

# **Redemptive Theology and White Racism**

**By**

**Stephen McCutchan**

steve@smccutchan.com | <http://www.smccutchan.com/>

The thesis of this paper is the assertion that predominantly White congregations have been infected by a cancer of racism that infuses their life and distorts their experience of the Gospel as they practice their ministry within the culture of the United States of America. I recognize that such a blunt assertion at first will appear unnecessarily extreme and objectionable. As I will explain, I further believe that the recognition of this reality, however, offers immense promise for our understanding the saving nature of the church in our society.

In examining this situation, it is helpful to begin with some clarification of the terms that I am using. I am using the term racism to refer to a condition that applies primarily to White people. Racism is distinct from, although related to, prejudice. Prejudice can be part of any person's attitude. It is, as the word implies, a prejudgment that negatively reflects on one's attitude towards a situation, people, or person. Often people make prejudicial judgments about categories of people based on religion, skin color, dress, age, size, etc.

In preparation for understanding the distinction between prejudice and racism, it is helpful to understand that prejudice can work for and against people. For example, I am white, male, over six feet tall, and have no obvious physical abnormalities. I do not have to be consciously prejudiced against any person who does not have those qualifications to recognize that I have benefited from privileges granted to me by society because of those characteristics. I not only benefit from such privileges but, despite my desire for a more fair and just world, I am not inclined to risk such benefits in pursuit of the cause of justice and fairness.

At the same time, people's prejudice can work against a person. I might see a person dressed in dirty, smelly clothes and assume that the person is illiterate, lazy, and perhaps dangerous. There might be a number of other explanations for the person's condition, but my prejudgment hinders, and many times prevents, further information from being gathered that might alter my perception of that person.

Such prejudgments or prejudicial conclusions are frequently made about people who are distinctly different from us. In this country, race is a major factor that feeds such prejudice. Racism combines prejudice with power. Racism includes the prejudice, whether conscious or unconscious, that people of color are in some way inferior to Caucasian people. Have you ever met a Caucasian person whose basic assumption was that Black people as a race were superior to Whites? Many Black people have prejudices

with respect to Caucasian people, but the difference is that the structures of society give Caucasians the advantage.

Some of the dynamics of this reality are captured in a scene from a play entitled *The Color of Bread*. The scene takes place at an officers' retreat of a consciously biracial church. The officers have convened to respond to a complaint that they have received that their food pantry has been reflecting a prejudice in the way that they deliver food to the poor. As we join the discussion, they are trying to understand the dynamics of racism. For purpose of identification, I will place a (B) before the characters of African-American descent and a (W) before those of Caucasian descent. The conversation is already in progress, and one of the Caucasian members has just expressed the hope that we would all learn to live together without always evaluating our relationships in terms of race.

(B) Reverend Evan White: "That's a nice ideal, but the ugly reality of the world keeps imposing itself on us. As Christians we may not be of this world, but we are certainly fully mired in it."

(W) Reverend Carol Black: "What do you mean, Evan?"

(B) Harry: "What he means is that we live in a world of power."

(B) Ralph: "You can be as nice as you want to be to me, but you always have the option to withhold that niceness."

(W) Shirley: "Wait just one blessed minute. Don't we all have the same choices to be nice or not nice to whomever we want to? That is certainly what I try to tell all my staff at the agency."

(B) Felicia: "That's true, Shirley, but the difference is power. When you stop being nice to one of your staff, you still have the power. When they stop being nice to you, they can quickly be left out in the cold."

(W) Al: "What do you mean, power? I wish I did have some power. I'd like to make a lot of changes. But frankly I don't control much of anything"

(B) Harry: "In one sense that is true, Al, but in a larger sense it is not."

(W) Al: "What do you mean?"

(B) Harry: "Well, think about it. If suddenly tomorrow all Blacks decided they didn't like how Whites were treating them, big whoopee-the world goes on. But if Whites decided

they didn't like how Blacks were treating them, hey, the Congress could pass new laws of segregation tomorrow, the banks could call in loans, the grocers could stop selling food, Black kids could get kicked out of school, and we would have no recourse."

