

**PASTORAL LETTER ON RACISM:
LAMENT AND HOPE**



INTRODUCTION



The goal of the writing committee is to provide a tool for Teaching and Ruling Elders, helping them shepherd followers of Jesus as they address racism and race-related topics in their churches or communities. This work is part of the larger movement of God within the EPC to engage with our churches, communities, and country on this divisive topic. Our committee looks forward with hope to the further work of the EPC as we continue deploying the Gospel in racism-eradicating ways. To that end, we write:

To our beloved EPC brothers and sisters in Christ, Teaching and Ruling Elders—shepherds all.

We thank God as you faithfully follow our Lord in loving service to all under your care and as you teach and guide, comfort and warn the sheep with the Word of God that they may flourish to his glory. In sharing their lives through a multitude of changing, challenging, and troubling matters and relationships, you have built into their being, helped bear their burdens, and shown sacrificial love.

We write to you, elder shepherds, mature in the faith, as you care for your flock.

We write to you, young shepherds, mindful of your youth as you undertake to care for those older in years and in the faith.

We write to you, shepherds, caring for those who regularly stand in harm's way in service to our country.

We write to you, shepherds, serving in hospitals and institutional settings.

We write to you, shepherds, serving our Lord in formal educational settings by honing minds and stretching hearts.

We write to you, shepherds, proclaiming the Gospel on far-flung frontiers amid myriad uncertainties.

We write to you, shepherds, who know the sting of racism and loneliness in ministering.

We write to you, shepherds, who enter this discussion uneasily.

OUR COMMISSION

We write with heavy hearts of a matter that so troubles our flocks and deeply affects our faithful obedience to our Lord's command in John 13:34-35: "Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Sadly, the bitter reality of racism is not restricted solely to culture wars fostered, fomented, and fought by groups in our society. Our sinful nature has permeated every human institution and system with the world's values, including Christ's bride. Systemic injustice (which we will define and discuss later in this letter), based on advantages/disadvantages, favor/disfavor and bias/prejudice in service of

vested interest, exists due to a host of factors including perceived race, ethnicity, gender, economic levels, and educational attainment. We must not pretend that the EPC is immune from the poisonous influence and impact of racism. As such, the 42nd General Assembly appointed our committee to write to you about the difficult subject of racism, both personal and structural, and explore its presence in the EPC.

We can feel some of you shudder or balk as we use words such as “racism”— “institutional” and “systemic.” We, too, wrestle with secular nomenclature and charged vocabulary attached to a variety of agendas, so *how* we talk about racism is as important as actually talking about it. The world and its language, biases, politics, and perspectives cannot rule over a Christian’s perspective. And while we seek to be culturally relevant, we write to you as fellow shepherds in the EPC with the aim to remain true to our evangelical,¹ Presbyterian, and church identity. This three-fold identity shapes our language as we deliberate and carve a way forward through this troubling reality toward reconciliation and hope. Throughout this letter you will find references to the Westminster Standards in hope that you seek further confessional reflection on this topic. As the Church, we hold scripture as the final rule in all matters of faith and life: the Bible must remain our North Star. Let our conversations remain grounded in and from the biblical perspective, our Reformed and confessional heritage, and the shared experiences of our brothers and sisters.² And so, we attempt to set forth a common language to have this discussion.

DEFINITIONS

Race. There is one human race. “And he made from one man every nation (*ethnos*) of mankind to live on all the face of the earth” (Acts 17:26). Each person shares 99% commonality in DNA with every other person. Over time, slight differences in genetic information combined with environmental factors created physical distinctions among people groups. The term **race** often is used to categorize physical characteristics of skin color, facial form or eye shape and may include ancestry, shared culture or historical affiliation.³ In current cultural conversations, **race** is the frequently used term. Yet, our research and discussions reveal that race is not a neutral term. Historically, this term has been used to divide the divinely ordained one human race into a *hierarchy* of races, legitimizing a multitude of abuses. These days, when race means distinguishing and defining by color, such use narrows the diversity of ethnicities that contribute to who we are. It strips away the depth of individual contexts, connections, and varied histories, reducing identity to a single word.

Ethnos/Ethnicity, as used in common language and in Revelation 7:9, more accurately defines the grouping of people sharing a common and distinctive culture, religion or language, and incorporates aspects of geography, historical background, allegiance or association.⁴ Therefore, as we examine racism, the use of *ethnicity*, not *race*, is the biblical, more accurate descriptor of diversity within humanity.⁵

1 *Evangelical* also is a highly charged word in our culture but in our context captures the “Essentials of the Faith” as set forth by the EPC.

2 *Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms in Modern English*, 3rd ed. (Livonia, MI: EPC, 2010), 1.10.

3 *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. “Race”; National Human Genome Research Institute; *Cambridge English Dictionary*, s.v. “Race”; US Census Bureau.

