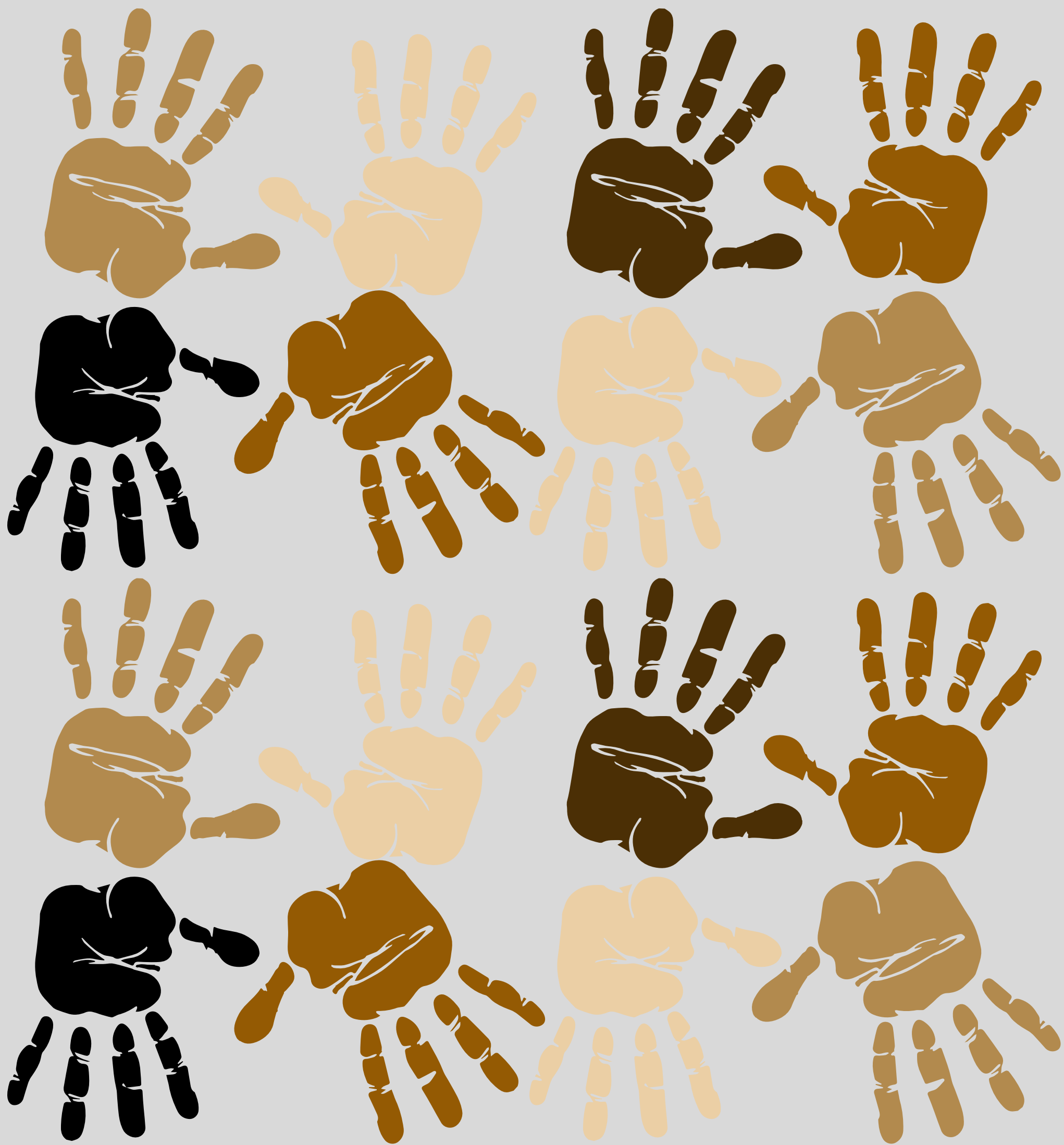


ACKNOWLEDGEMENT ACTION

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT. LAMENTATION. ACTION.