(W) Al: "Oh, come on, give us some credit for the progress we've made. With all our civil rights laws, nothing like that could ever happen today."

(B) Felicia: "Al, sweetheart, you've been teaching those students all those good feeling lessons during Black History Month and you've done forgot that most of us have to live in the real world the other eleven months of the year too."

(W) Jerry: "Heh! Wait a minute. I teach my children about Black history and how to treat each other fairly. What's wrong with that?"

(B) Harry rises and walks over to a mirror leaning against a wall. "Come over here for a moment, Jerry." Jerry gets up and walks over towards where Harry is standing. "Look in this mirror and tell me what you see, Jerry."

(W) Jerry: "I'm not sure what you mean. I just see me."

(B) Harry: "You're right, Jerry. Most White people look in a mirror and just see themselves. I'll bet it never occurs to you to notice what color you are."

(W) Shirley, joining them at the mirror, "What I notice is some new gray hairs, but I admit I have never been conscious of the color of my skin."

(B) Reverend Evan White: "That's because you just assume that being white is normal."

(W) Shirley: "You mean you don't assume that you're normal when you look in the mirror?"

(B) Harry: "Let's test it out. Ralph, what do you see when you look in the mirror in the morning?"

(B) Ralph: "I see a Black owner of a small marginal business. I know that there are some people out there who have less trust in me because I'm Black. My business with them is going to be done differently just because of the hue of my skin. It impacts me when I go to get a small business loan or try to negotiate a purchase with a wholesaler. Without even intending to, all their images of shifty Negroes, drug dealers, con artists, and perhaps some other prejudices from childhood enter into their interaction with me."

(W) Jerry: “I can’t believe that. Most people don’t think that way, do they? Do the rest of you feel that way?”

(B) Harry: “I’m a journalist, Jerry. When that Black New York Times reporter was discovered to be a fraud, I knew that it would affect how other reporters looked at me from that day on. Why do you think it’s so important to me to always have my facts right?”

(B) Felicia: “Most of us have those fears, Jerry, but it’s even worse when you have children.”

(W) Shirley: “How is that?”

(B) Felicia: “Any parent worries about their children getting into trouble, especially when they become teenagers.”

(W) Al: “Boy, that’s the truth. My son just got his driver’s license, and I am not sure I have gotten a good night’s sleep since then.”

(B) Felicia: “I understand, Al. But the truth is that my children have a far greater chance than yours do of being stopped as a robbery suspect, and, just because they act like normal, smart-mouthed teenagers, they could be beat up or even killed by well-meaning but scared officers.”

(B) Harry: “She’s right, Al. We have to live with that fear and a sense of powerlessness to protect our children against it everyday.”

(W) Jerry: “But that’s not us. I don’t have the power to either do that or not do that.”

(B) Reverend Evan White: “Of course not, Jerry, but you benefit just because you are white. You don’t have to be mean-spirited to benefit from the power of the system.”

Like most White individuals, White congregations do not normally think of themselves as white. Unless the subject is brought up, they generally think of themselves as “normal congregations.” Most of the racism that affects such congregations remains under the surface and is unconscious. Many such congregations would even rejoice if some people of another ethnic background chose to become members. They might even congratulate themselves on how open and accepting they were.

Yet, if you are a member of a White congregation, try to apply a couple of tests to your situation. Look at the process of calling a new pastor. Most congregations want to call the best person for the position possible. However, if all other qualifications were equal,

would the color of one's skin affect the acceptability of such a candidate in most Caucasian congregations? In recent years a great deal of attention has been given to strategies by which congregations might attract new members to their congregation. Picture the normal response of your congregation if the congregation developed an approach that resulted in a twenty percent growth within two years. Now picture your congregation's response if everything else was the same except that that twenty percent growth was almost totally African Americans.

It is not because White congregations are composed of mean-spirited, prejudiced people. In a similar manner to the personal privileges I described above due to my maleness and height, Caucasians simply live in a society that structures the advantages in their favor. Without even being aware of it, they benefit from the privilege of their "whiteness."