4 *Cambridge English Dictionary*, s.v. “Ethnicity”; National Institutes of Health; *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “Ethnicity.”

5 One of the crimes of racism is that many who descend from slaves cannot discover their ethnicity through genealogical ancestries. Our preference for the use of the term “ethnicity” should not be understood to discount this wrong or to discourage the use of the term “race” in popular discourse. Rather, our preference for the term “ethnicity” should be understood as an eschatological hope, a protest of the way things are and a longing for the day when every person’s knowledge of ethnic identity is restored.

Racism is the unbiblical belief that there is a *causal link* between ethnicity and traits of personality, intellect, morality, and behavior, typically resulting in personal or collective discrimination or favoritism.⁶ Racism is not a binary Black/White problem, nor one unique to the United States, but is historically entrenched within the whole human race, sowing deep discord and distrust as those of minority ethnicities are marginalized.

Institutional and Systemic Racism have varying culturally popular meanings that sow immediate discord and raise presumptions interfering with an honest discussion on how racism impacts institutions, even within the EPC. We begin with first discussing what **Institutional/Systemic Racism** is *not*. We do not believe the United States is irredeemably racist. Nor do we believe that people in any given institution or system are presumptively individual racists. Nor are individuals personally guilty of or complicit in past actions committed by others of the same ethnicity.

However, as Americans, we inherit a national history that includes heinous ethnic discrimination, most notably the enslavement of Africans with all its atrocities, the displacement and slaughter of Indigenous peoples, and internment of Japanese-Americans; all deep stains on the American soul. The impact of racism on our society's institutions—educational, judicial, financial and even religious—continues to reverberate to present day injustices. Therefore, our commission charges us with addressing this reality.

Institutional/Systemic Racism refers to behaviors, policies or practices of an organization or system that result in or otherwise support an unfair advantage to some people, and/or unfair or harmful treatment of others, based on ethnicity. Too often we fail to see and empathize with the suffering of those under the continuing oppression of racism that permeates perceptions, expectations and even systems of law, economics, culture and church culture. Indifference is the great ally of bias and racism. We fail to see why dealing with racism matters and that indifference, in turn, perpetuates the reality of racism at work in human systems.

THE SIN OF RACISM

Racism is a sin because it violates God's principles and commands. Racism belittles and dehumanizes people, stripping them of their created dignity as image bearers of God.⁷ The doctrine of adoption stated in *WCF* 12.1 leaves no room for misunderstanding our equality before God.

God guarantees the adoption of all those who are justified in and for the sake of his only son, Jesus Christ. Those adopted enjoy the liberties and privileges of God's children, have his name put on them, receive the Spirit of adoption, have access to the throne of grace with boldness, and are enabled to cry, Abba, Father. They are pitied, protected, provided for, and disciplined by him as a father. They are never cast off, however, and are sealed until the day of redemption and inherit the promises as heirs of everlasting salvation.⁸

We must also recognize racism as a poisoned fruit of spiritual warfare—a powerful attack on God's people by the ancient enemy Satan and his allies, cosmic powers and spiritual forces of evil.⁹ Our enemies' strategy is to fracture the Body of Christ, assault our identity as God's people, distract and divide us from our unity in and with Christ.¹⁰

⁶ Gal. 2:11-14; James 2:1-10.

⁷ *WCF* 4.2.

⁸ *WCF* 25.2, 35.1. See also *Westminster Larger Catechism* Q.62, Q.63, Q.74; *EPC Essentials of our Faith* #5.

⁹ Eph. 6:11-13; Rev. 12:7-9.

¹⁰ 1 Jn 2:9-11; *WCF* 16.6, 26.1,2.

Racism blinds us to the anticipation of the glorious gathering to come revealed to us in Revelation 7:9. “A great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands” is God’s triumph of all his people together. Having our lives hidden with Christ in God does not obliterate our uniqueness or consume us in a bland sameness. To be in Christ, with all glory directed to him, undergirds the preciousness of every created distinction.

CATEGORIZING/OTHERING

As people who understand that all humanity suffers from total depravity and the pervasive effects and deadly consequences of sin, we cannot be surprised that hateful attitudes and actions, violence, injustice, brokenness, fear of others and profound distrust abound.¹¹ Ever since the Fall, human beings have been ‘othering’ each other. Every human heart is prone to make such judgments. Every human group is prone to utilize such distinctions to the extent it has power to do so. We distinguish others and then make judgments, elevating some qualities and denigrating others. We group, actively and subconsciously, around shared distinctives and exclude based on differences, from children bullying on the playground to ethnic genocides. We deny. We tribalize. We accuse. We excuse. And this sin of partiality and even hatred is most inappropriate, hurtful and toxic when found among God’s people.

