God's image. It is a

holy, unified, blood-bought family. Jesus' vision captured our hearts and wouldn't let go.

The Bible Is Not Colorless

So when people ask me why I talk about race in my sermons, I describe it this way:

The reason I preach about race so much is that the Bible does.

The reason I preach against the sin of racism so much is that the Bible does.

The reason I preach ethnic unity in the church so much is that the Bible does.

The reason I preach about ethnic unity so much is that Jesus and the apostle Paul did. Paul even went so far as to say that when God's people are unified across ethnic lines, the demonic realm is put on notice that Jesus has won the battle.[5]

According to Paul, ethnic unity among his children is an eternal desire of God's heart. God has forever purposed through Jesus' sinless life, sacrificial death on the cross, and resurrection to create a multiethnic family. Racism, racial injustice, and disunity are invasive parasites that must be eradicated from his church.

The Bible is not colorless; rather, it is full of different ethnicities across the Old and New Testaments. If we take ethnicity out of the Bible, Jesus would not be a Jew, the woman at the well would not be a Samaritan, Pharaoh would not be an Egyptian, Cornelius would not be an Italian, Pilate

would not be a Roman, and there would be no Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites, and Jebusites. It wouldn't matter that Jonah was called to preach to the Assyrians. There would be no story about the Good Samaritan. There would no Ethiopian eunuch. There would be no Revelation 5:9-10:

> And they sang a new song:
>
> You are worthy to take the scroll
> and to open its seals,
> because you were slaughtered,
> and you purchased people
> for God by your blood
> from every tribe and language
> and people and nation.
> You made them a kingdom
> and priests to our God,
> and they will reign on the earth.

Our ethnicity is a gift from God reflecting his multifaceted wisdom. Biblical characters are not colorless or cultureless. They were people situated in real places, in real image-bearing ethnicities, in particular cultures and times—just as we are. God's Word cannot be faithfully interpreted and understood without understanding the sociohistorical reality of ethnicity and culture and the corruptive, destructive nature of sin. Sin, as it lives in the hearts of humanity

and in the systems and societies we put in place, has pitted humanity against God and humanity against one another. If we strip the Bible of ethnicity and cultural context and implications, we are left with an individualistic gospel that is only concerned with saving our own souls.

In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. addressed just this problem in his magisterial "Letter from a Birmingham Jail":

> 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.[6]

At Transformation Church, we believe—with the Bible as our guide—that ethnic reconciliation is intrinsic to discipleship. Jesus desires for his people—from all ethnicities and cultures—to love each other well. Jesus says, "May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me" (John 17:21). Our oneness bears witness to the reality that

Jesus was sent by the Father. We become a living testimony. The longer we allow our racial divides to persist, the harder it becomes to resist the powers that seek to destroy us and distract us from God's glory.

That's why I've written this book. Scripture paints a picture of unity that has already been accomplished in Jesus' work on the cross. The way to heal our racial divide is to catch the Bible's vision of a new community—a multiethnic community—formed around King Jesus in mutual love. In the first part of this book, we'll walk through the Bible and see how this was God's plan all along. And in the second part, we'll look at how this vision might be lived out today in color-blessed (rather than colorblind) discipleship.

God Promised Abraham a Family

Jesus wants to save more than our souls. As we journey together, we will showcase just how majestic, beautiful, and all-encompassing Jesus' salvation truly is. We are going to marvel at his brilliance and creative genius that not only forgives our sins but also creates a beautifully diverse family with different-colored skins. We will become color-blessed, not colorblind. This new blood-bought, regenerated, multicolored family is the one God promised Abraham long ago:

> Now the Scripture saw in advance that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and proclaimed the gospel ahead of time to Abraham, saying, All the

> nations will be blessed through you. Consequently, those who have faith are blessed with Abraham, who had faith.
>
> GALATIANS 3:8-9

Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, is the Savior of *all* humanity. With love in his eyes and grace in his nail-pierced hands, he came to earth to give his Father the family he promised Abraham. This family is called the church, the body of Christ. Jesus' passion to see his Father's children live in unity and beauty is rooted in God's covenant with Abraham. This is a redemptive aspect of the gospel that is often neglected: "He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit" (Galatians 3:14, NIV).

