



Shepherding
the Next Generation

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES THROUGH RACIAL RECONCILIATION

– Who We Are –

Shepherding the Next Generation is a nationwide movement of Shepherd Advocates: evangelical pastors and ministry leaders who are committed to speaking out on behalf of children at risk so that each child will have the opportunity to grow up in a strong, stable and healthy family.

Introduction

For centuries, the Christian Church has been proclaiming the message of reconciliation, of man to God and of neighbor to neighbor. Our faith holds to the belief that every person, regardless of race, ethnicity or background, has value because every person is made in the image of God. However, when we consider our divided past, we quickly recognize that we have not always followed this belief in practice and the shadow of this division still exists today.

Historically, the Christian Church in the United States has found herself on both sides of this division with some who worked to bring equality and others who claimed the name of Christ and yet perpetuated division. To our shame, it is only in the last forty years that

unity has grown in the Church as a whole. While we are grateful for the progress made, we need to remind one another that racial bias is still present; therefore, it requires us to continue to work toward reconciliation and equality – in life and opportunity.

A People Divided

At the root of the Christian faith is the gospel, the beautiful and complete picture of the reconciliation of man to God. It is through Christ that reconciliation was made for everyone - “persons from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9). The Christian Church in the United States has been a beacon of hope for centuries, opening her doors to those in need and bringing this message of reconciliation to every person, made in the image of God. Yet there also exist deep divisions that, despite our progress, still cast a shadow today.

Nearly fifty years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described Sunday morning as the most segregated time in America. According to Dr. Kevin Dougherty, assistant professor of sociology at Baylor University, King’s words still hold true today. Although we have witnessed progress toward diversity in many other



*“When God created mankind, he
made them in the likeness of God”*

Genesis 5:1

institutions, the Church is still divided across racial lines.¹ Even without a conscious intent, our willingness to ignore this division is a problem.

Today the conversation of racial equality stands firmly on one foundational truth so clearly laid out in scripture, namely that every person is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27, 5:1).

The Value of Every Person

The importance of racial reconciliation is found in God's creative anthropology that identifies every human being as bearing the image of God and, therefore, having great value. Like a stamp that marks each person as unique, it is what sets us apart, not from one another, but from the rest of creation. When we truly understand this truth, we will begin to see the shame of our past and, by God's grace, it will begin to shape our interactions across racial lines today.



It is the value of each individual that is behind Jesus' command to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). Jesus expands the definition of "neighbor" to include all people as he tells the parable of the Samaritan man. During this time, the Jews and the Samaritans were divided across ethnic lines, avoiding any interaction with one another. In the parable, a man is beaten and left on the side of the road, ignored by his own people. A Samaritan man comes along and has pity on him, caring for his needs, both physical and financial (Luke 10:25-37). This is the iconic example of how we are to live out the command to "love your neighbor as yourself," where we cross racial and ethnic barriers to see the value of every person, bearing the image of our creator.

Loving our Neighbors by Pursuing Reconciliation

It isn't enough to say we value people or that we love our neighbor. As part of our faith, we are also to seek the good of our neighbor through our good deeds (James 2:14-19). It is not enough to just avoid racial divisions, we must intentionally work toward reconciliation. In *Bloodlines: Race, Cross and the Christian*, Dr. John Piper, pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis states the following:

Godliness must mean something more public, more aggressively good. In fact, the aim of the gospel is the creation of people who are passionate for doing good rather than settling for the passionless avoidance of evil. "[Christ] gave himself for us... to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works" (Titus 2:14). The gospel produces people who are created for good works (Eph. 2:10), and have a reputation for good works (1 Tim. 5:10), and are rich in good works (1 Tim. 6:18), and present a model of good works (Titus 2:7), and devote themselves to good works (Titus 3:8, 14), and stir each other up to good works (Heb. 10:24).²

¹ Dougherty, Kevin D. and Christopher P. Scheitle. "Race, Diversity, and Membership Duration in Religious Congregations." *Sociological Inquiry*, Vol. 80, No. 3. (2010): 405-423.

² Piper, John. *Bloodlines*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2011.



Scott Roley grew up in what he called a privileged life near Washington D.C. He recalls how his father took him to hear Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. deliver his “I have a dream” speech. It was through this experience at a young age that Roley began to see that life was not the same – not

equal – for those with a different skin color than his. As an adult, Roley’s life took on a purposeful cadence toward racial reconciliation – both as a neighbor and as a local pastor.

For nearly 20 years now, every Wednesday morning at 8:00 am Roley and fellow pastors meet at McCreary’s Pub on Main Street in Franklin, Tennessee. This weekly meeting,

known as the Empty Hands Fellowship, is where faithful pastors and lay leaders have gathered for years to pursue reconciliation that spans the boundaries of race, economics and denominations. Every January, the Empty Hands Fellowship organizes a march in downtown Franklin to celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday and in the spring, the fellowship helps a local Latino church in their Cinco de Mayo outreach. Whether marching downtown to honor the civil rights leader or helping a family in need, the Empty Hands Fellowship continues to pursue the good of every neighbor because each one bears the stamp of their maker.

Scott Roley was a pastor with the Presbyterian Church in America for more than 20 years before founding The Franklin Table, a nonprofit ministry in Franklin, Tennessee. Roley also serves on the Advisory Council of Shepherding the Next Generation.

Source: Roley, S., Hard Bargain, 2010

It isn’t enough to merely avoid inequity. If this is all we do, we essentially ignore the needs of our neighbor. Our first and most basic step in the pursuit of racial reconciliation is to recognize that racial inequity is still a problem today. While we can and should be grateful for the progress made, we need to remind one another that racial inequity is still present; therefore, it requires us to continue to work toward reconciliation and equality – in life and opportunity.

As pastors and ministry leaders, we recognize that working toward true reconciliation – in life and opportunity – includes taking steps as the Church, as Christian leaders, and as individual neighbors:

- The Church must continue to take a leadership role toward racial reconciliation, purposefully pursuing reconciliation within our local

communities so that Sunday morning is no longer the most segregated time in our nation. Eradicating racism requires a long view but it begins with us, as the Church, taking responsibility for how we are either moving toward reconciliation or, by ignoring it, are moving away from it.

- As Christian leaders, we can join other pastors and ministry leaders through the efforts of Shepherding the Next Generation, supporting proven programs that strengthen the family by investing in the future of at-risk children. Through ensuring access to quality early education, home visiting programs, family supports for troubled youth, and other proven investments, at-risk children have the opportunity for a safe and healthy future.



- As individual neighbors, we can begin the difficult but necessary discussions about race and reconciliation, increasing our understanding of unconscious bias and promoting unity. For those in the majority culture, it is somewhat easy to dismiss racial inequity today, perhaps because it isn't as blatant as it once was, and from the majority

perspective, the inequities in opportunities may be somewhat invisible or unknown. This then requires each of us to develop greater sensitivity and understanding and recognition of the discrimination that our neighbors face by listening to those of a minority culture, learning and beginning to have dialogues to understand what life is like for them.

Conclusion

The reality is that racism is a painful and uncomfortable topic. And the pursuit of racial reconciliation is difficult at best. But we have a hope that is greater, a hope that is the very picture of reconciliation where love and kindness and the pursuit of the good of our neighbors covers hatred and the pursuit of evil. As Christians, our pursuit of diversity and unity and equity isn't for the sake of equity alone, but for the good of our neighbors and for the glory of God.

