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RACIAL DIVERSITY IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA: A QUALITATIVE AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

To my beloved grandmothers, Estelle Glenn and Verona Victa, who departed from this world during the research and writing of this paper. Their elegance and grace transcended their diverse heritages. Their differences were many, yet their influence on me was strikingly similar—each had a unique way of making me feel special and cherished. They embodied both elegance and strength. I am deeply grateful for the rich legacy they have left behind.

A special acknowledgment to Grandmom Glenn for nurturing my early writing endeavors by sending me to two writers' conferences in my teenage years. I cherish the support she gave me and the confidence she instilled in me.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the attitudes of teaching and ruling elders in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) towards racial diversity in local churches and ministries. Conducted from 2020 to 2023, a period marked by heightened racial tensions, the COVID-19 pandemic, and debates on ideologies like Critical Race Theory (CRT), intersectionality, white supremacy, and systemic racism, the research offers a timely insight. Utilizing an interpretive phenomenological approach, it features interviews with seventeen PCA elders from both majority (white) and minority (non-white) backgrounds across the U.S. The study aims to explore how these leaders' perspectives on race-related topics influence the church and denomination. The findings highlight a variety of opinions on racial issues and strategies for promoting an inclusive church that remains true to biblical doctrine. The research process collectively advanced a significant shift in perspectives, underscoring the importance of engaging with diverse viewpoints. These findings and evolving perspectives contribute to the ongoing discourse on racial diversity within the PCA, enriching the existing foundation with practical strategies to enhance denominational influence, inclusivity, and unity.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Howard[1] and Cindy were a young African American couple in their early twenties. Recently moved from Birmingham, Alabama to Lebanon, Pennsylvania in the midst of a worldwide pandemic, Howard, Cindy, and their two-year-old daughter, Abigail, were still trying to get their bearings in the new community. It was glaringly obvious that they were now far away from their old home city as only 5.9% of Lebanon's population is black or African American.[2] The difference was both in distance and culture. When a local pastor took his daughter to the local park, he noticed the couple sitting under the pavilion eating dinner while their young daughter quickly made a playmate with the pastor's daughter. The pastor, having recently been approved to plant a PCA church in Lebanon County, saw the young couple, and began to make small talk as they sat and ate. The pastor was touched by the couple's story of transitioning from so far away during so much uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Not having any friends and only minimal family support in their new community, the pastor welcomed them to his home for ice cream. During that time of getting to know one another, the young man shared how his initial days of employment at the local hardware shop in Lebanon were filled with being the brunt of racist jokes and put downs by his fellow employees. He eventually quit the job as going to work in such an environment became oppressive and taxing. For Howard, choosing to work in a sweltering warehouse with no

[1] The general story is a historical event, but their names and specific details have been altered to preserve anonymity.

[2] https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/lebanoncitypennsylvania.

air conditioning was preferable than enduring the racism in the workplace. The pastor listened empathetically, sharing his own concerns about racial issues in the community. It was then that the pastor mentioned a rally he had attended in the aftermath of George Floyd's death, a moment of revelation that struck a chord with Howard and Cindy. “We were there too,” Cindy said, her voice a mix of surprise and reflection. “It was a moment of awakening for us, seeing so many people standing against injustice.” The pastor nodded, “It was a profound experience for me as well. It's one of the reasons I feel so strongly about building a church community that can bridge these divides and offer support.”

The pastor also learned that Howard and Cindy were open to spiritual matters and had a cultural understanding of Christianity. When the pastor mentioned that they planned to start a new church in Lebanon in September, Howard responded, “I can’t wait three months! Can we start discipleship classes now?” The young man’s obvious enthusiasm took the pastor by surprise, but it was a welcomed reaction. The pastor began to share with him about the problem of sin and the good news of Jesus. Howard listened and did not object. He became transparent about his own struggles as a young man growing up without a father present in the home, his own fight with alcohol addiction, and his occasional run-ins with the law. The idea of him being a sinner was not something he tried to avoid or deny. The good news of Jesus, however, was novel, and it was difficult for him to process such grace and unmerited favor. The pastor, sensing this couple’s hunger and need for the Lord, scheduled *Christianity Explored* classes at his

home for the next several weeks.[3] Howard and Cindy were faithful to attend and kept copious notes from each session. The pastor also invited them to worship with his family at their local PCA church where he served as an assistant. The zealous couple obliged and drove forty-five minutes from their apartment to the church for worship.

Yet, as the church service began, it became obvious that this was not church as expected. The service was highly liturgical with a strong emphasis on uniformity, order, and, of course, the preaching of the Word through careful exposition. The preacher's voice remained monotone and was without much emotion, but the content was solid, relevant, and the Gospel was proclaimed. There were no "amens" during the sermon, clapping of hands during the singing, or the beating of drums and strumming of guitars accompanying the hymns. The worship style wasn't the only issue; apart from this couple there were few attendees from other cultural backgrounds. The congregation was exclusively Caucasian, although they warmly welcomed the new couple and expressed their hope that they would return. Ironically, if the couple had come on Wednesday night for the church sponsored English as a Second Language (ESL) class, the couple would have walked into a sample of how heaven is described in Revelation 5:9, joining others "from every tribe and language and people and nation." This PCA church's ESL Ministry is a robust example of people representing many nations. Unfortunately, the racial diversity represented on the Wednesday nights had not yet translated to the Sunday morning worship service. Thus, the couple, while appreciating the worship, the Word, and the friendliness of the congregation, sheepishly indicated that they did indeed feel

[3] Christianity Explored is an informal course for people who'd like to investigate Christianity, or just brush up on the basics. More information can be found at their website: https://www.christianityexplored.org/.

"out of place." The pastor who invited the couple to church continued to work with them in developing their understanding of biblical Christianity, mostly through small Bible studies and one-on-one meetings. However, the couple never seemed to find a home in the church the pastor attended.

What happened? What started out in great excitement to explore Christianity and join the church, withered to, at best, a loose connection to the church through a personal relationship. The cleavage between the local PCA church and the culture of this couple was too wide and not bridged to the point where they became active members of the local assembly. Did it have to end this way? Or could their inclusion in the church be the beginning of a culture of diversity in this local community of faith? Should church leadership actively seek to include people of different races and cultures, or is this not a priority? These questions were not just theoretical, but practical concerns.

Background and Rationale of the Study

As a pastor approved by my presbytery to plant a PCA church in Lebanon, Pennsylvania, I experienced a culturally meaningful moment that left me with some of the questions that would become the impetus for this project. It was the summer of 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic had disrupted life in a myriad of ways since March. With a goal to start the Lebanon church plant in September 2020, we had been looking for creative ways to connect with our community and learn about the specific needs of our county's demographics. A summer of disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was exacerbated by rising racial unrest in the US. The killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd sparked protests around the country. I was surprised to see an advertisement on our local town Facebook page that there would be a rally to protest the death of George Floyd. This was advertised as a "peaceful way for the community to

come together in solidarity."[4] I had two motivations for attending this rally: 1) I personally was moved to take some action after seeing Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin put his knee of Floyd's neck for nearly nine minutes. Protest is not the end all to injustice, but it can be the beginning of countering wrong, and 2) I felt at least going to see what was happening and being curious about the concerns of my neighbors in the city we would be starting a church was the prudent decision.[5] It is estimated that over 1,000 people gathered in the small city of Lebanon on June 5, 2020, ten days after the murder of George Floyd. The demonstrators included young and old, black and white, mothers and grandmothers. There were chants of "No justice, no peace" and "I can't breathe." I personally felt like I was drawn into something much bigger than myself. I turned to my wife and asked her if this was something our older children should come and experience. While anger and passion were visibly evident, there was no threat of violence or unruliness. We agreed that our older children should indeed experience this for their own formation, social understanding, and ability to empathize and advocate for those who are most vulnerable to racism. I interpreted the impromptu march through the streets of Lebanon amid the cries for justice as something holy, a display of God's Spirit at work in the community. In that moment, I, a member of the Christian community, joined with the

[4]Daniel Hamburg, "Hundreds of Peaceful Protesters March through the Streets of Lebanon," ABC27.com, June 4, 2020, https://www.abc27.com/local-news/lebanon/hundreds-of-peaceful-protesters-march-through-the-streets-of-lebanon/.

[5] Sharon Rusten with E. Michael, *The Complete Book of When & Where in the Bible and throughout History* (Wheaton, IL: Michael E Rusten, 2005), 471–472. Every January 22 (the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*), on state capitol grounds all over the country, pro-life advocates gather to protest the devastating effects that abortion has had on millions of mothers and children. Most Christian ethicists agree that protesting is a matter of personal conscience.

non-churched to share in the lament as mostly young minorities cried out for social justice.

It was well-documented that there was no violence or any arrests resulting from the rally in Lebanon.[6] While I was under no illusion that my attending a rally would instantly qualify me as a champion for justice and equity, I felt my participation sparked a core value for myself and the church plant: if we expected to reach all people groups in our demographic, we must labor for justice and stand up for those who are often overlooked or undeserved. Nevertheless, in the weeks following the rally, I discovered that not everyone agreed with my positive assessment or motivation in attending. One pastor mockingly said to me, "So I heard you were at a black power rally with your fist in the air." Another fellow minister forwarded me an article on the "Dangers of Critical Race Theory."[7] Lastly, I received an email from a pastor in one of our sister churches that read in part: "It was told to me by two different people that there are pictures of you online marching at a *Black Lives Matter* protest. I have no reason to doubt these reports. I am concerned that this is a poor witness to the community as you begin to start a new church in Lebanon."

As protests continued throughout the nation, with some resulting in violence and property damage, my sense of being a small part of something significant and needful was smothered. My desire to speak out was silenced. I quickly deleted the photos online

[6] Jenna Wise, "Protesters shut down Lebanon streets in peaceful rally over George Floyd's death, racial inequality," PennLive.com, published June 4, 2020, 4:40 p.m., updated June 4, 2020, 4:49 p.m., https://www.pennlive.com/news/2020/06/protesters-shut-down-lebanon-streets-in-solidarity-with-black-community.html.

[7] Heritage Foundation, "Learn How to Spot Critical Race Theory—and What You Can Do to Fight It," https://www.heritage.org/crt.

showing me at the rally, afraid I too would be labeled a Marxist or a rabble rouser. Internally, I was angered. I wanted to highlight that such misinformed beliefs and failure to advocate for people of color may be contributing to the lack of diversity in the PCA.[8] However, I also desired to respond humbly in a way that considered my own blind spots and walk carefully so as not to threaten the viability of the new church. These questions plagued me. Why did my well-intentioned participation in a rally for life incite criticism and concern from my peers? Why did they assume my presence at a protest would be a bad witness to the community instead of a means fostering empathy and solidarity?[9] Was this a learning moment as we sought to plant a church with one of our core values being to reach a diverse population? In one of my first experiences as a church planter serving in the PCA, I was dealing with issues of diversity and racial tensions. Shamed and intimidated into silence, was I overlooking a superb and powerful learning experience for myself, our church, and even our denomination? I thought about the reaction to my attendance at the rally often. It was a defining moment for me and impacted me as a

[8] At the time of the protest and its aftermath, I was not aware of what CRT was nor the origins of BLM. I was not equipped to counter or come to agree with the common accusation that both CRT and BLM represented political agendas of cultural Marxism. My participation, as a Christian pastor planning on planting a new church in the Lebanon region, was not even driven solely by my being a minority. Confronted with the cries of my black brothers and sisters, the anger of young people in the streets, and my own desire to defend the dignity of all humanity, I interpreted my actions as affirming the preciousness of life and weeping with those who weep. I contend that the misunderstanding of my well-meaning brothers was to first criticize the supposed ideological framework of the protest before defending the preciousness of every human life and empathizing with those in pain. (For more on the need to defend dignity while also discerning ideology, see Justin Ariel Bailey, *Interpreting Your World: Five Lenses for Engaging Theology and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 50.

[9] This incident also led me to explore the reasons for the concerns of my brothers. Over time, I came to understand that certain associations promoted ideologies that are antithetical to Christianity. In hindsight, I have come to understanding that such concerns may not have been not have been politically driven but theological. (For more on how ideologies such as CRT and organizations such as BLM are negatively influencing evangelical churches and undermining sound doctrine, see Neil Shenvi, Pat Sawyer, and Carl R. Trueman, *Critical Dilemma: The Rise of Critical Theories and Social Justice Ideology—Implications for the Church and Society* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2023), 7.

pastor, a member of our presbytery, and as a Christian. As a pastor, I felt the complexity of a double bind. I saw and felt firsthand the pain of the community I desired to reach. Young men and woman were visibly crying out in reaction that someone who looked like them could have their life snuffed out. Yet, I was being told that my concern jeopardized the viability of the church. This left me feeling like I had to choose between maintaining the status quo or advocating for those in the streets. As a member of our presbytery, I felt compelled to contribute to our need for diverse representation. I have taken considerable space reflecting on these two experiences, the introduction of the black couple to a PCA church and my presence at the protest for racial justice, for the purpose of reflecting on my own lived experiences. If I were to make sense of these events and interpret them in a way that led to progress rather than bitterness and retreat, I would need to be curious about the experiences of other PCA elders concerning the topic of race and diversity. Additionally, it was crucial for me to remain open to correction, ready to adjust my perspectives and actions based on new insights and understandings. This motivation became the impetus to pursue phenomenological research as the means for this project. If the point of phenomenological research, according to Max Van Manen, is to "borrow other people's experiences and their reflections of their experiences in order to better be able to come to a deeper meaning of significance," then a possible way forward out of my stalemate was to understand how other men in the PCA were experiencing similar tensions regarding race as elders, members of their presbyteries, and as Christians.[10] In other words, my reflection, although important, is not sufficient to arrive at a suitable

[10] Max Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (Langara College, 2021).

conclusion, either for me personally or for the broader church. I have merely started with a description of my lived experience about the phenomenon of race while serving as a PCA pastor so that I would have a more accurate sense of what I am attempting to obtain from my peers.

The defining, dual experiences of inviting my black friends to a PCA church and my experience in attending a rally/protest in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder (and the subsequent criticisms from some of my PCA peers), illustrates how ill-equipped we were to respond to these cultural moments. I felt ill-equipped to respond courageously, explaining and defending my position with insight and knowledge. Likewise, my peers' criticism may have, at best, impeded cultural appreciation and a concern for justice. In short, the door was closed on both ends, and further dialogue and exploration was negated. In addition, the experience of my black friends' introduction to a PCA church demonstrated that diversity issues are challenging, complicated, and confrontational. What, then, would be the benefit of investigating the views and experiences of elders in the PCA on the topic of race and diversity? Would a quantitative analysis of race and diversity yield more accurate results? Or would it be more beneficial to mine the Scriptures for their take on race and diversity with a goal to apply the findings to the PCA denomination through our local churches? One example of a biblical theology of race would be J. Daniel Hays' book, *From Every People and Nation*.[11] Of course, works such as these would be significant contributions. I have chosen to apply a phenomenological methodology, specifically interviewing PCA elders for the following reasons:

[11] J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003).

Elders hold a significant shepherding and governing role in the local church

PCA elder and author, Timothy Witmer, asserts that "the fundamental responsibility of church leaders is to shepherd God's flock."[12] The Reformed tradition has historically held that such shepherding should be regulated by God's Word. This regulation pertains not only to theological and doctrinal matters; it extends to caring for the nurture and health of the congregation. Since the Scriptures speak to the unity of God's people and the importance of relating to one another in love ("There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus," Galatians 3:28), elders have a responsibility of shepherding in a way that corresponds with this understanding while also countering racial beliefs or practices that are incompatible with the Christian faith.[13] This kind of biblical shepherding also includes addressing hurts, fears, and misunderstandings related to race. If members of the congregation experience racial prejudice or feel marginalized because of their race, elders have the duty to address this pastorally. If there is divisiveness in the congregation due to racial or ethnic divisions, the elders have a responsibility to rectify such issues. Likewise, elders are responsible to understand and combat unbiblical worldviews, teaching sound doctrine and instructing the saints how to walk wisely in the world.

The importance placed on elders for leading a congregation and setting the tone for positive change is high.

The importance of elder leadership to shepherd the flock, not to hinder or hurt it is well-attested to in the Scriptures. From the priests and prophets of the Old Testament to the pastors and shepherds of the New Testament, the call to be a model of godliness and

[12] Timothy Z. Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader: Achieving Effective Shepherding in Your Church* (P&R Publishing, 2017), 2.

[13] Galatians 3:28.

sacrificial service are non-negotiables in God's kingdom. When the leaders of God's people take on the character of the surrounding nations at large, the result is moral and social deterioration. When the people lacked knowledge of God's way, it was the priests who were held accountable (Hosea 6:1). When the prophets in Jeremiah's day were spokespersons for the status quo rather than for God, everyone under the prophet's leadership suffered (Jeremiah 29:9-40).[14] The weight of exemplary leadership is demonstrated when Ezekiel contrasts caring leaders to abusive ones (34), when Jesus identifies himself as a Good Shepherd who protects from wolves (John 10:11-15), and when Paul identifies himself as a model for the people to follow (1 Corinthians 11:1). These are but a few examples of the Scriptural affirmation of the importance of church leadership. The PCA has pursued high standards for qualified church leadership and painstakingly outlined specific standards for evaluating those who would serve in the sacred position of ruling elder and teaching elder.[15] Presently, the PCA continues to debate ways to heighten this standard and not compromise.[16] Therefore, while it would be a noteworthy task to determine the congregations' views and experiences on racial diversity, that may prove to be a backward, inconclusive, and unsubstantial approach. It is more likely that what elders are the people become. Again, this appears to be the scriptural progression. "Like people, like priest" (Hosea 4:9). Jesus said, "Everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40). A leader's influence on

[14] Allen R. Guenther, *Hosea, Amos*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 106.

[15] *The Book of Church Order*. Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, 1982.

[16] David W. Hall, *Irony and the Presbyterian Church in America* (Powder Springs, GA: Covenant Foundations, 2023), 394.

the local congregation is inevitable. But will it be for good or for ill?[17] Because shepherds are assumed to be "gifts to the church" (Ephesians 4:11) and the pastoral role remains central in the life of the local churches, any valuable insights for where a denomination or a local church is in their views and experiences of racial diversity will be found by querying the leadership.

A reasonable way forward cannot be strategized while thoughts, opinions, and feelings of our leaders remain vague

Querying the elders that make up the PCA denomination is an attempt to unearth that which often remains hidden. This approach seeks to contemplate, explore, and name not only the positions of these leaders on race, but to investigate how their lived experiences led to meaningful insights. While an anonymous poll may yield quantitative data, it is only the first step in understanding and moving forward in a positive way. Author David Simmons identifies several reasons why pastors are silent and unheard on certain subjects. Pastors naturally face physical isolation, as the pastor engages in the work of sermon preparation, personal study and growth, and church administration, all of which push the pastor behind closed doors in "behind the scenes" work. Existential isolation occurs also, as the pastor is "left alone with his own questions about ultimate issues. . . . Geographic isolation, then separates pastors from their extended families, collegiate and seminary colleagues, and childhood friends. Lastly, relational isolation . . . means that a pastor is never allowed to be human—only pastor or 'the Reverend.'"[18] Specifically, on topics that tend to be more controversial, like race relations and politics,

[17] Philip Towner, *1–2 Timothy & Titus*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, vol. 14 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 1 Ti 5:22–25.

[18] David Simmons, "The Pastor's Personal Friendships: Conflicts, Boundaries, and Benefits," DMin. project, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2014.

elders have learned to remain quiet or couch their words in ways that will not risk their position. This, however, is not a feasible and productive way to move forward. Interviews, therefore, have the ability to deepen knowledge of people, institutions, and social processes.[19] One goal of this paper is to provide a local point of view regarding the larger topic of race in a predominantly white denomination. Such interviews can challenge assumptions and uncover ideas and experiences that were largely unknown in previously published material.

Interviewing only PCA elders also has drawbacks

Exploring only the leaders in the denomination and local churches also possesses drawbacks as a methodological approach. While considered representatives of each local congregation, elders are subject to misrepresenting and/or misreading the congregational views on race and diversity. In a culture increasingly skeptical of institutional leadership, a more accurate reading of the temperature may be found among the people, rather than from those who are "out front."[20] Perhaps the greatest drawback to this approach is the exclusion of speaking to women, namely women of color. A singular analytical focus on one gender (male) and one specific identity (leaders) ignores what may be the most important and helpful voice in the discussion, those who are simultaneously invisible and hyper visible: women of color.[21] These, the most marginalized group, may provide multiple perspectives and divergent viewpoints needed for a more racially diverse PCA.

[19] Annette Lareau, *Listening to People* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021), 1.

[20] Barna Research Group, "People Are Losing Faith in (Some) Pastors," May 17, 2023, https://barna.gloo.us/articles/rp-module-3-2.

[21] Jennifer Esposito and Venus E. Evans-Winters, *Introduction to Intersectional Qualitative Research* (SAGE Publications, Inc, 2022).

Despite these glaring shortcomings, this paper will refrain from going beyond its scope, narrowing its query to a sample of men who serve as elders within the denomination. This may be an inherent weakness to the paper, but it is a disadvantage rooted in the reality of a denomination that is settled on a complementarian position. Despite belonging to the same denomination and agreeing on fundamental biblical and confessional tenants of faith, this qualitative study reveals a surprisingly diverse range of beliefs about race. As a result, they offer varied and nuanced perspectives on the topic in question. Because congregations are led by elders who have been selected by their congregation, they may provide the best data for where the denomination stands. The pastor of each local church is equal in authority to the other elders, and these elders are also members of their respective presbyteries, which has oversight over numerous churches in a particular region. To grasp the essence of where the denomination stands in regard to any matter, the best place to look would be to the ones who make up the denomination itself. This would be particularly true of elders, who have historically been held in high regard within the presbyterian system.

Louis Berkhof writes of that high regard and responsibility of the elder:

> While Christ committed power to the Church as a whole, He also provided for it that this power should be exercised ordinarily and specifically by representative organs, set aside for the maintenance of doctrine, worship, and discipline. The officers of the Church are the representatives of the people chosen by popular vote. This does not mean, however, that they receive their authority from the people, for the call of the people is but the confirmation of the inner call by the Lord Himself; and it is from Him that they receive their authority and to Him that they are responsible.[22]

[22] L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1938), 584.

Of critical importance to this proposed study would not only be the weight placed on elders, but their work. While the OT established that eldership would be a shared responsibility (Numbers 11:17), the NT expands the responsibility to those who carefully considered, debated, and decided theological issues (Acts 15).[23] When the apostle Paul urged the Ephesian elders to pay careful attention to themselves, to oversee, and care for the church (Acts 20:28), the implication is that the elders have both knowledge of truth and the wisdom to apply it to the people under their guidance.

The complexity of this task of eldership is succinctly described by Herman Bavinck in regard to the Jerusalem Council: "At the council of Jerusalem, according to Acts 15:4, 22–23, the elders had to consider and decide, jointly with the apostles, the weighty issue posed by the conversion of the Gentiles in the matter of their relationship to the Mosaic law."[24] The council decisively addressed the question of Gentile involvement in the new community. What should be the basis for their inclusion? This important question and the answer that was given should not be suggested as equal to the question of racial diversity in the PCA. This passage is not meant to carry the weight of an ethical demand for diversity in one or even all Christian denominations. Acts 15 is about Gentile inclusion and equality with the Jews, thus showing how Jesus brings reconciliation between people. Such a reconciliation will be a springboard for the preaching of the gospel in all the world (Acts 15-28). However, Acts 15 may provide some justification for this paper's qualitative methodology in querying elders in its

[23] L. Roy Taylor, "Presbyterianism," in *Who Runs the Church?* edited by Paul E. Engle and Steven B. Cowan, 80, Zondervan Counterpoints Collection (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004).

[24] Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, and John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

apparent framework of consultation. Darrell L. Bock reflects on the Jerusalem council, saying, "We call this meeting a consultation. It is not a council in the later technical ecclesiastical sense."[25] Beyond the vital theological issue being addressed in Acts 15 (inclusion of Gentiles in the church by faith in Christ) and the oft debated presbyterian-representative-connectional church government motif lies a practical example of leaders in the fledgling church questioning issues of life together, as they were living it, and the nature of their responsibility of personal opinions, decisions, and actions. They were exploring what it meant to be responsible for others (the Gentiles) and what that responsibility meant for the church they inhabited.

Problem Statement

Every day, on my usual route, I pass a car that sports a "Coexist" bumper sticker, made up of various religious and cultural symbols. This emblem, advocating for harmony and inclusivity, makes me pause and reflect. While the sentiment appears innocent, it oversimplifies complex and nuanced realities. The sticker, in its brevity, does not capture the depth and difficulty of these issues. This reminds me of the intricate and often challenging nature of addressing race, diversity, and the dynamics within the PCA, where simple solutions or slogans are not sufficient to grasp the full scope of these matters. Some would not consider the lack of racial diversity to be a problem in the denomination. Others would point to the need for racial reconciliation to be the dominant problem. Arriving at an answer is so elusive because we have not nailed down what is the problem. That is not to say there is a dearth of content and research available on racial diversity. Both within the church and without, there has been a flood of material identifying the

[25] Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

inequities and injustices present in racial relations in our nation. From a secular standpoint, publications for and against Critical Race Theory (CRT) have inundated the publishing world.[26] In addition to the Racial Reconciliation paper, *Hear Us Emmanuel: Another Call for Racial Reconciliation, Representation, and Unity in the Church,* is a robust book filled with essays dealing with the difficult issues, written specially for the PCA.[27] Dr. Irwyn Ince, Jr., recently appointed new Mission to North America Coordinator Pro Tempore, wrote *The Beautiful Community* to argue that the church should be intentional in its pursuit of racial diversity in its local fellowship.[28]

This study addresses the gap in understanding the lived experiences of the elders who lead the local congregations in the PCA in relation to their exposure, or lack thereof, to racial diversity and flourishing. What are the opinions and perspectives in racial diversity of the very men who lead these congregations? How have these perspectives been shaped by their physical, social, and cultural contexts? What experiences or relationships have altered these perspectives or further solidified them? What ideologies do they consider to be divisive in the context of race and diversity, alerting them to be vigilant in guarding the church against such dangers? The PCA Papers on Racism and Racial Reconciliation provided specific suggestions that listed concrete steps that sessions, presbyteries, and congregations might take in order to pursue racial reconciliation in their local contexts. While these recommendations followed a robust and

[26] Robert Chao Romero and Jeff M. Liou, *Christianity and Critical Race Theory: A Faithful and Constructive Conversation* (Baker Academic, a Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2023). Neil Shenvi, Pat Sawyer, and Carl R. Trueman, *Critical Dilemma: The Rise of Critical Theories and Social Justice Ideology—Implications for the Church and Society* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2023).

[27] Doug Serven, *Hear Us, Emmanuel* (White Blackbird Books, 2020).

[28] Irwyn L. Ince Jr., *The Beautiful Community: Unity, Diversity, and the Church at Its Best* (Westmont, IL: IVP, 2020).

thorough report, no follow-up report yet exists indicating fruit or progress that came from the study.

A second area of concern is the lack of emphasis on hearing from minority pastors within the denomination. With the PCA having a low representation of minority leadership, some would suggest that the voice of minority pastors is faint.[29] Many minorities call this the experience of feeling like a perpetual foreigner.[30] This issue is not exclusive to minority leaders, however. Most studies on race provide a macro-view of the topic or a more micro, nuanced, theological and theoretical view. Rarely is there a study that addresses the make-up of the elders involved, both from the majority culture and the minority representation, that explores their lived experiences that have inevitably informed how they view race within their lived world of shepherding. This presents us with the danger of losing touch with the real world of the elders who lead our congregations. This will also negatively impact the future of the denomination. If the PCA is to have a stronger representation of diverse people groups in positions of leadership, we need to be keenly interested in who these people are and be respectful of their differing experiences and viewpoints on matters not fundamental to the faith. Timothy Keller highlights the challenge, "The US church today stands in the midst of a maelstrom of conflict over e pluribus unum—unity and diversity. How can people who have been historically excluded and marginalized be genuinely included? How can the

[29] Alexander Jun, Scott Sauls, Sean Michael Lucas, Timothy LeCroy, Duke Kwon, Kevin Twit, Bobby Griffith, and Otis Pickett, *Heal Us, Emmanuel: A Call for Racial Reconciliation, Representation, and Unity in the Church* (Oklahoma City, OK: White Blackbird Books, 2016), 77.

[30] Adrian Pei, *The Minority Experience: Navigating Emotional and Organizational Realities* (IVP Books, an Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2018).

disempowered be empowered?"[31] For instance, Adrian Pei suggests that all organizations, systems, and communities that are aware of the gap between the majority and minority culture are more apt to work on the solutions to providing a more diverse, healthy environment than those who remain in willful ignorance.[32] An honest attempt to uncover the experiences, voices, and meanings of minority elders in the PCA may inform the denomination of ways to foster greater diversity in the denomination as a whole.

In summary, the gaps in racial diversity research reveal a lack of exploration as to how elders in the PCA are processing the topic of racial diversity, informed by their own lived experience, and formation. This has fostered an environment heavy in a theology of race and ample content on the prevailing discourses of race in the culture, but low on exploring the lived experience of the elder, the one primarily responsible for the leading and formation of the local congregation. Therefore, this project seeks to approach the elder within the PCA as a situated leader—thinking, acting, and relating in a very specific context. In what ways can he (or will he? Or should he?) expand his boundaries beyond the expected norms and outside the established framework? Or is the denomination at risk of straying beyond its established frameworks, thereby experiencing "mission creep"? This concern arises from the possibility that leaders, in a desire for positive racial change, have shifted their focus towards seeking cultural transformation instead of prioritizing Gospel transformation. Such a shift could lead to deviating from the church's

[31] Timothy Keller, *Uncommon Unity: Wisdom for the Church in an Age of Division* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022), xiii.

[32] Adrian Pei, *The Minority Experience: Navigating Emotional and Organizational Realities* (IVP Books, an Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2018), 18.

core mission and principles.[33] As a leader, an elder, he carries the responsibility of addressing the issues others may overlook. Not every congregant sitting on Sunday morning in the worship services needs to have a robust answer to CRT, Black Lives Matter, Christian nationalism, or white supremacy. But if the PCA, as a whole, is to be a place racially flourishing, then the leaders of that community must wrestle with these ideas on behalf of the whole.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore the experiences and viewpoints of PCA elders concerning racial diversity in the local church setting. Specifically, my aim was to delve into my peers' perspectives on this issue within the context of our denomination. By borrowing their experiences and exploring their viewpoints, I intend to reflect on these lived experiences in order to inform, shape, and enrich my own position as a pastor who desires a multi-racial ministry for the glory of Christ. Additionally, this process positions me to remain open to correction, allowing me to adjust and refine my approach based on the insights and feedback gathered from these interactions. In this phenomenological, hermeneutical investigation, the goal was to arrive at a deeper level of appreciation for being a pastor in the midst of racial tensions and polarizations. From this vantage point, I can theorize practical ways to move forward. Nevertheless, from the outset of the project, I am aware that this is an attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct an interpretation of how elders, both majority and

[33] Michael Horton defines "mission creep" as "the expansion of a project or mission beyond its original goals, often after initial successes." The term was originally coined in a 1993 *Washington Post* article on the UN Peacekeeping mission in Somalia, in which the writer argued that a humanitarian mission turned into a military operation which did not have clearly spelled-out goals and for which the soldiers on the ground were not prepared. See Michael Horton, *The Gospel Commission: Recovering God's Strategy for Making Disciples* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 8.

minority, are thinking through racial diversity, while being aware that this, as in all matters of lived life, is "always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal."[34] Moreover, from a biblical standpoint, it is important to recognize that we cannot achieve a utopia in this world. The church, in its pursuit of unity, will always grapple with failings and limitations, reflecting the ongoing journey towards understanding and harmony in a fallen world.[35] Therefore, the following pages are as important for what they do not contain as for what they do contain. This phenomenological research serves as a small part of what will, Lord willing, be an ongoing discussion on how the PCA can foster a greater environment for racially diverse peoples, gathered around the throne of the One true King, Jesus Christ.

Research Questions

I conducted seventeen conversational interviews with PCA elders from various parts of the United States. These elders were ordained as either teaching or ruling elders, serving in either the local church or parachurch ministries. I did not have a set of standard research questions at the outset of the research project. In contrast, I began with a general, single question that allowed for an openness to choose different interview techniques and questions that were not foreseeable when I began with my first interview. My single, broad question: how are elders in the PCA processing the topic of racial diversity in their local context? This initial question eventually led to a standardized set of further questions. The fact that I, too, am a PCA teaching elder—working as a lead pastor in a

[34] Max Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (Langara College, 2021).

[35] For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. Romans 8:22–23.

church planting initiated by the Susquehanna Valley Presbytery—and am familiar with what it means to be an elder in a congregational setting, and understand the basic aspects of these elders' situations leading to a certain level of acceptance and trust.

The following questions guided the research study and, using the conversational model, led to an array of follow-up questions related to the purpose of the study:

1) How have you experienced racial diversity in your life, in your ministry, church, or relationships?
2) What is your opinion on whether or not church leadership should intentionally pursue racial diversity in its congregations, leadership, and related ministries? If so, how can this be done?
3) In 2018, the 44th General Assembly issued a report on racial reconciliation. That report included some very specific suggestions for congregations, presbyteries, and committees on how to move forward for racial reconciliation and diversity. Six years later, do you see fruit coming from this report in our denomination? Why or why not?
4) Some people would say critical race theory provides an accurate diagnosis and solution to the lack of diversity in the PCA. What would you say to this suggestion?
5) For minority elders in the PCA: What has your experience been like observing your peers' reactions to racial tensions in our nation over the past year? For majority elders: How did you personally respond to the racial unrest during this period? (In the interviews conducted, I alternated between asking these two questions to different groups of elders).

Max Van Manen's Phenomenological Model Methodology

The art of conducting research requires "the inquiring into or investigating something in a systematic manner."[36] Understanding the phenomenon of racial diversity in the PCA is a massive undertaking, one that has been broached by large, broad studies, such as the Racial Reconciliation paper of the General Assembly. This paper attempts to take a narrower, detailed view of the subject by seeking to understand how elders within the denomination view and experience racial diversity in their spheres of pastoral influence. With a focus on experiences and views of such elders, I chose a phenomenological, qualitative research methodology that utilized interviews for the collection of data. The goal was to use phenomenology to better understand how the elders in the PCA perceive and experience issues of race as they work within the church. Cheryl Tatano Beck suggests there are two types of phenomenology, descriptive and interpretive.[37] In descriptive phenomenology, the essence of the experience is described. In interpretive phenomenology, also called hermeneutic phenomenology, the science of interpretation is applied in order to arrive at an understanding. Utilizing both types, the purpose of the research is to discover meaningful insights, reflecting on the meaning of the experiences to be "open and have an attitude of wonder."[38]

In this study, I provide a keyhole by which the reader can peer into the minds and hearts of elders serving in the PCA, observing how they think through and experience this vital subject. The data presented increases the understanding of a complex and, often,

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[36] Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis* (Jossey-Bass, 2002).

[37] Cheryl Tatano Beck, *Introduction to Phenomenology: Focus on Methodology* (SAGE, 2021).

[38] Ibid.

ignored subject. For instance, I seek to make sense of the elders' views, not merely of their opinions and doctrine on race and diversity, but through their personal stories and experiences. By examining personal histories and stories, I seek to ascertain how these histories and stories interconnect and provide a richer experience. Additionally, exploring their stories serves a dual purpose: it not only helps me grasp the complexity of their experiences but also offers an opportunity to reinforce or potentially modify my own views on these matters.