Whether personal or collective, through actions or indifference, such behavior compromises our witness, questions our integrity, and diminishes the goodness of the Gospel we proclaim and our ability to go into the world and make disciples. As followers of Christ, our response to the sins of racism should reflect an uninhibited resolve to love one another and reach the nations with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.¹² Yet racism directly harms our mission because these sins necessarily deny that all humans are created in the image of God and relativize the atonement according to perceived differences that affect how people are valued.

WITHIN THE EPC

As Presbyterians, we are united in a shared confessional commitment that faithfully presents the system of doctrine contained in scripture. The theology of the Westminster Standards leaves no room for participating in sins of racism and partiality. It provides the framework needed to develop a Reformed understanding of ethnic diversity and kingdom unity. Throughout the Bible, the sins of racism are condemned while proclaiming redemption by the Triune God. Through this redemption, God is creating a kingdom mosaic of his children from all people groups, bringing glory to himself.

Racism, as Satan’s tool against this redemption, promotes divisions that prevent us from truly loving one another. As a predominately majority culture denomination, we usually go about our church business without considering why it matters that we become a denomination more reflective of a Rev. 7:9 reality. We neglect to address who is unreached and welcomed into our churches. Ingrained biases can make it hard to recognize the abilities, strengths, and spiritual gifts of those from other ethnicities. These same biases also keep us from seeing how little power and influence we share with people not of our ethnic majority. We also are largely unaware that there are pastors in the EPC who have been deeply wounded by sins of racism. People of color often experience the need

¹¹ Isa. 53:6; Rom. 3:23; *WCF* 6.

¹² Matt. 28:19-20; *Essentials* #7.

(actual or implied) to prove that they are Reformed or conservative *enough* for the EPC, experiencing suspicions that cast shadows on their viewpoints and question the validity of their stories. Graduates of various seminaries, and historically Black seminaries in particular, find their qualifications examined more strenuously and their opportunities to serve the church fully in leadership and decision-making roles more limited. The Gospel calls us beyond such diminishing to the robust valuing Jesus embodied (WLC Q. 131, 132).

In communities or churches with little to no exposure to people of other ethnicities, the issue of racism may seem overstated and harder to recognize. "I have no problems with those people." "These things do not happen where we live." "Our police are not abusive." While acknowledging another racist or racially-charged event has occurred, physical distance seems to allow or excuse detachment or lack of empathy which settles into wrongly thinking, "This is not my problem. I don't know anyone there." However, we are *Presbyterians*, bound together as a global Church family. Whether or not these hurts are in our particular community, they impact our Church. If something causes pain and suffering to a fellow Christian, whether or not we can understand it or relate to it, we are called to weep with those who weep. The pain and injury, grief and fear experienced by members of our church family should not go unrecognized or unacknowledged.

Indifference to the pain of our brothers and sisters or to the sin that causes their suffering is not the call of kingdom people. Scripture teaches us to think differently. We are not to conform to the world and its values, but to love one another genuinely, with brotherly affection and outdoing one another in showing honor (Rom. 12:2-3,9-10). In the church there "is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you all are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:27-29). We are called to "walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:1-4). How can we say that we love God while merely tolerating or even distrusting our brother or sister in Christ?

We live in a time when the EPC is more exposed to and aware of the sin of racism and its many manifestations than ever before. A key purpose of this letter is to invite our shepherds to lament the suffering and sorrow racism has created in our nation. And, while it may not be within the power of the EPC to end racism in our country or culture, we are charged to recognize and end racism in our denomination and prophetically shine light into the world: to seek the welfare of the city wherein we dwell (Jer. 29:5-7). We are to tell our story of God's perfect creation, our tragic fall, Christ's costly redemption, the church's world-reaching mission and the glorious final re-creation of heaven and earth. Our hope contradicts narratives that view humanity merely through a story of unguided emergence, brute survival, oppression, struggle, liberation, and eventual earthly utopia. This letter is not about convergence with worldly values. Rather, we seek to identify the world's wounds within our church and apply the salve of Christ's sorrow, mercy, and love.

We feel burdened that the EPC has left this widespread, multifaceted, and profoundly troubling issue largely unaddressed. We are called to bravely consider how our beloved denomination has participated in our neighbors' continuing experience of racism. To truly love our brothers and sisters in obedience to our Lord, together we will reflect deeply on racism and learn to recognize its sinfulness in our own lives. We want to give voice in lament on behalf of those who suffer from, or otherwise experience, racism.

WHAT IS LAMENT?



Lament is a biblical way to publicly grieve our sorrows and express our anger to God: sorrow and anger we experience in the face of suffering, sin, and brokenness. It is the response of believers when confronted with unabating, faith-shaking injustice and gives voice to an equally persistent faith—refusing to give up hope. We are invited to bring our real concerns to the throne of grace, pouring out our hearts before the God who loves us, and know that he hears us (Heb. 4:16). Laments are expressed in words of hope that the God who is in covenant with us because of his word will once again remember his people, forgive our sins and rescue us. Unlike the grumbling of the Israelites in the wilderness, a lament always has hope, however apocalyptic its anchor. The hope is that although a solution to my plight may be elusive, I trust that despair will not have the last word.