When they turn to a curriculum supply house for educational material, for example, it is rare that the question even arises as to the effect on their children of having most of the people pictured in the curriculum be of a different skin tone from the majority of their members. If they need to acquire a loan for a building program, there may be many problems to resolve, but it is unlikely that they will have to factor in the impact that their race has on those with whom they are negotiating. If they need to settle a zoning issue with respect to their church program, it is more likely that a White congregation will have members who have connections within the larger community to facilitate the resolution of problems that might occur. Their pastors, when they studied in seminary, studied a core theology based on theologians trained in the Western culture. If they did have a class on faith from an African-American or other ethnic background, it was considered an addition to the normal core of faith. When such pastors accept a call to a congregation, they are not called on to translate such ideas of faith across cultures. Many such issues may seem minor, but cumulatively for African-Americans they create an atmosphere of being an outsider always looking in. All ethnic groups face such issues when living in a society dominated by another group, but African Americans carry the additional burden of their ancestors having been slaves and legally considered by the Constitution as less than fully human.

I was recently in a denominational meeting where a group of clergy and laity were discussing a petition advocating that the church protest the resegregation of the schools that they saw taking place within our communities. There were few in our meeting, Black or White, who would disagree with the concern that was being brought before them. None would have defended returning to segregated schools. However, several of the White people did think that the wording of the petition was too volatile and suggested that it be toned down. What became apparent was that the White members, without even being conscious of it, were exercising the privilege of their whiteness. If the Black members wanted their protest heard, they would cooperate with the Whites that wanted the language toned down. For the Whites, if the petition was not heard, not a great deal was lost. There is privilege in being able to do nothing and still benefit from it.

As we Caucasians confront the reality of racism within our congregations, it is important that we understand that we have paid a significant price for our privileges. Have we become isolated in a world of diverse cultures? Have we become suspicious of other people because they are different and therefore miss out on the richness of creation's diversity? Does the fact that as a group we have certain benefits cause us to be frightened that those who lack those benefits might want to take them from us? Is there a sense in which a lot of the hate crimes, violence, and fear in our society have the issue of race as a major contributing factor? On the positive side, would we not prefer to participate in a congregation that rejoiced in the rich diversity of God's creation? Most significantly, are we finding ourselves in opposition to God's intention for creation?

If Christians who are Caucasian desire to move beyond the plague of racism that has so infected our experience of Christianity in this culture, this paper suggests that an understanding of the redemptive work of God may offer them a sense of hope and a direction in which to move. Many books have been written attempting to analyze the problem of racism in our culture. There also have been a variety of educational and training events designed to help people develop a strategy for dismantling the structures that help perpetuate racism within our society. This paper seeks to add to this excellent work by providing a theological framework by which churches can open themselves to the saving work of God with respect to racism.

A critical aspect of this work is an understanding of the "consummating will of God." As will be explained in more detail, it is my position that God knew the nature of humanity and planned for it in God's redemptive design from the beginning. Evil, including the evil of racism, was not a surprise to God or a reality that dictated a series of emergency rescue strategies up to and including the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. If that is accurate, then the coming of Christ was not a radical departure but rather a culminating act by which God seeks to redeem the world. Evils such as racism are clearly actions and conditions that are in rebellion against God and God's intentions for creation, but they are not outside of the redeeming power of God.

In order to explicate this idea, it is necessary to recall the narrative history contained in the Hebrew Scriptures. As the Gospels make clear, what took place in Christ is entirely consistent with what God had already revealed through the Scriptures as to the nature of God's saving work. "Then, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, (Jesus) interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures."

What we saw hinted at when God clothed Adam and Eve as he sent them from the Garden, and reinforced when God would not make an end to the human project in the flood, was that God refused to be defeated by evil in the creation. In Genesis 12, the story moves from a story of all of humanity to a more specific story of God with a particular people. However, it is always made clear that the ultimate purpose of God is for the sake of all humanity.