While Beck suggests that a researcher should attempt "to put aside their past experiences, biases, everyday understanding, and presuppositions about what they are studying," I admit that I was unable to separate my stories from the meaning of my participant stories. I contend that a sharp distinction between the two was unnecessary. Recognizing my own subjectivities and presuppositions was a crucial aspect of the methodology. Because this study explored elders' perceptions on race, the qualitative phenomenological approach best presented the participants and systems in multiple and complex ways. This qualitative design collected data on the perspectives of the participants by way of semi-structured interviews. Interviewing a small number of participants over a three-year time period provided enough data to make valid, interpretive claims. These interviews shed light on the doctrinal, practical, cultural, and personal factors that have informed these leaders. Engaging with their experiences and viewpoints has significantly shaped and evolved my own understanding and approach to the issues at hand.

Assumptions, Strengths, and Limitations

I suggest that the strength of this research project derives from my experience of serving as a pastor in the PCA. My shared experience with the interview participants

provides a unique advantage as an *insider*. I had a keen sense of what my peers were experiencing. This provided me with an open door to interview the participants and to have a sense of solidarity with their occupation. This shared experience proved helpful in accessing other elders for this research and in understanding what their roles entailed. My being an ordained teaching elder in the PCA helped me to earn trust with the participants and gain further access with their acquaintances and colleagues. This insider position was balanced by my also being an *outsider* to the PCA. I have only been ordained in the PCA for the past 4 years. I did not grow up as a presbyterian or even in a mainline, Protestant denomination. I was raised within a Pentecostal/evangelical tradition and pastored within that tradition for over 15 years. In addition, I am an ethnic minority pastor in my presbytery. These outsider qualities may grant me the fresh perspectives that an outsider is prone to bring. I am new to the cultural mores of the PCA and am still learning what it means to be a leader within this denomination. This provides me with a curiosity and openness to understand the uniqueness of this denomination and those serving within its confessional standards. As I interviewed elders who had been in the denomination much longer than I have, I noticed that many of the participants were aware of my newness to the denomination, which allowed me to question them on topics or issues that would normally have been taken for granted (e.g., the reason behind requiring ordination candidates to take multiple written and oral exams in order to be considered for ordination). I did not try to eliminate either my insider or outsider position, but I was aware of both postures and sought to understand and use these for the advantage of the research. Nevertheless, my insider/outsider position as a researcher does not eliminate the

existence of limitations in the study. Some of the potential limitations to this study include:

1. My insider status in the PCA may have limited my observations. For instance, participants may have given me answers to please me, answers that would be acceptable for one elder to give another. Participants may have been influenced in their responses by my status as an elder. In addition, minority pastors may have biased their answers due to their speaking to a fellow minority pastor.
2. My outsider perspective as a minority pastor in the denomination results in a personal subjectivity. As Peshkin says, "One's subjectivity is like a garment which cannot be removed."[39] I was very much aware of my personal experiences and subjectivity.[40] Furthermore, I admit to privileging the data and experiences of fellow minority elders. While this was intentional due to the theoretical nature of the research, this selection and data bias may result in overtly negative or jaundiced views. The sociocultural factors that I bring to the study, namely as a Filipino, male, middle-class, theologically conservative pastor, inevitably influence the direction and outcomes of the paper. Likewise, having trained as a chaplain in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) at Penn State Hershey Medical Center, I have been equipped with intellectual hospitality that considers a wide spectrum of views.[41] This unique program fostered an appreciation for an

[39] Alan Peshkin, "In Search of Subjectivity—One's Own," Educational Researcher 17, no. 7 (1988): 17-21, Annette Lareau, *Listening to People: A Practical Guide to Interviewing, Participant Observation, Data Analysis, and Writing It All Up* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021).

[40] Beck, *Introduction to Phenomenology: Focus on Methodology*.

[41] "Association for Clinical Pastoral Education," accessed November 16, 2023, https://acpe.edu/.

interdisciplinary approach, nurturing my capacity to engage with eclectic theological disciplines. On the other hand, I have also seen how a promiscuous openness to foreign ideas can be perilous to the Christian faith. Certain ideologies, philosophies, and aberrant doctrines can corrupt minds and, ultimately, the church. Therefore, while this experience has shaped my approach to this topic with openness and nuance, it has also taught me the importance of discernment and maintaining appropriate boundaries in intellectual and theological exploration.

3. Because of the nature of a phenomenological, qualitative research, limitations exist in terms of generalizability.[42] The study relied upon a limited elder representation of the denomination. Relying upon purposeful sampling, I selected participants for my study from elders I was familiar with in my circle of influence and from those who were suggested to me by others. I interviewed participants from all four quadrants of the United States. I also invited participants from minority populations, collaborating with Black-Indigenous-People of Color (BIPOC) elders from various presbyteries. I used triangulation in my selection of participants, collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings.[43] Based on my first few interviews, I decided to split the interviews between 50% majority culture elders (white) and 50% minority pastors to see if I could find patterns similar to the initial differences, as noted in the first few interviews. I made decisions on who else to include in the study based on the

[42] Beck, *Introduction to Phenomenology*.

[43] Esposito and Evans-Winters, *Introduction to Intersectional Qualitative Research*.

preliminary analysis of the data. The goal was to confirm or disconfirm emerging patterns. Nevertheless, interviewing a small number of participants does not explore the breadth of the elders serving in the PCA. While I collected enough data to make valid claims, the narrow participation of the study mutes other important voices in the denomination and misses on the extensive variation of thought that exists on the topic of race.

4. The choice to interview only elders serving in the PCA for this study may betray the complex relationship between social identities, power, and knowledge.[44] The choice to interview elders and not congregants, including women and children, may perpetuate a deficient perspective that comes from ignoring those most overlooked among us. The choice to interview only men risks treating women as mere bystanders to the racialized experiences of those within the church. A lens focused only on ordained men may not be helpful in rectifying the lack of diversity within the denomination.

Summary

This chapter has laid the foundation for the following explorations into the issue of race within the church, particularly in the PCA. It has clarified the theoretical lenses and methodological tools that will be used throughout this research. Perhaps most importantly, it has made a case for why this study is necessary and timely, given the ongoing discourse surrounding racial diversity within the church.

The essence of protest is the pursuit of recognition and acknowledgment, the desire of a community to have its voices heard. In contrast, to be unheard or overlooked

[44] Esposito and Evans-Winters, *Introduction to Intersectional Qualitative Research*.

is to exist in the shadows, hidden and unheeded. Therefore, to foster meaningful dialogue and understanding, we must practice active listening and empathize with the stories and experiences of others. Part of that active listening requires a broad engagement with diverse academic discourses. This approach goes beyond the confines of theological studies and broadens the lens to include how the church is engaging with sociology, anthropology, history, psychology, and critical race studies. By assimilating insights from these diverse disciplines, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of the complex ways the church is wrestling with these topics. By adopting such an approach, we may be more equipped and more informed on the racial dynamics within the denomination. However, in pursuit of this broad engagement, we also face a danger: the risk of seeking cultural transformation while inadvertently neglecting the Gospel's power to build Christ's church. The following chapter will lay out the different, contemporary lenses employed in the PCA to discuss race and seek solutions.

CHAPTER TWO: THE ONGOING CONVERSATION ABOUT RACE IN THE PCA

> *When principles that run against your deepest convictions begin to win the day, then battle is your calling and peace has become sin. You must at the price of dearest peace lay your convictions bare before friend and enemy with all the fire of your faith*.[1] –Abraham Kuyper

> *To observe people in conflict is a necessary part of a child's education. It helps him to understand and accept his own occasional hostilities and to realize that differing opinions need not imply an absence of love*."[2] – Milton R. Sapirstein

Because this research utilizes specific theoretical frameworks by which to review and interpret the qualitative discoveries, this chapter will review the literature pertinent to this study. The research presented in the subsequent chapters fits into what is already known about racial diversity in the church, specifically in the context of the PCA. In this section, the Racial Reconciliation paper of the General Assembly is viewed as prior and existing research into race matters within the denomination. Staying within the milieu of the PCA, Dr. Irwyn Ince's argument for a multi-ethnic church, as presented in his book, *The Beautiful Community*, is examined.[3] Lance Lewis' chapter, "Black Pastoral Leadership and Church Planting," in the book, *Aliens in the Promised Land*, will act as a conversation partner with Ince, presenting possible objections to Ince's hope for more diverse churches in the PCA.[4] These conversation partners raise the question of whether

[1] Mark Water, *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations* (Alresford, Hampshire: John Hunt Publishers Ltd, 2000), 219.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Dr. Ince is the moderator of the Mission to North America, a missional outreach of the PCA.

[4] Anthony Bradley, ed., *Aliens in the Promised Land: Why Minority Leadership is Overlooked in White Christian Churches and Institutions* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013).

racial diversity should be pursued in the local church and within the denomination as a whole. The second section will engage with the current literature on CRT, examining whether this cultural tool is an appropriate mechanism for examining the lack of racial diversity within the denomination. Original sources from CRT scholars will be examined for possible continuity and discontinuity with the beliefs and practices of the PCA. Lastly, *Christianity and Critical Race Theory, A Faithful and Constructive Conversation,* by scholars Robert Chao Romero and Jeff M. Liou, will be analyzed to explore whether CRT could be a beneficial lens by which to view the current state of the denomination. Together, these resources serve as a sampling of current literature, providing an opportunity to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the relevant literature and grounding the present study in these previous works and theories. Furthermore, the critiques and analyzation of the literature provide a validation for the present study and the need for further research.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study, while finding its impetus in my own personal experience as stated in the first chapter, is primarily prompted by the Report on Racial and Ethnic Reconciliation to the Forty-Sixth General Assembly in 2018. The purpose of this study is to enter that conversation and, in some ways, build upon it. This report was written as a response to Overture 45 from the Potomac Presbytery. The study committee ad interim was appointed by the General Assembly with a four-part mandate: 1) to assess the current situation in the PCA concerning racial and ethnic reconciliation, 2) to identify problems the PCA needs to address to promote racial reconciliation and ethnic diversity, 3) to develop constructive guidelines and suggest concrete steps for the use of the PCA, including all presbyteries and sessions in order to make progress toward the work of

racial reconciliation.[5] There is both a qualitative and quantitative aspect to this report, as the committee "utilized Lifeway Research Services in order to survey current attitudes on issues of race among teaching and ruling elders."[6] The report further acknowledges the work of previous General Assemblies on matters of race and reconciliation, with concrete examples of the need for "establishing urban congregations, the enhancement of existing ministries of mercy in the cities, among the poor, and across all social, racial, and economic boundaries to the glory of God."[7]

Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Racial and Ethnic Reconciliation to the Forty-Sixth General Assembly

The GA paper is a framework to this study because it first establishes the need and general desire of the PCA to unify a voice for racial reconciliation and a more diverse racial representation in our churches. While the paper is not the force of law in the courts of the church, it does express the opinion of the denomination and provide suggestions and recommendations for its members to follow. More importantly, the report reads with a desire for change and improvement. Although the headline of the report highlights *reconciliation*, it becomes glaringly apparent that the hope is for a more ethnically and racially diverse PCA. "Our great hope is that this report will offer a pathway for our church to reflect the eschatological body of Revelation 7, drawn from every nation, from all tribes and people's and languages."[8] The report acts as a framework to this study because it embodies the same goals and raises some of the same concerns.

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[5] "The Pursuit of Gospel Unity." The PCA Paper on Racial Reconciliation. Lawrenceville, Georgia: PCA Committee on Discipleship Ministries, 2019. 95.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

After opening with a series of affirmation and rejection statements, the report offers three sections of biblical-theological, confessional, and pastoral-mission reflections that frame the work of racial reconciliation. The report closes by engaging with the data collected by LifeWay Research Services in a survey conducted among elders. The biblical and theological foundations follow a standard evangelical view of race and racism. There is no agenda-driven hermeneutic but an approach to fleshing out the Scriptures on race that follows a standard historical-grammatical method.[9] The evangelical presuppositions regarding the nature of the Bible and how it speaks to race and the inclusion of the nations in the body of Christ are evident. God's creation is exceedingly good, and this includes the ample diversity displayed in the divine design of the world. What is true for God's good creation of the inanimate and animate pertains to the apex of His creation, man and woman created in His image, as well. "Adam and Eve as the fountainhead of humanity represent all races in themselves; while they are not identifiable by race or ethnicity, they contain all races and ethnicities. And those races and ethnicities that spring from our first parents bear God's image. Hence racism or ethnicism—which presume that one's race or ethnicity is superior to another—is a denial that all people have been created in the image of God."[10] Just as we share in the goodness of creation together, all races also participate in the sin of our first parents.[11] Thus, no race is more or less sinful than another. From this sin comes a desire to dominate one another, a desire that has marred world history. The report, however, pinpoints this abuse

[9] Hays, *From Every People and Nation*, 21.

[10] "The Pursuit of Gospel Unity." The PCA Paper on Racial Reconciliation.

[11] Ibid.

as not only general, but often specific to the church and her leaders: "This dominion over others, both intentional and unintentional, is at times manifested in misuses and abuses by men in positions of power, leading to voicelessness and broken fellowship of brothers from minority groups."[12]

The answer to this division and fracture is found early in the pages of the Old Testament. Through Abram, God will bring blessing to all people (Genesis 12). Foreigners will join Israel as the people of God, evident in the lives of Rahab and Ruth (Joshua 2; Ruth 1). The promises made to David find their apex in the Anointed One who will make the nations His inheritance (Psalm 2:8). Isaiah sees a day coming when all nations will flow to Mt. Zion, to be ruled by the Lord (Isaiah 2:2–5).

> By the time one gets to the end of the Old Testament, the expectation is set. How is God going to bless all the families of the earth? God is going to bless them through a son of Abraham, a son of David. The New Testament tells us this One is the promised King, Jesus the Son of David, the Son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1). Through His cross, he will bring down the dividing wall that hinders fellowship between the races. Ephesians and Colossians are references to show that through the cross of Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile, whether white or black, Asian or Latino, or other races and ethnicities, through the cross of Jesus, we have been reconciled, displaying one humanity to the watching world.[13]

The biblical-theological section closes by clarifying that creation of one new man does not indicate the creation of a third race or eliminate ethnicity or race but points us in the direction of Revelation 7 in which people "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" are brought together by the blood of Jesus to sing his praise. Advocating for multi-ethnic and multiracial pluralism in the church, the report closes the

[12] "The Pursuit of Gospel Unity."

[13] Ibid.

biblical-theological section by yearning for a realization of the biblical storyline of diversity among our fellowships.

The second section on the confessional support for reconciliation is brief. Acknowledging that the word "race" was not found specifically in the Westminster Standards (a part of the PCA's constitution), the theological categories are present within the standards that "shape our approach to racial reconciliation and justice."[14] This is argued for how the standards direct us to the Triune God (WCF 2:3), whose image is evidenced in all humanity, in each race and ethnicity. This is the first time in the report that the *imago dei* is clearly used to defend the concern for racial reconciliation. Likewise, God's electing decree (WCF 3:6-7) is the fundamental division between the elect and the lost; nothing else inherent in race should divide people groups. Reconciliation even in this division is found only through the blood of Christ (WCF 8:5). This salvation is all of grace (WCF 10:2) and preference should never be given to one particular race over another. The Larger Catechism is then appealed to in regard to God's law on how Christians should live with one another. The second table of the law is primarily horizontal in nature, calling us to love and honor those in every station of life, whether superior or inferior (LC 131). A call to justice is found in LC 135, seeking to preserve the lives of our brothers and sisters, defend their rights, and always be ready to be reconciled. We are to honor each other's marriages as in the Lord (WCF 24:3), regardless of the racial makeup of the marriage. We are to act in accordance with economic justice regardless of race (LC 141). Specific focus is given to living out this justice and faithfulness from *within* the church, since the church "consists of all those

[14] "The Pursuit of Gospel Unity."

throughout the world that profess true religion, and of their children" (WCF 25:2). This communion with one another is shared primarily in the communion of saints around the Word and sacrament (WCF 27:1). These sacraments are not restricted by race, but open to all the elect who profess Christ (WCF 31:2). The confessional section of the report closes much like the first section: with an eye towards the ethnoracial diversity of Revelation 7:9. John's eschatological vision sees people from every race joining their voices to praise Christ in the aftermath of judgment (WCF 33:1-2). The report argues that our confessional documents "demand that we lean into these issues faithfully in obedience to the Scriptures themselves." Failure to do so is a failure to live faithfully to our own confessional standards.[15]

PCA pastor and author, David Hall, suggested that the 44th General Assembly's work on racial reconciliation was marked by "hype and an elitist push above."[16] He calls this the "parish gap," since most churches did not agree this (race) was a huge problem. Hall's point is bolstered by the fact that 68% were not aware of the PCA's history and practices that would meet the standard of racism. Even fewer understood why the PCA is dealing with this issue in the first place, or what the denomination is trying to accomplish on this issue (39%). Hall suggests that these numbers raise serious questions whether racism is being manifested in the structures and processes of the PCA. Hall quotes the data from the research paper that "very few see PCA staff or processes contributing to racism and very little racism among elders."[17] The report questions these findings

[15] "The Pursuit of Gospel Unity."

[16] David W Hall, *Irony and the Presbyterian Church in America*. (Powder Springs, GA: Covenant Foundations, 2023).

[17] "The Pursuit of Gospel Unity."

considering "elders are still sinners being sanctified." Nevertheless, Hall suggests that the racial reconciliation schema brought up by the 44th GA was a misguided agenda of elite leaders and pastors who are under the age of fifty.[18] Furthermore, Hall wonders if the real inequality is not racial but the privilege of teaching elders above ruling elders. He writes that an area of privilege is the "TE privilege in the courts. Ruling elders were less willing to lose their worship style (for the sake of diversity). Moreover, it is clear that 4/5 are not persuaded that this is as important as do the outspoken leaders of the Assembly (81%)."[19] Hall's interpretation of the data might be contested. Some could even say that his derogatory perspective of the GA's work on race may actually prove the need of the Race and Reconciliation paper.[20] Nevertheless, his musings do raise the possibility that there may be a disconnect between the beliefs and concerns of some of the elders in the PCA and the communities they lead. Alternatively, this gap may highlight the urgent need for a deeper understanding of race in theology, which would ensure that congregations are fully nourished and guided by understanding, compassion, and cultural intelligence.

Engagement, Diagonalization, and Watkin's Perspective

The church has a history of debating on how she is to engage with cultural theories and ideologies that appear to be incompatible with the Christian faith. What can be categorized as "common grace" truths that may be beneficial to the believer and what

[18] Hall, Irony "Presbyterian Church in America."

[19] Ibid.

[20] According to William E. Boyce and Carl F. Ellis Jr., the PCA denomination's recent report on race highlights a cultural divide. Demographic differences, especially age, region, and education, influenced the perceived importance of the study, underscoring the denomination's challenges in addressing racial issues. Boyce writes, "the denomination's leadership cannot agree on the need to have a conversation about race at all, let alone how to have it well." (See, William E. Boyce and Carl F. Ellis Jr., *Outsiders on the Inside: Understanding Racial Fatigue, Racial Resilience, and Racial Hospitality in Our Churches* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2022).

is deemed worthless and should be avoided at all costs, is not always easy to decipher. Christopher Watkins, a notable contemporary scholar, explores the nuanced ways in which Christians can engage with prevailing theories in today's culture. In his book, *Biblical Critical Theory*, Watkin proposes that the Bible does what all critical theories intend to do in that the Bible makes things in the world visible to us and shows us what is valuable. Watkin draws upon an understanding of common grace by recognizing that culture and religion are entangled, "to the point where we find it hard to work out which idea or behavior belongs to which."[21] The core assumption of Watkin's book is that although the culture retains a deeply Christian imprint (common grace), it is a poor photocopy of the real thing: "streaky, partial, distorted."[22] Between two opposing camps and positions, the Bible offers a third way, a cutting across the options and presenting a rearrangement of the false dichotomies. Watkin calls this "diagonalization," an interrelated biblical truth often splintered by a cultural dichotomy, thus fragmenting it into mutually exclusive choices. Diagonalization presents a biblical solution where the best options of the competing opinions are fulfilled, but in a way that appears as a radical, divine intervention. Watkin's theological/cultural proposal echoes Timothy Keller's motif of preaching the gospel as a "third way, distinct from both irreligion and religion."[23]

Watkin's diagonalization, however, provides a broader means by which to engage the culture, resisting polarized positions, and acting in a way that is revolutionary by

[21] Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2022), 14.

[22] Ibid., 15.

[23] Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Zondervan. Kindle Edition), 66.

substituting love of neighbor for the violence and power of brute opposition.[24] This leads to what Watkin calls a "biblical social theory." The Bible has something to say about what society is and how it works. Thus, it provides what all social theories also provide, what is viable, what is visible, and what is valuable. For Watkin, social theory is somewhat misleading. More than a theory, it shapes the world and influences, not only opening the world to the viewer, but creating it through perception and integration. "This is why these theories are so potent: once we have begun to look not simply at but through them, we start seeing their patterns and rhythms everywhere because the theory conditions us to find them everywhere. What I "see" is always shaped by my commitments."[25] Therefore, the ultimate social theory is the one provided by the Bible, as it tells the reader what is viable, visible, and valuable. It critiques other theories while also providing a positive agenda. This prevents what Watkin calls the taking of "the current flavor of the month in intellectual circles and dress it up in ill-fitting Christian clothing.[26] This is no Biblicist project, however. Watkin appeals to Augustine's *The City of God* in which the church father not only explains the Bible to the Roman culture, but also explains Roman culture in the framework of the plot line of redemption history.[27] This is in tandem with an appeal by Augustine to be open to learning from even the

[24] Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory*, 20.

[25] Ibid., 29.

[26] Ibid., 30.

[27] Augustine also took great effort to demonstrate that Rome, symbolizing the City of Man during his time, was not the city that Christians should cherish. He exposed the flaws of Roman culture in various aspects such as their deities, politics, and moral lapses: "Lust requires for its consummation darkness and secrecy; and this not only when unlawful intercourse is desired, but even such fornication as the earthly city has legalized" (Augustine, City of God, 14.18). Augustine wrote to defend the City of God specifically against the proponents of the earthly city: "For to this earthly city belong the enemies against whom I have to defend the city of God" (Augustine, *City of God*, 1.1).

pagans: “We were not wrong to learn the alphabet just because they say that the god Mercury was its patron, nor should we avoid justice and virtue just because they dedicated temples to justice and virtue and preferred to honor these values not in their minds, but in the form of stones. A person who is a good and a true Christian should realize that truth belongs to his Lord, wherever it is found, gathering and acknowledging it even in pagan literature, but rejecting superstitious vanities.”[28]

This returns us to the burning question of how an institution like the PCA should engage with racial studies from non-Christian sources. The Racial Reconciliation report appears to be open to the idea on the basis that all truth is God’s truth and the Reformed tradition of common grace, especially in the vein of Abraham Kuyper and neo-Calvinism. This, however, is with the caveat that the biblical message should remain prominent above all else.

The Rejection of Intersectionality

In the ongoing dialogue about race in the PCA, the Racial Reconciliation report is a robust document seeking to provide the denomination’s stance on various racial issues. There appears to be a concerted effort to provide guidance on how one is to navigate the complex terrain of talking about race in the church while also suggesting a framework aimed at building congregations that effectively minister to a diverse spectrum of people. However, the report is scant on addressing contemporary ideologies and controversies that have significantly impacted contemporary culture and left the church scurrying for answers. Only in the appendix of the report does one find a page dedicated to seven

[28] Augustine of Hippo. “On Christian Doctrine,” in *St. Augustine’s City of God and Christian Doctrine*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J. F. Shaw, vol. 2 of A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 545.

affirmations and eight denials. The fifth denial is a rejection of intersectionality. The footnote defining the novel theory of intersectionality references Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic's book, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. One wonders if a more helpful, bold cultural engagement would require a more nuanced engagement with these theories. In the words of John Stott, an approach of "double listening":

> We are called to double listening, listening to both the Word and the world.… We listen to the Word with humble reverence, anxious to understand it, and resolved to believe and obey what we have come to understand. We listen to the world with critical alertness, anxious to understand it too, and resolved not necessarily to believe and obey it, but to sympathize with it and to seek grace to discover how the gospel relates to it.[29]

However, double listening must also respect appropriate boundaries. A warning about affirming double listening would caution against filling the mind with ideas antithetical to the Word of God. Some practices of double listening could be dangerous. Neither of these warnings are addressed. Such an omission is particularly noticeable in the context where churches are a part of rapidly evolving discussions about systemic racism, various social justice movements, intersectionality, discussions which are only gaining traction in recent years.

Despite these omissions, with one statement of rejection, the PCA's report called two social theories into question and relegated them as unfit tools by which to examine race: intersectionality and CRT. CRT is not named in the appendix, but its reference in the footnote makes it guilty by association.[30] Indeed, the association between the two is

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[29] John Stott. *The Contemporary Christian* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 27.

[30] Overture 18, titled "Affirm Christ-Centered Racial Reconciliation and Reject Secular Social Justice and Critical Theory Ideology," was proposed by the Sessions of Carriage Lane Presbyterian Church, Covenant Presbyterian Church, East Cobb Presbyterian Church, and Tucker Presbyterian Church. They submitted this overture to the Metro Atlanta Presbytery for consideration on January 24, 2023. However,

undeniable. Intersectionality is rooted in black feminism and CRT, intending to be a method and a disposition, a heuristic and analytic tool. The genesis of intersectionality can be traced to the 1989 essay by Kimberly Crenshaw, entitled "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics."[31] The term was introduced by Crenshaw to address the "marginalization of black women within not only antidiscrimination law but also in feminist and antiracist theory and politics." Crenshaw would elaborate on the theory further when she employed intersectionality to "highlight the ways in which social movement organizations and advocacy against women elided the vulnerabilities of women of color, particularly those from immigrant and socially disadvantaged communities."[32] Although distinct from CRT, intersectionality is deployed by the former since race should not be considered in isolation. Rather, the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation should "intersect," considering how their combinations play out in various settings. Using an ancient example, consider Abraham and Sarah's slave, Hagar in the biblical text (Genesis 16). She was a slave, an Egyptian, exploited by Abraham, physically abused by Sarah, and ultimately economically disadvantaged as she was left

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the Metro Atlanta Presbytery rejected it on the same day. Additionally, on June 13th, 2023 the overture was presented at the 51st PCA General Assembly in Richmond, Virginia, where it was also denied with a vote of 91-39 in the negative. The overture was adamant to express affirmation of the Biblical reconciliation paper but wanted a clearer denial of CRT and intersectionality. The reasoning was as follows: "Since this secular ideology and its strands fail to recognize the eternal creator God and the unity of humanity as created in his image; the result of the fall and the character of sin, both individually and corporately; and the redemption and reconciliation that is found in Christ alone, we declare that this ideology's answer to race and racism is incompatible with the truth of scripture, the PCA's confessional standards, and our ongoing commitment to the gospel task of racial reconciliation and the furtherance of the gospel, and therefore disturbs the peace, purity, and unity of the church."

[31] Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, 1989 U. Chicago Legal Forum: Vol. 1989 Iss. 1, Article 8.

[32] Ibid.

for dead in the desert. The modern theory of intersectionality applied to this ancient story would clearly articulate these intersecting modes of oppression and call for a strategy to be employed to help the oppressed. Deloris Williams calls this the outsider position par excellence and introduces one to black women's predicaments in the modern world.[33] A modern day example of intersectionality would be the analysis and subsequent strategy to liberate a woman who experiences disadvantages due to being economically distressed as an African-American female: a triple oppression, according to ethicist Katie Cannon of being poor, black, and a woman.[34]

Jeff M. Liou and Robert Chao Romero, scholars noted for their contributions in advocating for social justice in the church, provide a positive assessment of CRT in their book, *Christianity and Critical Race Theory.* They define the theory as one of many academic lenses deployed as a tool to examine and explore how race and ethnicity have shaped laws, policies, and institutions in the United States for four-hundred years.[35] CRT is a legal theoretical framework built in the observation that systemic racism exists, is pervasive, and was long preserved by the American legal system and national values.[36] Proponents of Critical Race Theory (CRT) maintain that racism is inherently embedded in the American spirit, particularly within its legislation and organizations. Emerging from the minds of twentieth-century intellectuals, CRT was born out of the query as to

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[33] Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Orbis, Kindle Edition), 3-4.

[34] Katie G. Cannon, Black *Womanist Ethics*, America Academy of Religion Academy Series (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988).

[35] Liou and Romero are not affiliated with the PCA but provide a Christian, external, and academic perspective to the debate.

[36] Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 3.

why the gains from the civil rights movement seemed to be materializing at a glacial pace . . . if they were even happening at all. Although the theory finds its roots in the 1970s and 1980s in America law schools, it, too, has become interdisciplinary, moving into unexplored places of society and observing how race has operated in US history. While the genesis of Critical Race Theory (CRT) is deeply intertwined with dialogues around American legal and institutional frameworks, its multifaceted discourse has also expanded to the realm of the church. If racial biases infiltrate American systems and policies, it is logical to infer that they would also extend to the church. Thus, it is no surprise that a denomination with minimal minority representation would equally be subject to such scrutiny. Liou and Romero take a constructive view of CRT, pinpointing where the theory falls short up against the Christian faith while also identifying where CRT integrates with Christian faith and theology. Liou highlights that some Christian traditions have been doing the work of CRT well before there was CRT. These traditions, mostly driven by Christian communities of color, labored in critical social analysis having "already organized and operationalized their collective memories of racism and understanding of systems and structures that work against them in order to stand firm in the gospel."[37]

While Liou calls CRT out for its inability to offer an eschatological hope and an eventual end to racism (something the Christian faith does promise), he worries how the witness of the Christian faith will be harmed by those who reject CRT wholesale: "I am personally more concerned about those who would lean into a declaration that CRT is 'antithetical to the Bible' and what such a declaration might mean for their fellowship

[37] Liou and Romero, *Christianity and Critical Race Theory,* 19.

with the Christian traditions and communities that have taught and believed differently from them for decades and even centuries. What might it mean for ecumenicity and interdenominational cooperation against racial injustice?"[38] Liou and Romero go on to argue that a faithful and constructive engagement with CRT will show that the theory overlaps with Christian theology. Ironically, just as the writers of the PCA's race and reconciliation paper used the metanarrative of the biblical schema—creation, fall, redemption, and consummation, Liou and Romero work to reveal how some of the themes of CRT fit into the same drama of Scripture. Far from violating the Christian faith and theology, according to Liou and Romero, the themes of CRT can be a "strange bedfellow" with the values of the Christian faith, ultimately contributing to Christian churches and ministries that engage in racial justice. CRT "intellectual tools," such as "critical race counter-stories, the voice of color thesis, and color blindness," may bode useful for the church in the United States since the nation is in a "cultural diversity explosion."[39] Liou and Romero recommend that the church engage constructively with CRT, using the theory to overcome the obstacles that stand in the way of the heavenly dress rehearsal of Revelation 7.[40]

The Greatest Threat to the Gospel?

While the Racial Reconciliation report provides a brief footnote calling into question the legitimacy of CRT, others within reformed circles have been much bolder and negative about the theory. One popular and oft-mentioned book among the PCA is *Fault Lines* by Voddie Baucham. After briefly defining both Critical Theory and Critical

[38] Liou and Romero, *Christianity and Critical Race Theory*, 19.

[39] Ibid., 103.

[40] Ibid., 104.

Race Theory, Baucham echoes the remarks of popular author John MacArthur that these theories are the "greatest threat to the Gospel in his lifetime."[41] As ever-shifting tectonic plates rumble underground with eventual catastrophic consequences, the topic of social justice intermingled with Critical Theory and CRT has produced a dividing line in the evangelical church. On one side are those who promote or are friendly to the theories and on the other side are those who warn of the harmful ideologies of social justice that will, left unchecked, bring ruin to the church. Baucham warns,

> The current moment is akin to two people standing on either side of a major fault line just before it shifts. When the shift comes, the ground will open up, a divide that was once invisible will become visible, and the two will find themselves on opposite sides of it. That is what is happening in our day. In some cases, the divide is happening already. Churches are splitting over this issue. Major ministries are losing donors, staff, and leadership. Denominations are in turmoil. Seminary faculties are divided with some professors being fired or "asked to leave." Families are at odds. Marriages are on the rocks. And I don't believe the fracture in this fault line is yet even a fraction of what it will be. No, I am not writing this book to stop the divide. I am writing to clearly identify the two sides of the fault line and to urge the reader to choose wisely.[42]

Baucham's statement here, although not specific to only the PCA, is pertinent to the objectives of this paper. A scorched earth approach to this topic sees compromise as untenable and a threat to doctrinal purity. Baucham justifies his sober appraisal by tracing CRT and intersectionality to Marxist beginnings and the Frankfurt school. He then likens the theory to a modern-day cult, comprised of its own type of religion with no soteriology, no forgiveness, and no chance of redemption. Baucham offers a perspective on contemporary terms such as whiteness, white supremacy, white complicity, invisible

[41] Voddie Baucham Jr., *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism's Looming Catastrophe* (Salem: Salem Books, 2021, Kindle Edition), 254.

[42] Ibid.

privilege, and white fragility. He raises questions about the approaches of some advocates for social justice, criticizing "social justice warriors" and their proliferation of "ethnic Gnosticism," a subjective narratology that presumes itself a "Kafka trap wherein any denial of systemic racism is further proof of racism: there need be no actual racists or racist actions-racism is a given and is solely the possession of whites and whiteness."[43]

The current events that exposed the fault lines—Breonna Taylor, Michael Brown, Philando Castile, Tamir Rice, and George Floyd—are claimed to be misrepresented by the new social justice religion and frenzied media narratives. The real stories and facts of these cases have been overlooked to cloud the truth and establish a tired narrative of police brutality and racism. As opposed to an invisible systemic racism, Baucham pushes for a biblically centered focus on family and personal responsibility. He is suspicious of highlighting personal narratives, since, according to CRT, "narrative is an alternative, and ultimately superior, truth."[44] Likewise, he believes that goals of the social justice movement are unreasonable and unachievable. For instance, the goal of contemporary social justice is equitable outcomes. Disparities among the races and people groups are a highly nuanced and complex situation, composed of demographic differences, geographic differences, birth order differences, or cultural differences that evolved over the centuries. Every disparity cannot be traced to an evil society, system, or culture. Pinning the problems of the black community on racism, for example, is shortsighted and shallow. Baucham references the historical black church; while known for calling out racism, when necessary, the black church has also been consistent in addressing reoccurring

[43] Baucham Jr., *Fault Lines*.

[44] Ibid., 94.

problems in the black community, such as fatherlessness, lack of education, crime, and abortion. For Baucham, America is not free of racism, but there are a host of other issues that need to be addressed regardless of racism. His point is straightforward and should be given consideration by his critics. Although Baucham speaks primarily to the church, he echoes others in the public sphere who are concerned of how CRT and "wokeness" is threatening the very fabric of American institutions and families.[45] If all problems lead back to racism and the answer to every social problem is antiracism, then it is not difficult to see how such an "all or nothing" approach to the subject of racism would be detrimental to the church, called to train people to be focused on and to desire the Kingdom of God. There is injustice that needs to be addressed, but for Baucham, these injustices are "the false witness-bearing, Marxist ideology-promoting, Gospel-perverting ideology of Critical Race Theory and its offshoots."[46]

In an acknowledgment of Christian liberty, Baucham admits that Christians should not be intimidated to agree with political positions based on political parties, unless it is an issue the Bible speaks to directly. Yet, he does not mince words to celebrate Donald Trump's executive order against CRT, issued on September 22, 2020. He praises President Trump for taking such a stand against CRT while lamenting that more pastors and Christian leaders do not do the same. Again, he issues a clarion call

[45] Kenny Xu warns that CRT is infecting public schools and indoctrinating children in hate and reverse-racism. He provides accounts where children are being taught CRT in school, coming home and parroting the rhetoric that white people have inherent privileges in society and to be color blind in useless and even racist. Some parents lament that these discussions are causing rifts in their relationships with their own children. One Asian mother recounted that her son was embarrassed that his father was a white man. Xu concludes that such tragic examples are the consequences of school districts implementing CRT in its curriculum…and the effects of labeling white people as oppressors. (see Kenny Xu, *School of Woke: How Critical Race Theory Infiltrated American Schools and Why We Must Reclaim Them* (New York City, NY: Center Street, 2023), 11.