LAMENT IN THE BIBLE

Lament characterizes much of scripture and varies from personal to corporate expressions. The Psalms are replete with prayers of lament; over one-third of the Psalms fit in this category. Some examples are: Psalm 3; 10:1,12,16-18; 12; 77:1-20; 88 (which contains no resolution). Lamentations records the prophet's heart-rending lament over the fall of Jerusalem.

Why is lament such a prominent feature in the Bible? Because suffering sits at the center of sin-plagued human experience. We live in a fallen world, with nothing but our groans and our wordless idols to give us respite. And so we groan, even if only with the voice of the Holy Spirit who groans on our behalf when we ourselves are wordless (Rom. 8:18-26). This experience is common for God's people and, as Bruce Waltke argues from the prayers of Israel, normal for those living in a fallen world.¹³ R. W. L. Moberly similarly finds:

The predominance of laments at the very heart of Israel's prayers means that the problems that give rise to lament are not something marginal or unusual but rather are central to the life of faith.... Moreover, they show that the experience of anguish and puzzlement in the life of faith is not a sign of deficient faith, something to be outgrown or put behind one, but rather is intrinsic to the very nature of faith.¹⁴

Psalms 13 is a paradigmatic lament that helps us understand the posture and structure of this form of prayerful expression.

Verses 1-2 are an expression of pain.

How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts

and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

¹³ Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston and Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Lament: A Historical Commentary*, Kindle ed. (Eerdmans), 1.

¹⁴ R. W. L. Moberly, "Lament," *NIDOTTE*, IV, 879.

Verses 3-4 contain an appeal to God for help.

Look on me and answer, LORD my God.

*Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.*

Verses 5-6 are an expression of faith in God.

But I trust in your unfailing love;

my heart rejoices in your salvation.

I will sing the LORD's praise,

for he has been good to me.

As we encounter suffering, pain, and injustice, let us discipline ourselves to turn to God in lament, knowing that he is the holy and righteous one who can and will make things right.

LAMENT DOES NOT REQUIRE PERSONAL GUILT

Sometimes we resist the call to lament because we think it necessarily includes an admission of personal guilt; the Bible teaches us otherwise. We see in scripture the people of God joining the heart of God in lamenting the brokenness of the world. Daniel cried out in prayer to God over the sin of all Israel and asked the LORD to turn his wrath away from Jerusalem (Dan. 9). Nehemiah, too, confessed sin on behalf of the people of Israel and called on the LORD to keep his covenant promises (Neh. 1:4-11). The idolatry witnessed by Paul in Athens prompted him to make a faithful declaration of the Gospel (Acts 17:16-34).

Scripture also teaches us that lament is not unique to humans: our triune God himself expresses lament. In Genesis 6:6, God observed the wickedness of humanity. "The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled." The LORD also expressed lament in the face of Saul's disobedience, saying to Samuel, "I regret that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions" (1 Sam. 15:11). The Holy Spirit can be grieved by human sin (Isa. 63:10; Eph. 4:30). The Lord Jesus expressed lament in the face of sin and the suffering it brings.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord' (Matt. 23:37-39).

And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation' (Luke 19:41-44).

Jesus also grieved and lamented over the death of his friend Lazarus (John 11:33, 35, 38). As he faced his crucifixion, he experienced deep grief and cried out in prayer to the Father (Matt. 26:36-46; Mark 13:32-42; Luke 22:39-46; Heb. 5:7). Does our being in Christ, who offered up prayers of lament, shape us as a people who do likewise?

WHY LAMENT NOW?

The scars of racism have afflicted our world for millennia. In our nation's history, we can see pivot points of racial strife and their impact on society: the Civil War and emancipation; the Sand Creek massacre; the Chinese exclusion laws; the Montgomery bus boycotts and Rev. Martin Luther King's assassination – to name a few among several. These moments coagulate groups unified in an agenda, and likewise provoke a response from those who disagree or otherwise disregard that agenda. Polarization and conflict many times are the fruit of these events, with the church weaving its way through in an attempt to insert the peace of Christ.

In our day, among many racially charged tragic moments, the death of George Floyd particularly stands out. While we may not want to revisit the painful details, it is important for us not to flinch or otherwise look away; the heart of lament is to enter into the pain caused by sin and to cry out to the Lord in response. Vividly captured on video, Floyd's death became a pivot point in our national conversation about racism. To summarize, during a police encounter in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, for over 9 minutes an officer knelt on the neck of an unarmed Black man suspected of buying cigarettes with counterfeit money. Three other officers stood nearby and did not intervene. As the officer knelt on his neck, Floyd repeated, "I can't breathe!" until he died.