A *PERSONAL* MESSAGE TO HUNTSVILLE'S
FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH AND
FIRST MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH
ABOUT RACIAL UNITY

TRAVIS COLLINS, PHD

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT ACTION

Acknowledgement. Lamentation. Action.

***A personal* message to Huntsville, Alabama's First
Baptist Church and First Missionary Baptist
Church about racial unity and equality**

Travis Collins, Ph.D

African American Pastor and Fuller Seminary Professor William Pannel was right when he said that the ugliest 4-letter word in the human language is “Them.” And there is still way too much “Them” going around.

We’ve got to get beyond that.

That’s what we find in James 2:1. “Believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism” (NIV). The Greek word translated into English as “favoritism” is *prosopolimpteo*. I went back to my Greek books and found that *prosopolimpteo* means “to see someone’s face.” Hence, the verse says, “Don’t size up people by the way they look.”

Or, “When you look at people, don’t see *Thems*.”

I have sensed a divine call to step out into the gap that separates the “Thems.” Particularly the gap that separates White people and Black people. There is a gap to be sure. And if no one steps into the gap, then too many will remain on their side of the street looking distrustfully at those on the other side...and seeing “Them.”



If one could have picked a time to talk about “Us and Them”...to have hard conversations about race...it would not have been *this* time..

Our national anxiety is through the roof because of COVID-19. We fear the unknown. We grieve the losses. We loathe the inconveniences. We are anxious about our jobs. We worry about the economy, and we fret over our health and the health of our loved ones.

As if that were not enough, it is the year of a national election, when EVERYTHING is politicized—from masks, to school openings, to church openings, to Fauci, to sports...to race. Just about any opinion expressed gets one labeled as “this kind of person” or “that kind of person.” Our deep, antagonistic divisions make healthy dialogue terribly difficult.

But, we don’t get to pick the timing of hard conversations like this. So, I’m taking a deep breath and sharing what I’m learning.

I’ll be glad for anyone to see this little booklet. In fact, if it can be a helpful contribution to the dialogue about race in North Alabama, I’d be grateful and honored. Yet, my comments here are addressed primarily to the people of Huntsville’s First Missionary Baptist and First Baptist churches. I appreciate both congregations affording me this opportunity, and I am deeply grateful for our relationship.

I love the image painted by John Perkins...

There's an African proverb that I think expresses beautifully just how important this face-to-face kind of friendship is: “When I saw you from afar, I thought you were a monster. When you got closer, I thought you were just an animal. When you got even closer, I saw that you were a human, but when we were face to face I realized that you were my brother.”

The closer we get to one another the easier it will be for the fear to go away. We'll see that we have so much more in common than we ever thought. And the door will be opened for us to love one another with true biblical love.¹

The long-time relationship of these two congregations has enabled us to see each other face to face, to leave behind our fears, and to celebrate our commonalities. Had we not established a friendship over the decades, I would not be able to speak as candidly as I will speak here.

I believe it is time for our two congregations to engage in deeper conversations than we might have had before. And I hope this presentation is a catalyst for an ever-deepening partnership for the sake of positive change.

This is not the first time we have talked about racial unity and equality. I was the Interim Preacher at FBC when, on February 22, 2015, I preached a Sunday morning sermon titled, “This is Where Racism Comes to Die.” Then, in the evening, I interviewed Dr. Julius Scruggs in front of members of both congregations. I have preached about race at FBC multiple times since then, and have joined with members of both congregations at the Lynching Memorial in 2017 and the “Bloody Sunday” (Edmund Pettus Bridge) Remembrance in 2020. In other words, this is not the first time these two congregations have been in the same place for a conversation about White – Black relationships.

But never have tensions been higher. And never has the conversation been this crucial.

Racism runs in several directions. It involves White people, Black people, Asian people, Native American people, and Hispanic people. At this point, I’m focusing on White-Black relations, for they are often the most difficult and carry the most baggage.