[46] Ibid.

with no room for compromise on this issue: "I want to unmask the ideology of Critical Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Intersectionality in hopes that those who have imbibed it can have the blinders removed from their eyes, and those who have bowed in the face of it can stand up, take courage, and 'contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints'" (Jude 3). Baucham has no room for compromise on this issue, explicitly calling these ideologies "demonic."[47] Although Baucham is quick to state that he is not personally against various Christian leaders who, by his account, have aligned themselves with CRT and intersectionality, he does name these minsters and leaders (some who serve within the PCA) and minces no words in saying they are in danger of accommodating demonic ideologies.[48] Some have challenged his uncompromising stance on this issue that implies that anyone sympathetic to CRT is beyond the boundaries of orthodox belief and aligned with demonic forces. [49]

Baucham 's views on social issues affecting African Americans in the United States predominantly incline towards attributing explanations within the black community itself, as opposed to external factors such as socioeconomic disparities, institutional racism, and racial discrimination. While Baucham's perspective might be deemed radical by some, he is not the only African American minister who pinpoints the issue of African American disadvantage and its resolution on the actions and attitudes of the black community, internally, rather than externally. Korie Little Edwards and

[47] Baucham, *Fault Lines*, 254.

[48] In Chapter Nine, Baucham discusses Rev. Timothy Keller's views, suggesting that he leans towards supporting CRT and wokeness. Keller was an ordained teaching elder in the PCA.

[49] Bob Stevenson argues that Baucham's critique is beneficial in that it has stimulated conversation. However, Stevenson laments that Baucham's critique has also led to increased polarization through his "sloppy dogmatism." (see: Bob Stevenson, "Book Review: 'Faultlines' by Voddie Baucham," Mere Orthodoxy, July 29, 2021, https://mereorthodoxy.com/book-review-faultlines-by-voddie-baucham).

Michelle Oyakawa's recent research reveals that a surprising number of African American leaders within the Christian faith community also believe that the root cause of black disadvantage lies within the African American community or their collective cultural norms.[50] These internal explanations for black-white social inequity are grouped into two broad categories: personal responsibility and family dysfunctions. Thus, for these pastors, the impetus for change is internal. However, Edwards and Oyakawa's opinion is that these viewpoints generally stem from African American religious leaders who are part of predominantly white faith communities.[51] Being shaped by the prevailing values, beliefs, and attitudes within these communities, they tend not to attribute social structures as the primary source of African American disadvantage.[52]

Wokeness

Building upon Bauchman's scathing view of CRT and intersectionality, other pastors and authors have issued additional warnings against what has come to be known as "wokeness." Pastor Owen Strachan laments that many in the church are yielding to the dangers of wokeness, albeit, often from good intentions. He defines wokeness as a mindset and a posture that allows one to believe they are awake to the true nature of the world while others are asleep. This means one "sees the comprehensive inequity of our

[50] Korie Little Edwards and Michelle Oyakawa, *Smart Suits and Tattered Boots: Black Ministers Mobilizing the Black Church in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2022).

[51] One may argue that Edwards and Oyakawa's argument does not pertain to Baucham because he serves in Zambia in central Africa, African Christian University, accessed September 5, 2023, https://www.voddiebaucham.org/african-christian-university/.

[52] Edwards and Oyakawa label this the black Protestant work ethic: a moral framework that recognizes systemic black socioeconomic disadvantage but also describes disadvantage as a personal, cultural, or family problem and seeks solutions to this disadvantage in white, Western Protestantism that emphasizes black responsibility. In contrast, Edwards and Oyakawa propose that the aim should first be in dismantling structures of white supremacy. These systems are what keep whites as a group located in the dominant social position and people of color in subordinate ones.

social order and strives to highlight power structures in society that stem from racial privilege."[53] Specifically, someone becomes woke when they embrace the system of CRT. For Strachan, this leads one to view all societal life as structured along power dynamics.

In intellectual terms, wokeness occurs when one embraces the system of thought mentioned above called Critical Race Theory. Terms such as "structural racism," "systemic racism," and "white supremacy" are used to highlight the deficiencies of our world, specifically in the United States. This leads to a focus on the "disease of whiteness," a mentality inherent primarily in the Caucasian race, grounded in white supremacy, and the foundation by which predominantly white people benefit from the system. Such white supremacy not only provides a benefit to one group of people; it also perpetuates violence against racial minorities by police, "disproportionate incarceration of minorities, unfair housing decisions, unequal distribution of public resources for schooling and other causes, limited access to health and nutrition, and much more." Strachan blames the CRT theorists and activists who paint America as a racist nation rooted in white domination, consistently creating conditions that intentionally bring harm to people of color.[54] Like Baucham, he locates the roots of CRT and intersectionality in Marxism, a world which is divided by the oppressed and the oppressor. As a philosophy mired in atheism with a disdain for God's creation order, the implications of the philosophy are vast and troubling. Everything from male leadership to the majority race

[53] Strachan, *Christianity and Wokeness*, loc. 10.

[54] Ibid.

dominating minority cultures, these must be deconstructed and stripped of their authority in order to fully eliminate God from society. To Strachan, CRT adapts Marxist categories beyond class and economics to a broader anthropological perspective. This ultimately provides minority groups greater favor and privilege and puts the majority in a no-win situation. For this reason, Strachan laments how CRT and intersectionality are causing division in the body of Christ. He posits that in the past decade evangelicalism was increasing in racial diversity as it made more room for people of color in positions of leadership. But since wokeness has entered the church, unity has been lost, distrust reigns, and resentment festers.[55] Strachan's solution to this apparent regression in the body of Christ is similar to Baucham's: highlighting the unbiblical nature of wokeness and waring against it according to Ephesians 2. This includes confronting the false teaching of CRT and those who have come under its influence. This will be a means of "calling the wayward back into the fold."[56]

CRT and the PCA

Bauchman and Strachan may be in the constellation of the Reformed fellowships, but they are not in the PCA. Nevertheless, their stern warnings regarding CRT and similar secular theories are shared by those within the PCA. Rev. Dr. Jon D. Payne is the organizing pastor of Christ Church Presbyterian in Charleston, South Carolina. He previously served for ten years as pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church in Douglasville, GA. Payne is the Executive Coordinator of the Gospel Reformation Network, and a trustee of Westminster Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Newcastle, UK. In a blog post

[55] Strachan, *Christianity and Wokeness*, loc. 42-43.

[56] Ibid., 49.

entitled "The Courage to be Presbyterian," Payne writes on the recent debate in the PCA regarding elders who identify as same-sex or homosexual Christians while holding to biblical sexual ethics and refusing homosexual activity. In the article, Payne turns his attention from sexuality to the topic of CRT. Payne writes,

> The moral revolution has overwhelmed western civilization and is especially manifested in the LGBTQ+ and critical social justice movements. Intersectionality is the new reigning religion in the West, and her prophets, priests, and rulers are seated on the highest thrones of earthly power. The evidence of the moral revolution is ubiquitous. Sadly, this insidious revolution has found a foothold in a growing number of our churches, presbyteries, agencies, and ministries through side B gay Christianity/Revoice, and critical social justice. What is, perhaps, even more concerning than the ministers who positively and publicly affirm aspects of these false ideologies, are those who quietly acquiesce to them, reluctantly accepting error without protest. This quiet acquiescence is a spiritual cancer to ministers, and to denominations…Therefore, there must be no hesitation as it concerns the sufficiency of the gospel, and the divinely appointed means of grace, for the discipleship and mission of the church. We don't need side B or CRT. In fact, no one needs it. We have the gospel.[57]

Payne goes on to echo similar warnings as Baucham and Strachan, writing that these battles are like J. Gresham Machen's fight for orthodoxy in the mainline Presbyterian church, battles that bring the PCA to a crossroads moment. Some within the PCA have been seduced by the siren songs of progressive Christianity. These are the "pastors, teachers, and churches that are sailing foolishly into the rocky shores of wokeness. We must not let it happen …we cannot let it happen."[58] Payne's reference to CRT on the heels of the debate regarding Side B Christianity and his use of the word "wokeness" are very telling. For Baucham, Strachan, and Payne, these are not non-

[57] John Payne, "The Courage To Be Presbyterian," The Gospel Reformation, June 14, 2022, https://gospelreformation.net/the-courage-to-be-presbyterian/.

[58] Ibid.

essential issues open for differing opinions and viewpoints. Taking a via media approach or viewing these topics as falling under the rubric of "liberty of conscience" are not viable options. To do so would be to compromise on biblical fidelity for the sake of toleration, peace, and a "counterfeit unity." Recently, the denomination has been debating a proposed change to the *Book of Church Order* so that it states clearly that men who define themselves as homosexual (even if claiming celibacy) cannot be ordained as elders in the denomination. One commentator within the PCA on this debate writes, "The PCA is one of the more 'conservative,' or biblically sound, denominations in the United States. Yet over the last twenty-five years the woke progressive movement has been making inroads into the PCA like it has in many other denominations. These inroads have been made on biblical doctrines such as those related to the days of creations, race, and egalitarianism."[59] While the commentator does not elaborate on race, he does blame "wokeness" as a type of Trojan horse threatening to destroy the purity of the denomination. The primary concern is whether these pursuits for ideological purity will compromise biblical fidelity. Will they result in increased division and a less diverse denomination?

A Sharp Division in the Same Denomination

While Payne warns against "sailing foolishly into the rocky shores of wokeness," another prominent PCA elder cautions against a different kind of danger. Alexander Jun is a professor in the Department of Higher Education at Azusa Pacific University. Jun is also a ruling elder and attends New Life Presbyterian Church of Orange County in Fullerton, California. Jun was the moderator for the 45th PCA General Assembly and

[59] Bill Peacock, "PCA Members Should Speak Out on Overture 15," The Aquila Report, January 23, 2023, https://theaquilareport.com/pca-members-should-speak-out-on-overture-15/.

serves on the permanent committee for Mission to the World. In his book, *White Evolution: The Constant Struggle for Racial Consciousness*, Jun, along with co-author, Christopher Collins, engage the difficult conversation of white supremacy, white privilege, and racism. The book begins arguing for the need to focus on race despite the tendency for people to get fatigued about the topic. Avoiding the topic is like believing that "talking about a virus is the problem," instead of acknowledging the virus itself is a problem. For Jun, white supremacy is the virus that is evolving rapidly and producing devastating consequences to people of color and, indeed, all of humanity. Jun's answer is for a critical consciousness to evolve faster and outpace the supremacy.[60] This comes not merely by acknowledging and addressing individual racism but by thinking systemically. Systemic analysis requires searching for and evaluating what is happening regarding race, not merely on an individual basis, but institutionally. In *White Evolution*, Jun and Collins endeavor to call all people to a "collective solidarity" to do anti-racist work. This includes white liberals, moderates, and conservatives but also people of color to engage "in the complexity of ways in which White ideology is manifested outside of White bodies."[61] Jun and Collins hope this anti-racist work will go beyond the need for white people to do their anti-racist acts in the presence of people of color or an oppression Olympics (the quest to be the most oppressed in the room), to a place where people take stock of how systems of power in society perpetuate inequality based on differences of race, gender, sexuality, ability, etc. Such inequality benefits a select group and, thus, perpetuates a system of supremacy. These systems must be deconstructed and "replaced

[60] Alexander Jun and Christopher S. Collins, *White Evolution, The Constant Struggle for Racial Consciousness* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2020). xiii.

[61] Ibid., xv.

with an ecosystem that relies on a deep interdependence for epistemological, physical, and spiritual survival."[62]

It should be noted that Jun writes as an academic at a historically white Christian postsecondary institution. He acknowledges systemic racism at the very foundations and inception of higher education in the U.S. Thus, he writes with an initial eye towards places of higher education, places where students are working through identity development, struggle, and wrestling with new ways to sort out complex social realities. Nevertheless, Jun certainly does not limit the problem of white supremacy to the academy. He identifies power structures in institutions by analyzing the history, location, habits, and proportions of faculty or executives who are white. Based on this analysis, Jun and Collins refer to "dominant whiteness" or "Dominantly White Institutions" (DWIs). These DWIs are prone to "create a framework in which mental architecture and strategies blot out counter stories and deny privilege."[63] Counter stories, of course, is a concept particularly used in Critical Race Theory. In a counter story, a person of color brings to light their experience over and against the dominant narrative. Such a counter story, according to CRT, is made necessary because color blindness silences diverse voices. Failing to value the distinct voices of people of color, color blindness maintains the status quo and keeps whiteness in positions of power. A counter story can be used to dispel stereotypes and bring to light the personal and corporate experiences of people of color.[64] Jun does not mince words with how white supremacy must be dealt with,

[62] Jun and Collins, *White Evolution*, 10.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Romero and Liou, *Christianity and Critical Race Theory*, 103.

whatever system or institution it evolves. Jun's answer is unabashedly the opposite of Bauchman, Strachan, and Payne. "There is no arrival point to being woke," Jun writes. "White supremacy has a tenacious ability to regenerate and reappear in new ways, both individually and systemically. As a result, the work of eradicating such systems is never finished."[65] While Jun eschews the label of woke, he pushes for a more progressive, perpetual state of mind towards matters of justice and equity. Woke speaks of past tense and arrival, but racial consciousness is a work that is continually ongoing.

Jun and Collins write soberly and with urgency regarding the dangers of white supremacy. While overt white supremacy was obvious in the past (slavery, Kinism, overt discrimination of minorities in civic affairs), white supremacy is now more sinister and easier to hide. "Under the veneer of equal opportunity, new arguments emerged that any inequality in outcomes was rooted in personal moral failings. Family characteristics, neighborhoods, crime, income levels, drugs, and the war on drugs became new talking points about individual responsibility in a post-Civil Rights era covered by the assumption of equality. At this point, White dominance became much more like a dormant virus—it was more difficult to see, but the effects were insidious."[66] Jun, as an elder in the PCA, is theologically conservative. Like any other elder within the denomination, he subscribes to the Westminster Standards. Nevertheless, Jun ventures beyond the confines of "White, Western Protestantism," which is typically organized around an individualist worldview. He unashamedly proposes the dismantling structures of white supremacy.

[65] Romero and Liou, *Christianity and Critical Race Theory*, 103.

[66] Ibid.

White Supremacy and Reparations

In 2021, another notable contribution to the theological dialogue on race and the church came from the combined efforts of Reverends Duke Kwon and Greg Thompson. As teaching elders in the PCA, they wrote the book *Reparations: A Christian Call for Repentance and Repair*. Like Jun, Kwon and Thomspon also deal extensively with the topic of white supremacy. White supremacy is not only original to America's story but also pervasive today. Because of this, it behooves the church to "tell the truth about the presence and power of White supremacy within it. This means to embrace not merely the fact of its existence but also that this existence was not marginal but central, not an inevitability but a choice, and that this choice unalterably marked what America was and what America would become."[67] Kwon and Thompson present their case, advocating for the church to assume an active role in reparations. Their argument draws upon cultural perspectives and sociopolitical standpoints. However, they also attempt to root their claims in theological and biblical tradition. Looking to the scriptures and theological principles, they outline how true repentance for the historical and systemic sins of racism should go beyond mere acknowledgment.[68] Kwon and Thompson strongly believe that the church should make reparations a central tenet of its doctrine. They do not see reparations as a secondary or optional issue, but as an essential part of Christian faith and

[67] Duke L. Kwon and Gregory Thompson, *Reparations: A Christian Call for Repentance and Repair* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2021), 62.

[68] Kwon and Thompson, *Reparations*, 161: "…we are also persuaded that, according to the Christian Scriptures, reparations is not less than the logic of restitution, but it is undoubtedly more. We believe that the Bible commands us to return our neighbors' stolen things when we are guilty of their theft, and we believe that the Bible also commands us to restore their stolen things even when we are not. We believe that it is necessary to reckon with our culpability in the pursuit of racial repair, and we believe that it is also necessary as Christians to reckon with our essential calling in this world—our missional identity, integrity, and responsibility to love our despoiled neighbors as ourselves."

practice. This conviction is rooted in their belief that the church must be true to its foundational principles of justice, mercy, and compassion. By failing to address the issue of reparations, the church is complicit in the ongoing injustice and oppression (white supremacy):

> Our hope for the church is that the work of reparations, the work to repair our communities from the ravages of White supremacy, will become central to its mission. Our hope is that the language of White supremacy and reparations, now so unfamiliar and awkward, will one day become as fixed in the church's imagination and fundamental to its vocation as the language of repentance and reconciliation is today. This is the only way that the church can fully live with integrity, and the only path to beholding the joy of redemptive love made flesh in the streets of this world. Our hope for our nation is that we will renounce our willful blindness to our history, confess, and give ourselves collectively and collaboratively to the work of repairing what we have done. Until we do this, we will never embody the meaning of our creeds, never escape the secret shame and uneasy conscience that shadows our national identity, never know peace in our cities. Most of all, however, our hopes are for our African American friends and neighbors. Our hope is that the singular harm wrought by White supremacy, the theft it has visited upon you and those you love, will broadly be seen for what it is. Our hope is that when it is seen, it will be confessed. Our hope is that when it is confessed, it will be renounced. Our hope is that when it is renounced, the world that it made will pass away, and its weight will fall from your shoulders. Our hope is reparation. We labor toward this hope.[69]

After the book was published, Kevin DeYoung, a respected pastor and theologian in the PCA, provided a detailed and critical examination of the book. DeYoung pinpointed what he perceived to be multiple pitfalls in Kwon and Thompson's argument for reparations, specifically in their use of the term "White supremacy." In DeYoung's view, use of this term was ill-advised and nebulous. While acknowledging that it is always the right thing for someone, especially those who profess faith in Christ, to repay

[69] Kwon and Thompson, *Reparations,* 28.

what one steals or to return what has been forcibly taken from another, DeYoung seeks to correct the misuse of the term White supremacy. He writes,

> And yet, when 'White supremacy' covers everything from the horrors of slavery and lynching to the more common blindspots of self-centeredness and indifference, the result is that little effort is made to understand people in their own time and on their own terms. Moreover, the category of White supremacy, as a totalizing heuristic device, often lacks basic Christian charity in so far as it measures peoples, churches, and nations by their worst failures (as we see them) and pathologizes everyone and everything associated with the sin of partiality as being complicit with the most egregious catalog of sins in our nation's history.[70]

Furthermore, DeYoung found Kwon and Thompson's vision for a world without white supremacy to be "more in line with a community organizer's dream for America than a distinctively Christian one.[71]

Kwon and Thompson countered DeYoung's critique in a published rebuttal. They argued that DeYoung's hesitation regarding the term "White supremacy" is not purely theological but rather reflective of deeper cultural tendencies. Specifically, they contend: "While Reverend DeYoung's subtitle indicates that he believes his review to be an expression of a theological project, we believe his review actually to be expressive of a cultural project that seeks perennially to justify itself on theological grounds. And that cultural project is, in one inelegant and highly disturbing phrase, White supremacy."[72] This exchange stresses how debates about CRT, white supremacy, and associated racial

[70] Kevin DeYoung, "Reparations: A Critical Theological Review," The Gospel Coalition, April 22, 2021, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/reparations-a-critical-theological-review/.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Gregory Thompson and Duke Kwon, "Sanctifying the Status Quo: A Response to Reverend Kevin DeYoung," The Front Porch, July 19, 2021, https://thefrontporch.org/2021/07/sanctifying-the-status-quo-a-response-to-reverend-kevin-deyoung/.

topics are complicated and consistently leading to divisions and unease among churches.[73]

A Continually Widening Divide

It would be no stretch to presume, based on the works of Bauchman, Strachan, Payne, and DeYoung. that they would deem Jun, Kwon, and Thompson's writings as strongly animated by CRT. Likewise, Jun, Kwon, and Thompson's views on the inequality and the consequences of white dominance for people of color run contrary to the conservative view that the distresses of communities of color have many causes, primarily rooted in unethical moral values and habits—not white supremacy. In this view, the need for both people of color and the dominant race is not a "constant struggle for race consciousness," as posited by Jun, but eliminating that which undermines the agency of the disadvantaged. CRT, intersectionality, and anti-racism rhetoric will only cause the minority to languish in resentment and underachievement.[74] Talk of oppression, victimization, and white supremacy tend to trigger more discontent and bitterness rather than healing and reconciliation. As Thomas Sowell notes, "Many of the words and phrases used in the media and among academics suggest that things simply happen to

[73] It might seem that debates around topics like CRT, white supremacy, and reparations are limited to academic or theological domains. One may presume that the back and forth between DeYoung and Kwon and Thompson is isolated to the halls of the academies. However, such an assumption would overlook how these topics are impacting the local church in the PCA.

For example, during a recent planning session for a men's retreat at our local church (Lebanon Valley PCA), the book of Philemon was chosen for the weekend discussion. Given that the narrative includes references to Onesimus as a slave, there was a palpable concern among some participants. They worried that using the world "slave" might inadvertently spark discussions on the contentious issue of reparations, which had been a prominent subject in recent news. The concern was verbalized that merely teaching on Philemon and using the word "slave" could "blow up in our face." This incident underscores that churches aren't insulated from broader societal debates or arguments between theologians. Matters that might be perceived as restricted to scholarly or political arenas are resonating deeply within local churches.

[74] Groothuis, Douglas R., *Fire in the Streets: How You Can Confidently Respond to Incendiary Cultural Topics.* Salem Books, Kindle Edition, loc. 71.

people, rather than being caused by their own choices or behavior."[75] With a minimizing or total denial of systemic racism, laws, policies, or initiatives designed to prompt more opportunities for people of color are often considered unnecessary and represent preferential treatment."[76] Noted black theologian Willie Jennings would agree with Jun's assessment of white evolution and the dominance of whiteness in America's institutions, both secular and sacred. In *Beyond Whiteness*, Jennings warns that institutions steeped in whiteness and American nationalism are producing a distorted formation of individuals made in the image of "white, self-sufficient man . . . defined by possession, control, and mastery."[77] Jennings is drawing upon CRT in his analysis and (knowingly or unknowingly) is echoing Jun's belief that much of American Christianity is plagued by the idol of a human-made white Jesus. This theological construction of a white Jesus is ultimately used to maintain white supremacy. Jun writes, "White Jesus was constructed by combining empire, colorism, racism, education, and religion—and the byproduct is a distortion that reproduces violence in epistemic and physical ways."[78]

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[75] Thomas Sowell, *The Vision of the Anointed: Self-Congratulation as a Basis for Social Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 198.

[76] When we held our first new members class at the Lebanon Valley PCA church plant, I explained why we should believe the Lord for people of color to be given an opportunity for leadership among us. One of the initial comments to my suggestion was that initiatives to promote ethnic minorities may result in unqualified people being positioned in leadership. Such a comment may be rooted in a colorblind perspective that fails to recognize the persistence of ministerial and leadership inequality in our churches. The overwhelming majority of elders and lay leaders in the PCA are white. Likewise, the number of administrators of color who work at secular institutions is twice the number of those working at religiously affiliated higher education institutions. (see: Peter Rios, Untold Stories: The Latinx Leadership Experience in Higher Education (Eugene, Oregon: WIPF and Stock Publishers, 2021).

[77] Jennings, Willie James. *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, ed. Ted A. Smith, Theological Education between the Times. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), 6.

[78] Collins, Christopher S., and Alexander Jun, et al. *White Jesus the Architecture of Racism in Religion and Education.* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2018).

The divergent views to Jun's *White Evolution* are noted because this project's interest is in how elders within the PCA are processing the topic of race in their local contexts. A brief perusal of the contemporary literature on this topic reveals a striking divergence shot through with fervor, contradiction, ambiguity, and polarization. To say this is a topic that incites friction would be an understatement. Pitting Baucham/Strachan/Payne/DeYoung against Romero/Liou/Jun/Jennings/Kwon/Thompson on this topic makes one wonder if compromise in pursuit of the common good of the church is possible.

A Better Way?

Anthony Bradley, professor of religious studies and director of the Center for the Study of Human Flourishing at The King's College, Theologian-In-Residence at Redeemer Presbyterian Church, wrote an article entitled *Critical Race Theory Isn't a Threat for Presbyterians*. Bradley suggests that the turmoil caused by debate on CRT within evangelicalism, and specifically among Southern Baptists, should not pose a threat to the peace of the PCA. Bradley appeals to the fact the PCA is a confessional denomination, with its allegiance to "the Bible, the *Westminster Confession* of Faith (WCF), the Presbyterian tradition, and covenant theology." These confessional allegiances allow for members of the PCA to take an "eat the meat, spit out the bones" approach to a cultural theory like CRT. Bradley believes that the Christian tradition offers a superior diagnosis and solution to the race problem. Nevertheless, he does not reject CRT wholesale, preferring to take a more nuanced approach to the social theory by highlighting CRT's strengths and glaring weaknesses. "CRT can be and is useful in some limited contexts for identifying where race may be a variable just as other forms of secular theories (including much classical philosophy!) can be useful as tools for

analysis."[79] Nonetheless, Bradley's preference is for Christians, particularly those within the PCA, to appeal to Scripture, the ancient creeds, the confessional documents, and covenant theology to propose something far superior in the blemished racial history in America and within the body of Christ. "I am free to see how CRT may identify racial issues without having to pledge allegiance to its presuppositions about the nature of reality. As a covenant theologian, I need not wholly accept or reject secular frameworks for understanding reality. I can eat the meat and spit out the bones. Because of the fall, I am looking at society to see where the curse is found (Gen 3:14-24) and where the devil is at work (Eph 2:2). This curse and work include racism and much more."[80] It appears Bradley would agree with CRT's harshest of opponents in that the theory reduces the complex problems of human nature down to race alone. As a reductionistic theory, CRT does not go far enough to flesh out the sin of human beings and its devastating consequences on societies. In contrast, the confessional documents of the Presbyterian church provide a comprehensive answer, not only to the problem of sin, but how the church is to take up the cause of the oppressed, treat everyone as possessing the dignity and worth of being made in the image of God, and labor to preserve the wellbeing of all people. For Bradley, the confessional documents, by far, surpass CRT in its diagnosis and solutions. The world is much too complex for one theory to explain the multifaceted ways sin has distorted American culture regarding race. Nevertheless, while prior studies have taken an "all or nothing" approach to CRT, Bradley proposes a more nuanced engagement with the theory. In fact, his concern is that the PCA would take a hardline

[79] Anthony Bradley, "Critical Race Theory Isn't a Threat for Presbyterians," Mere Orthodoxy, February 3, 2021, https://mereorthodoxy.com/critical-race-theory-presbyterian-church-in-america.

[80] Ibid.

stance against the theory: "What are we to do with all of this in the PCA? My answer: Do not pledge allegiance to the secular conservative hysteria over CRT. Eat the meat, spit out the bones, use the resources of the Christian and Presbyterian traditions for analysis and proposals for solutions, and pray."[81] With such an analysis, it appears that Bradley is presenting Scripture and the confessional documents as superior to any social theory while still calling for appropriate engagement with such theories. This approach appears to be a "via media" way that allows for views that, at first glance, appear to be worlds apart. There are legitimate differences that matter, but these are also diverse viewpoints and expressions of an equally genuine Christianity.[82]

Racial Diversity in the Local Congregation

My interest in the research topic of racial diversity in the PCA was shaped by my receiving a call to be the lead church planter for a "scratch work" in Lebanon, Pennsylvania. One of our non-negotiable core values is to be a church that reflects the racial diversity of our community. In the current literature of church planting and revitalization, there has been ample material published on the importance of the multi-ethnic church. The rationale behind this push for the multi-ethnic church typically draws upon Revelation 7:9 as the ethical mandate to pursue diversity. The impetus for such a foundation comes from the idea that if heaven will contain people from every nation, tribe, and language, then today's church should be a reflection of such diversity. If diversity is the climax of God's kingdom, the church should be marching towards such a

[81] Bradley, "Critical Race Theory Isn't a Threat for Presbyterians."

[82] Richard Lints, *Uncommon Unity: Wisdom for the Church in an Age of Division*. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022), 3–4.

destination, albeit imperfectly, with a diverse representation in her congregations.[83] Liou, however, cautions that using Revelation 7:9 as a means of motivating efforts towards multi-ethnic congregations is an example of using a proof-text without consulting the hermeneutical nuance and broader context of John's eschatological vision. Furthermore, the differences of those gathered around the throne assumes that cultures "remain static and will, thereby, be discernable in the New Heavens and the New Earth."[84] In contrast, Liou suggests that cultures are not static but constantly changing. He writes, "Whatever ethnoracial distinctions can be made today will not be exactly the same as those that can be made a generation from now, much less in the eschaton."[85] Practically speaking, pushes for racially diverse churches often ignore the injustices and disparities that have led to racially segregated churches in the first place. Endeavoring for diversity in the church without exploring the causes for the lack of diversity is a massive omission.

This has led some in the PCA to push pause on the multi-ethnic church planting emphasis. Pastor Lance Lewis, a PCA pastor in Sacramento, explicitly challenges evangelical denominations, including the PCA, not to plant churches in predominantly black neighborhoods. Such aspirations can be arrogant and imbedded in ignorance of the black community. The lack of trust towards evangelical churches (even of black leaders who represent evangelical denominations) persuades Lewis to call for a pause on evangelical efforts among black communities. "My denomination didn't have a single

[83] Rodney M Woo, *Color of Church*. (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2014).

[84] Jeff Ming Liou, "Much in Every Way: Employing the Concept of Race in Theological Anthropology and Christian Practice" (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2017).

[85] Liou uses interracial children as an example of those who would deem themselves multiracial or biracial.

black congregation in a metro area of one million African Americans ten years ago. Now it has one."[86] In contrast, he suggests that evangelicals look for ways to support the black community and historically black churches apart from church planting. This would include supporting black churches already ministering among the black community. Lewis does not rule out that there could be evangelical initiative such as church plants in the future among the black community. This would come only after other concerns were addressed. Those concerns are beyond the scope of this review. However, Lewis' position highlights a growing comfortability with ethnic specific churches due to the hurt people of color have endured in white spaces.[87]

The multi-ethnic church movement used Revelation 7:9 as one of the proof texts for the racially diverse church. Of course, Revelation 7:9 does not stand alone. Much of the New Testament argues for the church to live as a community that transcends racial differences. The concern for Lewis and others who are skeptical of the multi-ethnic church movement is that the racial tensions that have led to Sunday mornings being the most segregated hours in the week have not been adequately addressed. Certain racial groups with less agency and opportunity are kept from power and status. This leads to a shallowness that pervades the multi-ethnic church motif. One solution to this problem would be to take Revelation 7:9 and appreciate the beauty of the coming day of

[86] Lance Lewis, "Black Pastoral Leadership and Church Planting," in *Aliens in the Promised Land: Why Minority Leadership Is Overlooked in White Christian Churches and Institutions*, ed. Anthony B. Bradley (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 31.

[87] Moses Y. Lee, interview with Thabiti Anyabwile and Dr. Alexander Jun, "Why Ethnic Specific Churches are still important," YouTube, January 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFozzaHSDp4.

ethnoracial diversity around God's throne but then ask why our current congregations fail to demonstrate such beauty now. Liou explains,

> In the modern racialized climate, the unintended consequence of merely appreciating diversity is to leave untouched the racial hierarchy perpetuated by the theological problem of whiteness. Inattention to power differentials in Revelation's situation and racialization in our current situation are mistakes that too frequently come packaged together.[88]

Like Lewis, Liou highlights the problem but does not provide a workable solution that heals fragmentation and overcomes differences for a more diverse representation. The building and flourishing of ethnic specific churches are certainly an alternative, and there is nothing forbidding such an ecclesia. This, however, could be interpreted as an escape from the hard work of living with each other's differences while still laboring for unity in the faith. Certainly, there is no guarantee that the church will be able to resolve all of her differences this side of the grave. Revelation 7:9 is the result of the cosmic and complete victory of Christ and the representational diversity is yet to be manifested. This future orientation, however, does not negate the call for unity in diversity. The fragmentation preventing such unity in diversity must still be addressed.

The Beautiful Community

In contrast to the hesitancy to push for multiethnic churches, Irwyn Ince Jr. believes that the church is mandated to pursue racial diversity in its midst. Ince is the PCA's Mission to North America Coordinator and Adjunct Professor of Pastoral Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary. In his book, *The Beautiful Community: Unity, Diversity, and the Church at Its Best*, Ince recognizes the racial difference, divides, and hostilities that not only plague the world but also cause deep embedded polarization

[88] Jeff Ming Liou, "Much in Every Way: Employing the Concept of Race."

within the church. This leads him to a divine dissatisfaction with the church, not only being influenced by the division, but being complicit in it. Furthermore, he laments the church's contentment with the status quo with a lack of racial diversity in her congregations. Ince sees a lack of progress towards the Revelation 7 climax of diverse representation as a failure of the church to mirror the reality of the eschatological union. He calls for the church to do the hard work of coming together as a unified, diverse community, seeking mutual love, respect, and understanding. To fail in this is to resist the very heart of God. He writes, "our Blackness, our whiteness, our Asian-ness, our Latino-ness still tends to be at the center of our identity even after faith in Jesus Christ! Only Jesus is able to bear the weight of the center."[89]

Ince's brief overview of the Trinity leads to the implication that the church is called to pursue the beautiful community which is highlighted by diversity. He argues that God's plan from the beginning of time is more than a theologically abstract idea, but it informs the very heart of Christian faith and practice. Because the Triune God is beautiful, the church is to pursue such beauty in its representation. Ince uses examples from his own life as well as other minorities who work in the majority setting within the church. He illustrates a few cases where minorities have worked in majority settings without being respected for who they were as individuals. This leads Ince to give a concise exploration of the *imago dei* and the need for all people to be known and loved for who they are. He spends most of the book fleshing out the doctrinal truths such as the ecclesia and the Imago Dei to show that a diverse church community is deeply rooted in

[89] Irwyn L. Ince Jr. and Timothy Keller, *The Beautiful Community: Unity, Diversity, and the Church at Its Best* (Westmont, IL: IVP, 2020), 97.

Christian theology. Ince does not absolve the reader from looking away at potential causes of fragmentation. He emphasizes that interracial religious organizations have faced significant challenges when minority groups sense a lack of connection among the dominant race. He uses an example of a predominantly Filipino church where the non-Filipinos felt socially isolated despite many efforts by the local congregation to make all people feel welcome. Ince also references the exodus of many black worshipers from evangelical churches. He infers the causes of this departure: the 2016 election of Donald Trump, the killing of unarmed black men and women by law enforcement, the ensuing racial unrest throughout the country, and the silence from white pastors in the midst of such tensions.[90] Ince pinpoints the election of Donald Trump as a turning point, or at least the reason racial tensions became more apparent: "When Christians of color heard white evangelicals cheering the outcome of the election reassuring uneasy fellow worshipers with talk of abortion and religious liberty, about how politics is the art of compromise rather than the ideal, it left many bewildered. It left them wondering how voters could so easily overlook the president's comments about Mexican immigrants, NFL players protesting police brutality, and his birther crusade against President Obama."[91]

One may infer that Ince is pinpointing a similar problem as Lewis: the embrace of conservative politics and its cultural norms cause a disconnect between many in the black community and the evangelical church. Ince takes a different approach than Lewis, however. Rather than suggesting ethnic specific churches as the possible remedy, Ince draws upon language used by Dr. Anthony Bradley, encouraging the church to shift from

[90] Ince Jr. and Keller, *The Beautiful Community*.