This tragic event, resulting in a conviction of the officer for second-degree murder, sparked a firestorm of racial unrest in the U.S. It also prompted protests in other parts of the world. Before Floyd's murder, many in the U.S. thought that racism was a problem of the past or confined to isolated areas of our country. But cell phone video footage and social media have universalized local events, causing many to rethink that optimistic position. Unfortunately, this horrific crime was not an isolated incident. Notwithstanding gains made toward legal justice and equality, persistent acts of racial injustice, indignities, and police brutality continue. Floyd's death raised awareness of how violence, and even deaths, remain overlooked.

Our society, and even our churches, are polarized on who is to blame in these events and the root causes of violent crime. Yet, the church can and should grieve the loss of life, the societal causes of these deaths, and the public divisions these pivotal moments expose.

And so we pray...

How long, LORD? How long will you allow the powerful to crush the powerless?

You who are near to the brokenhearted, will you not bring justice to the earth? You have sent Jesus, your Messiah, into the world to usher in peace, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim the year of your favor. He took our sin upon himself and paid the penalty on the cross. Your Spirit raised him from the dead, and he lives and reigns in victory with you. When will he return to bring final victory to the earth? When will Jesus come to judge the living and the dead?

As we wait, LORD, comfort us in our grief. Bring peace to those whose minds are filled with terror. Bring justice through the imperfect working of our courts. Keep us from perpetuating violence. Reassure us that vengeance is yours, that you will repay those who do evil deeds and do not bend the knee to you in repentance.

You are our only comfort and hope, LORD. You are the one we trust when no one else is trustworthy. We look to you. Come, Lord Jesus!

THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS AS GROUNDS FOR RACIAL LAMENT

Despite clear and consistent teaching in our Standards on unity, we acknowledge that our practice of that unity has not been consistent. Sadly, living into the adoption shared by all God's children has been and still is a stumbling block.

Adoption is an act of God's free grace in and for his only son, Jesus Christ, by which all those who are justified become his children, have his name put on them, have the Spirit of his Son given to them, are provided for under his fatherly care, are welcomed to all the liberties and privileges of the sons of God, and are made heirs of all the promises and fellow-heirs with Christ in glory (WLC A. 74).

WCF Chapter 26 teaches on the fellowship of all believers united to Jesus Christ and therefore to each other.

26.1 All believers are united to Jesus Christ, their head, by his Spirit and by faith, and have fellowship with him in his grace, suffering, death, resurrection, and glory. United to one another in love the saints have fellowship in each other's gifts and grace and are obliged to perform those public and private duties which nourish their mutual good, both spiritually and physically.

26.2 By their profession of faith saints are bound to maintain a holy fellowship and communion with each other in the worship of God and in the performance of other spiritual services for their mutual improvement. They are also bound to help each other in material things according to their different abilities and needs. This fellowship is to be offered, as God gives the opportunity, to everyone in every place who calls on the name of the Lord Jesus.

When we participate in the sacraments, we are celebrating the covenant relationship we have in and with Christ and with all others who are in Christ regardless of their tongue, tribe, or ethnicity. In the sacraments, we bear witness to the essential oneness we share in Christ and practice "holy fellowship and communion with each other." Speaking of baptism, Richard Mouw stated in 1978, "To make covenantal promises on behalf of a black child is to commit ourselves to the black struggle. If society tries to treat him like a second class citizen, we will have to protest on his behalf since he is our brother in a holy nation!"¹⁵

LAMENTING RACISM

Being in covenant together means that when one part of the body has trouble, it becomes trouble for all and prompts us to lament accordingly. Scripture clearly teaches us to care about and share in our brothers' and sisters' pain:

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15).

If one part [of Christ's body] suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it (1 Corinthians 12:26).

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2).

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others (Philippians 2:3-4).

¹⁵ Richard J. Mouw, "Baptismal Politics" *Reformed Journal* 28, no. 7 (July 1978): 2-3.

The EPC has people of color who experience the ongoing painful effects of racism. When we acknowledge the pain and destruction brought about through racism and prejudice, we see the wounds of our brothers and sisters and join our voices together, crying out to our God for intervention. Put another way: when we consider the damage done through racist attitudes, words, and actions, it may not be your fault, but it is *our* problem. Together as the people of God, we can maintain our holy fellowship with one another in Christ through the practice of lament in the face of hatred and injustice. We lament a situation that does not reflect God's design for his world, and we turn to him for justice, comfort, and transformation.

As we live into our covenant union, listening to one another's expressions of pain and lament creates awareness of ways in which we possibly participate in the racial brokenness of the world. The Holy Spirit may prompt us to turn to God in confession and repentance. Lament can open our hearts to one another and to God and invite the healing work of Christ's Spirit, overcoming our earthly divisions (Eph. 2:11-22) and demonstrating the truth of the Gospel (John 17:20-23).