It is made clear from the beginning that the fulfillment of the promise in the covenant rests on the faithfulness of God and not on the faithfulness or wisdom of humanity. Yet even the Israelites were haunted with the question of whether they might someday cross some invisible line, and God would give up on them. The rather humorous dialogue between God and Moses following the golden calf incident illustrates this fear. God was pictured as so incensed with this act of idolatry that he began to refer to the people not as God's people but as Moses' people. He declared that he was going to wipe them off the face of the earth. It was only Moses' intervention that prevented this judgment from taking place. Another version of this same question was illustrated in God's rejection of Saul as the chosen one to lead Israel. God's promise to establish an everlasting covenant with David was an attempt to settle the question of God's faithfulness despite the sinfulness of humanity, but the question still persisted.

While God is a God of justice, as the prophet Hosea described, God's justice is an agonizing struggle with the compassion of God's own heart. "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Ad'mah? How can I treat you like Zeboi'im? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath."

This compassionate side of God was particularly evident in the life of Israel's greatest hero, David. Among many examples, perhaps the clearest was in the events surrounding his adulterous affair with Bathsheba: murder, adultery, coveting, false witness, stealing. David broke most of the commandments and clearly dishonored God in whose name he had been anointed. How patient can God be with a person or a people who continue to dishonor him and refuse to recognize their grateful dependence on God? Yet God had made a promise to David, "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever." Would God give up on David as God had done with Saul? Will God give up on humanity? If not, how will God's promises be fulfilled in the face of the persistence of human sin?

To understand "Redemptive Theology," we begin with the cross. As Paul said, "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." It is with the cross that the question was answered decisively. The cross revealed the total depravity of humanity while at the same time revealing God's saving response to evil. Recall the story of the incarnation in its most basic narrative form. In the birth of Christ, we experienced Emmanuel or God with us. This was God's son who was sent into the world because God loved the world that God had created and called it good. The cross and the events that led to it were the response of the world to the goodness of God. The cross was a Roman form of execution in order to deter people from disobeying Roman law. It demonstrated Rome's absolute control politically. It also was a cruel, slow, humiliating form of death that was intended to make people fearful of breaking the law. In the story, we see displayed before us the worst insult that humanity could hurl at God.

What would be God's response to the total rejection of God's goodness by humanity? Imagine this story from the purely human perspective. You are a powerful ruler and see some people whose lives are mired in destructive activity. Out of compassion, you send your own child to bring your power to bear on healing their wounds. Instead of being grateful, they kill your son. They even choose to kill him in a painful and insulting manner. This is the basic drama of Scripture. This is the ultimate test of the steadfast love of God.

What we discover with the cross is that God is not only not defeated by evil but is able to work through even the worst displays of human sinfulness to provide a redemptive possibility. The cross, which would have appeared to be the worst sin that humans could commit against the love of God, has become, instead, the very instrument of our redemption. This is the core truth of Redemptive Theology. As God made clear to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for (my) power is made perfect in weakness."

In applying the truth of redemptive theology to the issue of white racism, there are several aspects that need to be noted. First, Redemptive Theology assumes that God is omniscient and therefore knew from the beginning the nature of humanity and the effect of sin on God's creative purpose. Within the scope of this paper, this suggests that the sin of racism is not a surprise to God who called the church into reality within this culture. God knew from the beginning that racism would be a part of the American culture and therefore a critical aspect of the community of faith within which God was working God's saving work.

Second, Redemptive Theology also assumes that God is omnipotent and is not defeated by sin but intentionally incorporates the reality of sin into God's plan of salvation. For example, when David was confronted with his sin by God's prophet, Nathan, David did not live in denial but confessed his sin before God. For narrative purposes, the canon saw Psalm 51 as an expression of David's confession before God. While humanity suffers for their sins and the sins of others, as seen in the death of Bathsheba's child and would later be seen in the disintegration of David's family, God can transform even sin into a redeeming possibility. David and Bathsheba have another son, Solomon. This son will provide the family line from which Christ will be born. Matthew emphasized this aspect of God's redeeming work in the genealogy with which he began his gospel, which in contrast to most genealogies not only included women but made a point of including women such as Bathsheba who had questionable qualities in their lives. God could use even the sin of adultery for a greater purpose.

With respect to racism, God's saving work within the church is not experienced by denying the reality of racism but through discerning what God is doing by incorporating the reality of the sin of racism into God's saving work. There is hope not because racism is insignificant but because God is not defeated by it. In what way can the redeeming power of God work through the reality of racism in our churches?