[91] Ibid., 83.

a "Great Commission Christianity" to a "Cosmic Redemptive Christianity." Great Commission Christianity announces the good news of Jesus with a hyper emphasis on saving individuals and the work of the church. This is not a wrong view, but it falls short of the fullness of the gospel. In contrast, Cosmic Redemptive Christianity focuses both on God fully accomplishing salvation for His people and His restoring creation to its original purpose. Cosmic Redemptive Christianity, therefore, presses into social justice issues.[92] Ince argues that Cosmic Redemptive Christianity is embodied in both the Black church and the Reformed tradition. While polarization within the church is a dire situation, Ince leans heavily on the Scriptures that show God has promised that his church will, indeed, be a beautiful community. Encouraging God's people to press into this promise and work towards its fulfillment, Ince reinforces that the church is at its best when it demonstrates a multinational communion (Acts 2:42-47). Unlike Lewis' hesitation with the multiethnic church model and Liou's pushback on Revelation 7 as a basis for multiethnic churches, Ince is much more optimistic that the church can reflect the racial diversity that will one day be a reality in the new heavens and new earth. Such optimism does not look away from the particular fact that the PCA has not been known as a racially diverse denomination. In his acceptance speech upon being unanimously elected as the first African American moderator for the PCA General Assembly in June 2018, Ince, a former "radical black nationalist," acknowledged that the denomination is overwhelmingly white with only one percent representation of African Americans. Nevertheless, this is where he is called by God to serve with joy the people of God. Ince said,

> It is my joy to be a pastor in the PCA. I might be a representative of the one percent when it comes to my ethnicity, but by the grace of God, I'm

[92] Ince Jr. and Keller, *The Beautiful Community*, 83.

> part of the 100 percent of us here in this church called by Jesus Christ to love the Lord our God with everything: heart, soul, mind, and strength. And to love our neighbors as ourselves; called by Jesus to bear witness to the mystery of the Gospel—that he reconciles contraries and brings them together into a mystical union that practically works itself out in their loving, serving, and submitting to one another.[93]

Uncommon Unity: Embracing Differences in the Church

Most of the literature on racial diversity and the church comes from a range of perspectives arguing for how race is to be viewed considering Scripture. As has been stated above, this literature is marked by significant disagreement, even from within the same denomination. Some believe too much attention is given to race and diversity, while others think the church's tendency is to overlook racial diversity and not pursue it. The common theme is there still remains a drought of multinational communion.[94] This reality bothers some, while others remain unbothered, choosing to focus on the sovereignty of salvation. Most of the mentioned literature comes from an array of perspectives. Another theoretical framework embedded in this discussion is on how to manage these perceived and explicitly stated differences. *Uncommon Unity: Embracing Differences in the Church* is a book written by Richard Lints, an ordained minister in the

[93] Irwyn Ince, "Not Here by Accident," in *Hear Us Emmanuel, Another Call for Racial Reconciliation and Unity in the Church*, ed. Doug Serven (Oklahoma City: White Blackbird Books, an Imprint of Storied Publishing, 2020), 104.

[94] See Barna Group, "Where Do We Go from Here?" produced in partnership with The Reimagine Group, December 1, 2019, https://barna.gloo.us/reports/where-do-we-go-from-here. This research suggests that white Christians are often skeptical about the disadvantages faced by minorities. While the survey didn't directly ask participants to compare minority experiences with majority ones, there's a noticeable disparity in perspectives: white respondents' perceptions of challenges encountered by minorities don't match the accounts given by the minorities themselves. Racial minorities are more likely than white respondents to perceive these disproportionate challenges as part of their regular experience. Black and Hispanic practicing Christians are more than twice as likely as their white counterparts to say minorities "always" suffer undeserved hardship (35% and 27%, respectively, vs. 12% of whites). Differences persist among other response options (32% of blacks, 33% of Hispanics vs. 21% of whites say "usually"; 24% of blacks, 29% of Hispanics vs. 56% of whites say "sometimes"). Furthermore, these ethnic imbalances in the church are reflective of the responses from the general population. Such misunderstandings and disparities in perception might shed light on why Sunday morning church services in America remain notably segregated.

PCA. He is presently Consulting Theologian to Redeemer City-to-City Ministry in New York City. Lints addresses the issue of unity within the church, and how Christians can navigate difference by learning to embrace differences rather than letting them disrupt unity. Lints admits that the polarization goes beyond the church. Ours is a deeply polarized age with no established rules on how to deal with the complexity of differences confronting us. Even the narratives that were supposed to produce an inclusive society have been found wanting. For instance, Lints argues that the democracy narrative of the United States did not ultimately produce an inclusive society. Founding documents that state all persons are created equal did not prevent inequality for women, slaves, and many others who remained excluded. Lints appeals to the gospel inclusion narrative as a resource for both the church and the society. "We who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:12-13).

Lints identifies the current age as one that has exacerbated our differences. We are prone to focus on what makes us different from each other instead of what binds us together. We are drawn to media that promotes division, alienating us from the "other side." Christians, however, are reminded that fracturing of relationships of difference is not the way things are supposed to be. Lints writes, "As much as we stumble into conflicts, we yearn for an end to them. The sweetness of reconciliation, when it does occur, serves as a reminder that conflict is not final or ultimate. It also provides a unique snapshot of the paradoxical unity-in-diversity for which we have been created. It is paradoxical in the sense that a certain difference is required for the kind of unity that is richer and more satisfying than mere uniformity."[95] He argues while the polarized age

[95] Lints, *Uncommon Unity: Wisdom for the Church*, xvii–xviii.

may influence the church, Christians do not rely upon the resources of the world for uniformity or conformity but rather on commitment to Jesus Christ and a shared commitment to the gospel. Christians must appreciate their differences, since diversity is a gift from God that causes the church to flourish. Fragmentation and polarization may impact the church, but she must not be content with the division. The church was created for the experience of unity-in-difference. Drawing upon a biblical anthropology, Lints posits that an individual's identity is found in relationships, first in relationship with God and derivatively in relationships with other persons. "This anthropology stands in opposition to the modern intuition that people's identity lies solely within themselves as individuals."[96] This countercultural view of identity will ultimately challenge the church to rise above the tendency to withdraw to her comfort zones. While it is the human tendency to migrate towards homogenous communities in reaction to the increasing diversity of the world, the church has historically overcome the obstacles of difference in favor of unity. Nevertheless, the church has also worked through deep differences, the kind of differences that create conflict and are not easily resolved. Lint's concern is that these kinds of differences do not mask the church's commonalities and keep her from the tasks the church was called to work on together as Christians.[97]

Fragmentation among Christians once was concerned with differences about doctrinal issues, such as baptism, millennium, or divine election. Lints observes that today's fragmentation is more likely to focus on differences of cultural engagement,

[96] Lints, *Uncommon Unity: Wisdom for the Church*, 20.

[97] Ibid., 5.

political orientation, or ethnic and gender issues.[98] In his opinion, the answer for the church wrestling through these kinds of differences is to challenge the belief that a person's identity is found solely in their ethnicity or race (or their gender and sexuality). While far from unimportant, they are not the sole basis by which a person's identity is secured. The complexity of the human being along with the Christian's identification with Christ resists the idea that human experience must be interpreted through the lens of race, ethnicity, and sexuality alone. Insofar as such theories as CRT and intersectionality would suggest this umbrella for understanding the human experience, Lints would push back and recommend a different model for navigating through racial differences both within the church and in the wider culture. In addition to the diversity in unity, he suggests that application of wisdom, which begins with the realization that God has made the world to flourish, while also recognizing the world is not the way it is supposed to be. Distinguishing the goodness of the created order and the brokenness of the creator order, one can apply wisdom amid diverse environments. Wisdom is at home in diversity, suggests Lints. "It does not flatten out reality by presuming that every situation is the same and that the same method of social interaction will be appropriate in every diverse setting." Faced with enormous social complexities in our world, one must resist reducing people to a single identity, whether that be their race or their identification as a liberal or conservative Republican. While these identities matter, they should not be viewed as exhaustive. "Persons are far too complex to be captured by any single group to which they belong, whether that belonging is voluntary or by the reality of one's birth."[99]

[98] Lints, *Uncommon Unity: Wisdom for the Church*, 5.

[99] Ibid., 242.

The groups to which people belong may change over time and none of those groups fully explain one's broader personhood. Some groups are so large, it would be impossible to ascertain and identify a person fully by belonging to the group. In keeping with the previous literature on race and the forthcoming interviews, identification with a certain group such as "woke" or "anti-woke," a proponent of CRT or anti-CRT, evangelical or progressive Christian—these may express one's preferences and leanings, but these associations must not be elevated as to reduce the individual to that association alone. According to Lint's argument, "these tendencies must be described at such a generic level as to downplay how different its members are in their relationship to the group itself."

Summary of Literature Review

This chapter has been a review of literature that provides the framework to understand what specific issues elders in the PCA are encountering when addressing racial issues both in the local congregation and in the denomination as a whole. The literature review provides an overview of several present-day texts that highlight the major debates in contemporary theological, racial studies. These debates are not limited to academic circles or the broader Christian community. Instead, they have a profound impact on leaders and congregants in PCA churches. Drawing upon the current research and social commentary of leaders within the PCA and those within the constellation of the reformed community, this chapter explored topics such as Critical Race Theory (CRT), intersectionality, the concept of "wokeness," and the motivations behind seeking to establish ethnic-specific churches and multi-racial congregations. The literature review also emphasizes the current perceived challenges of predominantly white institutional contexts and the principles for increasing racial diversity in church congregations. The

doctrine of common grace was examined to explore how this historic Reformed doctrine might guide the church to adopt a learning and accommodating posture, receptive to insights about race even from potentially unexpected sources, without succumbing to indiscriminate acceptance of non-Christian ideas that could threaten the church's integrity. Principally the literature review focused on the PCA paper on Racial Reconciliation of the 44th General Assembly in 2016. This paper, along with other PCA papers and current documents, were examined, allowing the researcher to explore how the material addressed the five research questions that have guided this project. The themes from this literature review will be compared with the findings from the later research stages. The next chapter will outline the working research methodology.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

> True, indeed, is Paul's statement: "Christ … gave himself up for the church that he might sanctify her; he cleansed her by the washing of water in the word of life, that he might present her to himself as his glorious bride, without spot or wrinkle." Yet it also is no less true that the Lord is daily at work in smoothing out wrinkles and cleansing spots. From this it follows that the church's holiness is not yet complete. The church is holy, then, in the sense that it is daily advancing and is not yet perfect: it makes progress from day to day but has not yet reached its goal of holiness.[1]
>
> John Calvin

The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water,
but a man of understanding will draw it out.
Proverbs 20:5

This chapter provides an overview of the methodology used in this qualitative study. It begins with an introduction to the study, then reviews the purpose statement and research questions. Furthermore, this chapter explores the definitions, strengths, and limitations of the qualitative methodology. It then proceeds to propose a justification for conducting a qualitative study, explaining its effectiveness in comprehending the perspectives of PCA elders regarding race within the context of both congregations and the denomination at large. Additionally, this chapter explores the qualitative method and how the participants were selected. A concise introduction of the study participants is also provided. Lastly, this chapter explains the data collection methods, interview approaches, and interview procedures employed in the research process.

[1] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion & 2*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1 of *The Library of Christian Classics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 1031.

Employing in-depth interviews, this study aims to capture the narratives, thoughts, and emotions of individuals serving in leadership roles within PCA congregations. Qualitative methodology has been chosen as the most appropriate approach for this study, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the experiences, beliefs, and perspectives of the participants. By employing this methodology, the researcher and reader gain insights into the rich narratives and multifaceted considerations of PCA elders as they navigate issues related to race within their leadership roles. While some qualitative studies are rooted in the postmodern belief that every theory and conclusion is our own construction, with truth being relative, this qualitative study does not bend to that secular idea. The exploration of subjective experiences does not suggest the automatic affirmation that each subjective experience arrives at God's truth. The popular phrase "my truth" is not being affirmed. More correctly stated would be "my experience" or "my viewpoint." The words of Dr. Eric Mason provide a needful warning:

> We live in a world where people are led by experiential conviction, the idea that my experience and my feeling are my truth, and my truth is ultimate……our experience may be real, but that experience is still interpreted through a lens of beliefs and values. So even our experience, though it may be factual and real, doesn't always amount to the truth.[2]

This qualitative study aims to delve deeper into the personal experiences, cultural frameworks, and thoughts of individual participants, focusing on elders in the PCA and their perspectives on race and diversity. Even with the Racial Reconciliation Report and Survey of 2016, there remains a lack of comprehensive knowledge on this topic.

[2] Eric Mason, gen. ed., *Urban Apologetics Cults and Cultural Ideologies, Biblical and Theological Challenges Facing Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2023), 12.

Qualitative, phenomenological research, through in-depth interviews, is suggested as a means to bridge this gap, given the belief that stories can illuminate understanding. The subject of race, undeniably intricate and intensified in religious contexts, underscores the need for a qualitative approach. Such an approach enables insights into the influences of physical, social, and cultural backgrounds on participants' perspectives. According to anthropologist John A. Maxwell, qualitative research reveals how certain views are formed, influenced, and potentially changed by various phenomena and relationships.[3]

In the context of this study, qualitative research aids in grasping the nuanced world of PCA elders by interpreting their personal narratives, emotions, and interconnected stories. As defined, qualitative research isn't bound by statistical procedures or quantification. It's chosen for this study to glean in-depth insights into participants' lives, in contrast to quantitative research, which, while effective in validating theories and providing statistical results, lacks the depth and personal touch to resonate with specific situations or individual experiences. Qualitative methods give voice to situations that can't be quantified, offering fresh viewpoints and enriching data on understudied topics.

This qualitative study primarily utilized interviews to gather data, complemented by observations, document reviews, and podcast analyses. Interviewing allows participants to reflect on and make meaning of their stories, offering a glimpse into individual consciousness. By examining individual experiences, complex concepts like "race" can be better understood, especially within specific settings like the PCA

[3] Joseph A. Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2013), 7.

denomination. While qualitative research, particularly phenomenological interviewing, presents challenges such as time, cost, and potential biases, its strengths lie in capturing the depth of participants' experiences and views. The approach sees each participant as a "living document," similar to how scholars study texts. This in-depth approach offers a holistic perspective, capturing the essence and nuance of topics that quantitative methods might miss.

Participant Selection

Careful consideration was given to the criteria employed for participant selection in this study. The selection process ensured representation from a diverse range of PCA elders, considering factors such as geographic location, church size, and racial composition. By encompassing this broad range of perspectives, the study aims to capture a comprehensive understanding of how PCA elders approach the subject of racial diversity. Seidman recommends that the researcher come as close as possible to a participant's lived experience, thus selecting participants who are currently engaged in those experiences that are relevant to the study.[4] Following this selection, the researcher selected only participants who were actively serving as elders in the PCA. The goal was to interview these elders and present their experiences and words in a way that would be convincing enough so that the reader could connect to their experience and further their understanding of the issues presented.

The selection of the participants began as opportunistic sampling. Those elders serving within the same presbytery as the researcher were chosen. However, as additional names were suggested, the researcher utilized purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling

[4] Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 2019), 20.

produced individuals who had the best chance of answering the specific questions and granting insights related to the purpose of the study. Snowball or chain sampling was employed. Participants were selected based on who they were and what they knew rather than by chance. Because of the lack of minority elders serving within the researcher's presbytery, participants with a strong network in the PCA helped to identify a pool of elders who were ethnically of minority status. The criteria for attaining a purposeful sample required that the participant was: (1) an ordained teaching or ruling elder in the PCA and (2) was willing to discuss the topic of race and diversity in the context of PCA as a denomination and within their local church. The researcher assured each participant that the participants' identities and personal information would remain confidential and undisclosed. This required deletion of all recorded Zoom-based interview files, dissociation of names from responses during the coding and recording process, and using aliases or pseudonyms for individuals and places within the manuscript in an effort to protect the identities of the participants. Nevertheless, unlike data derived from a survey, there is no way a participant could remain completely anonymous in a study that utilizes interviews. An outsider may attempt to locate the participants based on clues from the data or make a claim to recognize a participant but be completely wrong.[5] The researcher assured participants that every effort would be made to protect their identities. Certain words from the interviews were intentionally de-identified from the participants and specific references to time and place were removed.

[5] Merriam, Sharan B., and Elizabeth J. Tisdell. *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley and Sons, 2016.), 264.

Table 1: Interview Participants Profiles

Name	Eldership	Age Group	Location
EY	Teaching	60s	South
TC	Teaching	60s	Midwest
FL	Teaching	50s	Northeast
WY	Teaching	50's	Midwest
SM	Teaching	60s	Southeast
DE	Teaching	30s	Northeast
BF	Teaching	30s	West
KA	Ruling	30s	Midwest
CA	Teaching	40s	Northeast
DWJ	Teaching	50s	South
NP	Ruling	50s	West
FT	Teaching	40s	Northeast
IL	Ruling	40s	West
IR	Ruling	40s	Southeast
KC	Ruling	40s	West
KM	Ruling	70s	Northeast
SN	Teaching	50s	South

Interview Approaches and Procedures

The interview process was carefully designed to encourage open and honest dialogue. The participants were provided with a structured interview guide that encompassed a range of relevant topics and prompts. The interviews were conducted in a respectful and empathetic manner, allowing the participants to share their perspectives freely. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and subsequently analyzed to identify common themes and patterns. The following questions were asked using a conversational model:

1) How have you experienced racial diversity in your life, in your ministry, church, or relationships?
2) What is your opinion on whether or not church leadership should intentionally pursue racial diversity in its congregations, leadership, and related ministries? If so, how can this be done?
3) In 2018, the 44th General Assembly issued a report on racial reconciliation. That report included some very specific suggestions for congregations, presbyteries, and committees on how to move forward for racial reconciliation and diversity. Six years later, do you see fruit coming from this report in our denomination? Why or why not?
4) Some people would say, critical race theory provides an accurate diagnosis and solution to the lack of diversity in the PCA. What would you say to this suggestion?
5) As a *minority* elder in the PCA, what has it been like to see your peer's response to racial tensions in our nation over the past year?

The conversational model allowed for the interview to unfold in unexpected ways while staying on the specific topic. It also allowed for numerous follow-up questions that directed each conversation in a unique way. Once the audio of the interview was transcribed, the data was coded using the NVivo data analysis software.[6] This involved taking the text data and segmenting the sentences and phrases into categories. Once those categories were labeled with a term used in the actual language of the participant, a theme was generated for further analysis. These themes are the ones that appear as major findings in the qualitative study. They display multiple perspectives from the participants and are supported by diverse quotations and specific evidence.

In summary, this chapter has outlined the methodology employed in this qualitative study. The subsequent chapter will present the findings derived from the analysis of the qualitative data, providing valuable insights into the perspectives and experiences of PCA elders in relation to race.

Table 2: Comparative Insights from Pastors on Racial Diversity

Pastor Identifier	Racial Diversity View	Key Quote	Suggested Actions
TC	Racially Diverse Church as Ideal...Create Larger "Box"	"I believe that an intercultural church represents the ideal. It's the most effective means to foster the sanctification of Christ's followers. When I interact solely with people similar to me, the need to grow and adapt is minimal. However, engaging with people from different cultures forces me to practice love and understanding towards my neighbor. This journey is part of the sanctification process, becoming increasingly holy and	"Not only the PCA, but many denominations have limited themselves by adhering strictly to their established norms. If the PCA aims to truly embody a denomination of the highest diversity and mirror the Church of heaven, albeit imperfectly, it must either create a larger, more inclusive 'box' or deconstruct the existing one that has dictated operations for decades."

[6] "NVivo," Lumivero, accessed November 24, 2023, https://lumivero.com/products/nvivo/.

Pastor Identifier	Racial Diversity View	Key Quote	Suggested Actions
		more like Jesus, who exemplified cross-cultural engagement."	
IL	Racially Diverse Church as Complex…Learn from those outside the PCA	"Theologically, the concept of a multi-ethnic church is beautiful and aligned with the vision of a multi-ethnic gathering in heaven. But practically, it's complex. The notion of multi-ethnic churches often seems idealistic, as even those that appear diverse may still operate under white cultural norms. This leaves me torn and uncertain about the future of multi-ethnic churches and my role in them."	"I think our rigid adoption of complementarianism has limited the voices that can speak authoritatively in our tradition. This has led me to learn from black, brown, and Asian women who, in recent years, have come from outside our tradition because they haven't been given a platform within it. In the past years, my reading has expanded, including sermons, books, tweets, and other forms of information, much of it from outside our tradition."
CA	Racially Diverse Church as Nuanced…Pursue all people for God's Glory	"I deeply appreciate multicultural worship and see it as a beautiful expression of faith, but I'm cautious about insisting that every church should adopt this approach. Each style has its own unique way of allowing congregants to connect with the Lord wholeheartedly."	"I fully support efforts towards multicultural and monoethnic worship. My support for multiculturalism is primarily for the advancement of the kingdom of God, not for the sake of multiculturalism itself. I agree with the PCA's initiative to reach out to diverse communities and to explore barriers that may prevent people from joining in worship. This includes examining our blind spots, sins, and habitual patterns that could be changed to make our rich spiritual offerings more accessible and inclusive."
…	…	…	…
EY	Racially Diverse Church as Defined…Pursue All and Pursue Unity	"I pointed out to our elders that there's a difference between being multicultural and being multi-ethnic. What exactly do we want to achieve? Are we striving to be multicultural or multi-ethnic?"	"God's act of regeneration inherently brings about unity. It glorifies God more when we strive to come together, love and understand our neighbors, rather than segregating ourselves into separate corners. A church should aim for inclusivity and unity rather than defaulting to ethnic-specific congregations. Of course, there are practical exceptions, like first-generation Koreans who may not speak English and naturally form a Korean church in their community. Such situations are understandable. However, generally, a church should

Pastor Identifier	Racial Diversity View	Key Quote	Suggested Actions
			aim for inclusivity and unity rather than defaulting to ethnic-specific congregations."

Theme One: A Fluctuating Desire for a Racially Diverse Church

For all the participants, there was an agreement that a racially diverse congregation was a representation of heaven and a kind of "ideal." Nevertheless, there was a divergence of how majority culture pastors viewed the racially diverse congregation as opposed to minority pastors. Majority culture pastors appeared more eager to affirm a racially diverse church as a God-given objective. For example, TC, an author of books specifically addressing the topic of the diverse church and a leader who has guided multiple racially diverse churches, said,

> There is nothing wrong with a monocultural church. But the most mature form of the church of Jesus is a multiethnic, intercultural church. Firstly, this is what the church will be for all eternity. Thus, it is the heavenly pattern. Secondly, a multiracial church is the best way to encourage sanctification. If I am always with my own kind, I never have to be pushed or seldom do I have to challenge others. But to learn to love my neighbor as myself, to deal cross culturally and interracially, then I have to learn to give someone who is very different than me the benefit of the doubt. Instead of judging him I must learn to respect his ways, even though they are very different.

Similarly, FL emphasized that "the gospel needs to speak to people from every culture, every nation, every race or ethnicity. Because the Gospel is for all nations, the church should begin to resemble what is coming in the new heavens and new earth." For FL, this drive to reach beyond his own came from an innate desire since his conversion to Christ in high school. He continues,

> I've been interested in missions since I first became a Christian. The idea that the gospel reaches outside of my own borders and into unknown territories has always invigorated my faith. I look back to when I was a

> young man. Even then I had a passion to reach out to people of different races and cultures, to embrace those from a different world than my own . . . the alien, the widow, those Scriptures have always melted my heart. When I was in high school, there were some Laotians who moved into town. I am from a small town, and I probably had the small-town mentality like others. But I befriended them and would drive with them to high school. I think those were the embers that gave me a love and interest in people who are not from the dominant group. I don't always see that kind of heart demonstrated in my own congregation. How to relay that and foster that love for the outsider is something I struggle with as a pastor.

Likewise, KM, a ruling elder, echoes the desire for a more racially diverse congregation and yet laments that others don't share the same passion. He stated:

> To have a core value in your church vision statement that you want to be a racially diverse church, it's a reasonable core value. But in our own church context, I don't think it has made an impact as of yet within the ethos of our congregation. Our church, although in a rural setting, has an opportunity to reach out to an international community present among us. But we haven't lived up to our core value to be a diverse church. As a leader, I can say that although it's a core value in our vision statement, other than the pastor, I don't think the church, as a whole, thinks about it very much.

There appears to be a sense of theological uncertainty if indeed a church should be racially diverse. KM reflected on churches that are not in racially diverse populations. "Should they bus people in from another region just to say they are diverse? Such action would be diversity for diversity's sake, without an eye towards the glory of God. So, what bothers me is not that our church lacks racial diversity but that we have not made a concerted effort to reach out into the communities that are racially diverse." Such a statement sounds contradictory, but KM appears to be wrestling with the theological justification for the pursuit of a racially diverse congregation. He stops short of saying it is a mandate but affirms that evangelism to all people is a biblical directive. Therefore, his lament is with the lack of intentional evangelism, specifically to diverse people

groups. KM goes on to wonder if this lack of intentionality in evangelism is hindered by our "traditional comfort zone." He continues,

> As a denomination, we have a fairly intellectual and philosophical tradition. The Reformed church is particularly strong in these areas. But it appears to me, at least in our particular congregation, that we lack an evangelical friendly gospel which motivates us to reach out beyond our comfort zones. Thus, a racially diverse congregation has not materialized for us. That's what bothers me.

FT, a young Caucasian pastor, echoing this sense of frustration, spoke of the desire for a racially diverse congregation but pondered on what may hinder the reality. He says,

> I know this is going to sound really trite, but I think our inability to have racially diverse churches is rooted in human selfishness. Knowing what the Bible says about selfishness, it is highly deceptive and insidious. Most of us just don't fathom how selfish we are as people, even as Christians and leaders in Christ's church. One of the concepts that has challenged me comes from Miroslav Volf's book, *Exclusion and Embrace*. In the book he says that when two differing communities come together, the community has to become de facto a third thing altogether. Even though each party has its own history, preferences, and styles, in order for the two separate communities to become one, everyone has to live by the way of the cross and be willing to die to self and truly honor the other person. And that's just so hard for all of us. We do that in fits and starts. We don't do it as our Lord would have us. In my experience, even when we do this well in a limited way, welcoming in others, we get stuck and fail to welcome in new groups. Thus, the church stagnates in its diversity.[7]

Not everyone sees the lack of racial diversity as a point of frustration, however. CA, a young Caucasian pastor of a large, growing congregation, affirmed that a multi-racial, multi- cultural church was beautiful and a reflection of the heavenly reality, yet he was concerned that a racially diverse church was wrongly being portrayed as a "gold standard" in some quarters of the denomination. He says: "There is a sense if a church is

[7] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace, Revised and Updated: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019).

not laboring towards a racially diverse church, then everything else in the church is not as quite as good as it should be. I disagree strongly with that view. The goal should be love and unity in the body of Christ." In order to circumvent the racially charged motif, CA uses an example of differing styles of worship:

> Is it a good thing that there is a church in town that has more contemporary worship while another church has more traditional worship? Or is that necessarily a bad thing? Should both be striving for blended worship, which will attract every type of person? If I notice in my congregation a sense of superiority that our preference of music is biblically superior to another's preference in music, that is sinful and should be undercut. The goal is to enable people to worship God with their whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. The Reformers put it this way-—true worship is always the best. If someone else is better enabled to worship the Lord in a different style than my preference, is that necessarily wrong? Now if this becomes a matter of sinful division, where we can no longer fellowship or worship together, then these are sinful actions and must be addressed. If I turn my preferences into biblical mandates, then this must be addressed. But I'm not necessarily sure if we have to say multicultural congregations are the most biblically faithful. I would have concern about that inference.

KM also disagrees that racially diverse churches are the standard. He says,

> Do I want to be a part of a racially diverse congregation? Do I want our church to have more diversity? Yes, but not because it is theologically right but because diversity is something I enjoy. My heart rejoices when I read in the Scriptures that the nations are coming into the kingdom of God. Specifically in Revelation, where the nations are coming and bringing their treasures. That is a very rich image. It's an appealing image. Coming to worship with people that have different songs, different clothing, different aesthetics, art, etc. Worshiping with people who have different takes on the truth, different emphasis, and different concerns—this is all very appealing. I would love to see a church like this. But it is an intellectual and aesthetic desire more than a theologically driven desire. I don't think there is anything wrong with a church that is made up of all the same type of person. Think of the many times in church history where there was no opportunity for diversity. If you started a church among the peasants in the countryside of England or France or Spain or any place until this century, you would only have Spaniards and French and Irish and English. You wouldn't have any diversity. It wasn't a diverse world. But today, where the big cities are full of different cultures, it would seem to me an opportunity to have a church that was like the new Jerusalem. But I don't think it's a mandate. I think there is a level of richness which

would be enjoyable and maybe desirable. But I don't think it's theologically required.

Participants from the majority culture appeared to bounce back and forth between the tension of racially diverse churches being a mature, better representation of the church to an ambivalence of its pursuit. For instance, TC, stressing that there is nothing wrong with a mono-ethnic church, continued to stress that a racially diverse church is to be desired—even pursued by the leadership. He stated,

> In a racially diverse church setting, we have to take our sensitivity and concern for the other to a high level. Learning to be sensitive towards the needs of people who are very different than me is amped up in a racially diverse setting. This growth and sensitivity towards others is actually a growth in love, a growth in sanctification. When we strive to build racially diverse churches, we are creating churches where people are challenged in their sanctification. In the mature expression of the church, we see that the foreigner and the stranger play a significant role not only in the in the form of a congregation, but also in the plan of God's salvation at key points in the history. The people that God uses in significant ways are immigrants: Abraham, Moses, Ruth, a Moabite, which actually was an enemy of Israel. Esther, an immigrant in Babylon. I've learned from the example of the scriptures that every immigrant we look at, every refugee we look at could be a potential Abraham or a potential Moses. We never can fathom what the purpose of God is in any given person, but we do know that God has used immigrants in a most significant way. This should inform our view of what the church should look like and who we should notice among us."

BF is a young black pastor who strongly expressed concern about the multi-ethnic church model. It was learned from the interview, that BF was impacted by the thoughts of Kori Edward's book, *The Elusive Dream*, which calls into question the viability of the multiethnic church.[8] BF said,

> A multi-ethnic church still tends to operate like a white church. It leans towards the white church model. In these churches, there is a tendency to elevate white members above people of color. Inevitably, it will be the people of color who have to do the heavy lifting of assimilation and sacrifice in order to stay in the church. In my experience, the white

[8] Korie L. Edwards, *Elusive Dream* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008).

> members are never called upon to assimilate and sacrifice at the same level as the people of color. The white members are never asked to do the same thing. For that reason, I do think multi-ethnic churches can be unsafe places for people of color because there is a veneer, a mask of safety, but it is not a safe place for people of color. When you take the mask off, it is a white church masked as a multi-ethnic church. But it still looks at things from a white point of view.

BF's perspective sheds light on the power dynamics that may persist in a multi-ethnic, diverse church even when the goal of the church leadership is to be inclusive and racially diverse. While the intent behind building racially diverse churches may be rooted in biblical foundations, BF's experience suggests there is a preference for a "white church model." BF's experience was that people of color felt considerable pressure to conform to the dominate culture of the church, thus compromising their own expression of faith and culture. The terms "veneer" or "mask of safety" that BF uses may be particularly significant, suggesting there is a surface level diversity that is masking deeper issues of bias and inequality. BF went on to question the authenticity and depth of integration efforts in PCA churches.

Out of all the participants, SN had the longest tenure as an ordained PCA teaching elder. Ordained for over 30 years, SN offered a broader perspective than any of the other participants. He served for several years as a pastor of evangelism and discipleship. The bulk of his ministry was as lead pastor of two churches in the South. SN admitted that the PCA he knows would be consistent with other men in his demographic: "largely white, middle to upper class, suburban type ministry." Nevertheless, SN looked back to his first church coming out of seminary, and the one he was ordained in, he said, "There was a great amount of diversity." Yet, he acknowledged that the idea of what diversity means now is different. SN said,

> In the United States, we don't typically discuss the concept of castes, but it's clear that social structures and levels exist. Our church community was a tapestry of diversity, largely defined by economic status. In our church, we had an array of professionals from various sectors: medical, legal, financial, including CEOs. Alongside them were the 'boots on the ground'—the blue-collar workers employed by some of these professionals or working within the same organizations. Our church was a microcosm of this diversity, with members ranging from the highly educated to those without formal education, from the comfortably affluent to those living paycheck to paycheck. It was a broad spectrum of society, and being part of such a church was truly fulfilling. It reminded me of what I imagined the Church of Antioch to be like. Interestingly, I didn't focus on racial diversity at the time, as the church seemed to mirror the community's composition. We had a Black elder who worked for the same company as my father-in-law. There were about four or five African American families and a significant number of Asians. It's only upon reflection that I realize race wasn't a factor in my perception of diversity then. These individuals were simply part of our community. It was later that the concept of race emerged as a predominant element of diversity, although I can't pinpoint exactly when that shift occurred.

SN dated this part of ministry as "before this became such a big conversation in the PCA." He reiterated the positive view he had of the church, comparing it to Antioch because of the composition of members from different social strata, a variety of professions, educational backgrounds, and economic diversity. Racial and ethnic diversity, although present, was not at the forefront of SN's perception. What mattered was that the church "reflected the community." SN indicates that the PCA evolved in how diversity was perceived and valued, now with more emphasis placed on skin color, rather than a transcending of various societal divisions.[9]

SN's second church provided a stark contrast to his first:

> I relocated to Tuscaloosa, Alabama, which, despite my Southern upbringing, was a very distinctive place. The setting was entirely different. Our church was situated just off the University of Alabama campus, attracting many college students. Tuscaloosa's culture is multifaceted,

[9] The church in Antioch is mentioned in the following New Testament Scriptures: Acts 6:5, Acts 11:19-30, Acts 13:1-3, Acts 14:26-28, Acts 15:1-2, Acts 15:22-35, and Galatians 2:11-14.

> essentially divided into three: the campus culture, which is predominantly liberal and academic, the old Tuscaloosa representing ‘old money’, and the new Tuscaloosa characterized by newer wealth. Surrounding these, in the county's outskirts, were people who might pejoratively called ‘uneducated and simple.’ I identify more with what I considered “redneck” from my upbringing—simple country folk who were mostly high school educated and tended not to travel far from their hometown or state, except perhaps to the beach. This culture was noticeably stratified, and this was reflected in the church. It was my first encounter with what I would describe as a lack of diversity within a church community. To the best of my recollection, the church was almost entirely Caucasian, predominantly educated, and composed of a mix from old and new Tuscaloosa. The congregation was privileged in the truest sense of the word, as it was once used: they were people who generally never wanted for anything and were, for the most part, aware and appreciative of their advantages, albeit perhaps from a more ‘publican’ standpoint. However, there were emerging signs of what I hadn't observed in my first church—a palpable, not racist, but certainly a color-conscious attitude. In Tuscaloosa, there were several prominent African-American evangelical churches, yet there was no interaction with them.

SN further recounted an experience in his church that revealed the complexities of racial diversity within some PCA churches in the 1990’s. SN reflected on this encounter that brought to light the challenges and contradictions of embracing true diversity beyond mere lip service.

> The issue of racial diversity and controversy became more evident to me when I learned that a member of our church was the president of an organization known as the League of the South. He had been a university professor and a historian but was no longer teaching, having been ostracized for his strong advocacy of what was then termed 'Southern Heritage.' He was also connected to the Auburn Avenue theology and the related controversy in Louisiana, which involved several PCA figures who are now no longer part of the PCA. He assured me that he would keep his political views separate from church activities. However, his presence raised concerns among the elders. They weren't particularly progressive, but they were uncomfortable with the idea of having the president of the League of the South, which was listed by the Southern Poverty Law Center, in our congregation. I found myself in the midst of a controversy, a precursor to the kinds that would later become more common. After meeting with him, he expressed his commitment to Presbyterian polity and his desire to be part of our church community without causing disruption.