One of the miracles of the early church was its barrier-breaking, reconciling nature. Jesus birthed a new society, composed of unlikely participants—Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, male and female:

> In Christ there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all.
>
> COLOSSIANS 3:11

> There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if

> you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, heirs according to the promise.
>
> GALATIANS 3:28-29

> For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and we were all given one Spirit to drink.
>
> 1 CORINTHIANS 12:13

The apostle Paul was constantly harassed, persecuted, and slandered because he preached the reality that Gentiles were full members of God's family. Jews, as well as Gentiles, considered Paul's desire to heal the ethnic divide worthy of death. At one point, he was speaking to a crowd of Jews, telling of his Jewish heritage and his persecution of Christians until God intervened on the road to Damascus:

> "[The Lord] said to me, 'Go, because I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"
>
> They listened to him up to this point. Then they raised their voices, shouting, "Wipe this man off the face of the earth! He should not be allowed to live!"
>
> ACTS 22:21-22

For Paul, the message of unity between Jews and Gentiles in Abraham's family was seen as a threat. Today, not much has changed as it relates to reconciling people of different ethnicities.

If you choose to become a uniter, many of your friends will become enemies.

You will be slandered.

You will be persecuted.

You will be called an agitating race-baiter.

You will be called "woke" or worse, a communist.

You will be called a sellout to your own race.

But, most importantly, you will also be called faithful to Jesus, his gospel, and his Kingdom.

The hard, gospel work of healing the racial divide in the church and in our nation is going to cost you something personally. But whatever the cost, Jesus and his glory are worth it. Our pursuit of Jesus and his purpose to see his people unified will lead to "weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and . . . difficulties, for the sake of Christ." But this is not a bad thing, for, as the apostle Paul tells us, "when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10). Paul also writes, "I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" (Galatians 6:17). At the end of your life and mine, may we, too, bear the marks of Jesus because we lived sacrificially, laying down our lives to unite people in Christ.

MARINATE ON THIS

PRAYER

Father,
I look at all the anger, division, and hatred that seems to be everywhere.
I want to do something, but I am not sure what to do.
Racism and racial injustice are crimes against you and humanity.
Ethnic disunity in your church hurts your heart.

Lord Jesus,
Show me how to love like you do.
Teach me how to heal the racial divide in my own heart and in the world.
You loved all people. I want to love like you.

Holy Spirit,
I need a power beyond myself. Just as you blew the wind of life into the early church,
blow the winds of grace into the sails of my life
so I can be a uniter, not a divider; a healer, not a hurter.
I pray this in Jesus' name,
Amen.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- As Jesus' blood-purchased people "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9), we must hold people's hands and walk with them into the promised land of unity.
- The reason I preach about race so much is that the Bible does. The reason I preach against racism so much is that the Bible does.
- Our ethnicity is a gift from God reflecting his multi-faceted wisdom (see Ephesians 3:10).

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

1. Read Revelation 5:9. What has been your experience with race and ethnicity in the church? How does it compare to the picture we see in Revelation?
2. Biblical characters are not colorless or cultureless. They were people situated in real places, in real image-bearing ethnicities, in particular cultures and times—just like we are. When you read the Bible, what examples of ethnicity and culture do you see? Why are these important?
3. In what ways does your ethnicity and culture shape your faith or how you read the Bible?
4. Read Ephesians 3:4-11. How is our ethnicity a gift?

GOSPEL BEHAVIORS TO PRACTICE

Find another Christian (of another ethnicity, if possible) to read through this book with you. Discuss what you hope to get out of reading this book and how you might spur one another on to unite people in Christ.