Third, Redemptive Theology also assumes the holiness of God. God is a God of justice who cannot simply overlook the sins of humanity as if they were unimportant in God's larger plan. God has created a moral universe in which humanity must be held accountable for its behavior. However, God is also accountable for the creatures that God has created and cannot allow them to be destroyed by the sinful possibilities of their nature. Therefore racism within God's church cannot be ignored, but it also needs to be acknowledged in a manner that does not simply paralyze the human participants with guilt. In most White congregations, racism is a reality that is not talked about or even acknowledged. In those who do take it seriously, there is often a tendency to become paralyzed with an overwhelming sense of guilt that results in what is often referred to as "white bashing." Neither response is especially helpful in moving towards a healthier future.

Fourth, Redemptive Theology acknowledges the inability of humanity to save itself. While we may educate ourselves to the dimensions of sin, such as racism, and may draw upon the techniques of behavioral psychology to alter behavior and attitudes, Christian hope does not depend upon human progress for salvation with respect to this or any sin. One does not have to read much about the history of racism within our society to recognize the insidious ability that racism has to infuse every aspect of our personal and corporate lives and to repeatedly morph into new forms in defiance of our attempts to eradicate it. One of those forms is the continual effort of the dominant culture to assert that we are progressively triumphing over the effects of racism and that we need not make any significant sacrifices in our lives in order to achieve this progress towards a society free of racism.

Fifth, Redemptive Theology places its trust in the creative power of God who not only is not defeated by evil but also is able to take even the worst of evils and transform it into a redemptive possibility. With respect to racism, this means that while it is an evil scourge on our churches, in the hands of God it can be transformed into a redemptive possibility.

Sixth, Redemptive Theology is rooted in an affirmation of God's intention for creation. Whether it be in creation itself or in the separation of the androgynous creature into sexually specific male and female, life is the result of division that leaves a yearning for reconciliation. God also yearns for that reconciliation. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Godself..." Such reconciliation is not the homogenization of our differences but a celebration of the richness of our differences that enrich the whole. For Christians, this is most clearly depicted in the economy of the Trinity. God, Christ, and the Spirit live in relationship to each other in perfect harmony and yet with appreciation of the distinctiveness of each. The variety within our creation, including races, was part of God's intention in preparation for the full reconciliation with the divine. Our inability to relate to each other with appreciation and respect for our differences demonstrates our distance from God who is utterly different from any of us. It is only as we learn to live in the midst of the diversity of creation with rejoicing in the otherness of those who are different from us that we can grow closer to God. Full reconciliation in a world that can celebrate the beauty of our diversity prepares us to gaze upon the beauty of God.

For Christians to respond to the reality of racism in our lives and in our congregations, we must first move beyond denial. In classic Christian terminology, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” But such confession is done in hope. “If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” A congregation that desires to overcome the sin of racism that bogs down and distorts their experience of the faith must begin with confession. Such a confession, however, must be seen as a positive step. It is a significant step towards the healing of a major division among humanity.

Of course, just because you confess, forgiveness by the victimized humans is not inevitable. Desmond Tutu relates a story of the cost to the victim that will not forgive. “A recent issue of the journal *Spirituality and Health* had on its front cover a picture of three U.S. ex-servicemen standing in front of the Vietnam memorial in Washington, D.C. One asks, ‘Have you forgiven those who held you prisoner of war?’ ‘I will never forgive them,’ replies the other. His mate says: ‘Then it seems they still have you in prison, don’t they?’”

Tutu continues, “In forgiving, people are not being asked to forget. On the contrary, it is important to remember, so that we should not let such atrocities happen again. Forgiveness does not mean condoning what has been done. It means taking what happened seriously and not minimizing it; drawing out the sting in the memory that threatens to poison our entire existence.” One of the powerful discoveries in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa was the power of truth-telling. There was healing in the victims finally having someone listen to their story of suffering and honoring their pain. Desmond Tutu notes, “It may be, for instance, that race relations in the United States will not improve significantly until Native Americans and African Americans get the opportunity to tell their stories and reveal the pain that sits in the pit of their stomachs as a baneful legacy of dispossession and slavery.”