> He and his family wanted to be under the church's authority and were willing to submit to the leadership of the session. I saw this as an opportunity for our church and advocated for their membership, highlighting their willingness to adhere to church discipline and authority. Despite this, the session voted against accepting them as members. Remarkably, he and his family took the decision well and continued to attend the church. Ironically, I felt they demonstrated more trust in our church polity than we, the leadership, did. This was in 1999, a time when such issues were beginning to surface in PCA discussions. It seemed to me that the concept of diversity was valued more in theory than in practice. As a church, we were unwilling to accept this man into membership, yet we also did not actively pursue a representation of diversity that more accurately reflected our community. It appeared we wanted to avoid controversy without truly committing to the principles we professed to uphold. We rejected his membership, while still having very little pursuit of the people different than our current makeup.

SN's account underscores the complex and often contradictory nature of how churches approach diversity. Despite professing a desire for inclusivity, churches may struggle to embrace true diversity, especially when it leads to discomfort or controversy. SN's story, marked by a sense of pain and lament, highlights a specific instance where a church rejected a family due to their controversial affiliations, yet also failed to actively engage with the black community. This contradiction between words and actions reveals a gap in genuinely committing to diversity, reflecting the broader challenges churches face in reconciling their stated values with practical implementation. Furthermore, SN seemed to suggest that the Presbyterian polity of the church would have been strong enough to handle these challenges and discomforts, but it was never give the chance to bear such weight.

Theme Two: A Cautious Approach to the Desire for a Racially Diverse Church

While majority culture pastors wrestled with the idea of racially diverse churches, seeing the benefits but stopping short of calling it a mandate, minority elders in the PCA were also cautious, but for different reasons. BF said,

> Church leadership should only pursue racial diversity in two ways. First, if the church is located in a racially diverse geography. Don't try to be something that the demographic will not allow you to be. You can't bus people into your church just because they are of a different skin color. If you are in a predominantly white area, then you will have a white church and that is fine. I think the church should look like the community it's a part of. Secondly, church leadership should only pursue racial diversity in their congregation if they have done the hard work of studying race issues and dealing with their own hearts regarding race. Is the leadership aware of their own racism? Are they dealing with their own issues of how they view other people differently than them? Are they in talks with ministers of color? If not, then no! Even if their church is in a diverse demographic, they should not pursue racial diversity. They should be honest with themselves and with others. When black and brown people come to their church, they should say, 'We are still problematic in regard to race. We are not a place where you will feel safe, fully welcomed, and celebrated, so we would recommend you attend a church elsewhere.'

While BF's statement was blunt and candid, many of the minority participants raised a similar concern: in their view, there are some PCA churches that are not safe places for people of color. As leaders within the denomination themselves, they acknowledge this as a need for change and improvement. NP, a ruling elder, suggested that this lack of safety for people of color includes those who are different in gender, sexuality, along with those who have a different skin color. He said,

> The question is who are we appreciating and affirming among us? Do we appreciate and affirm our brothers and sisters of color? Do we appreciate and affirm our sisters in faith? Do we appreciate and affirm those who struggle with same-sex attraction? These are the three big issues: race, gender and sexuality. And if you're a conservative, southern white male then you always feel like those are the three threats. Diversity always includes sexuality, gender and ethnicity, and we get very, very defensive about these topics. This is where a nuanced understanding of intersectionality could help us. Properly understood, intersectionality recognizes that there are groups of people whose identities minoritizes them in such a way, that me, being heterosexual, I'm in a dominant group and I fail to understand the struggles and the pains of people who are not in the dominant group. Our reaction to these perceived threats is: 'when in doubt, push them out.' We can't claim to want diversity among us and yet act in ways that pushes out those who are diverse because we sense they are a threat.

Likewise, KC, a Korean teaching elder on the West Coast, said,

> One of the things that is very interesting to me is why many of my Korean brothers would prefer to remain in the Korean presbytery rather than join with the English-speaking presbytery. I know for a fact, many of them do not speak Korean, and yet they remain with the Korean presbytery. They are ethnically aligned and would prefer to join a presbytery that is Korean speaking when they don't even speak Korean! I infer that this preference for ethnic specific fellowship is widespread across the nation. Why do we have so few black and brown pastors in our denomination? In my presbytery, 80 to 90 percent of the teaching elders are white. This is astounding when you're talking about the population of Los Angeles! My personal experience in the PCA, especially at the beginning, was that I was very disengaged. This wasn't for racial reasons, but the culture of the PCA was vastly different than the Pentecostal tradition I grew up in. As I reflect back, perhaps my not being involved was also racially motivated. In some ways I excluded myself. I didn't feel welcome. Things started to shift, though around five years ago when, to my surprise, someone nominated me to be the moderator of our presbytery and I became the moderator of our presbytery for one year. At the end of my first year, they changed the bylaws at our presbytery so I can moderate a second year, which I think was unprecedented. That was never done up to that point. I was a moderator for our presbytery for two years. That's when I realized how important it was to empower minorities. I was a recipient of that grace which gave me a sense of belonging.

Minority elders who participated in these interviews responded with similar examples of maintaining an "insider/outsider" position within the denomination. This belief often reinforces the caution of promoting multi-ethnic churches. BF reported a skepticism towards his fellow pastors who portray themselves to be "woke" and racially progressive. He opines,

> White ministers have to be aware of their own failings, their own shortcomings, their own racial ignorance, and their own racism. This is true of pastors who consider themselves 'woke.' I've actually found that those who think they're racially woke can be the most damaging and harmful and racist. I would rather sit under a white pastor who's like John MacArthur than the one who thinks that they are woke and really isn't because they perpetrate more harm. It's like what Dr. King said. It's not the KKK that is the issue; it is the white moderate. That's the biggest hindrance, an obstacle to racial equality and a spiritual danger to African-Americans in the PCA. It's the one who says, 'I agree with your cause, but

> I don't like your methods.' Oftentimes progressive racism in the PCA is worse the conservative racism that I've seen.

KA, a Hispanic pastor who grew up in the Pentecostal church before becoming convinced of the Reformed faith, spoke highly of Dr. Iwyn Inces' book and the need for intentionality in pursuing diversity in the church:

> My journey has been significantly influenced by my upbringing in an immigrant church, where I witnessed stark generational differences, particularly between the Spanish-speaking first generation and the more bilingual second and third generations. This exposure to cultural and linguistic gaps sowed seeds in my heart about the importance of uniting diverse groups. My minority experience in this country further reinforced these seeds. Observing scriptural teachings, I recognized the church's need to be proactive in embracing diversity. Living in major Hispanic cities like New York, Orlando, and Houston, I've been puzzled by the lack of Hispanic missions or works in these areas among the PCA, especially considering their significant Hispanic populations. This scarcity has left a bitter taste in my mouth and led me to question if another denomination might be more suitable. However, my strong Presbyterian convictions and discussions with many people have persuaded me to stay and contribute as best as I can. Although one person alone cannot effect widespread change, I believe in the power of leading by example and influencing my presbytery, which is why I choose to remain and make a difference from within.

While the majority of minority participants wrestled how they fit into the denomination, DE, a Latino teaching elder in his 30's, took a contrarian view. He sees the discussion on racial diversity in the church to be misplaced and overemphasized. He acknowledges,

> I grew up in a very diverse area. Hispanics, Colombians, the Cubanos, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, and Nicaraguans were everywhere in my neighborhood. They were all represented where I live. There is also the Chinese who are represented where I lived. People were geographic. Eighth Avenue was owned by the Chinese people. Mexicans are on 4th Avenue. The South Americans were here and there. The white people and the Norwegians, they're up by Orpington and down that way…so it was very old world in its geographic distinctions. But the thing I saw as a child and what I came to hate was the incessant nationalism of the people around me. I was told that I did not love my people enough because I

> didn't have the Puerto Rican flag on my shoes or my socks or my shorts or my shirt or my hat or my watch or my wristband. And I didn't listen to enough bachata. I didn't speak Spanish enough. So I was viewed as less than others. Every time I saw people speaking Spanish and nothing but Spanish, they were always poor people. They were always people who were struggling to survive or people who were drunkards or people who struggled with drugs. And so as a kid, I came to associate that culture in that lifestyle and that language with poverty and ignorance. This is me being very transparent. People I saw who were educated and were not struggling were not like that. And I didn't want to be like that. My parents worked so hard so I could go to school. My dad worked 13 days in a row and then from Thanksgiving to the new year, he doesn't get a day off except Christmas. My mom worked long hours, so my grandparents functionally raised me and they also worked. My grandfather worked. My grandmother stayed at home. They did that so that I can get an education, and the idea as a child was that education is freedom. I didn't want to be like these people. So there is a sense where I don't think I fit. I'm not Spanish enough for the Spanish, and I often feel rather white by comparison. So although I am a minority, and although I am a Hispanic, and although I am from a Puerto Rican background through and through, I often don't feel like it. I often don't view myself in that way. It's probably one of the least important things in my world, to be honest. It doesn't mean I don't love my people, and when I hear the language, it brings me back to a wonderful place in my childhood and I hear the music and I'm brought back to being a little boy again. And I have been to Puerto Rico several times, but it was a trap to me. Brooklyn was a trap. There was violence, there's gangs, there is drugs. There was danger. And that was all associated with a particular culture that I didn't want anything to do with.

Likewise, DE was frank in reporting that race has not been an issue in his welcome into the PCA. He says,

> Race has not been a factor. There's a unique warmness in the PCA that I did not find in other denominations and fellowships. I have encountered a relational distance and maybe even indifference in some other denominations. I've been very thankful for the camaraderie and the warm welcome that I have felt in the PCA, which was refreshing. It was the PCA and the brothers in my area who wanted to step into my life and church to make a difference, and that's the only reason I am where I am right now. And in many ways, the only reason I'm still able to make a difference.

Although the presbytery where DE serves is one of the least racially diverse presbyteries (ministerially), this has no bearing on his outlook. His candid answer was

> I could care less. I don't think that matters. I think the question is, are we reaching people for Christ? If that's the aim, then we will eventually have Black pastors, Hispanic pastors, Arabian pastors, Chinese pastors, ect. But if our goal is mere statistics, then even those people serve particular ends, there's an angle to their being a part of us. It's not just about this individual or the quality of scholarship or spirituality, it's just about a statistics game at that point. Now, if it's that people are being pushed down because of their race or their skin color or something like that, that's a real problem. But if they're being elevated merely because of their race, that's also a problem because it cheapens them as a human and, in some sense, I think diminishes their dignity. Do I, as a Puerto Rican man, feel out of place in my church or denomination? No, I do not. I've never been made to feel out of place. I've been made to feel out of place because the person I've dealt with was a wicked, vile sinner. But I feel like he was an equal opportunity, equal vile sinner, and he was equally vile to everyone. It's not always a race issue."

For DWJ, an African American teaching elder in his 40's serving as an assistant pastor in a large congregation in the south, race does matter. But like most participants interviewed, he is wary of the multi-ethnic church emphasis, but for different reasons. He reports,

> In my pastorate, I'm not necessarily trying to fulfill the evangelical dream of having a multi-ethnic, multicultural church. I just want to be faithful to what God's called me to do. That means that I'm not necessarily looking for people who come from where I come from, or that I trust, because we have the same background. None of that matters. The kingdom is like a net that was cast and gathered all manner of fish. When you go to your average evangelical church today, what you'll see is a largely white, dominant leadership. It's hard to find those who will actually trust a person of color based upon their own merit. There's a whole unspoken subset of commitments that I've alluded to, that one must subscribe to. Typically, it means being pro-life or, more specifically, outspoken about pro-life or outspoken against critical race theory. As long as you're willing to feed the crumbs that they toss you, then you'll be accepted by them. They don't accept people of color based upon their own merit.

KM wrestled with the tension of wanting a racially diverse congregation, but unsure if pursuit of racial diversity finds warrant in biblical theology. He is also unsure if it is always practical for a church to be racially diverse. On whether churches should be

content with an ethnic-specific congregation, KM revealed that in his younger years as an elder he would balk against monoethnic churches. He said,

> I would be the first one to say, 'No! We need to integrate and labor to have a multi-ethnic church.' Now, while I would love to see it, I think it's a more nuanced issue. A church, in a sense, is an elective association of like-minded and like cultured people. In a sense, a person chooses where to go to church. People are more comfortable around certain associations and uncomfortable around others. However, if we accept racially distinct churches, there must be some real serious work done towards acceptance of one another and, at times, helping one another. I think there's some churches that have plenty of money while some of our ethnic churches struggle along. This shouldn't be. We should find ways and commit ourselves to helping our sister churches financially and working together in other matters as well.

KC spoke favorably of the ethnic specific church,

> I believe there's something inherently beautiful about ethnic-specific churches, reflecting how God uniquely wires people. In the PCA, while some churches are racially multiethnic, I often wonder if they've simply conformed to a Western, white way of doing things. It raises the question: Is it true multiculturalism, or just a form of assimilation, resulting in a monocultural yet multiethnic environment? How significantly do these diverse cultures and ethnicities influence their church practices? In my observation, the reason Asians and whites coexist well in the PCA is largely due to the successful assimilation of Asians. However, when I visit a predominantly Korean church, I see a distinct beauty in their practices, deeply rooted in Korean culture. As someone who identifies with that culture, I find comfort and a sense of belonging in such settings. I fully support ministries specific to minorities and recognize that all ministries within the PCA are influenced by their ethnic backgrounds. There's no ethnically neutral way of doing church. To me, these ethnic-specific ministries aren't odd; they're a natural expression of our diverse backgrounds.

NP acknowledged both positive and negative outcomes emerging from efforts to address ethnic diversity within a the PCA. Reflecting on the fruit that has come from the 2016 RR paper, he said,

> Do I see fruit? Yes and no, but I guess the answer is yes. Fruit seems to emerge in two ways. One is, that certain individuals across the country, teaching elders in particular, have embraced this notion of diversity, ethnic diversity, and are making efforts to be intentionally ethnically diverse. So

> that's good. That's some of the fruit that emerged. That's the obvious one. The less obvious one is the fruit that emerged as a result of resistance from this type of report. And anecdotally, perhaps, and in other forms where you hear this in written form, in certain groups where they would say this is the danger of our denomination, that we focus on race at all. And proof texting biblically saying that there is no Jew or Gentile, there is no race to now to speak of. So, I think there are some people who you sense this resistance increasingly to say we shouldn't be talking about race and diversity. And we had the report and their perspective, some people's perspective is we're done, we've settled it…we are not reading the recommendations on how to move forward, how to actually discipline people who are continuing to show evidence of racism in their heart and in their practices. And people get very nervous with that. But that's the fruit also that it was born from this study. It's backlash and resistance that is even stronger now than before. Rumors right now are circulating about next year's General Assembly, where they're going after critical race theory. And there was an overture that came up this year that was defeated soundly, but, you know, I really believe that Southern strategy is alive and well and there's greater organization and coordination and money and intentionality to try to defeat some of these issues that they see as a problem in the church.

IL had a similar response:

> I would say the response to the GA report has been a mixed bag. There have been some positive changes. Notably, among a certain group in the PCA, there's now an acknowledgment that racism does exist. This has led to empathetic conversations with many men and women in the PCA about my experiences and those of other minorities. These discussions, often remorseful and appalled at the shared stories, might not have happened without the report. However, there's also a subset within the PCA that has reacted quite differently. They seem to view the report as a definitive statement that racism in the PCA has been resolved. This interpretation is problematic because the report wasn't intended to be conclusive or final. It was meant to be the beginning of an ongoing process, not to provide definitive answers but to raise awareness and encourage continuous engagement with the issue of racism. So, in essence, while there have been positive developments, there have also been less encouraging responses to the reconciliation paper.

KA, a Hispanic pastor, balked at the idea that some in the denomination tired of talking about race. He referenced his upbringing where race was a frequent topic in his family:

> As a Hispanic who grew up in a household where my parents, undocumented immigrants, shaped my environment, I've always been immersed in discussions about race and ethnicity. My parents instilled in my brother and me the belief that we should never let others, especially white individuals, feel superior to us. This perspective has been a constant in my life, making it difficult for me to relate to those who are just beginning to engage in these conversations. While I can understand how it might be overwhelming or exhausting for some, for me and many in my community, it's an integral part of our existence. Recognizing ethnic pride and racism as significant issues, I see them as matters of spiritual and moral significance. They represent a form of spiritual warfare, challenging our views on the inherent dignity of every person.

Theme Three: Coming for the Doctrine, Dealing with the Lack of Diversity

Like many of the minority elders interviewed, DWJ had a similar background. He came out of a Pentecostal, charismatic background to the PCA. The primary motivations were for a robust, healthy biblical doctrine and a persuasion to Reformed theology. DWJ's home church prior to his transition in the PCA had no need to talk about racial diversity. It was one of the most racially diverse churches in the state. Multiple flags filled the sanctuary representing the nations of the congregants' origin. The pastor of the church was black and boasted a staff representing the ethnicities of the congregation. When DWJ became reformed in his theology and chose the PCA as his ministerial affiliation, he said,

> I knew that it was taking several steps back. I also knew that the Lord had brought me here for a reason. I started to become aware of some of the history of Presbyterianism. The Civil Rights Act passed in 1965, and the PCA didn't acknowledge that they were wrong on that until 2016. So that's fifty -one years before repenting. They're half a century behind the curve. I figured that I should just take the good with the bad, for no denomination is ideal. But I increasingly met people in the PCA that I felt I needed to distance myself from. On the other hand, I felt that God was presenting me, along with others, to help make some positive changes. The Lord was giving us the opportunity not to propagate that country club mentality, that the PCA church is a white southern denomination. It's the Lord's Church. There's just been some wicked men who held it in unrighteousness.

KC desires to see greater diversity in influential committees,

> I've never perceived white leaders in the PCA as inherently superior due to race, but I do sense an 'old boys club' within the denomination. This isn't about inherent superiority; frankly, I find some of their ideas lacking. However, the real power in the PCA lies within its standing committees like the Standing Judicial Commission and the Overtures Committee, which are predominantly white. This is a significant issue because these permanent committees wield considerable influence behind the scenes, far beyond the symbolic roles like minority moderators who serve briefly. The real change in diversifying the PCA must happen in these permanent committees. Their long-term membership contrasts sharply with the fleeting tenure of minority moderators. I've observed firsthand the close-knit, almost insular nature of these groups. For instance, during a case before the Standing Judicial Commission, I noticed the camaraderie and long-standing relationships among the white members, highlighting my position as an outsider. There's an unspoken dynamic in these circles that minorities are currently not a part of. I recall a conversation where my race was unknown to the speaker, and he made a disparaging remark about a black member of the commission, revealing an underlying bias. This experience and others have shown me the less visible, yet impactful, side of the PCA. My wife often questions why I choose to stay in what appears to be a corrupt system. For me, the turning point will be when we see a diverse representation in these powerful committees, with black, brown, and other ethnicities playing significant roles. Until then, the lack of diversity in these key areas remains a glaring issue in the PCA.
> SM is a black teaching elder in the south.

Before taking this call with an existing church, he planted a daughter church in a diverse city setting, as an extension of a large church in the suburbs. By his own admission, SM was given ample resources, support from the mother church, and time to grow the church plant. He found, however, that in a predominantly black community, he struggled to bring his neighbors into the church. When asked what was the primary hinderance, he responded,

> As a black pastor, I can say for a black person to come into a PCA church is like moving from the United States to Canada. That was my experience, the transition was drastic. For me, I came because I saw the beauty and biblical accuracy of Reformed theology. But the transition was drastic. Now when someone changes from traditional church to a contemporary church or when they go from Pentecostal to Baptist, that's like moving from state to state. But the transition from a historically black Pentecostal church to the PCA—that's a more significant move. I found the task of

> attempting to convince black people to come into a PCA church was very, very difficult. I was trying to commend them, not only to the PCA, but to the Reformed faith. That is a 'combo package.' The PCA is like a middle upper class white structure, and I was inviting them into that structure. They were not coming. I used to think it was strictly because of the Reformed tradition that they were not coming. I found that it was not only the tradition, but it was also because of the reformed theology. Even though there are similar elements of understanding God's sovereignty and other foundational doctrines, ultimately, the differences were too vast. When I tried to commend the reformed faith to my black family, friends, those in the neighborhood of the church plant, they couldn't accept the theology nor the tradition. It was very difficult.

There was a sense of disappointment for SM since the church plant eventually closed. According to SM, it was both the theology and culture that was not accepted by the predominantly black neighborhood. He reflected on his own upbringing to help him understand why even those closest to him could not overcome their presuppositions to join the church plant. He acknowledged,

> I didn't grow up surrounded by black gatekeepers. I was born into a working-class family. My mother was a teacher and my dad a factory worker. They were born and raised in the projects, as was I. Nevertheless, the importance of education was continually emphasized to me. My parents pursued education to the best of their ability. So the fact that the PCA tends to be attractive to intellectuals was not the issue. But when I took my mother to my supporting church, it was like the different culture smacked her immediately when she walked through the door. She gave me that look that said, 'This may work for you, but it's not going to work for me.' Unfortunately, that became the pattern for those I introduced to the church. The differing culture smacked them in the face immediately when they walked in the sanctuary. They said, 'This may work for you, but it won't for us.'

DWJ explained that his entrance into the PCA has been a journey of finding where he fits. He asserted,

> When I came in, I didn't want to play my African-American card. I felt like I was smart enough that I could stand on my own two feet, that I could navigate a lot of this on my own. I think to a large extent, I've kind of done that pretty well. But it's finding a fit has been a challenge because I think your progressives in the PCA are accustomed to angry black man types who are like Voddie Baucham, the anti- critical race theory, against

> the cultural appropriation and intersectionality. Or they're used to the African-American ministries of the PCA types who kind of have an axe to grind. You've got your ones on the left and the ones on the right, and if you don't belong to either camp, they're not going to know what to do with you. I was told, coming out of seminary, that most of the PCA is not going to know what to do with me because I'm not an angry black man mad at the progressives in the PCA. Neither am I a Reverend Al Sharpton type, lobbying against the conservatives. Finding my way through, it was going to be difficult. That's basically proven to be true.

DE, in contrast, articulated a perspective that diverged from common answers on race and diversity. This was, in part, because of his serving as a teaching elder in a monolithic, rural community. But his view also was influenced by a disdain for any ideology or doctrine that separates God's people into categories, whether race or something else. He said,

> In our congregation, I'm one of two Hispanic families and there has been no issue with (talk about lack of diversity). So, it's hard for me. There's a sense where this topic is rather artificial. But if I'm talking to somebody who's new in Christ (and they are caught up in race-based ideologies that are harmful) one of the things that I would do is be careful and slow to pastor them because we destroy arguments with ferocity, but we don't do that to people. We are careful and slow and loving and patient with people and covering sins. And I see that as a point of sanctification really—just slowly showing them the truth. The CRT movement on some level is going to prioritize some people over others. That's not a Christian perspective. We are all equal at the foot of the cross. We are equally in need of the grace of God. We are all equally capable of being renewed by Christ. And there's not a first or second- or third-class citizen or any sort of system that's going to create or establish first, second, third, fourth, fifth class citizens. I don't have time for that. That was something in my Pentecostalism. Again, in Pentecostalism, you had people who were filled with the Holy Spirit, whose evidence fit with the speaking of tongues and those who have the Little Holy Spirit, and they don't speak in tongues. In my own heart, I'm thoroughly intolerant of any sort of view of Christianity that's going to create first- and second-class citizens. That's something that's just kind of hardwired into me from being an ex-Pentecostal. Any other form or any other present philosophy or anthropology that's going to come through in that way—I'm just going to have no time for it because not only is it degrading, but it's also unscriptural and it really cheapens what God has done, is doing, and will do.

KA shared a similar sentiment of being welcomed in the PCA, but wondered if this was because he sought out "certain expressions of the PCA"

> My experiences within PCA have been quite positive, and I attribute this to deliberately seeking out certain expressions of the PCA. As you might know, the PCA encompasses a range of expressions. By God's grace, the first church I encountered was more moderate, fitting somewhere between the extremely traditional 'Westminster' types, the highly progressive, and the moderate groups. Although issues of race or racism weren't explicitly discussed, I always felt welcomed, especially by the leadership. This has been my experience both as a congregant and now as an ordained minister. Fortunately, I haven't personally encountered any overt racism or attitudes of superiority within the church. However, I'm aware that some of my friends have had different experiences, which is regrettable. I'm grateful for my own journey, untouched by these negative experiences.

Theme: Racial Unrest and the Response of the Church

Throughout the period of researching this paper (2020-2023), the United States had experienced significant racial tension and unrest because of incidents of police brutality. Most notably was the death of George Floyd in May 2020. In May 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, was arrested by four police officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The officers suspected Floyd of using a counterfeit $20 bill. While in police custody, Floyd was handcuffed and pinned to the ground by Derek Chauvin, one of the officers. Chauvin kneeled on Floyd's neck for 9 minutes and 29 seconds, even after Floyd repeatedly said that he could not breathe. Floyd eventually lost consciousness and died. The incident was captured on video by bystanders and quickly went viral. The video sparked outrage and protests across the United States and around the world. The protests were part of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which claims to advocate for the end of police brutality and racial injustice.

The BLM protests were some of the largest in American history. According to *The New York Times*, an estimated 15 to 26 million people participated in the protests in 2020.[10]

The protests led to a national conversation about race and policing, and they helped to raise awareness of the issue of police brutality against Black people. I asked all the participants to share their thoughts on how they navigated the church through these times of racial unrest. For the minority pastors, I asked how they felt their pastoral peers responded and to reflect on how it impacted their ministry in the PCA. KA responded:

> Our church reflects the area's diversity, encompassing a variety of ethnic groups including Southeast Asian, white, black, and Asian members. Our leadership mirrors this diversity, with myself and the senior pastor, who is Filipino, leading the congregation, and our ruling elders representing a mix of races, including two white and one Asian member. In 2020, amidst heightened discussions on race, our church faced challenges. These discussions were new for many families, creating a sense of awkwardness as they tried to reconcile social media narratives with tough racial and political discussions. Despite these challenges, our church has made intentional efforts to engage in these conversations, holding Zoom sessions to explore racial issues through the lens of scripture. Our congregation is politically diverse, with some families leaning towards extreme right or left views. This diversity has sometimes led to difficult situations, but these families have remained with us, a testament to God's grace. During 2020, we've navigated numerous challenging conversations and emails, yet even the families that lean more left and those that lean more right, they continue to be a part of our church. As leaders, we aren't focused on being experts in these tough racial and political discussions, nor do we strive to be. Instead, we focus on what we can learn from these discussions and rely on scriptures as our primary guide in addressing these issues. It's been a tough journey, but the Holy Spirit's grace has been evident, helping us to persevere in our ministry.

NP was adamant that he needed to use his scholarship in racial studies to speak out on behalf of his brothers and sisters of color, especially during the season of intense racial

[10] Ben Change, *Christ and the Culture Wars: Speaking for Jesus in a World of Identity Politics* (Geanies House, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2023), 53.

unrest. He admits that he did this reluctantly, expecting that he would be misinterpreted and misunderstood by those within his denomination. He admits,

> On a personal level, I confess that I am a people pleaser at heart and always have been. I think God, in his infinite wisdom, knows that about me and might use my scholarship that is incredibly unpopular with my own beloved denominational brothers and sisters, some circles of our denomination, God may be using that to sanctify me, to break me down so that I don't walk away with any sort of arrogance to say that I'm smarter or more articulate than others. And every time I write a piece (on race and the response to racial injustice), it's deeply painful because I know the pushback is coming. The criticism is coming. It breaks me down. It humbles me in many ways. It is the white Southerners (in the PCA) who are pushing back. And I now come to expect that criticism from some, although incredibly encouraged by others who said, 'I used to think this way, I'm starting to think differently. Thank you for helping me see these things.' Those are incredibly encouraging conversations. But it is also incredibly painful and surprising that I would get fierce criticism from other people of color, other Korean Americans and Asian Americans who come at me with the same kind of ideology that's opposed to racial justice. They say to me, 'You have become so liberal.' I've had other Korean Americans say, 'can't you see all these things that you're saying publicly are going to come back on us and people (in our denomination) will not like us because of you?' I will often pause and respond, 'Who are they? Do you mean our white brothers and sisters? They will not like us because I am addressing the need for social justice?' It reveals so much about how we're connected, how they recognize, even in that statement of telling me to stop it and be careful, they recognize that we're lumped together.

Likewise, KC, spoke of not being surprised by the reaction of his peers during the racial unrest of 2020. He said,

> Dealing with racial issues for a long time, I can't say I've been surprised by the response to racial unrest, though it is discouraging. During my seminary years, I encountered various attitudes that highlighted the racial divide. For instance, after the Virginia Tech shooting by a Korean-American, a white roommate insensitively joked about it, reflecting a lack of sensitivity. Another time, when discussing overt racism in churches with my roommates, their responses ranged from oversimplifying complex racial issues to outright ignorance. One roommate, who had never met an Asian person before me, opened up about his lack of exposure to diversity. These experiences in seminary made me realize the spectrum of attitudes towards race – from those who are willfully racist and seek to maintain white authority, to those who are simply ignorant due to lack of exposure. In our presbytery, the reaction to racial issues was eye-opening. Attending

> the General Assembly (GA) made me realize that serving in a diverse area like Los Angeles is an anomaly in the predominantly southern, white Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). The discussions at the GA, particularly about celibate gay ministers and the reluctance to denounce Asian racism, were disheartening. It was a stark reminder of the ignorance and potential racism within the PCA. The lack of understanding about minority experiences was evident in statements made during the overtures. For instance, the argument that no statement could justify the hate Asians have received was used to avoid addressing the issue, highlighting a disconnect in understanding minority struggles. I believe there's a need for extensive education within the PCA. Minorities like us might have to endure ignorance and insensitive remarks as part of the process. The alternative is leaving, but that doesn't help in bringing about understanding or reform. It's going to be a painful journey, especially for Hispanic and Black minorities, who are even more marginalized. As a Korean American, I feel like we're a significant minority in the U.S., but the path to reform and education within the PCA is still fraught with challenges.

DWJ spoke of the visceral reaction he had in the aftermath of George Floyd's death. Specifically, he was troubled by the narrative that was spun minimizing the police officers' actions leading to his death. He shared,

> When George Floyd was murdered, they said, 'Oh, that was a horrible thing. He shouldn't have died like that, and that police officer needs to be held responsible.' Then they shifted and started placing the blame on Floyd. He was on drugs, and he had used a counterfeit bill at the convenient store. If he hadn't done all of that, then, no, that would not have happened. I say that's not necessarily true, because you've got Philando Castile up in Minnesota, who was licensed to have a concealed carry, identified himself as a concealed carry, went to go get his carry license and the cop shot him. He panicked and shot him. I think that those who were very vocal early on felt empowered, but because the wave of public sentiment was against them, what they did was they just silenced themselves. I don't think that there's been any real movement by the PCA church to speak into these matters. After Floyd's death, I marched in downtown Houston with *Black Lives Matter*. I had a friend who happened to be the pastor of the oldest African American church in Houston, that was founded in 1865. He was a good friend of mine. What I saw was an opportunity for my brothers in the PCA, who just a few years earlier in the Race and Reconciliation Report they admitted that they were wrong. This is an opportunity that they had to show their concern for us, and they dismissed it. I went to my brother in the African American church and asked him, 'Are you going to march with *Black Lives Matter* for George Floyd?' He said, 'If I don't, my grandfather would be rolling over in his grave.' I said, 'yeah, me too'. Because his church was not far from the

> March route, I said, I'll meet you down here. I told my pastor in the PCA church I serve, 'Look, I'm going to go down here. I'm going to march with the pastor of *Missionary Baptist Church*, and I'm probably going to post some photos and videos on Facebook. People are going to say something to you about this. He said, 'don't worry about it. You go, No, do it." I said," All right". I went. Nobody said anything to me. There's a difference between lowercase *black lives matter* and uppercase *Black Lives Matter*. I'm not signing off on the BLM group but I'm saying this was a gross injustice that was done to this man. It is wrong. He was treated worse than a dog in the streets by this officer who was being filmed and looked at the camera the whole time. This is a gross injustice. What concerns me are my brothers who are empowered by people like Candace Owens, who still disrespect Floyd's memory. A couple of years later, do I feel shamed into silence by some of my brothers in the PCA? Yes, I do.

DWJ highlights the shift in public sentiment following George Floyd's murder was mirrored by some of his peers in the PCA. What started as a demand for accountability and calls for justice turned out to place blame on Floyd himself. It is of importance to note that DWJ was encouraged by a fellow black pastor from a historically black church to march in the BLM protest and was given an affirmation to do so by his PCA pastor. DWJ saw the act of marching as a way to show concern and care for his people. Yet, he had serious concerns that even his presence in the march would result in backlash from those in the PCA congregation. DWJ expresses frustration with those who dismiss the injustice and disrepute Floyd's memory. While acknowledging the difference between supporting *BLM*, the organization, and supporting his black brothers and sisters, DWJ ultimately expressed disappointment that some of his fellow PCA peers were silencing his discussion on these matters.

KA noticed a lack of empathy during the racial unrest of 2020:

> It's disheartening to witness certain dynamics in our church denomination. We are all brothers and sisters in faith, yet sometimes empathy seems lacking. When people courageously share their personal experiences of hardship, they are often met with statistics or outright dismissal, rather than a sympathetic ear. This approach can feel deeply unempathetic, as if their experiences are being invalidated. Hearing such accounts from

> various friends within the church is painful. The church, ideally, should be a beacon of diversity, mirroring the New Testament's portrayal of a diverse early church, where Jews and Gentiles were united by the gospel. Despite evident challenges and conflicts, the New Testament demonstrates how the gospel and Christian faith foster unity amidst diversity. It is a reminder that our faith should bring us together, with the gospel at its core, guiding us to live in unity.

BF also revealed the deep emotions of pain, anger, and hurt that emerged in the aftermath of the racial unrest in June 2020. He was adamant about the racism he experienced in one PCA church which prompted him to move his family to another PCA church in a different state, one that was pastored by a man of color. The way the session members reacted to the unrest of 2020, caused him to deem "most of the session and the lead pastor" as racist. He spoke with pain in his voice as he relayed how harmful and hurtful it was for him and his family. Like several other minority participants, BF spoke of doing the hard work in recovering from the summer of 2020 and the church's reaction to these events. He said,

> I'm still recovering from an inferiority complex and, you know, you start to kind of buy into the idea that white Christians really have the best theology. I began to see that for many years in my life, while in the Reformed world, people looked down on my own cultural ethnic expressions of theology and faith. So, I looked down on that part of myself and my history as well. It took years to really come out of that, repent, and I'm still continuing to grow. While I appreciate my reformed context, I have come to realize that God works just as much in other contexts as he does in the reformed context. 2020 began a very painful season for me but it lead me to do a lot of internal work. I became honest with myself as a black pastor in a white denomination. Out of the pain came new revelations. I began to see that reformed churches and reformed theology have blind spots. But that is why we need the body of Christ. For me, I feel like my journey has just begun.

While BF found positives that came out of the racial unrest of 2020, he was candid about his experience as a minority in the denomination:

> It sucks to be a minority in the PCA. So often it feels like instead of getting to work on evangelism and other biblical mandates, we still have

> to coddle white brothers and sisters. Their feelings are so fragile, we have to hold their hands and tiptoe around their feelings. Instead of keeping focused on the biblical mandates, we have to make sure they are not falling apart. All the while, we are drained and not focused on what we should be doing together. I am tired of coddling white people.

When asked for examples of what he meant by "coddling white brothers and sisters," he referred to such debates on CRT, reparations, and white supremacy. He said,

> When addressing race issues, my white brothers and sisters will respond, 'Are you calling me racist?' No! I didn't call you racist, we are just addressing the issues! If I even mention CRT, the immediate response is 'That is secular and Marxist, and you shouldn't be reading that kind of material.' But I want to respond and say, 'Well, why are you comfortable talking about your being a Republican? Both CRT and Republicanism are secular and not Biblical. When I say white people are fragile, I am referring to these kinds of examples. These are proofs that we are truly depraved, totally depraved….so we should be able to be honest about our crap, move on, and grow up in the faith.

