

Dear Chapel Class,

A SMALL YET ESSENTIAL STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Who do I say that I am? How do I identify myself **to myself**? What is my identity **according to me**? In the wake of the death of George Floyd, this question has been prominent in my mind.

But why? What is the connection? Surely we should simply get on with prosecuting the perpetrators and with a radical reform of police selection, training, procedures and practices. At this writing, the police killing of George Floyd is not even the most recent instance of an African American not surviving arrest! Yes. All of that and more is needed. But what happens to African Americans in police custody, as horrific as that is, is but one lethal manifestation of something much larger. And something much more pervasive will be required if change is going to come.

Leo Tolstoy famously wrote, "Everyone thinks about changing the world, but no one thinks about changing himself." The essential first step in the right direction is the transformation of how we see others, especially those who we perceive as not like us. And that begins with the transformation of how we see ourselves. Why? Because I will identify others according to the matrix of attributes from which my own identity emerges.

At this point a couple of definitions are needed. According to The Aspen Institute Roundtable On Community Change, "*Race* describes categories assigned to demographic groups based mostly on observable physical characteristics, like skin color, hair texture and eye shape"; and "*Ethnicity* refers to social characteristics that people may have in common, such as language, religion, regional background, culture, foods etc." Ethnicity is about the diverse ways through which human beings express human life.

Race is a fiction. One cannot tell anything that ultimately matters about another human being based on color of skin, texture of hair, shape of eyes or other observable physical characteristics. Ethnicity is real and important but is too narrow to provide a fundamental basis for human identity.

So, if the question is: Who do I say that I am? and my answer is: I am a white man and a Southern Baptist who lives in Southeast Texas, I have taken a false step. According to that matrix almost everyone in the world is "other" to me and, therefore, potentially available for dehumanization. Dehumanization begins with regarding those who I perceive as not like me as "other", then as deplorable, then as a threat to "my way of life", then as sub-human and finally as an appropriate, even necessary, target for annihilation. And be assured, that gun kicks as hard as it shoots.

But is there available to me an identity that is authentic and unifying? How might I learn to identify myself to myself in a way that is real and that also embraces rather than excludes those who I perceive as not like me?

To begin with, as a human being I am made in the image and likeness of God and precious in God's sight. So is everyone else. And God loves me not because of who I am but because of who God is. The most "deplorable, unbelieving other" I know is made in the image of God and precious to God, no matter what. We know this because Christ died, not for the righteous, but for the ungodly, his enemies. As I rethink my

answer to the question: Who do I say that I am, this is the place to begin. But there is much more to consider.

Dr. Willie James Jennings is a graduate of Calvin College and Fuller Theological Seminary, an ordained Baptist minister, and an Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and African Studies at Yale Divinity School. While holding a comparable position on the faculty of Duke Divinity School, he published the award winning and seminal book: *THE CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION: Theology and the Origins of Race*.

In his book, Dr. Jennings has given us much that bears our consideration. Dr. Jennings identifies the origins of race, racism and the pervasive euro-ethnocentricity of our day in the theology of European theologians of the age of conquest and colonialism. From that misguided theology, he disentangles the authentic and common identity, rooted in Israel's story, of **all** who are in Christ. And, on the basis of this authentic identity of all who are in Christ, he envisions the church as a visibly boundary shattering community of loving kinship (koinonia) in Jesus.

In Dr. Jennings' book, I find sobering truth and a vision for such a time as this. Permit me to pass along some of what I am learning. To the degree that I have understood him and faithfully reflected his thinking, Dr. Jennings is entitled to the credit. Of course, any errors are entirely my responsibility.

God's redemptive intervention in human history is Israel's story: God's Covenant with Abraham, fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth the Anointed One of Isaiah 61, through the nation of Israel. The Bible tells that **one** story. To be sure, those who through faith belong to Christ are the descendants of Abraham and the heirs according to the promise. But God's redemptive narrative is Israel's story according to God's sovereign election of Israel as the vessel through which God would rescue humankind.