If we refuse to join our brothers and sisters in lament, or if we move too quickly to gospel victory without taking time to grieve with those who are hurting, we communicate to them that their pain is their own—we are not part of the same body. In so doing, we fail to bear one another's burdens, and the chance for unity and solidarity is lost.¹⁶

The depth of human depravity and the unrelenting fruit of the sin of racism means that lament can never be "one and done." As long as there is suffering on the earth, the people of God will join their voices in lament. As long as there are brothers and sisters who experience the pain of hatred and injustice, we will persist in crying out to the Lord.

When we hear of, see, or experience the dehumanization of those created in God's image, how can we *not* express our pain and disgust to the Lord? How can we not turn to the Holy One for relief when we reflect on the suffering and destruction wrought by racial division?

Heavenly Father,

We acknowledge your eternal goodness and the gracious covenant you have established with us. It is not our own righteousness that has brought us into this relationship but the righteousness of Christ, covering us and restoring us to our purpose as image bearers chosen to reflect your glory.

We grieve over how individuals who bear your image and likeness are subjected to abuse. We lament the discrimination and denial of dignity experienced by those in America who have been marginalized, not only by those distanced from you but even by those who declare Jesus as Lord. Regrettably, the church has fallen short in taking action, speaking out against and publicly or privately condemning and lamenting racism in any form toward any individual or group. This racism is evident in acts of antisemitism, ethnic hate, and immigrant hate. We lament racism in both personal and structural contexts.

We humbly pray for healing, unity, and justice. May your love permeate our hearts and communities, transforming us into reconciliation agents and advocates for equality. Grant us the strength to confront and dismantle the structures that perpetuate discrimination and grant us the courage to stand against racism in all its forms.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

¹⁶ Waltke, Houston and Moore, *The Psalms*, 2.

OUR HOPE



The realism of lament can seem like a path only of gloom, but the opposite is the case! When we enter the grief of people without dismissing, qualifying, or blaming, we find ourselves bearing one another's burdens and showing love, in communion with Jesus who gave himself utterly on the cross. Engaging in lament, we live out our faith that Jesus will bring a new heaven and a new earth. In that hope we live and minister.

As Christ's people, let us seek the opposite of ethnic-discrimination and race-hatred. Let us long for the communion of true *kingdom harmony*. Scripture pictures a unity that does not obliterate ethnic distinction, but weaves uniqueness into oneness. The church, in the power of the Spirit, can demonstrate this vision to a world weary from ethnic strife. Let's consider how.

JESUS RECONCILES US TO GOD AND ONE ANOTHER

Amidst the constant human tendency to tribalize around ethnic distinctions, we have yet one great reason for hope. "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Cor. 5:19). Through Jesus' sinless life, atoning death, mighty resurrection, and glorious ascension, the great divide has been crossed and a new and living way to God is open.

Moreover, Jesus has created in himself reconciliation for humanity with one another. "For he himself is our peace," wrote Paul to the variety of ethnicities in the Ephesian church. Christ "has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph. 2:14). Jews and Gentiles, people intently declaring "the other," discovered a deeper oneness.

Every person who is united to Jesus by the Holy Spirit through faith and repentance becomes a new creation. We die to the sinful self. Paul testified, "I have been crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20). Previous identity markers recede before the primary identity of being in Christ. Let us repent of any identity marker we held as supreme. Nation, language, social class, education, ethnicity in all their manifestations remain part of us, but they yield in priority to the one supreme marker, signified in baptism, of our having died and risen with Christ Jesus. Nothing from the old humanity may remain elevated above the new Adam, Jesus. "The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17).

This dying to self and rising in Christ, being joined to his humanity as the only reconciliation with God, *is also the only basis of being truly reconciled to others*. Kingdom harmony can only occur if the very basis for relationship is set at this deeper, grace-filled level—to deal with personal sin, of course, but also to provide the bridge whereby we can find connection, even unity, turning "others" into "one another." An angry, polarized world cannot provide real reconciliation. This is why the church takes responsibility to engage this topic of racism in all its forms.

THE WORK OF RECONCILIATION

Regarding this unifying work, “We should also harbor charitable thoughts, love, compassion, meekness, gentleness, and kindness. Our speech and behavior should be peaceful, mild, and courteous. We should be tolerant of others, be ready to be reconciled, patiently put up with and forgive injuries against us, and return good for evil” (WLC A. 135).

These reconciling actions arise from understanding how people of diverse ethnicities share *equal* standing in Christ. “Equals are required to pay attention to the dignity and worth of each by honoring each other above themselves and by rejoicing in each others’ gifts and success as if their own” (WLC A. 131). In other words, we live out the prayer our Lord taught us: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, *on earth*, as it is in heaven.