In the aftermath of the tragic events surrounding George Floyd, both DWJ and BF shared upsetting experiences and weighty frustrations. Likewise, DE, a Black pastor in his 50s, conveyed apprehensions, albeit for markedly different reasons. Serving as a teaching elder in a substantial southern church with a congregation exceeding 800, of which only two are Black, DE's hiring was partially motivated by the church's aspiration to transition into a multicultural and multiethnic place of worship. When asked about how he experienced the racial unrest of 2020, DE's perspective was radically different. He responded,

> What I am about to tell you, I left unsaid in the immediate aftermath of the George Floyd incident. It would be too explosive and unaccepted. But it's important to show how the forces of the enemy are working to divide us as a church. Let me be clear: the George Floyd incident was not racially motivated. That's something that the church, including every single black pastor, should have been saying to their congregations. They did not. Instead, the black pastors jumped on the secular agenda of saying it was a racially motivated incident.

DE went on to explain his view by referencing his extensive work as an investigator for the police department prior to his ordination. One of his primary responsibilities was to do background investigations for all potential and existing police officers for the district. DE worked on internal affairs files, conducting lie detector exams, and led extensive investigations of the police officers themselves. He continued,

> They claimed that Derek Chavin had eighteen internal affair incidents. However, none of those incidents indicated that he was a racist. If there was anything in his internal affairs file that said anything to the effect that he conducted himself in a racially toxic ways in the past, it would've been all out there. But nothing of that sort ever came out. The reality of the situation is…when you look at the facts on the floor, nothing indicated that the George Floyd incident was racially motivated. However, *Black Lives Matter* and other organizations took up the mantle of using the race debate for nefarious means. And instead of black pastors being able to discern that, they fell for the agenda of the secular humanists. This is what I call skin color idolatry, and it's the reason we fell for the agenda of the secular humanists. Because of that, instead of bringing healing to the church, we have even more division and polarization.

DE's insights were informed by his substantial experience as an investigator. Ultimately, his unique position and experience caused him to raise questions about the widely accepted narrative surrounding Chauvin and the death of George Floyd. Furthermore, he spoke negatively about *Black Lives Matter* and other unnamed organizations whom, he believed, leveraged the unfortunate incident to fuel racial divisions. As a black pastor, what DE found even more disheartening was the response of his fellow black pastors. Accusing them of "skin color idolatry," they were more influenced by secular humanists instead of the biblical promotion of racial healing and unity. In addition to George Floyd and Derek Chavin, DE also referenced the *Unite the Right Rally* in Charlottesville, Virginia on August 11-12, 2017. Specifically, DE

mentioned President Donald Trump's comment that there were "good people on both sides."[11]

> If it wasn't for 'skin color idolatry,' we all would have been able to look at this situation and recognize that there were protestors who got their permits to march legally, and we would understand that there are people who look at the Confederate flag not as a racist symbol, but a reminder of a certain culture. If we would seek to understand that, we could say, 'Yes, this flag triggers me, but I also understand that not every single person is viewing this flag in a racist way.' When you think this way, then you create more of an environment of reconciliation instead of polarization. When you don't understand it that way and you fall prey to what society and its humanistic agenda is pushing, then you will bring into the church the same spirit of polarization and division that's outside the church. I am concerned that the secular humanists have infected the church in more ways that we recognize. And unfortunately for many of us blacks, we can't see it. We can't see when we are guilty of the same racist mentality that was committed against us. But now we, too, are guilty of the same secular mindsets that perpetuate separation instead of reconciliation.

It is important to note that the majority of participants indicated that their church made an attempt to respond to the racial unrest of the summer of 2020. It is also important to remember that these volatile racial events were happening several months into the world-wide pandemic of COVID-19. The pandemic brought about significant upheaval in local churches as pastors dealt with the disruption of worship services, the in-fighting over masking, and significant challenges in raising funds as people were watching Sunday services from home. Attempting to navigate these issues along with needing to properly respond to the racial unrest was a task that took a toll on many pastors. Nonetheless, each participant reported that their church saw the issue as something that needed to be addressed and engaged with in their congregations. FL

[11] Angie Drobnic Holan, "In Context: Trump's 'very fine people on both sides' remarks," PolitiFact, April 26, 2019, https://www.politifact.com/article/2019/apr/26/context-trumps-very-fine-people-both-sides-remarks/.

reported that he wanted to make a statement that conveyed solidarity with people of color in the aftermath of the killing of Ahmaud Arbury and George Floyd. His desire was to draft this statement and post it on the church's Facebook page and website. His fellow elders ruled against him, however, stating that the church had already made sufficient statements in their core values that they are a church "for all people."

CA and his fellow elders had a more aggressive response by deciding to devote a Sunday school class to the topic of race. He stated

> I decided to take the mentality that I want to give myself room to grow, and I want to give other people room to grow. Just because someone is reactive doesn't mean they are not teachable. We decided that was the mentality we needed to address what was happening racially in our nation. As elders, we felt that we needed to talk about the important issues that cultures is talking about. But we were not reactive. We started with a decision to pray consistently about what was happening. Over time, the temperature kind of came down and then we offered a Sunday school class on race. Over three hundred people showed up for that class—in the middle of the pandemic! It was a way for us to say, 'This is an important topic. We can't hide it or be disinterested or make the excuse that we are fatigued from talking about race.' The people responded in a way that showed they were hungry to learn, discuss, pray, and address what was happening on our neighborhoods.

It should not be overlooked that CA pastors a predominately white church. Yet, there was a desire to learn and engage with what was happening in the nation. In addition, the elders took the bold step to use Robin DiAngelo's book, *White Fragility*, as a text to examine during a Sunday school class. CA explained his reasoning,

> We are called to be salt and light. If we are going to be effective in reaching the culture and ministering to people, we have to know what's happening in the culture. I noticed that the book *White Fragility* was on the *New York Times* bestsellers list. It remained on the top of the list for a considerable amount of time. We just can't ignore that if we want to see and examine where the culture is in regards to race and other topics. I wanted to understand what DiAngelo's message was and why it was striking a nerve in our society. Despite what others may say, this woman is made in the image of God. She is going to reflect on things and because of God's common grace, she is going to touch on some truths. As people of

> God, we want to be able to identify those truths, applaud them., and learn from them. As we do that, two things happen: first, we learn from people who know more than we do about certain topics. We have to be open to learning. Secondly, we are given an opportunity to evaluate these philosophies in the light of Scripture. If we're going to be faithful shepherds and teach other people how to weigh all things against the scripture, we need to be able to model that. So, the Sunday school class utilized apologetics and yet it was evangelistic. Let's equip our people to be able to talk to their neighbors, to engage their friends, and think through what is happening in racial matters in a way that is not reactive. The way we dealt with DiAngelo's book was in three parts, we called it the good, the bad, and the ugly. In God's common grace, what is she saying that is good? But it was also very problematic because it counters what we know is taught in Scripture and bad theology can result in something very ugly. It was very motivational for me and our people found it to be beneficial. The large turnout indicated that people were dealing with these issues in their own minds.

CA explained above his view that Christians need to be actively engaged and understanding current cultural issues. In this situation, the issue at the forefront of people's minds was the turbulence caused by racial unrest. Addressing the book, *White Fragility*, was a bold move by the elders of this affluent, primarily white congregation.[12] The popularity of the book factored into the pastor's decision to address it thoroughly in the Sunday school class. He acknowledged that although the author held radically different beliefs, as an individual made in God's image, she was someone they could learn from. Of course, her work must also be critiqued in light of Scripture, which they did as well. He is forthright in stating that there were many aspects to the book that contradicted Scripture. He understood the potential devastating consequences of bad theology for the congregation. Nevertheless, the humility of this pastor in a highly

[12]Robin DiAngelo. *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018). DiAngelo posits that racism should be seen as a structure rather than an isolated incident. This viewpoint stems from a pervasive institutional definition that positions whites as the standard for humanity, with people of color deemed deviations from this norm. DiAngelo further suggests that white individuals are generally unaware of this societal assumption, making them unintentional contributors to the continuation of racism.

politically and conservative area to demonstrate learning from someone who may have more knowledge than him in racial matters was an act of humble leadership. The elders' decision to act in this way may be an example of the concept of "double listening" as articulated by theologian John Stott. In his book "The Contemporary Christian," Stott encourages readers to listen actively and attentively to the multifaceted realities of the modern world. He also emphasizes the importance of listening humbly, submissively, and meticulously to the Word of God. Stott concludes that only by engaging in both forms of listening can we effectively bridge the gap between the teachings of the Word and the realities of the world.[13] This church's example encourages others to utilize a similar approach when it comes to race. However, CA questioned if this approach would still be effective a year or two later due to escalating tensions around racial topics like CRT and reparations. The Sunday school class on race and the decision to address such a controversial book as *White Fragility*, took place at a time when, despite ongoing racial unrest in the nation, people seemed to be more curious and open to discussing such issues. CA suggested that racial fatigue and greater polarization may deem a similar approach unhelpful. Nevertheless, he offered a wisdom on how to navigate the polarization,

> In our class on justice and race, we aimed to start with Scripture, grounding ourselves in its definitions and terms. The issue with Critical Race Theory (CRT) and similar frameworks is that they introduce a specific vocabulary. By adopting this vocabulary, there's a risk of inadvertently adopting or communicating their ideas. So, even if CRT proponents highlight valid points, like the existence of cultural blind spots, we chose not to use CRT language. Instead, we returned to Scripture for guidance. For instance, instead of discussing racism and discrimination in CRT terms, we talked about the sin of prejudice, which Scripture

[13] John R. W Stott, *The Contemporary Christian: An Urgent Plea for Double-Listening* (Inter-Varsity, 2001).

> addresses and can manifest for various reasons, including race and ethnicity. We focused on self-focus and blindness, as illustrated in Scripture, rather than relying on CRT's language. When critiquing CRT, we again turned to Scripture. Our approach was not to dismiss CRT simply because it's seen as leftist or for other cultural reasons, but to compare its views on power and anthropology with what Scripture teaches. We aimed to highlight the differing worldviews from a biblical perspective, not through a political lens. The key is to extract the discussion from the cultural tug-of-war and the terminology it brings, focusing instead on what Scripture says. This approach allows us to discern what is true and false biblically, without being confined by political framing.

Other white participants experienced similar attitudes of self-reflection in response to the racial unrest of 2020. KM shared,

> I know the focus was primarily on race in the aftermath of the George Floyd situation, but what struck me was in how our churches have a problem in regard to the fundamental differences socioeconomically of those who attend our churches. Speaking specifically to our church and what I know of the PCA, the danger for American churches is not just that there aren't enough people of color in our midst, it's that there aren't enough people without money in our midst. I think that the problem is that middle class and upper middle-class people are very self-reliant, they have become self-reliant. The American story is one of self-reliance. Belonging to a church where everybody has made it, I think it's more dangerous than being in a church where there are some ex-convicts, former prostitutes, those in Alcoholics Anonymous, etc. The diversity of lifestyle and diversity of experience in life is one of the beautiful benefits of diversity in general.

KM's reflections in the wake of the George Floyd situation adds a new layer to the conversations that have been dominated by a focus on race: the lack of socioeconomic diversity among the attendees of some of the PCA congregations. Of course, this subject is not entirely disconnected from race, either. KM's concern is the presence of self-reliance and self-sufficiency that often come with economic success. His reflection introduces the question if people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds feel welcome in churches dominated by people from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. It is telling that the issues of the summer of 2020 led him to consider all the opportunities the church

may be missing by not only ministering to people from all walks of life, but also learning from them. His concern was about how his church may be insular and disconnected from the needs of the wider community.

In reflecting on the wake of social unrest, FT also connected the topic of race with socioeconomic concerns.

> I find it easier to relate to people that have true money struggles. I mean in the sense that they are not going to their financial advisor to help them think through how to bridge the unexpected layoff when they really have plenty of resources. I am talking about people that pray, 'Lord, give us this day our daily bread' and, literally, that is what they are praying for. They need bread day by day because they don't have ample resources in storage. When they thank God, they are thanking him for daily bread." FT's perspective was informed by his upbringing. He continues, "I grew up in a family where I was the second of four children. I don't know what my dad's salary was, but I would be shocked if he wasn't either just above or just below the poverty line. I infer that's the way it was for my entire upbringing. We shopped at the discount. My first job as a pastor, I think my salary was more than twice that my dad ever made in any given year his entire life. So, I was just I was just used to a culture of scrimping and saving. Even though we always had food on the table and God always provided, I can remember the sense of insecurity in the air. My dad went through periods of being unemployed and underemployed. That actually taught me a lot about trusting God in a good way and given me an ability to see what I don't think everyone in the PCA can see. We are used to being at the apex of influence with money and power. I am not saying the wealth is necessarily a bad thing. I have been a recipient of many people blessing me, paying my seminary, my college. I wouldn't be where I am today without those blessings. But in regards to how this affects my view of race and the PCA? I think my upbringing has given me an ability to see how money can cause blindness. We begin to think our success and results come through doing things professionally and it causes us to be blind to perspectives and experiences outside of our own. I get the sense that many in the PCA are prone to this viewpoint. Thus, we don't see and sympathize with the struggles of people outside our own kind.

FT finds his solidarity with some people of color in his facing genuine financial struggles. His perspective stems from his upbringing in a family that lived near or below the poverty line, where scrimping and barely getting by financially were the norm. Experiencing periods of unemployment and underemployment in his father's life taught

him to trust in God and provided him with a unique insight that not everyone in the PCA may possess. FT believes that the focus on wealth and success within the PCA can lead to a blindness towards different perspectives and experiences, preventing sympathy for the struggles faced by those outside their own circle.

KM's reflections went beyond the socioeconomic issues, however. A surprising source of media caused him to rethink how he viewed people from different cultures and ethnicities. He further reflected:

> I was sitting with my couch with my grandchild watching the Disney movie, *Coco*, by Pixar. The movie is based on the Day of the Dead in Mexico. My view was this was about worshipping the dead. In fact, I was hesitant to allow my grandchild to watch the movie with such pagan concepts. Come to find out, my idea about the Day of the Dead was wrong. It's not that they were worshipping the dead but they were remembering where they came from. They remembered their ancestry and were honoring their father and their mother back through the generations. It was an eye opener to me that they honored their ancestors. It didn't involve worshipping them, but merely an acceptance of who you are as having come from these people who were before you. I think that's a very biblical concept. Their ecclesiastical calendar actually brought to my mind an idea that I had not thought about before, which was the importance of your ancestry and where you came from and accepting it as having been given to you by God.

This elder recounts having reservations about a cultural practice of a particular group of people and how his understanding was corrected. The result was his realizing and appreciating the worth of acknowledging and accepting one's ancestral heritage as a grace from God. Like his thoughts on the need for more diverse people groups in his local church, KM further reflected on the need to learn from those who were different than him. These were some of the positive results that came out of reflecting and engaging with the racial unrest of 2020.

Theme Five: Debate over Definitions: White Supremacy, Christian Nationalism, and Diversity

Earlier it was noted that in the wake of racial unrest in the nation, one pastor and his team of elders led a Sunday school class devoted to the topic of race relations. During this class, they reviewed the book, *White Fragility*, by Robin DiAngelo. While DiAngelo's book was a best-seller in the year of 2020, it was only one manifestation of a broader set of material coming out of what Chang characterizes as the "modern racial justice movement."[14] This movement popularized the notion of "white privilege," highlighting a what has become a contemporary form of "white supremacy." The phrase "white privilege" has its roots in Theodore W. Allen's 1967 book, *Can White Workers Radicals Be Radicalized?* The concept gained traction in the United Kingdom, thanks to writers like Reni Eddo-Lodge. She offered her perspective on it in her best-seller, *Why I Am No Longer Talking to White People About Race.* Eddo-Lodge defines "white privilege" as the unacknowledged advantage that automatically benefits those who are white, influencing their life's path. She underlines that "white privilege" is not an innocuous attribute, but rather an insidious and oppressive force that permeates all facets of our society.

If one applies the understanding of "white privilege" and white supremacy, as defined and described by Eddo-Lodge and DiAngelo, to the PCA, one would assume that the denomination is built in a way that is fundamentally biased against ethnic minorities and is programmed to propagate structural racism.[15] According to this framework, the fact that the PCA is not a racially diverse denomination in its leadership would further

[14] Ben Change. *Christ and the Culture Wars*, 47.

[15] Ibid., 48.

deem the structure as a 'white-dominated institution.' The churches engagement with these topics is reflective of a broader conversation, one that has gained prominence and urgency in recent years. Since the concepts of white privilege, white supremacy, and whiteness studies have accelerated during the time of the writing of this paper, the participants were asked their views on how they navigate these ideas in their own minds and the life of the church. As evident in the wider culture, some participants pushed backed on these ideas as racist in themselves, since they interpreted the concepts as generalizing white people as complicit in racism *as racism*. Others were more ambiguous, quick to point out the flaws in these philosophies while acknowledging that these concepts are now common terms used in both the academy and in everyday culture. In their view, we must engage with them to have any voice within the current culture. This was not a blanket acceptance of these theories but with any theory one would encounter, the encouragement was to try to see both its advantages and distortions or blind spots.[16]

While FT, a majority culture teaching elder, was adamant that white supremacy was not prevalent in the PCA, he shared a foreboding example that it is not non-existent, either. After a brief discussion on white Christian nationalism, FT returned to the subject:

> Going back a little in this interview, you asked about white Christian Nationalism. Do I see that in the PCA? Not necessarily. Having said 'not necessarily,' I think that it is true that in the Evangelical Church and, unfortunately, in some circles of the PCA, there is more of a belief in some form of white superiority and white supremacy. A lot of people would deny those terms. I have not found white supremacy and white superiority to be dominant in the denomination. However, those aberrant beliefs are present among us. Several years ago, there was a Facebook group that was saying they were 'concerned Presbyterians' and they were

[16] Peter Elbow, quoted in Joseph Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2013), 2.

protesting some kind of racial reconciliation action that the PCA was working towards. Their Facebook page was completely anonymous, however. Several of us were interacting with them, basically telling them to take their bedsheet off so we could talk, which they didn't like very much. I said, 'You can see our public profiles, you can see where we live, you can see where we pastor. Why should we engage you?' They wanted to argue for Kinism, and I joining with a bunch of other voices, said, 'Why should we engage with you if we don't even know who you are, if we don't even know that there's more than one of you? If you're not public with your views, why should we engage?' That very next Sunday at our church, there was racist literature, flyers, slipped under every windshield of the cars in the parking lot during worship. Whoever it was on that Facebook group, had connections somewhere in this area with prejudiced friends, racist and prejudiced and bigoted friends. Yes, there is a minority in the PCA that have a hidden assumption that white people are more gifted in ruling, leading, and planning. I think that there's a hubris in general in the PCA .....I've often heard people in the PCA say, 'the PCA punches above its weight.' Borrowing the boxing analogy, basically saying that intellectually the PCA is great enough that they can win in a fight above their weight class. In other words, given the size of our denomination, we are outsized in the number of the intellectuals and thinkers we've produced as a denomination. People start listing Tim Keller, R.C. Sproul, right on down the list of people who have had a major cultural influence brought up in this denomination. When I hear that kind of boasting, I remember the Scripture, 'Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap……. Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.' I think there is a real danger in the PCA. There is a love of the intellect where we love God with our minds rather than loving God with all that we are. God becomes the object and we're the one loving ourselves for how good we are thinking things through. Two things that I've seen in the PCA is a hidden hubris around knowledge itself, where there's an assumption that we got things right. And that assumption is so dangerous because it feeds right into that the lie that somehow the Western tradition of theology has everything right and doesn't have anything to learn. And so that sometimes is marked with a lack of humility, a lack of willing to listen to the voices of every Christian that names the name of Christ. And so that's one place where I see a hidden idol in the PCA.[17]

[17] Kinism is one branch of a diverse series of religious movements that promote racial segregation. Liou contends that Kinism finds root in Reformed circles. He writes, "This movement is based in Christianity and, for the most part, is populated with people who are historic, Calvinistic, orthodox and Reformed in their doctrinal views. Years ago, and oceans away, I peered into the theology of apartheid

FT admits that although he does not necessarily perceive a prevalent white Christian Nationalism in the PCA, he acknowledges the presence of white superiority and white supremacy ideologies within certain evangelical church and PCA circles. He recalls a distressing event where he debated with an anonymous Facebook group named "concerned Presbyterians," who were, in essence, advocates for Kinism. Though the origin of the incident remains unverified, one could deduce that they were opposing the 2016 Racial Reconciliation report. The fallout from these online debates was a disturbing episode where racist pamphlets were dispersed on vehicles during Sunday church service. FT contemplated this event, suggesting that a small, yet present minority within the denomination may harbor covert beliefs in white supremacy, particularly in matters of governance, leadership, and planning. Additionally, he queried if there was a degree of arrogance within the PCA, characterized by flaunting intellectual accomplishments and cultural sway. He cautions that there is a risk in the PCA for an excessive adoration for intellectualism to lead to an absence of humility and a refusal to heed diverse Christian perspectives, thereby evolving into a form of idolatry within the denomination.

SN, when asked if Christian Nationalism was a problem in the PCA, answered emphatically:

> I would say Christian nationalism is not a problem in the PCA. I think it's an amped up, a hyped-up issue. It seems to be amplified as a kind of 'bogeyman' to fit certain narratives, particularly in discussions around Critical Race Theory. Are there people who wrap the flag around their

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from the racialized society here in the United States. My reading and research generated a hunch about the kinds of theology that are vulnerable to racist and nationalist distortion. In 2019, my denomination, the Christian Reformed Church of North America, declared the theology of kinism—an apartheid-like theology that prescribes racial separation and opposes interracial marriage—heresy. Knowing what I knew about the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa and its justification of apartheid, I was not surprised to hear about kinists within the ranks of my historically Dutch denomination." See Jeff Ming Liou, "Much in Every Way: Employing the Concept of Race in Theological Anthropology and Christian Practice" (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2017).

> Christianity? Yes, there are people like that and it is not right. But I don't think they're nearly as many of them as are being asserted. Of course, it should also be said that there's no sin in loving your country. It's a sin when your country becomes your idol. And so everything that is getting passed off as Christian nationalism, most of it isn't. I think it's a sloppy, insincere response. I'll ask people, 'Give me some examples of Christian nationalism in the PCA that concern you.' And I've not yet had anyone able to point one out. I refuse to go on the defensive with Christian nationalism. And I'm the guy that, when I got to my church, made sure that the flags were taken out of our sanctuary, because I don't think it's appropriate. And yet, I get accused of being a Christian nationalist! Theres a real irony to that. I like to respond to people who raise Christian Nationalism as a problem and ask, "Where do you see this in the PCA?" I just don't think it's as big an issue in the PCA as many in the PCA think it is. I think it's a deflection of the real issue… the real issue is that we are losing sight of the gospel, as a denomination. Not that we don't know the gospel, or we don't believe in the gospel. We're losing sight of it because we're trying to have something only the gospel can bring…. but we are trying to get it on human terms. When we think we have something to learn from critical theory, whether it's critical race theory or other applications, or sexuality… then we have decided the gospel is insufficient.

NP offered a distinctly contrasting perspective, acknowledging the varied opinions on Christian Nationalism, white supremacy, and the approaches to fostering greater diversity within the denomination:

> A common misinterpretation is that if others play unfairly, we should too. But that's not a Christian response. As arguments against critical race theory continue, those concerned about racism and systemic racism need to be equally loud and vocal, focusing on changing institutional culture, not just engaging in Twitter battles or overtures. It's about structural change. For instance, we've seen progress with Reverend Dr. Irwin, the newest pro tempore Mission to North America coordinator, becoming the second person of color in a permanent committee position, following Dr. Lloyd Kim in 2016. This shows the influence in working on structures and systems, which is positive evidence, though progress is slow. The danger lies in only celebrating individual and visible successes; change must be embedded in structures…we can't let up. For example, after a study committee report in 2016, it shouldn't be the end-all of changes. We recommended another study five or ten years later to assess progress. Without follow-up, people might think the issue has been addressed and resist further efforts, claiming it makes the church 'woke' or too aligned with worldly culture. But follow-up is crucial for structural change and to

address these ongoing struggles… “I feel like I'm living in two paths right now. The first is to keep the pedal on the gas, focusing on structural changes. My hope is for intentional structural change, particularly with Mission to North America. In my part-time role with the Korean American Leadership Initiative, we aim to encourage Korean Americans, and Asian Americans more broadly, to love, appreciate, and actively serve in the denomination. Figures like Irwin Ince, the former director of the Institute for Cross-Cultural Ministry, carry this mindset into their work within MNA, influencing the culture of this denominational agency. Similarly, Lloyd Kim is making intentional changes within MTW. That's the positive part. The second path is resistance, which is exhausting. Every attempt to implement biblically based changes, especially those aimed at reaching underrepresented groups, is met with accusations of cultural Marxism or attempts to liberalize the denomination. This resistance, fueled by fear and defensiveness, is tiring. Yet, I accept that change is hard and takes time. The most exhausting part is engaging in tit-for-tat battles on social media or in debates, which often feel like a waste of time but seem necessary. Some people, who reject systemic racism or even the existence of racism, are challenging to engage with, especially when they claim adherence to Calvinist doctrines like total depravity while denying the ongoing reality of racism.

KM identified a different problem, suggesting that the challenge is dealing with these issues in a society where classism is unstated but, nonetheless, present. He says,

> I think a big chunk of the issue here is tied to American culture. I'll give you an example. We have a family at our church who are fairly new attenders. They're a young family and the father works a labor-based job in a church filled with professionals. He expressed a concern about whether he'd fit into our church culture. This guy isn't poor or anything, solidly middle class, but he felt like he might not belong because he's not as educated, and he doesn't have a typical office job. He was afraid these things might keep him from joining. Thankfully, he did join in the end, and honestly, everyone went out of their way to make him and his wife feel welcome. They're such great people! Once I heard about his worries, I knew we had to address this feeling of not belonging. But, it's tough, because it's not just about us. It's more about this classist culture we've got going in America. Even if we like to pretend we don't have classes, they exist and people know where they stand. I think this also applies to the subjects of race and ethnicity in our churches. We need to be super intentional about this. I hate to use such a buzzword, but it's true.

Reflecting on over three decades of ordained ministry, SN contemplates the shift in the conversation in the PCA about diversity, wondering how the discussion has

become predominantly focused on race and ethnicity. He pondered the diminished attention to other forms of diversity that are present in a healthy church:

> In 2001, I moved to Pensacola, where the community had a military presence and a chemical industry, much like in Missouri, with Monsanto being a significant employer. The church in Pensacola mirrored the one in St. Louis, with a rich diversity of economic and educational backgrounds. Our congregation included everyone from the former CFO of Gulf Power to the linemen working there, and we also had a number of Asian members affiliated with the University of West Florida. A few years into my tenure, we welcomed an associate pastor who was a Black Bahamian, adding to our visible diversity. This period shaped my understanding of diversity as encompassing more than just race—it was about a variety of differences, including economic status. However, around 2008 or 2009, during the Obama presidency, the narrative seemed to shift, and diversity began to be discussed almost exclusively in terms of ethnicity and race. This change was perplexing to me. As a PCA pastor, I've since been trying to understand this shift and its impact on what I consider a vital aspect of diversity: the coexistence of people from different economic and educational backgrounds, united by the gospel. In Pensacola, our smaller church included two or three Black families, and I felt confident in our approach to diversity. Yet, I now realize that my understanding may differ from the current discourse on diversity within the PCA leadership. Reflecting on these experiences, I'm still convinced of the gospel's power to bring people together across various divides is paramount, even if the prevailing definition of diversity (in the PCA) has evolved.

When asked whether the PCA has been influenced more by a cultural and societal perspective of diversity, with an overriding concern for the optics, SN answered,

> I believe the PCA has been influenced by the culture's understanding of diversity. As someone who grew up in the South within a military family, I was accustomed to a certain level of equalization among people, despite my parents' roots in the Old South. My upbringing, influenced by my parents' faith and military background, instilled in me a belief that all people are just people (despite race or ethnicity). However, upon returning to South Carolina, I encountered overt racial bigotry for the first time, which was shocking to me. Within the church, as the conversation around race became more prominent, many pastors, including myself, who had grown up with a clear sense of right and wrong, did not want the extreme examples of racism, sometimes justified by a distorted view of Christianity, to define our ministries or the PCA. There was a collective desire to acknowledge the truth and distance ourselves from the sins of our predecessors. This led to the PCA issuing its first apology for the sins of our PCUS fathers and brothers. In my view, this was done in a spirit of

> humility, with a willingness to learn and improve. However, many of our denominational leaders, I think, stepped forward naively, not anticipating that some would seek more punitive measures rather than reconciliation. This has led to a situation where we're now trying to play a game of clarification, which hasn't been very successful. We've reached a point where we've almost stopped trying to clarify and have instead begun to adopt the world's terminology, hoping to redefine it within our context. But this approach is problematic, as it causes further division both within and outside the denomination due to our stances not being perceived as strong enough. The Obama administration's era seemed to be a turning point when our leaders saw an opportunity to demonstrate magnanimity and a willingness to learn and repent. While some received this in good faith, others saw it as an opening to demand more. And that's where we find ourselves today, in a place where the concept of diversity is more about conforming to a cultural narrative than following a scriptural one.

As SN reflects on the PCA's trajectory in grappling with racial diversity, and the denomination's shift towards more cultural narratives, he acknowledged that the conversation has now been amplified with the rise of CRT, intersectionality, and other ideologies finding root in the denomination. SN offered his candid perspective on these influences:

> As a preacher, I am prone to hyperbole, which I then clarify. Let me do just that. I believe we should never allow the opposition to define our terms or set the parameters of the debate. When it comes to CRT it is fundamentally a Marxist ideology and utterly incompatible with Christianity. Christians affirm the dignity of work, but our context and rationale are entirely different. We see work as dignified because God created man to work in a sinless environment, and although work has become toilsome due to the fall, it still retains its dignity and requires redemption. Marxism, however, says work is a form of redemption, which is a direct contradiction to Christian theology. In Marxism, class conflict is necessary to bring about the rise of the 'right' people to power. This is inherently anti-God, considering human beings are created in God's image. The type of struggle Marxism advocates is, from a Christian perspective, satanic. I view the notion that we can learn from CRT with not just skepticism, but also fear, because it is inherently a divisive strategy aimed not at achieving equity but at reversing power dynamics. It's about who gets to wield power, and the criteria for deserving power are fundamentally flawed and irrational. The roots of critical theory, especially in French political philosophy, are starkly anti-Christian. Our denomination must distance itself from this infatuation as swiftly as possible. While I support racial equity and community diversity, I believe

> that embracing CRT is a misguided approach. The insights of Carl Trueman and Rosaria Butterfield, particularly regarding sexuality issues from her experience as a former Marxist, are invaluable. The path forward, I believe, is repentance. Our leaders must admit that embracing any aspect of CRT, whether its language or framework, was a mistake. It's a flawed approach that fails to convey our priorities of disciple-making, advancing the kingdom, and the means of grace. We need to openly repent, not just acknowledge a misjudgment or a lack of helpfulness. I'm aware that such a stance might be misconstrued as racist or privileged, or as an unwillingness to address the real cultural and social issues we face. However, I contend that such accusations are part of the divisive nature of CRT itself. You can sense my strong feelings on this matter. What I've observed is a dynamic where well-intentioned men are willing to make concessions for the sake of progress, engaging with others who are not inclined to reciprocate but are all too ready to accept these concessions as the bare minimum. To me, this is merely a sanitized version of pure critical theory. It lacks grace, it's devoid of the gospel, and it certainly doesn't keep the long-term glory of God in perspective. When such topics arise, immediate polarization follows. We've become so averse to polarization that we shy away from discussions and instead, we're quick to vilify individuals like Voddie Baucham. Carl Trueman receives less criticism, but it's baffling to me why Baucham is often dismissed, especially since, by their own standards, he should be deemed qualified to address these issues. Yet, there's a palpable reluctance to outright discredit him, stopping just short of labeling him an “Uncle Tom.” But it's apparent in the undertones. And this is coming from within our own PCA circles. It's clear they're insinuating as much, even if they don’t say it outright.

SN’s concern was not so much for defending a certain author or argument, but for the those in the denomination who have embraced CRT and similar secular ideologies to come to a place of repentance for the good the denomination and of Christ’s church. Explaining his strong call to repentance, SN explained:

> The reason I emphasize repentance is that it represents a hopeful beginning, an on-ramp. Repentance is a form of grace. It's the kindness of God that leads us to repentance, providing us the chance to truly change, not just to utter a superficial 'I'm sorry' that might imply regret over being caught rather than genuine contrition. True repentance involves a metanoia, a change of mind that leads to a change in action. To me, repentance stands in stark contrast to the erasure goal of cancel culture and Wokeism. In Christianity, the focus is on restoration and reconciliation. It's profound that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, not counting people's sins against them. Repentance is the pathway to this

reconciliation. It rejects the notion that equity or balance is achieved through conflict, or that we must maintain a warring dynamic between oppressors and the oppressed. Instead, it embraces a cross-centered, redemptive understanding of evil, good, hope, and reconciliation — something only the gospel can accomplish. Repentance is necessary because without it, we might recast the gospel in terms of CRT or other secular ideologies, or omit the gospel entirely. We need to admit when we've mislabeled something as the gospel or its fruits, or claimed it's what God requires of us when it's not. These misrepresentations require repentance. In repentance, our focus is always on Jesus, the gospel, the work of the cross, and the transformative power of resurrection and regeneration. It acknowledges that while we can experience significant change on earth, the ultimate utopia we seek can only be found in the new creation, in the new world. Some might misinterpret this as advocating for a dispensationalist view, as if we shouldn't bother improving our current world because it's like polishing brass on a sinking ship. But that's not what I'm saying. We can't experience the fullness of the eternal state now, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't strive for healing. However, we must pursue it through gospel-centered means, because the end does not justify the means. We're at risk of bypassing the gospel to achieve immediate results, which ironically sacrifices the gospel itself.

CA's insights on racial diversity and prejudice emerged not from academic theories but from real-life experiences and personal growth. He shares his journey:

> My journey with racial diversity has been quite limited. Raised in a predominantly white environment — family, church, college, and seminary — my exposure to racial diversity was minimal, and my understanding of racial prejudice was largely confined to historical accounts from textbooks. However, the PCA's 2016 study report was a turning point, prompting me to delve deeper into these issues. My awareness grew through personal experiences. Firstly, interacting with a biracial student in my youth group and his mother, who faced racial prejudice, was eye-opening. It wasn't just history; it was happening now. Secondly, my wife and I engaged in Safe Families, providing temporary care to children in crisis, and later fostered a Congolese child, which brought a direct, personal connection to racial diversity. Our church, intensified its refugee ministry, especially from 2015, focusing on Congolese families. With an elder from Kenya who speaks Swahili, we've been able to integrate around 130 Congolese worshippers into our community, enriching our church's diversity but also presenting challenges. The final significant step in my journey was the aftermath of the tumultuous summer of 2020. Our congregation was divided: some sought guidance on racial issues, while others were apprehensive. In response, our pastoral staff conducted a 13-week Sunday school class on justice and race. This involved interviewing African and African

> American church members about their experiences with racial prejudice, which was enlightening. The class was structured into three parts: a biblical perspective on race and justice, a critique of cultural solutions to racial issues, and an assessment of our church's approach to these matters. These experiences have significantly broadened my understanding and awareness of racial diversity and prejudice, marking a shift from my previously narrow perspective…. Reflecting on my past, I realize I had significant blind spots in understanding the struggles associated with poverty and the impact of racial and ethnic backgrounds on how people are treated. I was largely unaware of these complexities. However, there was a positive aspect to my upbringing: the few people I knew from different racial or ethnic backgrounds were treated as fellow human beings, without undue emphasis on their race or ethnicity. This approach, while positive in one sense, didn't fully acknowledge the broader context of their experiences. My journey towards greater awareness has been gradual and multifaceted. Reading books on various topics, including poverty and housing issues, has been enlightening. These weren't directly about race, but they provided valuable insights into the lives of those grappling with poverty, which often intersects with racial discussions. Additionally, my family's involvement in Safe Families and foster care, as well as teaching a class and conducting interviews with church members from diverse backgrounds, have been instrumental in this learning process. Each of these experiences brought its own revelations and 'light bulb' moments. While I've made progress, I'm far from having all the answers. Each step has contributed to a broader understanding, helping me see beyond my initial blind spots and lack of awareness.