We Gentiles are included as wild olive branches grafted onto the root of Israel, the olive tree that God has cultivated. The Call of Abram, the Patriarchs, the Bondage, the Exodus, the Wandering, the Kingdom, the Exile and the Consolation are Israel's story. By the mercy of God, we can be included in Israel's story and share that history with **all** who are in Christ. Otherwise, as aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, we Gentiles have no hope and are without God in the world. Jesus was not "Plan B". He is the fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham and the one name given under heaven whereby we all must be saved. As Jesus himself said to the Samaritan women at the well, "Salvation is from the Jews." One is either part of Israel through faith in Jesus or not. This is God's matrix, God's definitive distinction among human beings.

There is simply no room here for a Gentile ethnocentricity of any color, texture or shape. And the notion that the now dominant ethnicity of persons of fair skin and European descent define the limits of valid expressions of life in Christ is not only false but an affront to the sovereignty of God. Jesus is a Jew and a man of the Middle East. The color of his skin is neither white nor black. No one is included much less put in charge on the basis of *race*.

Think of it this way: Jesus did not include you (or exclude you) because of the color of your skin or your ethnicity. To the contrary, Christ Jesus creates in himself one new humanity. In him there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free. In the words of Dallas Willard, "God's purpose in human history is the creation of an all-inclusive community of loving persons with God himself as its chief sustainer and most glorious inhabitant."

As Dr. Jennings writes, "Israel's story opens to *all* people the drama of peoples living in the presence of the living God. Israel's God ruptures the way peoples imagine their collective existence, reorganizing what they know about God and how they should understand themselves in their space and in the world. Israel's God has drawn an irrepressible distinction between the elect and those outside Israel." The only attribute that truly distinguishes among human beings is whether they are participants in Israel's story. And as Dr. Jennings writes, "The Jesus movement offers a new communion of kinship (koinonia) with the possibility of cultural intimacy between peoples. Boundary shattering love between strangers and even enemies is now possible in Jesus."

I am not saying that we should ignore the false category called *race*. The world that we actually live in rewards and disadvantages persons based on the fiction of race through its evil offspring racism. We must continue to keep track of that so we will know what to do in pursuit of social fairness that transcends *race* and *ethnicity*. Here I mean a fair opportunity to participate in the benefits of our society unhindered by *race* or *ethnicity*.

If you have any doubt about the need for this sort of change, listen to your friends who are African American. Ask them to be ruthlessly candid and really listen. If that is not an option, read *George Floyd and Me* by Shai Linne. He is a graduate of the pastoral internship program at Capital Hill Baptist Church in Washington D.C. where my daughter and son-in-law knew him. They think highly of Shai Linne. His article is available at thegospelcoalition.org/article/george-floyd-and-me.

Second, I am not saying that ethnicities are unimportant. As Dr. Jennings observes, "Our knowledge of our collective selves, of our peoples, of our ways of life, is not eradicated in the presence of Israel's God, but that knowledge is up for review." This review is primarily, almost exclusively, the prerogative of those within a specific ethnicity. Those persons are the ones to determine what is and is not consistent with the claim of Jesus Christ on their lives. The rest of us encourage always, offer advice rarely, correct only when certain and condemn never.

Finally, I am not advocating assimilation; but rather that we move beyond assimilation. To understand what I am advocating, consider our church. Those who attend our church are representative of the demographics of our city, the most diverse city in the United States. But we are not thereby a diverse congregation. We are an assimilated congregation.

Yes, when we gather at 8:45 and 11:45 on Sunday mornings the many people groups who live in our city are represented. However, and this is hard to hear, the implicit requirement is that all who participate be white; that is, that all who participate do so in terms of the ethnicity of fair skinned people of European descent. Reading the Bible or having someone pray in a language other than English from time to time does not change this.

To move beyond assimilation is not a matter of checking the boxes of some sort of quota system. It would require a collective willingness to submerge ourselves in and submit ourselves to the ways that all in our midst experience and express life in Christ for the good of all concerned. To do that we will need people of non-white ethnicities with decision making authority concerning what happens in the worship services, elsewhere on the campus and beyond the campus.