Our evangelism, our telling of this good news, will be real when we live out visibly this kingdom harmony. Our witness can shine brightly as we demonstrate reaching across ethnic lines. We can pursue the unity that exists in Jesus only as we lay down our own cherished identity markers for finding deeper identity with one another in Christ. Then our blood-washed robes will dazzle. Our songs will be beautiful.

Before we get there, may we each bow on our faces at the foot of the cross. Let us acknowledge our inability to save ourselves or cleanse our sins of racism. From that common ground we will look up and see in Christ’s nail-pierced palm all the names of the redeemed written, including our own. And from that common ground, we will look left, right, fore and aft, and see each other, see every other whose name is also engraved in the Redeemer’s hand. And we will say, “You, too? Hallelujah!”

EXERCISING THE GIFTS ALREADY GIVEN

Through the person and work of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit, the EPC already has:

1) Power to engage humbly in the lives of people from different ethnicities and *ask to listen*. Kingdom harmony requires two sides to meet, listen, work out problems and pursue unity. We can intentionally set aside time on a regular basis to allow open discussions between ethnicities to occur. Candidness and respect for diversity will be the key to successful conversations. We encourage participation and input from every tribe and nation represented in the Kingdom of God. This is a crucial first step. Truthful discussions will allow for forgiveness and lament to occur. Truthful discussions transform hearts. Truth gives hope. We deeply desire to be in line with the Word of God by pursuing racial reconciliation on the basis of Ephesians 2 and the vision of Revelation 7. We already see our churches taking responsibility to vigorously pursue activities that will foster such kingdom harmony. We can strive for steps that will produce meaningful progress.

One example is Hope EPC in Memphis which developed a course called *Ethnos*. It is an 8-week multi-ethnic, intergenerational small group which includes three outside joint class spiritual adventures. *Ethnos* features a hot meal eaten together, Bible studies, guided table-talk and biblical deliberation on ethnicity and culture from a Scripture-centered view, not just a socio-economic viewpoint. Active listening, praying, caring, and sharing each other’s life experiences allow the group to appreciate and celebrate their God-given varieties, while breaking through the barriers of ignorance or fear to promote kingdom harmony and their commonality in Christ.

2) Courage to embrace the lives of the overlooked, gazing in love until we are deeply moved with compassion out of which arises Spirit-prompted acts of love. As relationships develop, we can risk an exchange of ethnic stories. This would include, in time, sharing experiences of the effects of racism. Those whose stories express pain and suffering will find such exercises riskier and more burdensome. Those whose ethnic stories have nurtured and sustained us will want to be grateful for the effort it takes to tell painful stories. We all want to be patient as we begin noticing as precious people those we have not seen or seen only through a lens of dismissal or blame.

Congregations could recognize and celebrate the different ethnicities in their congregations. If a church is largely homogenous, the congregation could seek relationship with another church in its community. For example, the staff of First Presbyterian in Baton Rouge met with the staff of a neighbor church, Abounding Love Ministries. They shared stories of their history, their people. In particular, the mainly Caucasian staff of FPC listened, grieved, and prayed over the stories of those who grew up Black in Louisiana. A few weeks later, together they visited the River Road African American Museum together, and then over lunch, processed the visit, sealing their friendship in gentle tears.

3) Commitment to lament alongside others who have experienced the effects of racism. We know that the Spirit leads us into the sorrow of creation over the Fall of humanity (Rom. 8:22-23). This includes daring to grieve racism and its consequences before trying to defend, justify, deny or possibly even own our part in the destruction wrought by racism. Regular confession of sin lays down the tracks along which regular, honest, and healing lament over racism can occur. Every week we willingly participate in Reformed worship with its sacred emphasis on calling each and all of us to confess our sins before God and one another. We frequently offer prayers aloud for sins we may not personally have committed that week, but we confess in solidarity with the body of Christ and in humble awareness that we have the capacity, if not the propensity, for those very sins.

Similarly, our worship services could regularly include prayers of confession that draw us to lament and repent of various aspects of racism. Ethnic indifference, blindness to racial pain, acts of diminishment, discrimination or hostility, stereotyping and blaming can all be acknowledged. Such lament is healing and uniting. We can dare it because we possess the wonderful heritage of the declaration of pardon. All we name goes to the cross of Jesus for cleansing that enables us to live in a new way.

In our wider communities, we can find a model in Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC. In 2015, a racially motivated shooter killed nine members gathered at the church. At the shooter's bond hearing, family members of the slain openly grieved, named the wrong and then deliberately offered forgiveness. The pastor of the church has since begun a ministry called One New Humanity, which in November 2022, organized a Prayer Procession through seven places in Charleston, including the Old Exchange Building where slaves had been traded. The multi-ethnic event focused on lament, repentance, forgiveness, and unity. Such creative ways of shared sorrowing for sin can lead the church to a richer experience of faith, hope and love.