Theme Six: Reformed Worship and Contemporary Challenges

The subject of diversity, or lack thereof, in the Reformed church is an ongoing point of debate. A significant point on this debate revolves around the style of worship in some PCA churches. This paper opened with the example of a black couple that visited a PCA congregation who felt alienated by the liturgical format. This suggested a presupposition: individuals coming from predominantly black church backgrounds or from other minority traditions, such as Latina or African, might find it challenging to connect with the worship styes prevalent in some of the more conservative PCA churches. For example, Terry Johnson, and ordained elder in the denomination, argues for the church to align closely with the liturgical reforms of the 16th and 17th centuries

and resist the seeker sensitive and market-driven/contemporary style of worship.[18] One must ponder: could such an uncompromising stance exacerbate the existing diversity deficit with the denomination?

EY, a black pastor in the South, doesn't think so. He does acknowledge, however, that his eclectic background may inform his opinion. EY grew up in the Virgin Islands that was predominantly black. He went to an all-black elementary school, middle school, and high school. Upon graduation, he went to a black college, Howard University. Then, he continued his studies at Corbin University, in Salem Oregon, an environment he called "lily white." Likewise, when he joined the Navy, his bootcamp was predominantly white. EY's first introduction to the PCA was markedly different then what he was accustomed to in worship style. It was not as emotive, people were not as emotive, with not as much clapping, dancing, etc. No one was throwing up their hands vigorously. But EY reiterated,

> I did not make the transition from a contemporary evangelical church to the PCA for the sake of music or worship style. It was a logical move. I had to grow in my appreciation for the worship and the style of worship. It's been a kind of journey for me. I went from a very emotive form of worship, to a contemporary style of worship, and finally to worship that was a very high liturgy where all of the music was from hymns and the organ was the dominant instrument. Ultimately, the issue for me is, are we worshiping God, where God is central in the worship, and the worship service is theologically sound. That was the thing that kept me. All of the other stuff became a secondary issue for me. The reality of how central Christ was in the worship service was more important to me. As a result of this change, I grew in my appreciation for hymns, recognizing the depth and the breadth of those hymns. Instead of hearing songs that appealed to the emotions and said the same words sixty times over and over again, I grew in my appreciation for doctrine sung.

[18] Terry L. Johnson, *Worshipping with Calvin: Recovering the Historic Ministry and Worship of Reformed Protestantism* (EP Books 2014), 11.

EY would go on to add that he understood when some African-Americans push back and say, 'We need a certain level of emotiveness. It is our culture to have exuberance.' EY continued,

> I understand and respect this sentiment. However, this is where I make a distinction between the multicultural church and the multiethnic church. If you want a multicultural church, then one must have various expressions of multiple cultures. Then you must have the more emotive singing and styles of songs that some consider the DNA of the black church. But that adaptation is not necessary, per se, if you want a multi-ethnic church.

EY's insightful distinction between "multicultural" and "multiethnic" churches served as a prominent theme in his interview. Hired by a large congregation of roughly 900, which had only two black members, EY was tasked with guiding the church towards a multicultural vision. During the beginning stages of his ministry at the church, he facilitated discussions that enabled the congregation to discern between the concepts of multiculturalism and multiethnicity, teaching them the differences and urging them towards their desired identity. According to EY, the ideal time to lay the foundation for multiculturalism is during the inception of the church plant. He contends that a truly multicultural church doesn't merely reflect racial diversity but demonstrates the cultural nuances of its congregation in both leadership and worship. Such a church, if it is truly multicultural, will reflect various expressions of worship, from traditional hymns to black Gospel music. In contrast, a multiethnic church, while racially diverse, may not integrate the unique cultural facets of its congregation into its worship practices and styles.

EY emphasized the unique and distinct variations of worship within those black churches, asserting that such nuances resist the broad generalizations that are often made of blacks and worship styles. He said,

> You can go to ten different black churches and experience ten different cultures. In some, I have seen the same exact style of liturgy as in an all-

> white church. The idea that black people will not appreciate a high, Reformed liturgy in worship is simply not true. When I first started my ministry at this church (of approximately 900 people), there were only two black people other than myself. Now, we have 12. I can honestly say that every one of those 12 come here because they want to worship in the way we are worshipping God—which is with a Reformed liturgy and the singing of hymns.

EY explored the thought-provoking theory also suggested by another minority pastor, DE. This theory suggests that Reformed worship, with its Scriptural heavy liturgical practices (worship extending far beyond just the singing), transcends all the various kinds of difference represented within the congregation. If the multiethnic model does not preclude the changing of style or form of worship, but rather reaches out to all different kinds of people, with the objective of glorifying God in corporate worship, then the Reformed style of worship may help people transcend difference in authentic worship of the Most High God. This would facilitate believers in a local congregation (even the most diverse one) to look beyond a myriad of differences—including racial—in an authentic adoration of the Savior.

Despite this hopeful outlook, EY acknowledged, yet lamented, that the above statement would not have broad agreement among the elders of the PCA, including black elders. DE, a Puerto Rican pastor in his 30's, who came out of the Pentecostal church, agreed. He argued that Reformed worship had the ability to lift people out of the slavery to the moment to worship that was truly transcendent:

> Liturgical worship transcends our immediate moment. It seems in our day we are slaves to the moment. For example, a movie trailer comes out and we are really excited to see the movie. By tomorrow, however, it is already 'old hat.' It's been out for twenty-four hours, but it is already old. It is so easy to become slaves to the contemporary. When we do, we will become exhausted, and our people will be groundless. What I think is so useful for all of our churches, not just in wanting to be ethnically diverse, but just as human beings, is to give the people something that transcends the moment. In this contemporary moment, we are slaves to the current

> stream. As a pastor and as a Christian, I want something that transcends that. I want a pillar to hold on to, something that grounds God's people, leads them, and encourages them. We need something that stands the test of time, something that does not enslave people to the moment. I have been in churches that are slaves to the moment. You know what is amazing? What was contemporary and cutting edge then, is now a joke today! When we are entering worship, we are transcending everything. We are stepping into the Holy of Holies. We are coming close to Christ. We are being bathed in this glorious biblical liturgical structure and are being re-grounded and realigned, re-honed so that we can leave the place on mission, reflecting the fullness of our family history… we're trying to transcend the moment to say that what we're doing here and now is bigger than this present day that we're stuck in and obsessed with, and we'll forget everything else in God's presence. That's the beauty of liturgical worship.

DE pushed back against the assumption that when the topic of diversity is discussed, there is an underlining assumption that to draw in African-Americans, gospel music must be essential or to attract Latinos, a distinct musical style might be required. DE continued,

> Isn't that kind of cheapening? I mean when you hear that isn't it like, 'Oh, if I only had some casseroles and some cottage cheese, I could get some white Baptists in my church.' You know, that makes me ask, 'What are you doing here?' There is a cultural dynamic, right? I've been to Kenya and I've gotten to worship there. I got to teach out there a couple of years ago, and there is a unique cultural dynamic that is tied to that place and those people. But I don't know if you say, if I do this or that, then boom, Kenyans will show up at my church! It's as if we are reducing people to simple equations that if I add bongos, then Spanish people will move left to right and then they'll come. Or if I have a keyboard solo or if I have this drum or this horn or this solo... then these kinds of people will come to my church. I recognize I'm reactionary to this because of my own background in Pentecostalism, where I've seen music abused to manipulate people. That was my sin. That was my wickedness. And that's why I'm so sensitive to this. But I don't ever think it's that simple, like if we just had this or that, this ethnicity will worship with us. Jesus didn't have that. He was quite wide in his context and in his impact. I don't think he had a simple thing that made the people come to Him.

DE passionately revisited the concept of Reformed worship and its liturgy as a bridge that transcends potential divisions, whether they be racial or generational.

> Worship is unifying by necessity because everyone worships together. So the same prayers being said by grandmothers are being said by the grandbabies. And so one of the things that it does is bridge continuity. The same songs that taught grandma about Jesus are teaching me about Jesus, the same prayers, the same liturgies, the same words. It allows us to step into something bigger than ourselves. We take seriously the dichotomy of the church militant and the church triumphant. We are stepping into their song. We're not demanding that they step into ours. I think when we have the opportunity to shape the liturgical context that is seeking to extend beyond the last 20 years, we might find that there is something to learn from those who've gone before us. And then also something to cling to. I've had the joy of being at people's bedsides when they're dying and singing the same hymns that they would have sung as little boys and little girls and still bring comfort to them in their last breaths, as well as some children in their earliest breaths. You know, the psalter is still good today, even though it's thousands of years old, the hymnal still good, even though these hymns are hundreds of years old or less. So again, I refuse to be a slave to the contextual or to the contemporary. It's rather presumptuous, too, isn't it, that the last 50 years have outweighed the last 2000 years of music? You know, you have music that you're ashamed of, that you liked, and you make sure nobody ever finds out that you love this one artist, and you will go to your grave that I was a huge fan of this or that. Sometimes our worship music is like that. We are listening to 80s pop and we're wondering why nobody else is liking it.

DE's appreciation for Reformed liturgy was a journey and, in some ways, influenced his decisions in how to lead in worship as a minority in an "old, white community." When he first came to his church to serve, he said,

> I didn't know anything liturgically. I was a Pentecostal in a robe, and I was led graciously by leadership in my church. But there was particularly an old woman who had been a widow and her husband, who was the pastor of our church. She gave me his copy of the *Book of Common Prayer, 1928*. I had never seen that before, but I had access to old books from the church, the church's original liturgy book from 1866, the early 20th century edition for the denomination, the *Evangelical Reformed Church* and the *Book of Common Prayer*. And I began to use that for my own personal devotion time and saw how that rhythm of morning and evening prayer and the psalter gave language to my heart; it directed me. I live in illustrations and metaphors. I don't know how to talk any other way. It was like having a friend to go on a long walk with and to enjoy. And even though I had walked the same path a thousand times, I always found something else beautiful to look at. And that really began to shape me. And as I sought to help the congregation, which was mostly triple my age, return to the truth of scripture, I wanted them to transcend the reality that I

was a young man and a minority. So, I wore my Geneva gown and don the historic liturgy and found it to be a place to cling to for my own development and the church's development. *The Book of Common Prayer* was a dear friend to me.

DE discerned that delving deeply into liturgy, into the ancient texts, and wearing a robe, was freeing and a way to transcend potential presuppositions about him in his young age and his race. He said,

> I was 24 years old in a church that was debating dying, and the church already had a liturgical background. The first book I read was *Preachers and Preaching* by Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones. I love Lloyd Jones's preaching. In his book, he talked about the Geneva gown. So, the man who influenced me wore one. Lloyd Jones found this practice rooted in the history of the church. I looked at myself and knew I was nothing, I was young, and here I was pastoring in an old congregation that was white and I was a minority. Even though I don't have a Brooklyn accent or a thick Spanish accent, I knew how I could be perceived. I don't really look white in appearance. I wanted something that would hide the man and elevate the office. And that's not unique to me. That's the language of Lloyd Jones. It's not about me, it's about the office that I've been called to. I'm rather unimportant. But the pastor, insofar as he's preaching God's word faithfully, is delivering the words of God to the people of God and using language of the second...confession. If preaching is faithfully reflective of the word of God, it is the word of God. With that in mind, the robe became a tangible reminder. Every time I put it on, I was reminding myself of what I was doing. I was not about to give a TED talk. Where I live, in this context, there's such a devaluation of ministers…There was no educated clergy or very little of it. Every time I put on the robe, I was reminding myself that what I'm doing is different, special and it's to be delivering God's words to his people in a place analogous to a prophet. There's a somberness to it, a soberness, a solemnity.

CA also spoke of his church being traditional in his worship, but acknowledged the challenges that may pose to integrating diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds,

> In our church, we have a distinct way of worship that emphasizes reverence and joy, focusing more on the internal awe of the Lord rather than external expressions of emotion. This approach means we are less emotive in our services. For instance, we don't typically clap or raise our hands. This can be striking for visitors, especially from African-American backgrounds, who might perceive our church as lacking vitality. However, I believe our congregation is deeply engaged and sings with vigor. The challenge arises when integrating individuals from diverse racial and

ethnic backgrounds, as our worship style might not resonate with their cultural expressions of faith. While our congregation is welcoming, the specific style of our church can create barriers for those not accustomed to it. It's not just about welcoming diversity; it's also about the inherent cultural DNA of our church, which is predominantly shaped by a particular racial and ethnic background. To truly embrace a multiracial congregation, it might require a shift in our church's DNA or changes in our structures and leadership to accommodate different styles of worship and expression.

I believe there's a unique beauty in multi-ethnic churches that reflects a vision of unity we aspire to. However, I have reservations about the notion that multicultural congregations are the gold standard, with everything else falling short. My disagreement lies in the idea that every church must strive for this model to be valid or effective. True unity and love within the body of Christ are what we should aim for, not necessarily a specific church model. For instance, consider the diversity in worship styles – contemporary versus traditional. Is it inherently better for churches to blend these styles to appeal to everyone? Or is it acceptable to have distinct congregations catering to different preferences? If a sense of superiority arises within my congregation, suggesting our worship style is biblically superior, that's a problem. But it's also true that worship is most effective when it resonates deeply with the worshippers, using their 'heart language' – a concept emphasized by the reformers. The question is whether it's biblically mandated for all congregations to blend their cultural differences in worship. If cultural preferences lead to sinful division, arrogance, or judgment, that's clearly wrong. But I'm not convinced that multicultural congregations are the only biblically faithful model. For example, I know of a church where an African-American congregation and a white congregation share a building. They worship separately but come together quarterly for joint services. This pattern, where they occasionally set aside preferences to worship together while also valuing their distinct 'heart languages,' seems attractive to me. While I find multicultural worship beautiful and commendable, I am cautious about claims that it's the only valid approach. There's also a place for congregations where people with similar cultural backgrounds can worship in ways that resonate most deeply with them.

Theme Seven: The Struggle of Minority Pastors to Fit In

Unlike DE, one common struggle shared by many other minority pastors was their abiding in the denomination with a sense that they did not fit or fully belong. This absence of a sense of belonging wasn't always prompted by external factors, but often by

internal beliefs. When asked if he considered white pastors as superior to himself, NP responded,

> For years, I've been recovering from the ingrained belief that white people are inherently in charge. This notion was subtly and overtly instilled in me from childhood, seeing white individuals in positions of authority - teachers, administrators, pastors, police officers. As a child in the 80s, observing Asian-American immigrants engaged in menial jobs and struggling with English, I internalized the stereotype that leadership and authority were synonymous with whiteness. Tim Keller echoed this sentiment in a talk about race, highlighting how we're conditioned to associate leadership with whiteness. When I came into (a significant leadership position), the impact of my appointment on Asian-Americans was profound. They expressed their surprise and emotion, comparing me to figures like Obama and Jeremy Lin, highlighting the rarity of seeing someone like themselves in such a position. This was a significant moment, not just for representation but for challenging the deep-seated norms of white leadership. My journey has been about more than just representation; it's about confronting and dismantling the white supremacist ideology within myself, as Cornel West describes. This ideology is not exclusive to white people; it permeates through all, regardless of race. Recognizing my own value and identity as created in God's image, as described in the scriptures, has been liberating. It has allowed me to embrace my Korean heritage and reject the need for approval from those who dominate white spaces. I strive to be a peace-loving individual, yet I understand that my views may not always be well-received. It's about finding a balance and helping others realize that adherence to a system that equates whiteness with Christianity and faithfulness is a form of oppression. This realization is crucial for our denomination and for individuals to break free from these ingrained beliefs.

NP lamented what he saw as a disregard for the issues that minorities often face and the hypocrisy of some overlooking racism even though holding to a doctrine of depravity:

> And theologically, at best, you're inconsistent. On this side of glory, given our fallen state, we won't achieve complete sanctification until Jesus returns to fully restore and glorify us. Hence, there will always be problems in the world. However, we can choose a positive path and advocate for change. The negative path would be engaging in tit-for-tat arguments, which I reject. I'm now reading more carefully the works of those vehemently against critical race theory. I've noticed they are more passionate in their opposition to critical race theory than in their

> opposition to racism itself. This observation is telling and suggests that arguing against their stance on critical race theory is futile. Instead, we need to continue to argue against racism, not against the arguments against critical race theory. That's the danger. We can't get tired of doing good, as Galatians says, 'Never grow weary of doing good.' This is the slight distinction I want to make in terms of 'racial battle fatigue.

WY, a Latino teacher elder also spoke of the struggle to feel a sense of belonging in the denomination.

> At times I have felt that my gifts were inferior to my other brothers because I was not English-speaking. I got the sense from my ministerial peers that I was not the 'real McCoy.' I was substandard. In my years of working as a pastor, I had to put in the extra effort of how I speak, how I write, and how I communicate with those around me. I would feel the need to make sure I was speaking in a way that was logical and linear. Of course, there is nothing wrong with those methodologies, but as Latinos we are an experiential people. We communicate in a way that is experientially and narrative focused. It would be helpful if more of my Anglo brothers were sensitive to this difference. Yet, I know that inside me I think that wisdom resides in the English way of communicating. So, when I am presenting before my presbytery, I try to be more logical and speak like an Anglo. Even as I am doing this interview, I am trying to answer your questions in a way that gives answers like an Anglo. I sense that going on inside of me as we speak. But that is not the real me. As a Latino, I communicate experientially and with stories. We articulate in an experiential way. We share what we know with a feeling. It's like talking with an exclamation point instead of a period. When I was a young pastor, I would try to overcome my difference and attempt to be accepted by telling jokes. I got the sense that if I acted like a clown, people would laugh, and I would be accepted. Now I am 66 years old. When I was 30, I would be funny, make people laugh, and consequentially blend in better. Now, I refuse to be someone I am not. If I must act like a clown and make people laugh in order for them to include me, I would rather not be among those people. I am not the joke of the room. But it has been my experience in the PCA, that to be sort of accepted, I had to be the clown. Some of my minority brothers would agree with me. If we are not too authoritative or bring weight to the room, we may be able to blend in. Don't be someone to respect, just blend in and you will survive. Of course, this is not healthy nor is a representation of Christ's diverse church.

WY reported that he was accustomed to thinking that white leaders were superior to him. It took time, as he came into his own leadership as a pastor, to overcome this negative perception. In fact, WY reported: "I have learned to fight the thought that I am

inferior to my white brothers. I was often plagued by the thought that my accent will never go away and what makes me different will never change. Even at my age and experience as a pastor, these thoughts still must be fought." WY surmised that these thoughts of inferiority for a minority like himself found their source way before the establishment of the PCA or most contemporary institutions. He places the blame on colonization. He continued:

> Historically, the United States and the Anglo are colonizing powers. Even in my roots, the South American culture, the Hispanic culture, we were colonized by the Spaniards. Many would not consider the Spaniards to be Anglo, but they were much whiter than us. In time, the African slaves were exported to my country and exported to New Orleans. So, we have to reckon, no matter our racial background, with the history of colonization. We must reckon with the fact that God has blessed the United States and Europe with wisdom, the ability to create wealth, and technological advancement. But used in a nefarious way, these things can create colonization. So deep within our consciences, there is this thought that the white person is better than me. They have a bigger country, more money, more power, and a bigger army. For my people, there is this normal reaction for us to take our place at the feet of someone else. We know; however, this is not the way it is to be in Christ's church. We are called to mutual submission.

NP reflected on his coming into the PCA, the challenges he has faced, and what motivates him to continue to serve:

> I don't believe my actions are driven by passion or personal dedication, but rather by survival. For many years, I adhered to a race-blind, race-neutral worldview, influenced by conservative media and as an Asian-American, identifying with whiteness. I've discussed some of these experiences in my book, including my assimilationist efforts to succeed by acting white, and my struggles with bullying and teasing due to my ethnicity, which led me to reject my culture, heritage, and language. My relationship with the Bible began in college, starting with a full gospel church and then a church plant from my college ministry, which I still attend. It was a small Presbyterian church plant, part of the PCA, which felt like family and home to me. Unknowingly, I was embracing an institution with racist, segregationist Southern white roots, similar to the broader context of the United States. As an Asian-American, I've come to understand and acknowledge my complicity in these settler colonial roots and how the system benefits people like me, but not indigenous or Native American

> communities. My involvement in my local church, first as a session member and then at the presbytery and denominational levels, has been a journey of joy. However, I was shocked to discover the depth of racism in our denomination. When I (served in a significant leadership position) I was immediately confronted with a hit piece published in Tennessee, falsely claiming the denomination had gone liberal because of my discussions on white privilege. This experience, which violated journalistic and Christian ethics, was a harsh introduction to the extent of racism within our denomination. Although my experiences may not be as severe as those of previous black and brown elders who faced vocal opposition, they are nonetheless significant. I'm not alone in this struggle, and the pushback I've encountered is part of a well-practiced pattern among those resisting these discussions.

KC shared some of his journey as a minority pastor in the PCA. Initially feeling estranged, KC found a sense of belonging by being given a voice in his presbytery and through the mentorship of fellow pastors:

> When I joined the Pacific Presbytery, a predominantly white majority, I was astounded to find that about 80 to 90 percent of the teaching elders were white, especially considering the diversity of Los Angeles. In my initial four or five years after ordination, I felt very disengaged. This was partly due to my unfamiliarity with the denomination's polity, as I came from a Pentecostal background, where practices like Robert's Rules were foreign to me. I also felt a sense of racial isolation, perhaps self-imposed, due to a lack of peers who shared my background. However, about five years ago, things began to change when I was unexpectedly nominated and then served (in a significant leadership role) a role extended uniquely in my case. This experience was eye-opening, underscoring the importance of empowering minority voices. My engagement with the presbytery increased significantly, and I became one of the more vocal members, despite being in the minority. A pivotal aspect of my journey has been the mentorship I received from other minority leaders. These mentors, who were trailblazers in their own right, guided me through challenges and disappointments. Their support has been instrumental in my continued involvement with the PCA. The contrast between my experience and theirs at General Assembly meetings – from their initial dislike to my current enjoyment in connecting with others – highlights a significant shift in the denomination's atmosphere. This mentorship and engagement have been crucial in my transition from a feeling of estrangement to a deeper sense of belonging within the presbytery.

IL expressed a similar sentiment:

> My journey with cultural identity has been a lifelong process. I grew up in Baltimore City, a predominantly black area, and then moved to a majority white suburb in first grade. During my childhood, I always felt out of place and aspired to fit in with the dominant white culture. From first grade through high school, most of my friends were white, and I desperately wanted to blend in, avoiding the attention that came with being an outsider. This desire to assimilate led me to embrace white culture while becoming critical of my own Korean heritage. This conflict extended into my church life in unique ways. I realized I needed to be fully immersed in white culture to understand that I wasn't as integrated as I had thought. This realization hit me especially when I tried to fully engage in the predominantly white PCA culture. It was then that I noticed I wasn't as accepted as I expected. Small things, like missing Korean food at presbytery meetings or longing to see Korean faces in a non-Korean church, highlighted my minority status and brought up feelings of alienation. Even now, this journey continues. I've learned that my identity and comfort aren't rooted in ethnicity or culture, but in Christ. This realization provides a stable foundation and hope. However, I've also come to understand that my cultural background, being Korean, is an integral part of who I am. It allows me to appreciate my culture in a healthier way, recognizing its flaws but not feeling the need to reject it entirely. Now, I can embrace my heritage while being aware of its shortcomings, a much healthier stance than I had in high school, college, or even a few years ago.

It is evident that some minority pastors often grapple with a profound sense of alienation, lack of belonging and, at times, resistance. This sentiment is not solely the result of external sentiment but also stems from deeply ingrained beliefs.

During the research period from 2020 to 2023, the pastors interviewed faced particularly intense challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant difficulties, including church closures, social isolation, and contentious debates over health measures like masking. During the same time, the high-profile deaths of black men at the hands of police sparked historic protests and dialogues around racial matters. The societal unrest was further amplified by a highly contentious presidential election in 2020 and the January 6th Capitol uprising. These interviews did not occur in isolation from these tumultuous times. The elders, navigating their ministries and congregations through these

unique circumstances, felt the stress and impact to varying degrees. One may wonder if the global pandemic along with other volatile events exacerbated certain issues that were already present in the church but are now openly manifest in unique ways.[19]

Despite these challenges, the elders interviewed demonstrated remarkable qualities. They showed competence, knowledge, and passion, underlined by a deep commitment to their role as shepherds under the Great Shepherd. Their leadership was characterized by fervent passion for the church, profound knowledge of God's Word, and an approach to these complex issues with conviction. These characteristics, in the researcher's opinion, stem from a desire to care for the church of God, which Christ purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28). They all spoke with passion, but also with respect, love, and selflessness. Adding to this, a striking conversation with one of the participants revealed a deep sense of commitment. When questioned about the risks to his reputation that came from his bold stance, he responded, "I try to always remember who I am advocating for." This response highlighted his commitment to reaching out to those he perceived as outsiders, with the aim of bringing them to Christ and helping them find a sense of belonging within the church community. This sentiment was not unique to him; it was a common theme among all the pastors interviewed. Each one shared a strong desire for glorifying God and serving all people, without exception.

What does this all mean for the current leaders in the PCA, for the leaders yet to come, and for the denomination as a whole? The final chapter addresses these questions

[19] Mark Jones, *The Pilgrim's Regress: Guarding against Backsliding and Apostasy in the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2023), xx.

by providing recommendations and suggestions for those who have been called to the sacred task of shepherd.

CHAPTER FOUR: RECOMMENDATIONS

Like love and bankruptcy, it happened slowly, then all at once.[1]

Lord, when we are wrong, make us willing to change.
And when we are right, make us easy to live with.
Peter Marshall[2]

A few initial presuppositions posited at the outset of this research were subsequently found to be incongruent with the emergent evidence. If the primary purpose of research is to uncover truth and increase understanding, then it is required of the researcher to weigh the evidence and allow his original assumptions and conclusions to be challenged. Intellectual honesty and, more importantly, adherence to God's truth demands reevaluation. Over a three-year period, my grip of clinging to original presuppositions loosened; my initial solutions were found wanting. In addition, the stark differences of opinion on this subject were wider than I anticipated. Considering the previous research, I recommend the following:

Delve Deeper into Individual Narratives Within the Denomination, Moving Beyond Simplistic Racial Dichotomies to Appreciate the Rich Diversity of Perspectives and Experiences

One initial assumption was that elders from minority backgrounds and those from majority cultures would have markedly different perspectives on racial issues. Although there were notable distinctions in some cases, there were also substantial variations within the minority and majority categories themselves. The focus on racial disparities

[1] Foo, Stephanie. *What My Bones Know* (p. 299). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

[2] Mark Water, *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations* (Alresford, Hampshire: John Hunt Publishers Ltd, 2000), 229.

may have been more unhelpful than helpful. Such methodology may have fortified separations based on racial categorizations, thus maintaining the divisions it sincerely aimed to resolve. The assumption that elders from minority backgrounds would stand in stark contrast to those from the majority cultures was incorrect. Some minority elders argued for a higher liturgy in worship, asserting that a high liturgy in worship was a means to transcend various racial and social differences. These distinctions did not conform to strict racial lines. One majority culture elder argued against a return to 16th century style Reformed liturgy, finding it silly and an indication that some are conforming to ancient cultural expressions rather than seeking consistency with biblical worship. He argued that "biblical principles and biblical truths can be expressed in transcultural ways." Other minority pastors found a high liturgy to be an unnecessary hurdle to reaching urban or minority demographics. Nevertheless, most minority pastors and elders leaned towards a desire for more traditional forms of worship. Likewise, the research also revealed nuance in the reactions to the racial unrest of 2020. There was a spectrum of experiences and viewpoints shared in the interviews that defied simplistic categorizations. Therefore, my recommendation is that as elders, we respond to the strong, binary racial dichotomies pushed in our present culture with an even stronger emphasis on the common ground every Christian has with each other due to our redemption in Christ. While we certainly recognize that when people share the same race, culture, and backgrounds, there tends to be strong connections and sense of belonging, our greater connection comes not from a shared race or ethnicity but from our adoption into the family of God (Galatians 3:28). We must lead ourselves and Christ's people to look beyond racial constructs to the shared spiritual heritage of all believers. Our unity

with other Christians is even more profound that are sense of connection with those of our same race. The exhortation of the late Timothy Keller is helpful:

> (The Gospel)…creates even deeper and more extensive connections, so much so that when you become a Christian, though you are still Chinese, though you still feel a connection to other Chinese people, you now feel greater connection to the people who also believe, have been through the same experience, have been convicted of sin and received the grace of God. You feel a closer connection, and it's a stronger bond with them than you do with other people from your own race who don't share that faith…Therefore, the church becomes actually a new humanity, a new nation, a new people… I am Christian first, and I am white second. I am Christian first, and I'm an American second. I am Christian first, and I'm college-educated second. That means when I meet… a poor single mother in Soweto, a black African township in South Africa, who's also a believer, there is a closer tie I have with her, and there's a closer bond I sense with her and a more profound connection than I have with the people I grew up with, same street, same school, same race, same generation.[3]

Embrace a Distinctly Reformed, Liturgical Worship Framework Over Contemporary Evangelical Practices to Transcend Racial Differences

In retrospect, the personal experiences that spurred this paper took on new dimensions as my research progressed. Initially, the discomfort expressed by the black couple in the PCA's liturgical worship service seemed straightforward. They were not accustomed to the liturgy and the lack of emotive singing. However, their continued presence over the subsequent three years at our church, alongside their young daughter, called into question my presupposition. It became evident that their relationship to liturgical Reformed worship was neither one of aversion nor particular attraction. Instead, it was the bonds they formed with the congregation that anchored them in the church. However, even these connections had their limits. After three years of attending our

[3] Timothy J. Keller, "A New Humanity," in The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive (New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2013), sermon, "Who is the Church?—November 6, 2011," Ephesians 2:11–18.

church plant, in a heartfelt conversation, the young lady conveyed, “There are aspects of worship that I deeply yearn for which aren’t available at your church. I can’t consistently attend a service where I feel I must remain seated or quiet when I want to stand up and shout, to weep at an altar, or to express my joy and praise. I need an environment where I can freely express these feelings without the apprehension of drawing puzzled or disapproving glances.”

Despite my sadness at their departure, I remember the interviews with KM and CA which suggested that the focus and style of the PCA will not be for everyone. We do not have an exclusive hold on the body of Christ, but we are one tradition among many in the bounds of orthodox Christianity. In addition, I reflect on the interviews with DE and EY when both men theorized that Reformed worship could actually be a way to transcend racial difference. I reflect on my interview with EY who made a distinction between a multicultural church and a multiethnic church. In light of this distinction, I ascertain that our local church aspires to be multiethnic. This means we will hold on to a reformed, liturgical understanding and practice of worship without attempting to appeal to every culture in our church or demographic. I am content and motivated to test this theory out in a greater degree, convinced that a high liturgical worship can indeed transcend multiple differences.

Furthermore, the diverse array of musical styles, liturgies, and aesthetic expressions permit a multitude of perspectives, often reflecting the cultural and ethnic differences within the congregation. However, it is proposed that a more rigorous assessment of worship practices within the PCA be undertaken to determine the extent to which these practices are God-centered, as opposed to being predominantly oriented

towards personal gratification or amusement. The effectiveness of worship services in transcending various forms of difference, including racial differences, is contingent upon the nature of these services. If worship is predominantly perceived and practiced as a form of "baptized entertainment," we have no opportunity to test the theory that Reformed worship could indeed transcend difference.[4] Therefore, a critical evaluation is necessary to ensure that worship in the PCA maintains its foundational purpose of glorifying God and fostering a genuine communion among its diverse participants.

Prioritize Scripture and Gospel-Centered Reconciliation in the Church, Cautioning Against Overreliance on Contemporary Societal Theories

Upon contemplation of my involvement in the June 2020 protest following the tragic death of George Floyd, and the subsequent feedback I encountered, a few sentiments emerge. I resonate deeply with several of my peers that I interviewed who shared similar reactions and actions, along with criticisms of their taking a stand publicly on a heated issue. I find solidarity with these brothers. However, upon deeper introspection and the results of my research for this project, I've given considerable thought to the apprehensions voiced by my brothers in the PCA regarding BLM, CRT, and affiliated ideologies. Although my initial reaction to their reservations about CRT and intersectionality was one of skepticism, with time and reflection, I have come to recognize the validity of their concerns. My initial desire was to take an approach of "intellectual hospitality" towards these theories. In hindsight, I understated the error of these novel and fluid systems of belief. I did not see the need to engage these theories in a polemical way, but rather in a more academic engagement that "ate the meat and spit out

[4] Terry Johnson uses the term "baptized entertainment:" See, Terry L. Johnson, *Worshipping with Calvin: Recovering the Historic Ministry and Worship of Reformed Protestantism* (EP Books, 2014), 77.

the bones." Nevertheless, as my understanding and research into these theories deepened, my initial perceptions were challenged. There are a few reasons for this change. First, I recall an important experience that began to reshape my view of these ideologies. I participated in the week-long *CRT Summer School* organized by the African American Policy Forum in 2022. Established by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Luke Harris, this forum is recognized for its pivotal role in advancing the understanding of intersectionality and the intricacies of structural inequality.[5] The plenary sessions at the school featured a mix of politicians, journalists, and faith leaders, some of whom are affiliated with the Reformed tradition, including a leader from the PCA. While my intent here is not to delve into a critique of the various teachings presented during that week—some of which, admittedly, were not relevant to this study—it is noteworthy that certain sessions highlighted how CRT poses crucial questions and captures nuanced truths about systemic racism in America and within the church. However, my primary emphasis lies in articulating the profound emotional turmoil I experienced in the wake of those sessions. A palpable anger consumed me, an emotion not wholly unwarranted. It is entirely justifiable to harbor indignation regarding the stark disparity in resources between neighboring schools, the schisms in the church arising from racial and political disputes, or the insensitivity displayed by some of my evangelical brothers and sisters toward Black Christians hurt by racial prejudice or pained by police brutality in their communities. Yet, my emotions were not solely dominated by anger; it was also marred by an overwhelming sense of despair and hopelessness concerning these issues. The envisioned brighter future seemed

[5] The African American Policy Forum, "It is with great enthusiasm that we announce the countdown to CRT Summer School 2022!," Facebook post, March 16, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/aapolicyforum/posts/305857348308783/.

elusive. Furthermore, once my anger subsided, I was able to differentiate what was legitimate and illegitimate anger. The tenets of CRT do not compute with my experience. I am a Filipino pastor, serving in a predominantly white area, and yet I have had measured success in beginning a church plant in the PCA that mirrors the racial composition of our locale. Like some of my ministry counterparts interviewed for this research, I have occasionally grappled with the feelings of not belonging. However, the primary sentiment I have felt is a warm welcome from my presbytery and brothers in the faith. White men and women have labored beside me, when necessary, yielded to my leadership, and supported my ministry. Like some of the minority brothers expressed in their interviews, I did not come to the PCA from a much more multi-racial denomination to find diversity. I came with a conviction for solid, biblical doctrine in the Reformed tradition. Admittedly, I was somewhat perturbed by the reactions of certain peers amid the politically charged milieu of 2020, particularly against the backdrop of racial tensions. However, as events have unfolded, I have come to recognize that the apprehensions articulated by some regarding BLM, CRT, and related ideologies were not only well-founded but, perhaps, prophetic in nature.