Did you know that in South Korea during Christian worship services there is a time when each member of the congregation prays out loud at the same time? Someone I know well has experienced this. She says

that on this occasion the power of these prayers was so great that she was not certain the building would remain standing. A year or so ago I attended the funeral services for a friend at St. John's United Methodist Church, a predominantly African American congregation. The senior pastors, Rudy and Juanita Rasmus, officiated and both spoke at length. However, this service was conducted by the entire congregation, who filled the sanctuary. In word and song they ministered to Joe's widow and his family and their comforting love was palpable. And during the congregational singing, Joe's widow stepped into the aisle and danced beautifully before the Lord as one who grieves but not as one who has no hope. For me, the way we do funerals pales in comparison to what I experienced that day. Perhaps we might be well advised to learn from those who express their life in Christ differently than we do.

The words of Dr. Jennings cast a vision of church beyond assimilation: "Imagine a people defined by their cultural differences yet who turn their histories and cultural logics toward a new determination, a new social performance of identity. Imagine a people who enfold the old cultural logics and practices of others inside their own. The words and ways of one people join those of another, and of another, and of another, each born anew in a community seeking to love and honor those in its midst. In Christ there is the possibility of a new identity rooted in the Resurrected Son of God and a process of transformation that involves enfolding peoples and their ways of life inside one another through communion with the Triune God. This is the way of peace and love within a visibly boundary-transgressing kinship (koinonia)."

Of course, our church is not the only one that operates out of an assimilation model. As far as I know most churches do so. As Dr. Jennings rightly observes: "... the church has failed to capture this trajectory coming out of the New Testament toward communion. The tragedy here is cumulative. If the struggle toward cultural intimacy was not faced by the church as inherent to the gospel itself, despite the constant work of the Spirit to turn Israel and Gentiles toward one another, then over time the only other option was the emergence of a Christian segregationist mentality." Thus, we have "white churches", "black churches", "Korean churches", "Congolese churches", "Burmese churches" and all the rest. As matters now stand, a pervasive Christian segregationist mindset renders the church anemic in the face of racism.

To quote Willie Nelson, "It's not supposed to be that way."

Makoto Fujimura is a world acclaimed painter and Christian speaker and author. In his book: *Culture Care* he likens the greater culture to an estuary. Mako's metaphor perfectly illustrates the unique role available to congregations that are willing to move beyond the prevailing Christian segregationist mindset and the assimilation model.

"In an estuary", he writes, "saltwater mixes with fresh water, bringing together multiple ecological layers and habitats to form one of the world's most diverse and abundant ecosystems." He continues: "We can think of the river of culture as an estuary, a complex system with a multiplicity of dynamic influences and tributaries. Within it are many nurturing -but not isolated- habitats. Each individual habitat strengthens its participants to interact with the wider environment.... "

The sort of community of persons in Christ that Dr. Jennings invites us to imagine is precisely the "nurturing habitat" needed to form the sorts of persons who are able to provide a "dynamic influence" within the estuary of our broader culture for the change that must now come. Peaceful demonstrations are a good thing, part of our heritage as Americans. But the street is not where change happens. Ultimately, what is needed is people who are able to stand at the interstices of our society and end racism.

And our church is, it seems to me, uniquely positioned to move beyond assimilation and become a place where such persons are formed and matured for the good and the care of all in our culture.

So now what? Well, who do you say that you are? Who do I say that I am?

The small step in the right direction that is first and essential is to identify myself according to God's matrix. This is to identify myself as part of a new humanity in Christ where there is no Greek or Jew, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free. In humility, I must come to see myself as a wild olive branch included in Israel's story by the grace of God. I have been grafted onto the root of Israel, the olive tree that God has cultivated. Jesus, in his mercy, does not exclude me (or others) on account of the color of my skin, the texture of my hair, or the shape and color of my eyes or my way of expressing life. This is my authentic identity and one that embraces rather than excludes others. For me and perhaps for you, this is a matter that calls for sober assessment and repentance. And prayer that God would renew my mind so that I see myself and others according to God's "irrepressible distinction". Before I change the world, perhaps I need to receive a change in the deepest parts of myself.

One final question: Does what I am advocating apply to all who are in Christ regardless of ethnicity? Yes, we all need to take a step in each other's direction. But given the pervasive predominance of whiteness (the ethnicity of persons of European extraction), those of us who share that ethnicity must be the first ones to take this small yet essential step in the right direction.

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June 23, 2020