For a White congregation to move to the step of confessing that they are racist is neither an easy step nor does it, in itself, solve the problem of racism. To draw upon the truth discovered in Alcoholics Anonymous, White people and White congregations are always “recovering racists.” That is as much a given of our context as being an alcoholic is a given of their constitution. We did not create the history that shaped us, but we cannot escape it either. A critical step in our healing, however, is acknowledgment of the problem.

In God’s economy, we are saved to community. We not only need to confess, but we need someone to listen to our confession. Picture the power of members of a White congregation taking the sin of racism so seriously that they are willing to sit before a Black congregation and speak of their own complicity in the sin of racism as well as listen intensely to the pain that their African-American neighbors experience in their lives. “True forgiveness deals with the past, all of the past, to make the future possible.”

Such confession is not a single act but a process. We continue to need the dialogue made available through community. While individual congregations may be of predominantly one race, the Body of Christ is diverse. Thus God's gift of the church to humanity is to provide humanity with that community of faith that transcends human divisions and provides it a context for such a dialogue.

Continuing with the model provided for us by Alcoholics Anonymous, the second step of the process is to admit our helplessness to control this disease and our dependence on a higher power. While education is important, we cannot educate ourselves out of racism. While laws to protect the community are important, we cannot legislate the end of racism. The history of racism makes it clear that racism will not be defeated by human agency alone.

Our hope lies in the redemptive power of God that has been revealed in the cross. The cross revealed that God is not defeated by evil and can use the experience of evil redemptively. Not even racism can defeat God's reconciling purpose for humanity. If racism is our cross, the rebellious act by which we defy the intention of God, our hope is that God can use this cross as part of God's redemptive purpose.

It is important to emphasize that this is not an attempt to justify the evil of racism or to suggest that it is good in disguise. Evil is evil, but God is neither restrained nor defeated by it. As Christians have learned through the ages, however, we must turn and face the cross if we are to experience its redemptive power. "Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon you? It is my treason, Lord that has undone you. 'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied you; I crucified you." We not only do not need to deny the corporate history of racism in our nation and in our church and the ways that we have benefited from it, but it is important that we turn and acknowledge it for our own salvation.

By identifying the types of privileges that have come to us by virtue of our being white, we can share in the search for the signs of God working redemptively in those very areas. It is not the pattern of God's saving work only to speak through the pure in heart; frequently, the opposite is the case. Jesus followers held clear prejudices. "The disciples rebuked those who brought the children for Jesus' blessing (Matt.19:13). They were surprised to see Jesus speaking to a Samaritan woman (John 4:27). These same twelve beseeched Jesus to send the woman of Canaan away when she sought healing (Matt. 15:23). Prejudice toward children, Samaritans, and Canaanites influenced the disciples' response in each instance." Yet Jesus worked through them to heal the oppression of prejudice. It is easy to demonstrate, through the history of the church, that we continue to be filled with prejudice. When Jesus is quoted in Luke as saying, "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost," it is important for the church not to shy away from the truth that Jesus is referring to us.

If the process of confession and forgiveness between Black and White congregations takes place, God can then liberate them to seek signs of God's redemptive power at work in the whole Body of Christ. Economic benefits and societal acceptance, for example, are

strengths that can be utilized for the good of the whole. Could not such economic privileges, political power, managerial abilities, and shared theological truths contribute to a strategy by which the structures of racism in the larger society might be confronted?

Of course trying to address the demonic power of racism in the society is not an easy task. This is where it is important that the believers be joined together in community and be well-grounded in the faith. God's story, as revealed in the cross, is an invitation to the privilege of sacrifice and will likely include both great effort and not a little measure of suffering. It was not pleasant for Jesus to go to the cross. His invitation to his followers to take up the cross and follow him was not meant to be an invitation to luxurious comfort. Jesus deliberately chose the path of the suffering servant and invites us to participate in this path by which God is glorified.