I believe every conversation about race should begin with “From where I sit,” “The way I see things through my lens,” or “From my viewpoint.” We cannot help but see things such

as race differently. Our personal histories and experiences inevitably influence our perspectives.

And, to quote the Apostle Paul, We *all* “see through a glass darkly.”²

So, I offer this from where I sit...the way I see things through my lens...from my viewpoint... looking through a glass darkly. I would not speak to this important and volatile topic without significant preparation, but even good preparation cannot overcome limits to my perception.

And let me be clear: This is about *my* journey. I share what I’m learning with the prayerful hope that it will be helpful to others, but I’m neither wagging my finger nor pounding the pulpit. This is about *my* journey. I’m seeking neither agreement nor applause; I’m simply offering my perspective.

Perhaps you’ve noticed that the title of this presentation is *ACKNOWLEDMENTACTION*. I couldn’t find a word for what I am trying to communicate, so I had to invent one. And that strange word (Acknowlamentaction) seems fitting to describe my deep sense of what is demanded of me:

Acknowledgement

Lamentation

Action

Let me talk about those.

Acknowledgement

Here are some things I recognize, admit, and concede.

I acknowledge I am still learning.

Until recently, I have not been as attentive to the topic of race as I should have been. I have been embarrassingly unaware of many racial elements in our nation's past and present. The last several weeks, however, I have been on an important journey. I've read a great deal and have had countless conversations. Yet I still have a lot to learn.

I feel the need to offer a caveat here, near the beginning: In this presentation, there may be unintentionally inaccurate statements. And there might be things I will say differently in the future. What I include here is the best I know at this point in my journey. My understandings are still forming.

I cannot wait, however, until I get it all figured out (as if I ever will). I sense a profound call to speak to this important matter at this critical juncture...as imperfect as my insights may be. Part of my calling as a pastor is to speak to moral, spiritual, biblical issues, and the topic of racial unity qualifies on all three accounts.

I acknowledge that God still has some work to do in *my* heart.

It was 1985. I was a young pastor. It was my first church. I invited my mentor, Dr. Bryant Hicks, to the Lucas Grove Baptist Church for a revival.

I don't know what he said, or what the Spirit said, that stirred my heart. But I remember where I was sitting, and where Dr. Hicks was sitting, when we had the following conversation.

I told him, "I feel bad about my thoughts sometimes toward Black people. When something happens...if someone cuts me off in traffic...or I see a picture of someone who has been arrested on television...and it's a Black person...I feel guilty about my immediate thoughts."

Dr. Hicks answered, "You can't always do anything about your initial reactions to something, but you *can* choose your *behavior*. You can make sure you don't *act* on those wrong feelings, and you can choose to do something positive."

"And," my mentor continued, "you can ask God to change your heart."

With time, more information, and relationships with people of color, my heart has been changing for years. I have confessed my sins and allowed God, by His grace, to transform me. But God still has work to do in my heart.

However, and it's a big however, I acknowledge this is not just about the feelings in my heart. There are societal structures and practices in which racism still exists.

It's easy for me to say...

"I'm not a racist."

"I have Black friends."

"When I was in high school one of my buddies was Ralph Bush, a Black guy."

“I don’t have a Confederate flag in the back of my pick-up truck!”

“I love getting together with our Brother and Sisters from First Missionary Baptist!”

Those things are easy to say. And they are true! But I’m learning that the *big* conversation is not merely about the growing affinity for Black persons I feel in my heart. The big conversation is about whether my Black friends have some disadvantage because of real policies and practices, many of which I never think about.

You see, *Prejudice* is about an individual’s sinful feelings, one’s unjustified suppositions, toward a certain group of people. *Racism*, however, is a situation, or a system, in which prejudice is giving a disadvantage to a group of people. Let’s not confuse prejudice and racism.

So, the big conversation is about racism, not merely about the presence or absence of personal prejudice. It is possible for me to say, “I’m not prejudiced,” and yet be a participant, even an unintentional participant, in racist structures.