4) Do justice in our communities. As our churches take responsibility to address racism and its effects, we can seek more just communities. This can include churches partnering with public schools or even creating Christian schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Jobs and training programs can open paths for prisoners returning to society. Our churches

can encourage members to serve on town/city councils and task forces that address transportation access, housing, policing, and economic initiatives. Churches can host or organize community festivals that welcome a variety of ethnicities to participate. There are limitless possibilities for creative engagement cultivating kingdom harmony.

5) Knowledge to resist narratives that respond to the pain of racism without lament, empathy, confession, repentance or reconciliation in Christ. Genuine resolution can only come by being born from above, out of the old self and into the new creation begun by Jesus the last Adam.

We want to become aware of and counter the non-Gospel strategies which define liberation as moving *into* more of ourselves and our tribes. These philosophies set people of different ethnic, economic or social groups against one another. We know they are doomed to fail, dividing others and furthering hostility. We offer the Gospel as the truly freeing alternative. We require liberation *from* ourselves into Christ, by whom alone forgiveness for sins committed against us as well as by us can occur. The EPC can encourage teaching that clearly distinguishes true from false models for kingdom harmony.

6) Authority to wield scripture, prayer, and the truths of our Confession against the principality of racism in the church. Even as we expose errant narratives of liberation, we are also bold to shine the light of scripture into our individual hearts and the ways racism has affected the EPC as a whole. We can find energy and motivation to pursue kingdom harmony when we courageously allow the truth of scripture and the Confession to speak to our racial/ethnic sins. We may well come to realize how we have overlooked the painful effects of racism on our own members and in the culture to which we bring the Gospel.

Revelation 7 envisions glorious multi-ethnic worship of the true God. It offers a great picture of unity and equality. Has our largely homogenous denomination intentionally opened doors for service and leadership by those not of the majority ethnicity? Have we risked our preferred styles of worship to be enriched and challenged by the worship flavor others may bring? The Word slices even to the division of joint and marrow, soul and spirit. Let us more boldly proclaim a message of kingdom harmony, and the change it calls for, even at risk of creating initial discomfort or anger.

7) Inspiration to plant more multi-ethnic churches, to encourage mono-ethnic churches to envision a widening reach in worship and mission, and to engage varied and creative interaction with believers across ethnic lines. At the presbytery level, we are encouraging new church development leaders to focus more intentionally on fostering churches whose initial DNA is living now the future promised in the Word.

For example, Forge Church is an EPC multi-ethnic church plant in Greensboro, NC. Their leading edge of evangelism is through children's sports leagues. *Pay It Forward* promotes multi-ethnic and socio-economic integration by offering participation at no charge. Sports for children becomes an invitation for families to participate in the church. Multi-ethnic sports leagues have readily led to a diverse worshipping community.

8) Finally, the joy to celebrate the many places and ways in the EPC where the biblical vision of kingdom harmony is occurring now. We're beginning to tell the stories of people of color in our own church history. The Tim Russell Memorial Scholarship prepares African American EPC candidates for church leadership. Intentionally multi-ethnic churches in

places such as Houston, Ferguson, Cleveland, Greensboro, Memphis, New York, Detroit, Philadelphia, and other cities live forward our vision. Ministries in and with non-majority ethnic communities display our commitment to kingdom harmony. Increasing ethnic variety in leadership of churches and General Assembly indicates our willingness to share influence and authority. We embrace the great joy of meeting together around the table of the Lord who makes us one body, one temple, one church and one new reconciled humanity in which each member offers a consecrated distinctness to enrich the whole.

CONCLUSION

Writing this letter has brought us the sad realization that throughout our country's history, there have been Presbyterians participating in, or even benefitting from, racism. At the same time, we've given thanks that we serve in a denomination that courageously confronts this reality. We've sought to engage in honest self-reflection about our failures. But we've also rejoiced that there have been Presbyterians at the forefront of abolition, civil rights, ethnic equality, and continuing reform. We stand on their side. The purpose of our letter has been to lament any complicity, by omission or commission, in racism. Yet, alongside lament, we rejoice in the atoning, harmonizing, embodied grace of Jesus Christ. Our beloved EPC bravely seeks to reflect the kingdom harmony envisioned in Revelation 7. We pray for your energy, courage, imagination, and zeal in *lamenting* racism with us, so deeply that the *hope* of the Gospel flows in a river of tears that Christ Jesus is making new as a river of everlasting life.

BENEDICTION

May the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus, to whom be glory forever and ever (Heb. 13:2-21).

With you in Christ,

The Ad Interim Committee

TE Sean Boone
RE Ken Chang
TE Gerrit Dawson, chair person
TE Joe Kim, assistant chair person
RE Linda McDaniel
TE Marcos Ortega
TE George Robertson
TE Annie Rose
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