However, it was not an invitation to suffering for suffering's sake. What lifts this type of suffering beyond mere pain is that it is a suffering for a greater purpose. Many people in the course of their lives have experienced the nobility of suffering for a greater purpose. Athletes strain their body in order to achieve a team victory. Soldiers sacrifice their lives for their country. Scientists spend long hours seeking to make a discovery that will benefit others. Jesus offers us the opportunity to devote ourselves to the greatest purpose of all. We are invited to participate in the life of the suffering servant and share in the reconciliation of the world.

Using the cross and the resurrection as our template for how God works in our world, congregations are invited to face the evil of the cross of racism, trusting that God is not defeated by such evil, and to search for ways that God can use even the reality of racism redemptively.

It is important to approach this search for the redemptive power of God with a combination of faith and humility. The Gospels recount that Jesus told his disciples three times that he would be crucified and would be raised from the dead. Despite Jesus having said this, it is clear that the disciples did not understand what this meant. They had to live the truth of the resurrection before they could understand it. We can believe that racism will be used redemptively, but we must live the truth of God's redemptive power to discover its full meaning. .

One aspect of God's reconciling work may involve the issue of reparation. Desmond Tutu, in speaking about the struggle to overcome racism in South Africa, speaks of the challenge of reparations. To "put the past behind us" and act as if an act of confession clears the tables of justice and allows us to "get on with life" is to trivialize the pain of the past. Part of our painful past is the fact that our constitution clearly states that our ancestors were fully aware of the economic value of slave labor in building a prosperous country. Historically, both Native Americans and African Americans paid a heavy price for the economic prosperity of this country. There is no way that one could calculate the value to African Americans in lives and wealth that racism has cost their ancestors. While there may be efforts to make symbolic economic reparation, as we have done with

respect to Native Americans and to the Japanese Americans that we imprisoned during World War II, it would not be feasible to actually restore to a current generation that which has been taken from their ancestors. However, if we fully explored the various dimensions of that cost together, could God use our confession of sins redemptively in raising our awareness as to how to respond to the challenge posed by the new wave of immigration in our country?

There is also no clear way to calculate the psychic cost passed down through generations of African Americans with respect to the heritage of slavery that was imposed on them. The issue of the disproportionate incarceration of African-American males in our society might well be the result of a combination of the current prejudice of courts, police, and others and the historic psychic cost in which victims begin to accept the judgment of the dominant society. If Black and White congregations were willing to explore that reality together, perhaps another form of reparation might be the focus of energy on the redemption of those who are in prison in our society. It would be a way that the Body of Christ could embody Jesus' statement about his own ministry, "He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

To approach the problem of racism from the perspective of a redemptive God is to both acknowledge our sins and be open to God's saving activity. The Scriptures continually report that God is full of surprises from a human perspective. Redemptive Theology anticipates the exciting possibility that God might use the very troubling experience we have had with racism as an opportunity to advance the reconciling possibilities in our world. In taking this path, we are learning to live with the diversity of God's creation in a way that enhances all of its parts. Our model is the Trinity. Each part is distinctive, all are equal, and each contributes to the good of the whole. As we evolve in our capacity to live in the rich diversity of the world, we prepare ourselves to experience communion with the God who created all of us and calls us home.

It has become common to refer to such congregations as "predominantly white" to acknowledge that many such congregations will have some members from other ethnic backgrounds. As the paper proceeds, I will refer to such congregations as "white" because this is the dominant culture in which they operate even though I recognize that there might be some representation of other ethnic backgrounds in their membership. I will be speaking as a white clergyperson about White congregations.

I will capitalize "White" and "Black" when they refer to people who are Caucasian or Negro. I realize that race is more an accepted designation than a scientific reality. However, in our society, they have become powerful designations often with tragic consequences.