I find the following to be both fascinating and alarming:
“White evangelical Protestants report the warmest attitudes toward African Americans (an average score of 71 on a scale of 1 to 100), while simultaneously registering the highest score on the Racism Index (0.78 on a scale of 0 to 1).”³ That may sound confusing, so let’s note the findings of the Public Religion Research Institute’s 2018 “American Values Survey”:

White Christians were asked to say how warmly they feel toward African Americans as a group on what social scientists call “a feeling thermometer”: a scale ranging from 1 to 100, where 1 is cold, and 100 is warm. White mainline Protestants (mean=65) and white Catholics (mean=66) on average report views close to the general population (mean=67), while white evangelical Protestants

report ever warmer feelings (mean=71). But when white Christian attitudes are illuminated by more specific questions about the symbols of white supremacy, about economic and social inequality between African Americans and whites, or about unequal treatment of African Americans in the criminal justice system, white Christian attitudes appear considerably less warm, and the differences between white Christians and other Americans are revealed in stark relief.⁴

Let's be clear: People like me report we have a fondness for Black people that exceeds that of the average White American. And yet people like me are less likely to believe white supremacy is a real problem or that there are racial inequalities.⁵

It is obviously not enough for people like me to merely *like* Black people and have Black friends.

I acknowledge racist systems.

So, what are these racist systems of which so many speak? I acknowledge, regretfully, that I am a novice in the study of those situations and circumstances. I am still learning, so please keep that in mind as you read what follows.

I've learned about "**redlining**"—the practice going back to the 1930's whereby banks and real estate firms drew red lines around the neighborhoods where people of color lived. People living within those red-lined boundaries were considered high risk; so, loans were not as generous, and businesses were not as eager to invest or locate there as they were in the emerging suburbs. Thus, the segregation of our cities was unofficially guaranteed by redlining.

To combat redlining, the Fair Housing Law was passed in 1968. So, housing discrimination hasn't been legal in more than five decades. Yet, though the laws on the books changed,

practices didn't necessarily change. Thus, there is a lasting impact of once-legal discriminatory practices. Even today, many distressed neighborhoods across the country were once within those red lines.

Furthermore, until 1950, Realtors were bound by law not to sell a house in a so-called White neighborhood to a Black buyer. Their Realtors Code of Ethics actually forbade it. Even the Federal Housing Authority Manual stated, "Incompatible racial groups should not be permitted to live in the same communities."⁶

"But, Travis, don't forget that redlining is no longer legal. So are the discriminatory rules of the FHA and the Realtors Code." True, but African Americans still live with the residual effects of racist housing practices. For example, one reason Black families have, on average, so much less money than White families is the value of the houses belonging to our previous generations. Redlining and realtors made houses in the so-called Black neighborhoods worth a fraction of what they were worth in the so-called White neighborhoods. Therefore, there was less wealth to pass to the next generation. The impact of government-sanctioned segregation does not go away quickly.

And inequitable housing opportunities are not only a thing of the past. On August 10, 2020, the Associated Press published an article titled *Alabama public housing authority put whites in riverfront towers, but not Blacks, government finds*. The article stated,

A Housing and Urban Development study determined that 94% of the Decatur Housing Authority's units in two towers with views of the Tennessee River are occupied by white people, while all the units in a housing project farther from the river are occupied by Black people, The Decatur Daily reported.

The developments provide subsidized homes for low-income elderly people. Minorities on the waiting list to get into the towers were passed over as units there were filled with white people, the report said.

That, if true, is not just prejudice; it is systemic racism.

What about **health care**?

Why are black people sicker, and why do they die earlier, than other racial groups? Many factors likely contribute to the increased morbidity and mortality among black people. It is undeniable, though, that one of those factors is the care that they receive from their providers. Black people simply are not receiving the same quality of health care that their white counterparts receive, and this second-rate health care is shortening their lives.⁷

There is a disparity between White and Black people when it comes to health. Some reasons for the differences may be genetic. Some of the reasons for disparity, however, result from structural racism.

Redlining, discussed above, is one of those reasons. A Harvard study notes, “(W)here we live determines opportunities to access high-quality education, employment, housing, fresh foods or outdoor space – all contributors to our health.”⁸ Multitudes of neighborhoods where concentrations of Black people live are underserved.