While my personal experience provided me with a certain perspective, it should not be misconstrued as an indicator of truth and error. I am simply recounting what a week immersed in CRT did for me in the negative impact on my thoughts and emotions. The week furnished me with many questions and shined a spotlight on numerous pressing issues. However, to find hope and answers, I had to turn elsewhere. I considered the interview with CA where he suggested that these ideologies and the church's engagement with them were a "fad" that the Body of Christ would soon move beyond. In his words,

the church will again find that the Scriptures are sufficient to handle issues of reconciliation, equity, injustice, etc. As I reflected on our local church plant and our core value of becoming a racially diverse congregation, a realization dawned. Despite my rigorous engagement with concepts like CRT and intersectionality for the purpose of this research, those ideologies played no practical role in our outreach to varied ethnic and racial communities. We weren't leveraging the latest trending racial ideology to cultivate an inclusive church. Instead, our compass was the unchanging Word of God. Our guiding principle was a desire to be committed to the Scriptures, the creeds, and to emphasize how His Word speaks to all the issues we face in worshiping and serving with one another in the midst of our differences. Our emphasis was on the reconciliatory power of the Gospel. I am not declaring a categorical opposition to the engagement with these ideologies through the lens of God's Word. Nevertheless, from a practical standpoint, I found the use of these theories to be, at best, minimal in the everyday work of the local church. At worst, my caution is to avoid basing our faith upon or bending it to conform to pagan philosophies.[6]

On October 16, 2023, entrepreneur, political consultant, and author of *Hopping Over the Rabbit Hole: How Entrepreneurs Turn Failure into Success,* Anthony Scaramucci tweeted, "We are entering the post Woke World. It's started on October 7."[7] This comment was set against the backdrop of escalating tensions and the tragic events in Israel on October 7. The heinous and violent actions committed in Israel by Hamas, a

[6] Colossians 2:8: "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ."

[7] Anthony Scaramucci (@Scaramucci), "We are entering the post Woke World. It's started on October 7," Twitter, October 16, 2023, 9:39 PM, https://twitter.com/Scaramucci/status/1714093674760450410.

Palestinian militant group recognized as a terrorist organization by both Israel and the United States. Although approximately 1,400 people were killed by Hamas on October 7, 2023, students across the United States reacted in anger against Israel.[8] Such reactions sparked a wave of commentary. Analysts and thinkers tried to fathom the seemingly immediate pivot from mourning the victims to criticizing Israel as an imperial power. A dominant theme emerged from these debates: the influence of intersectionality and CRT in shaping these perceptions and actions. It was argued that students have been so immersed in these ideologies that delineate the world through the lens of the oppressed and the oppressor that they were merely reacting in a way that coincides with these worldviews.[9] As the students embodied these ideologies in their protests against Israel, people wondered how those on these campuses could overstep the complexities and convoluted history of the Israeli-Palestine conflict, while also showing no or very little sympathy for those murdered and kidnapped.[10] One can only surmise that the strict adherence to a singular worldview led to such bombastic actions.

The seeds of this paper began with my own journey to dive deeper into understanding how elders in our denomination were responding to race, racial unrest, and diversity within our denomination. Because such ideologies as CRT and intersectionality

[8]The Associated Press, Live updates | Israel's bombardment in Gaza surges, reducing buildings to rubble, AP News, October 24, 2023, accessed October 26, 2023, https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-palestinians-live-updates-9a0ddf745bde0ffc46921b99ed34fb65."

[9] For a deeper explanation of how critical theory divides society in "dominant/privileged/oppressor groups," see Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer, *Critical Dilemma: The Rise of Critical Theories and Social Justice Ideology—Implications for the Church and Society* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2023), 410–411.

[10] Conor Friedersdorf, "College Students' Justice for Palestine Chapters & Hamas," The Atlantic, October 14, 2023, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/10/college-students-justice-for-palestine-chapters-hamas/675640/.

became hot issues during the time of this research, the deep dive into CRT and intersectionality initially seemed like a promising avenue for understanding and addressing the complexities not only facing society but our own churches. Yet, in light of the lack of practical implications and the emotional toll this study had on me, I realized that these worldviews have the propensity to oversimplify or distort reality. They can compel individuals to view the world and the church strictly through the lens of oppression, thus overlooking other facets of a situation in historical or geographical context. This phenomenon is eerily echoed in the aftermath of the tragic events of October 7th, 2023, in Israel. Having studied these ideologies for the purpose of this research over the past three years, the rotten fruits of critical theories became more apparent. Israel was cast as an imperialist-colonialist force, Israelis are settler-colonialists, and thus the Palestinians have a right to eliminate their oppressors. Israelis are "white" or "white-adjacent" and Palestinians as "people of color."[11] Therefore, the assertion that "we are entering the post Woke World" potentially draws attention to a shifting global perspective on these ideologies. It may be that more people like me are being stunned out of a friendly, hospitable approach to these ideologies. Indeed, it can be argued such a shift in perspective has been building, even from those considered progressive and liberal.[12] The common thread, highlighted by recent events, is the propensity of these ideologies to frame narratives in such a way that overshadow truth.

[11] Simon Sebag Montefiore, "Decolonization Narrative: Dangerous and False," The Atlantic, October 27, 2023, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/10/decolonization-narrative-dangerous-and-false/675799/.

[12] Yascha Mounk, "Woke Ideology: History, Origins, Flaws," The Atlantic, September 26, 2023, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/09/woke-ideology-history-origins-flaws/675454/.

Extremely nuanced and complicated cases are reduced to a binary narrative of oppressors versus the oppressed.

Listening to my peers on this subject and reflecting on my own experiences and study brings me to an altered conclusion than where I began.[13] While these secular ideologies may offer insights, specifically in shining a light on the racial problems in our institutions, an uncritical acceptance or implementation will lead to distorted perceptions. My recommendation is to back away from these ideologies and ensure that our ministerial compass remains on the answer God's Word can bring to all problems faced by the Body of Christ. As Pastor Mark Jones wisely writes, "The Christian life is not meant to be overcomplicated. God treats us as children, not as enemies that he wishes to confound."[14] The idea that the Gospel can bring racial reconciliation and create a diverse representation in the church are not oversimplifications.

Address Racial Tensions in the PCA by Enhancing Minority Leader Support, Challenging Political Biases, and Amplifying Historically Overlooked Voices

Considering the interviews conducted with minority elders within the denomination, there is a mixed sentiment. While some convey a palpable sense of unease and a feeling of partial belonging, it is essential to note that several minority elders express contentment and a sense of full integration within the denomination. Even though each participant affirmed their commitment to remain with the denomination, the expressed unease of some remains disconcerting. A recent study by Barna, titled "Beyond

[13] This is one reason it is of utmost of importance to be in constant conversation with fellow ministers and brothers and sisters in the faith. We all have glaring blind spots that often are not revealed unless we are willing to hear from others in the faith. As Andrew Fuller notes in his book, *The Backslider*, "But whatever difference there be between a partial and a total departure from God, it will be difficult, if not impossible, for the party himself at the time to perceive it." See Andrew Fuller, *The Backslider* (London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1840), 19.

[14] Jones, The Pilgrim's Regress, 150.

Diversity," may speak to this issue. The research suggests that almost three out of ten black practicing Christians in multiracial churches have encountered racial prejudice within these spaces. Such findings are compared with data that shows only 11% of black practicing Christians report facing similar bias in monoracial black congregations.[15] The difference raises questions about multiracial congregations and how well they work for black Christians, but it also may speak to the unease that some minority pastors feel in a predominately white denomination such as the PCA. While these statements from the elders cannot be dismissed, it is also necessary to consider the statements of the individual experiences and their testifying of their own internal struggles. Some minority elders' feelings of unease or not fully belonging may not primarily stem from external factors or that the denomination is historically white. Instead, some expressed that these feelings were rooted in their own internal struggles of identity and self-worth. Others expressed feeling the pressure to represent their entire racial or ethnic group in the denomination. This pressure, coupled with the internal perception of being seen as inferior, can amplify feelings of alienation or inadequacy, even when one is the leader and when there is an absence of any racial prejudice within the leader's denominational affiliation. Thus, taking the data from the interviews with minority elders, one must address the feelings of unease with a holistic approach that goes beyond accusing an entire denomination of racial prejudice and highlighting that the PCA is a "white dominated institution." Taking their stories seriously, one can agree that racism does exist in even the best churches and presbyteries. However, it is essential to provide support for

[15] "Barna Minute: Multicultural Congregation," Barna, [Accessed October 25, 2023], https://barna.gloo.us/videos/barna-minute-multicultural-congregation.

minority leaders by not only acknowledging this, but also supporting them in their self-awareness, identity as leaders, and empowering them within denominational structures.[16]

Furthermore, there is a palpable apprehension among some of the minority elders I interviewed that there is a bias, or at best, a perceived bias in the denomination. Some expressed that they see an inclination towards right wing politics within PCA churches. Irwyn Ince suggests as much in his book, *Beautiful Community*, referencing evangelical's marked preference for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election. This preference seemed to overlook Trump's dismissive remarks about various groups, including Mexican immigrants and NFL players who were voicing their concerns over police brutality.[17]

Likewise, this inclination towards right wing politics does not stop at the election booth. The perceived evangelical silence during moments of racial tension, specifically in the face of tragic killings of unarmed black individuals, stand in stark contrast to their vehement criticisms of ideologies like CRT and intersectionality. One PCA minority elder who was involved in the drafting of the 2016 Reconciliation report expressed regret in my interview, saying that there was a missed opportunity to strongly denounce white superiority and Christian Nationalism in the report. Such observations and sentiments from these minority elders underline an essential concern. Perhaps this also explains why some have become attracted to CRT and spend considerable time defending it. CRT has offered them a lens through which they can articulate their lived experiences of racial

[16] Two potential resources for minorities in the PCA can be found at African American Ministries, accessible online at aampca.org, and the PCA Unity Fund - Mission to North America, available at pcamna.org

[17] Ince Jr. and Keller, *The Beautiful Community*, 85.

discrimination. Beyond a theory, they see the real-life reflections of the real stories and struggles of minorities. They also believe it provides a way to highlight the blind spots where the majority have not adequately addressed prevailing racism and inequality—both in the nation and the church. Perhaps, most notably, CRT's emphasis on "counter-narratives" allows voices that have been historically overlooked to be heard and validated. The vigorous critiques of CRT coupled with a deafening silence on issues that affect people of color and the silence of denouncing Christian Nationalism raise eyebrows among some minority leaders in the denomination. Such perceived inconsistencies may be driving a wedge between majority and minority Christian communities in the PCA. Nevertheless, as expressed by one interview participant, the concern about Christian Nationalism may be a "false flag," meaning it might not be a genuine or legitimate concern in the PCA. If this is true, the concern about Christian Nationalism could be employed solely to strengthen an argument in favor of Critical Race Theory, since Christian Nationalism is not a widespread or even a minor issue within the denomination.[18] The unfortunate outcome of this could be a focus on arguing

[18] Author Brandon Washington presents a generous view of CRT and sees attacks against it as originating in Christian Nationalism. He writes, "By and large, Christian critiques of CRT have resulted in whole-cloth dismissals. However, I maintain that this results from Christian nationalism, an unwholesome alignment between American evangelicalism and American institutions. Unexamined nationalism can obscure debased national values and their pervasive, ongoing implications. So, the conclusions of critical race theorists are automatically offensive. I'm reminded of an assertion from my coffee shop interrogators, "CRT is an unholy attack on the godly history of a Christian nation." Looking to the past, they do not see the ghettoization of subdominant groups ("minorities"). They are missing part of the historical story, and an incomplete understanding of American history results in a flawed interpretation of the American present. CRT excels at highlighting these overlooked events and, therefore, has merit." See, Evaluating Critical Race Theory," in *Urban Apologetics, Cults and Cultural Ideologies, Biblical and Theological Challenges Facing Christians*, ed. Eric Mason (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Reflective, 2023), 28.

for and against divisive, aberrant ideologies at the expense of addressing more critical and Gospel-centric concerns.[19]

It is also noteworthy that the majority of minority pastors interviewed indicated their transition into the Presbyterian Church in America from more racially diverse environments was primarily motivated by an attraction to Reformed theology and a pursuit for deeper doctrinal and theological substance, as offered within the PCA. This shift underscores that factors beyond racial diversity held greater significance for them. Their integration into the PCA has, by virtue of their participation, enhanced the denomination's diversity. Given the growing focus on racial diversity, revisiting these foundational motivations for joining the PCA could be beneficial. Recalling these initial motivations may help us to be more clear-eyed about what ails our churches and opens us up to focus on effectively solving the real problems that plague us.

Cultivate an Environment of Genuine Dialogue in the PCA, Prioritizing Unity Over Silence, and Authentic Engagement Over Division

Another danger is present. During the course of this research, there was a hesitation among some participants when broaching contentious subjects as CRT and the racial upheavals of 2020. Even with the assurance of anonymity, some participants demonstrated apprehension, fearing a misrepresentation of their views or the backlash that might come from confronting such polarizing topics head-on. One participant candidly said, “I am aware of the issue and the differing views, but I have no desire to speak to it.” This points to a reverse danger: the suppression of leaders in the

[19] However, there continues to be accusation that white supremacy plagues the PCA. See Anthony Bradley, “I learned this the hard way as well. I’m still having the exact same discussions about the history of US Calvinism as I was in 1998. Has not changed. The PCA is still full of Dabney lovers, Xian Nationalists, deniers of racism in the history of Calvinism, and people who don’t prioritize Presbyterianism over evangelicalism.” I learned this the hard way as well...over evangelicalism,” Twitter, November 20, 2023, 3:15 PM, https://twitter.com/drantbradley/status/1726695680388062780 5.

denomination who sense the need to introduce valid concerns, critiques, and corrections against what they discern as misleading and dangerous ideologies within the church. In a world where there is heightened sensitivity to differing viewpoints and a quick reaction to label those on the opposite side of the isle with damning labels, there may be a similar climate developing in the body of Christ. There was a fear among some of the participants of facing consequences to addressing the race issue at all. Any suppression of genuine apprehensions will not only ostracize valuable members of the denomination, but it may widen the chasm where meaningful dialogue is no longer possible. As one participant lamented, "It seems we are no longer talking past one another; we aren't even in the same room." The church will have to oppose the contemporary trend of cancel culture, the quickness to brand all opposing views as 'racist,' and the stifling of certain voices within the denomination. If such a trend mushrooms, the denomination runs the risk of further division, ultimately compromising the unity in diversity foundational to the church's mission.[20] Nevertheless, the incredible conflict that this topic has generated, does not have to be a destructive thing to our churches or denomination. The words of a Swedish scholar may be appropriate:

> If you cannot remove conflict from your life, why not adjust your thinking about it? If you can't beat it, join it. Why not try and see conflict as the salt of life, as the big energizer, the tickler, the tantalizer, rather than a bothersome nuisance, as a noise in a perfect channel, as disturbing ripples in otherwise quiet water? Why not treat conflict as a form of life, particularly since we all know that it is precisely during the periods of our lives when we are exposed to a conflict that really challenges us, and that we finally are able to master, that we feel most alive.[21]

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[20] For more on the importance of having open dialogue and the diversity of opinions on contemporary topics, see https://heterodoxacademy.org and https://freeblackthought.com.

[21] David W. Augsburger, *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures: Pathways and Patterns* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 4, quoting Galtung.

These words, applied to the corporate setting of the church and denomination, indicate that growth and progress can come about by addressing the internal differences we are facing. Indeed, many of the pivotal moments in Church history involved confronting and overcoming challenges.[22] By treating these racial discussions as an opportunity rather than a hurdle, we can grow stronger in our faith and mission.

Provide Further Theological Education and Practical Training, With A Specific Emphasis on Multi-ethnic, Multi-cultural, Mono-ethnic, and "Raceless" Congregations

The most ambiguous findings in the data emerged from how participants conveyed their perspectives on the multi-ethnic church. Notably, only a single participant firmly advocated for the deliberate promotion of a racially diverse church. The majority displayed a more nebulous stance, marked by uncertainty and vagueness. While there was a general openness to diversity, there existed a spectrum of questions regarding its biblical integration. This ambivalence in the data suggests a shift from the previous literature's focus on the multi-racial church, which gained prominence at the century's turn.[23] Similarly, the rationale behind support for monoethnic churches remained ill-defined, leading to potential misinterpretations and unclear motivations. This indicates a need for more precise theological and practical guidance in these areas. It is advised to broaden and deepen theological education and practical training, with a specific emphasis

[22] Consider the Reformation in the 16th century. This was a time when the Christian Church experienced significant upheaval due to differing theological viewpoints, leading to the Protestant Reformation. The climate of the Reformation was one of intense debate. However, despite the conflict and division, the Reformation also led to a period of significant theological development, spiritual renewal, and the growth of literacy and education due to the emphasis on reading the Bible. The Reformation shows that while conflict within the Church can be divisive, it can also serve as a catalyst for change and renewal. See Richard Watson, "Reformation," *A Biblical and Theological Dictionary* (New York: Lane & Scott, 1851), 813.

[23] Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim, *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

on multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and mono-ethnic congregations. This expanded training should include an exploration of theological and biblical perspectives on these church models.

Furthermore, new theories regarding race will require rigorous theological and biblical engagement to test their possible integration with the Christian church, perhaps seeing the church as "raceless." For example, the theory of racelessness suggests that race is a social construct rather than a biological reality. This theory, currently promoted by Dr. Sheena Mason, a distinguished academic with expertise in African diaspora and literature, challenges the traditional understanding of race by suggesting that the concept of race is not rooted in inherent, immutable characteristics but is instead a product of social, historical, and cultural contexts.[24] Her theory advocates for a 'raceless' approach to understanding human identity, emphasizing shared humanity over racial categorizations. She argues that racism stems from the belief in race and that to combat racism effectively, society must first dismantle the belief in race itself. Her approach encourages a reevaluation of how race is perceived and discussed, promoting a focus on individual experiences, cultures, and histories rather than on generalized racial groups. Dr. Mason presents the idea that ending race is the future of antiracism, including the concept of whiteness. This argument is rooted in the observation that individuals often view one another through a racial lens, leading to a process of racialization. Such a perspective reduces people to mere racial categories, stripping them of their individual humanity and complexity. By focusing on racial differences, we inadvertently contribute to the

[24] Dr. Sheena Mason, "The Raceless Antiracist: Why Ending Race is the Future of Antiracism," YouTube video, posted by GEOG UMD, November 8, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O8CdGD8J6Ag&t=6000s, accessed November 13, 2023.

dehumanization of individuals, overlooking their unique identities and experiences. In mono-ethnic churches, the theory of racelessness could lead to a reevaluation of their identity. Defining themselves primarily through a singular ethnic lens will be challenged. These churches might begin to question the extent to which their identity is tied to ethnicity and consider how this focus aligns with or diverges from biblical teachings. For multi-ethnic and multi-cultural churches, this theory will challenge the very acknowledgement of racial differences. The theory may encourage a move towards seeing the congregation as a collective body of believers beyond racial categorizations.[25] Regardless, biblical engagement will be necessary as we continue to look for ways to define the church according to biblical standards.

Harness the Westminster Confession of Faith, Particularly Chapter XX.2, as a Beacon for Constructive Dialogue and Mutual Respect within the Church

In dissecting the interviews, it becomes apparent how vast the differing perspectives can be, even within the confines of our own denomination. The intense and varying reactions to the racial unrest of 2020 stand as a stark illustration. Take, for instance, the contrasting reactions to the widely publicized death of George Floyd. One the one end, DWJ, a black teaching elder, was deeply affected by the injustices he perceived against the black community. The death of Floyd was a microcosm of a widespread problem. He was further agitated by the posthumous disrespect directed at Floyd's memory, an issue that remains three years later.[26] DWJ lamented that his

[25] Kimi Katiti, Khadija Mbowe, Dr. Sheena Mason, Samuel Sey, and others, "Colorblindness in Race? Kimi Katiti, Khadija Mbowe, Dr. Sheena Mason, Samuel Sey & others discuss...," accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9Up88WtA7g, accessed on November 17, 2023.

[26] Nicole Silverio, "'Everyone Lied': Tucker Carlson Points To Shocking, Untold Details About George Floyd's Death," Daily Caller, October 20, 2023, https://dailycaller.com/2023/10/20/tucker-carlson-george-floyd-death-coroner-lawsuit/.

colleagues within the denomination agreed with these conservative commentators. On the flip side, EY, also a black teaching elder, drawing from his background as a former police investigator, expressed sympathy for Derek Chauvin, viewing the incident as "not racially motivated."

Such contrasting views naturally raise the question: How can one reconcile such opposing stances? Notably, these divergent views are not isolated to the racial events of 2020. For instance, one teaching elder fervently believes that a multi-cultural church epitomizes the most mature form of the Body of Christ. A racially diverse church, in his view, is a local church most living up to the standards of the world to come. Yet, another teaching elder expresses reservations of the multi-cultural church model, suggesting that the monoethnic church, while not biblically superior, is more apt in our current climate, where prevailing political and social rifts might endanger people of color in predominantly "white" congregations.

These are significant issues, demanding consideration and perhaps indicating that one perspective is closer to the truth than the other. However, if we do not allow each other's opinions of social issues or politics, we are endangered of being plagued by division. When we look at issues that are situated in the "fog of war," with facts not yet established or known, and attempt to say we have the full picture, we may have fallen into hubris and arrogance. We should take to heart the message of Dr. King in his 1965 commencement speech at Oberlin College, "Remaining Awake Through a Great

Revolution." He stated, "We must all learn to live together as brothers [and sisters] or we will all perish together as fools."[27]

My earnest recommendation for PCA ministers is to navigate these differences by referring to a familiar source: *The Westminster Confession* of Faith. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (WCF) is often referred to as the "constitution" of the Presbyterian Church in America because it serves as the foundational doctrinal statement that governs the beliefs and practices of the denomination. Furthermore, teaching, ruling elders, and deacons in the PCA are required to subscribe to the WCF, meaning they must affirm that they believe its teachings and will uphold them in their ministry. I recommend that we ground ourselves in this confession with appreciation and implementation, namely Chapter 20, Of Christian Liberty, and Liberty of Conscience. In this chapter, the confession turns from the discussion of the law of God to liberty. WCF 20:2, 3 reads,

> 2. God alone is Lord of the conscience, (James 4:12, Rom. 14:4) and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in any thing, contrary to His Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship. (Acts 4:19, Acts 5:29, 1 Cor. 7:23, Matt. 23:8–10, 2 Cor. 1:24, Matt. 15:9) So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: (Col. 2:20, 22–23, Gal. 1:10, Gal. 2:4–5, Gal. 5:1) and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also. (Rom. 10:17, Rom. 14:23, Isa. 8:20, Acts 17:11, John 4:22, Hos. 5:11, Rev. 13:12, 16–17, Jer. 8:9)
>
> 3. They who, upon pretence of Christian liberty, do practise any sin, or cherish any lust, do thereby destroy the end of Christian liberty, which is, that being delivered out of the hands of our enemies, we might serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him, all the days of our life. (Gal. 5:13, 1 Pet. 2:16, 2 Pet. 2:19, John 8:34, Luke 1:74–75).[28]

[27] Martin Luther King Jr., "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," commencement address, Oberlin College, Oberlin, OH, June 14, 1965.

[28] *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).

This section of the *Confession* gives the good news that Christians are truly alive and flourish spiritually when they believe the goods news and seek to obey God's law. To understand one's liberty in Christ, it to flourish and have true life.[29] This is a liberty purchased for the believer by Christ (Titus 2:14, 1 Thess 1:10, Galatians 3:3). The NT Christian is blessed with the saints of old, but even more so since he now enjoys freedoms which the OT saint could never have fathomed. He now has freedom from the ceremonial law, greater access to the throne of grace, and an unction of the Spirit of God. Truly, where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom (2 Cor 3:13, 17, 18).

The *Confession* then begins to look at the liberating effects of being under Christ's lordship. First, there is now only one true Lord over the Christian's conscience. This means the Christian's conscience is free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to His Word, or which—in matters of faith or worship—are in addition to it. The first point is obvious: never should we feel obligated to listen to men rather than God's Word. Never should we rank the advice of men over Scripture. Especially in doctrine and worship, we must be careful not to adhere to man's rules which counter the Scriptures. But this warning not only is given to avoid manipulation and coercion to man's ideas, it also allows for freedom to have certain prerogatives, opinions, beliefs, and rights of private judgment that are not to be imposed upon by any other authority that would attempt to dictate conscience. The believer can say "God alone is Lord of the conscience."

[29] Chad B. Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 264.

Understanding and applying this truth may be one way the church, filled with people and minsters who hold varying opinions on a host of subjects, can still worship and serve together in unity. We respect the right of our fellow brother and sister to hold to different views than we do—as long as those views do not flaunt the clear instruction of the Word of God or lead to the practicing of sin. Our liberty has limits, intending that we lead lives which have "been delivered out of the hands of our enemies, so we might serve the Lord, without fear, in holiness, righteousness before him, all the days of our life."[30] Because the topics broached in this paper can lead to such enflamed passions and opinions, it becomes more urgent that we have the wisdom and willingness to see when our brothers and sisters have a right to hold to or express a view that is radically different from our own.

Author Michael Horton shares a story that embodies this reality:

> A friend recounted to me his experience as a pastor during the Vietnam War. Since he proclaimed the Scriptures rather than his own political views, the church consisted of believers who held various positions on the Vietnam War. In the parking lot one day, he noticed two parishioners—a veteran and an anti-war protester—arguing to the point of fisticuffs. Calling them into the service, my friend wondered what might happen once they were brought under the same roof. Sitting on opposite sides of the church, they heard the pastor greet them in Christ's name. As they heard the law, they were visibly moved—and even more so, as they participated in the corporate confession of sin and heard Christ's absolution through the lips of the minister. After the sermon, he noticed that they not only came to the rail for Communion, but they knelt there together with their arms around each other, sobbing, as they held out their empty hands for the bread.[31]

[30] *The Westminster Confession of Faith.*

[31] Michael Horton, *The Gospel-Driven Life: Being Good News People in a Bad News World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 265.

I argue that the *Westminster Confession of Faith's* chapter on Liberty of Conscience will help us differentiate what we are bound to hold to without compromise and what we have freedom to think and believe under the banner of liberty of conscience. Again, many of the issues broached in this paper are not without consequence. There is an important place for politics and how we interpret contemporary social issues. Nevertheless, as ordained minsters of the church, we are first members of another Kingdom. What we believe about an array of issues is secondary to our calling as the "people of God," and recipients of God's mercy (1 Peter 2:9-10). I echo Horton's statements with exclamation:

> At last there is an identity politics that unites people from many races, cultures, classes, generations, and tastes. At the mall, they may be builders, boomers, or busters. In the voting booth, they may be Republicans, Democrats, Libertarians, or Independents. They may join their neighbors at a rock concert or the symphony, at a football game or on the ski slopes. However, at Christ's font, in the pew, and at the table, they become a new people. Here we are made citizens of the holy city "coming down from heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband," an anticipation and foretaste of the marriage feast of the Lamb, when we will hear finally and forever, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with us" (Rev. 21:2–3). It is this Good News that dismantles Satan's dreadful kingdom and fills the world with the faint but growing laughter of a heavenly feast."[32]

A Way Out of the Maze…A Call to Repentance

> All of us have been in a maze before. A maze is a set of false paths usually with only one leading to the true exit. It's easy to get in a maze; it's hard to get out of a maze. Some of us, our life is a maze and every time we think we are going out, we run into a dead end, again, and again and again and again, 'cause there's so many roads and all of them look possible; but usually only, one of them gives you the exit. If you are lost in a maze, the clear view of the maze is from the top. When you look down on the maze, you then see all the false paths and you see the one true path. Well God is looking at the maze of your life from on top. So let me tell you something, if you're lost, been lost… maybe you ought to stop right where you are trying new paths, 'cause obviously you're not guessing that good, and

[32] Horton, *The Gospel-Driven Life*, 266.

> begin to look at the view from the top, rather than the view of your own human understanding, maintaining being lost in a maze.[33]

The writing of this paper represents a deeply personal journey, not for one individual, but as a collective experience. It was initiated by events that led to a dedicated research endeavor, fueled by a desire to seek answers. However, it must be acknowledged that this research was approached with a set of existing presuppositions and answers that had yet to be fully challenged. The aim was to dedicate to a subject that resonated with the calling of being a church planter, with the hope that the church would reflect the diverse community it serves. The aspiration was for the diversity present in the region to be equally represented in the Lord's Day worship.

Examining this subject was akin to navigating a labyrinth, a complex maze of events, cultural shifts, and personal stories, each with its distinct nuances and interpretations. These elements were just the entrance to the maze. Facing uncomfortable truths sparked upheaval, challenging previously held beliefs and causing disorientation amidst polarizing views within the denomination. In conversations with competent, thoughtful participants, there was an effort to understand their perspectives, value their experiences, and examine their insights. Nevertheless, the ultimate goal was to find an exit from the maze, seeking a solution not just for the church, the denomination, or the world, but on a personal level.

How does one exit the maze? The question arose whether to delve deeper into biblical reconciliation, engage more with secular theories, transition from engagement to polemics, or remain dedicated to the cycle of learning and unlearning. None of these

[33] Tony Evans, "Lord, Do You Care When I Am Confused?" in *Tony Evans Sermon Archive* (Tony Evans, 2015), Jn 11:11–16.

avenues provided an escape from the labyrinth this project led into. A small phrase in the WCF, Chapter 25.1, "Repentance unto life," provided an exit from the maze. True life is found on the other side of biblical repentance.[34] For the sake of analogy, the path out of the maze is through personal repentance.

Thomas Watson, in *The Doctrine of Repentance*, defines one aspect of repentance as "a sorrow for heart sins."[35] Confronted with a topic that offered numerous perspectives, paths, and dead ends, it was realized that much was outside of my control, but something was within control: a personal action, repentance. Watson says, "While we carry the fire of sin about us, we must carry the waters of tears to quench it."[36] In this journey, there is much to lament and repent of, particularly in the realms of race relations, division, and the reliance on secular ideologies over the Gospel. The path of repentance is not just a theological concept but a practical necessity in addressing these issues. It involves acknowledging the pride that often blinds us to the Gospel's simplicity and power. It means acknowledging our tendency to become infatuated with the latest fad, philosophy, or movement.[37] It means admitting when we have overlooked the suffering

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[34] *The Westminster Shorter Catechism: With Scripture Proofs*, 3rd edition. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).

[35] Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 21.

[36] Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes: Or, A Discourse Upon Part of Christ's Famous Sermon on the Mount* (London, 1671), 73.

[37] Rosaria Butterfield, "Why I no longer use Transgender Pronouns—and Why You shouldn't, either," Reformation 21, April 3, 2023, https://www.reformation21.org/blog/why-i-no-longer-use-transgender-pronouns-and-why-you-shouldnt-either. In her article published on April 3, 2023, on Reformation 21, Rosaria Butterfield explores her personal journey and perspectives regarding the usage of transgender pronouns. As a former professor of English and women's studies at Syracuse University who embraced Christianity in 1999, Butterfield reflects on her past endorsement of transgender pronouns—as a Christian, a stance she now regrets. She presents a compelling argument that the use of transgender pronouns contradicts various Christian doctrines and principles. Furthermore, she offers a critical examination of the broader evangelical movement's approach to this sensitive topic. If we apply Butterfield's insights beyond the specific issue of transgender pronouns to the church's promotion of

of our brothers and sisters or have been callous to their plight.[38] The appropriate language is not an apology, or acknowledging a lack of clarity, a mistake, or a resolve to make a course correction. The only appropriate language is to call these heart sins, the stirrings of pride and arrogance. As we navigate the complexities of these societal and spiritual challenges in our denomination, the need for a humble, Gospel-centered approach becomes increasingly evident. This is the path out of the maze – a journey of continual repentance, guided by the Gospel, leading to true reconciliation and unity.

The final recommendation is for elders to lead by example in personal repentance for the sins in their hearts before they manifest in deeds. Such repentance is an "evangelical grace," with the power to lead not only out of the maze but into true life of fellowship with the Lord and with one another. This is the view from the top. Perhaps individual repentance will not only change the shepherd but will spread in churches and the denomination. Perhaps God would be pleased to bring an awakening to the land and to all

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Critical Race Theory (CRT) and related ideologies as an attempt to bridge the gap with mainstream culture and instigate internal change within the church, then a similar path of repentance is warranted. A call to repentance begins with a call to introspection and redirection within the church, especially in its interaction with and response to prevailing societal ideologies and cultural shifts.

[38] Shenvi, Sawyer, and Trueman are helpful in their calling for repentance from those who hold to racist views or who pretend that injustices and inequity do not exist: "Anti-woke Christians can indeed overreach or use an unfairly broad brush to tar their perceived opponents. Real social injustices do exist. Racism does exist. Sexism does exist. Actual oppression does exist. Christians who try to address these issues from a biblical perspective often complain that they are immediately dismissed as woke, and there is some legitimacy to this concern. Any discussion of the persistence of racism should not be deemed an embrace of critical race theory. Any discussion of sexism or sexual abuse should not be denounced as capitulation to feminism. Words like oppression and justice should not immediately trigger red flags and flashing lights, since they are found all over Scripture. Moreover, some may leap to accusing others of embracing woke ideology or social justice or CRT or radical feminism, etc., because they want to distract from the fact that they hold to racist and sexist views. If that's you, you need to repent, and seek forgiveness in Christ. Further, concerns that the anti-woke movement has become just as paranoid and radical as the woke movement are worth considering. In fact, certain expressions of Christian nationalism blur the lines with White identitarianism and seem to fantasize about a White ethnostate, both of which are evil." Neil Shenvi, Pat Sawyer, and Carl R. Trueman, *Critical Dilemma: The Rise of Critical Theories and Social Justice Ideology—Implications for the Church and Society* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2023), 20.

the people groups in the regions we serve. The world may be cast along the shore in shipwreck, but God has left us a plank of repentance, a means of grace for the rebuilding of something good and new.

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VITA

Francisco I. Victa III was born on February 7, 1978 in Stratford, New Jersey. He is the son of Francisco I. Victa, Jr., and Susan Jackson, and was lovingly raised by Susan and her husband, William M. Jackson, who had a pivotal role in his upbringing.

His education included both public school in Allentown, New Jersey and homeschooling. In 2000, he graduated from Faith School of Theology in Charleston, Maine majoring in Theological Studies. After marrying Kati and starting a family, he served as a Christian school principal and youth pastor in Groveland, FL. He later returned to New England where he pastored a church in Milford, NH and founded another church in Nashua, NH. He furthered his education at Liberty University where he earned a Master of Divinity in Theological Studies in 2014.

Following his graduate studies, he continued his pastoral service in New Hampshire before becoming an assistant pastor in Corpus Christi, TX. In 2018, he was ordained in the Presbyterian Church in America and served as an assistant pastor at Trinity Presbyterian Church, Harrisburg, PA and its daughter church, Hershey PCA. He also completed a chaplain residency in the surgical intensive care unit at Penn State Hershey Medical Center and attained his Level Two Clinical Pastoral Education training in 2018. In September 2020, at the initiative of the Susquehanna Valley Presbytery, he planted Lebanon Valley Presbyterian (PCA) in Lebanon, PA.

Francisco I. Victa III is married to Katherine A. Victa (née Hashem). They are blessed with eight children: four sons and four daughters.

RACIAL DIVERSITY IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA: A QUALITATIVE AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

F. I. VICTA III

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