Excerpted from *The Color of Bread*, written by Dr. Samuel Stevenson and Stephen P. McCutchan

Desmond Tutu speaks of the cost to the privileged in South Africa. “All South Africans were less whole than we would have been without apartheid. Those who were privileged lost out as they became more uncaring, less compassionate, less humane, and therefore less human; . . .” *No Future without Forgiveness*; Desmond Tutu; Doubleday; 1999; page 196

The Consummating Will of God refers to the intention that God has had from the beginning of creation and will accomplish by the end of time. This intention is in contrast to the Gnostic assumption that creation is basically evil and that God’s saving work is to enable the faithful to be “raptured” out of this evil world. It also stands as a challenge to a belief that while God created the world as “good,” it has become so hopelessly defiant of God’s goodness that in desperation God sent Christ to redeem the world. The Consummating Will of God sees the act of Christ’s coming, death, and resurrection as part of a plan of salvation that God intended from the beginning and will bring to fulfillment in the end.

Luke 24:27. All four gospels insist on making the point that what happened to Jesus was consistent with the nature of God that had been previously revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Genesis 3:21.

Genesis 6:1-9:17

Genesis 12:3b

Genesis 15:1-21. In this earliest narrative of the covenant between God and Abram, it was the smoking fire pot, a symbol for God, and not Abram who passed through the cut up pieces of the animals. Normally in such covenant making ceremonies, both parties would pass through the split animals.

Genesis 32:7-14

1 Samuel 13:5-14

Hosea 11:8-9

2 Samuel 7:16.

1 Corinthians 2:2

Matthew 21:33-42. Note that in this story it is the common assumption of the listeners that the owner will respond with violence to the people's insult because that is the way the world thinks. Jesus, however, challenges their response with, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.'"

2 Corinthians 12:9.

Psalms 103:14: "For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust."

2 Samuel 12:7

Matthew 1:1-17

Isaiah 64:8-9: "Yet, O Lord thou art our Father; we are the clay, and thou art the potter; we are all the work of thy hand...Behold, consider, we are all thy people."

2 Corinthians 5:18

Patriarch BARTHOLOMEW in a speech before the United Nations states: "In fact, the creation of the universe and humanity by God is characterized by diversities. Creation is not a monolithic reality; diversity is a salient feature of it. In the story of creation told in the book of Genesis, diversity is a dominant reality. However, along with the emphasis on diversity, the book of Genesis also speaks of coherence, harmony, interaction and unity as inherent qualities of creation. These two aspects show that in the context of God's creation, diversity is a source of enrichment that acquires its true meaning and value through unity. In fact, the creation of the universe and humanity is in its essence a concrete manifestation of unity in diversity and diversity in unity. Diversity is a gift of God that must be preserved for the integrity and sustainability of creation. This basic affirmation of Christian theology is common in all living faiths."

1 John 1:8-9

*Ibíd.*, Tutu, page 271.

Tutu, *Ibíd.*, p. 279 "If we are going to move on and build a new kind of world community, there must be a way in which we can deal with a sordid past. The most effective way would be for the perpetrators or their descendants to acknowledge the awfulness of what happened and the descendants of the victims to respond by granting forgiveness, providing something can be done, even symbolically, to compensate for the anguish experienced, whose consequences are still being lived through today

“The victim, we hope, would be moved to respond to an apology by forgiving the culprit. As I have already tried to show, we were constantly amazed in the commission at the extraordinary magnanimity that so many of the victims exhibited. Of course there were those who said they would not forgive. That demonstrated for me the important point that forgiveness could not be taken for granted; it was neither cheap nor easy.”

Tutu, *Ibíd.*, p. 279

“Ah, Holy Jesus,” verse 2

*Enter the River: Healing Steps from White Privilege Toward Racial Reconciliation*; Jody Miller Shearer; Herald Press; 1994; page 52-53.

Luke 19:10.

Mark 8:34

Mark 8:31; 9:31; and 10:34 (See parallels in other Gospels).

Mark 9:32.

Slaves were calculated as two-thirds of a person for the purpose of counting them. Like the new wave of immigrants today, the dominant community both needed their contributions and needed to dehumanize them in order to justify their actions.

Tavis Smiley in his book, *The Covenant*, identifies ten areas in which people could work to rectify the damage done to African Americans through the structures perpetuated through racism. While he is particularly addressing Black America, White America can read it both as an analysis of the cost of racism and the prospect of making a better America. As Mr. Smiley says in his introduction, “I believe that when we make Black America better, we make all of America better.” p x.

Luke 4:18-19.