Furthermore, it appears there is distrust of the health care industry in some corners of the Black community. On September 11, 2020, NPR did a story on African Americans’ hesitancy to participate in Coronavirus vaccine trials:

Black Americans have reason to be suspicious. Beyond the well-known Tuskegee experiments, where syphilis patients were misled for decades, they’ve also faced an ongoing exclusion and mistreatment by medical providers.⁹

Let's take pregnancy as an example of inequality. Both Black mothers and Black babies are more than twice as likely to die in childbirth than White mothers and babies.¹⁰ "Well, certainly it has to do with differences in lifestyles and educational levels," one might say. But a study by the CDC titled "Racial and Ethnic Disparities Continue in Pregnancy-Related Deaths"¹¹ states, "The Pregnancy Mortality Ratio for black women with at least a college degree was 5.2 times that of their white counterparts." That points to a system with bias, whether overt or unconscious.¹²

For a number of reasons, some of them systemic, there are disparities when it comes to the health of Blacks and Whites.

Then there is the matter of **jobs**. Studies confirm¹³ there are still a lot of employers who, if they receive two resumes of candidates with equal credentials, and the name at the top of one is *Shaniqua*, and the name at the top of the other is *Suzy*, *Suzy* is the only one who's going to get an interview. That is often referred to as "implicit bias." And that's a racist system.

And what about **incarceration** of Black people?

An example often noted of unfairness in our criminal justice system is that jail sentences for crack possession (often associated with Blacks) have long been greater than for powder cocaine (often associated with Whites).¹⁴ An attempt to remedy such inequities in the penal system was Congress' *First Step Act* of 2018. This was an attempt to make sentencing and incarceration more equitable. Its positive impact on Black people (91% of those receiving reduced sentences due to the First Step Act were African Americans) was celebrated.¹⁵

What about informal **networks**? Imagine with me a company or organization with only White people in leadership roles.

The natural tendency of those White leaders is to rely on their social and professional networks to fill open positions. If their only contacts are other White people, then only White people are going to have opportunities to apply for, and be considered for, those open positions. The White people may have no overt prejudice. They might all say, “I *like* Black people.” But, *unintentionally*, they shut out Black people by not *intentionally* going outside their normal networks to fill positions.

I can’t say it enough: The conversation is about more than some fondness that I, or another White person, may feel toward people of color. The larger conversation is about policies and practices...whether I am going to educate myself on those policies and practices...and whether I am going to be guilty of participating in such inequities, either actively or passively. Even if there were not a trace of prejudice in my heart, that would not erase the need to be aware of structures and policies that put people of color at a disadvantage.

I don’t mean to imply that in every business, in every school, in every courtroom, and in every government office, people of color are discriminated against. I *am* saying that there are places and situations in which Black people face significant obstacles because of the color of their skin. Wherever that is true, there is systemic racism.

I’m also not saying that every racist system is *intentionally* racist. The system of networks, for example, does not deliberately shut people out; it simply does not deliberately let people in.

And I don’t mean there has been no progress. Affirmative Action has enabled our nation to make significant progress in leveling the playing field. So much so that I know lots of White people have been frustrated when they believed they

were passed over for jobs, even when they had the best qualifications.

Nevertheless, there are still structures that require our attention. We cannot stop educating ourselves and working for improvement until everyone, no matter the hue of their skin or the accent of their tongue, gets a fair shake.

I acknowledge I am still learning about this topic. In the recent Statement on Unity by White and Black pastors in North Alabama (see Appendix), is this line:

We believe we all need to be educated about the underlying structures of systemic racism, especially educational, health care, judicial, economic, religious, and governmental systems. And we must work together to eradicate any inequities.

I am still in need of education. But I am committed to learning.

I acknowledge that the Kingdom of God is bigger than an individual heart...and that I might have unintentionally contributed to a limited understanding of God's Kingdom.

If there is any theme that characterizes the movement of Jesus-followers, it is the Kingdom (reign) of God. The Kingdom of God in its fullness awaits the future. But the Kingdom of God is not a castle in the air. And we're not supposed to just sit around and wait for it. We are to pray and work for the coming of the Kingdom here and now, in every nook and niche of creation.

The Kingdom of God certainly is about God's will in one's heart, one's attitudes, and one's behavior. It is about one's eternal destination. But the Kingdom of God is also about such important things as freedom from oppression and freedom from the blindness of our own biases.

Anyone who has heard me speak over the years knows that I understand my primary message to be the eternal transformation of people by grace through faith in Jesus. I've said it thousands of times in dozens of ways: Humankind's greatest problem is sin, and our deepest need is Jesus. For here and forever. The cross stands at the center of history and at the center of Scripture.

But that is not the only message in Scripture. God is concerned about the whole person. He is concerned about fairness and equality.

For example, in Isaiah 58 God denounces His people for going through their religious rituals and then turning around and exploiting their workers. He didn't want a religious feast or festival. He wanted to see His people do this:

to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke...to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter--when you see the naked, to clothe him. (Isaiah 58:6-7, NIV)

Galatians 3:28 likewise says, *"There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"* (NIV). That has societal and relational consequences. It means the divisions between us and them, racial and otherwise, have got to go.

And let's remember Jesus' first sermon in Nazareth, his hometown, from Luke 4:18-19:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners*

*and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's
favor" (NIV).*

To "spiritualize" those words of Jesus...to read them as if they were written only about the human heart...is to misunderstand them. There are societal implications in our Savior's sermon.

I acknowledge that I have preached racism as primarily a heart problem, and by doing so I may have unintentionally offered only a partial answer. While racism is indeed rooted in sinful hearts, the answer is bigger than personal remorse, better beliefs and more loving feelings toward people different from us.

The answer is often systemic, structural. The answer involves both personal conversion *and* social justice.

The phrase "Social Justice," by the way, has gotten a bad rap.

Are there people who have socialist leanings whose mantra and rallying cry are "social justice"? Absolutely there are. And I do not count myself among that circle.

But that doesn't make social justice a bad thing, and I'm not willing to let radicals co-opt the phrase. Social justice is simply the attempt to address the needs of people at the structural level. It's about fairness, a righteous impartiality and equity between people.

What is referred to as "social justice" is a recurring theme in Scripture. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Micah, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Zechariah and Malachi all would be shocked that the phrase "social justice" has been hijacked and labeled as somehow unbiblical. It was fairness for everyone, for example, not punishment for the criminal, that Amos was referring to when he declared famously, "Let justice roll on like a river!" (Amos 5:24, NIV)

Being a follower of Jesus is about more than individuals' relationship to God through Jesus. God is concerned about

interpersonal relationships, and about societies. The Gospel of the Kingdom is bigger than my personal relationship with Jesus and my future in Heaven.

The invitation to faith in Jesus and into a community of Christian pilgrims is the most important calling a Christ-follower has. But it is not the *only* calling we have. Christ-followers must join God in *all* that He is doing in the world, including the establishment of justice.

God's mission is broad and holistic. Joining Him in His mission means proclaiming the Gospel and making disciples, serving people in need, and actively pursuing just and fair societal structures. All in the name of Jesus!

Whenever we work for the fair and just treatment of everyone, and whenever we work to break down the walls that still divide us as races...and when we do that in the name of the King...the Kingdom comes.

A lesson from an oil disaster

Perhaps you will remember the catastrophic BP oil leak of 2010. The drilling rig, Deepwater Horizon, was digging an exploratory oil well in the deep waters of the Gulf of Mexico when an explosion took the lives of seven people and sent oil gushing into the ocean. In addition to the tragic loss of human life, the devastation to the environment was heartbreaking—from the massive loss of marine life to the contamination of the sugar sands of the Gulf's beaches.

People rallied. There were people on the beach shoveling oil and cleaning the birds with dishwashing liquid. Some, in their boats, encircled the oil slick with booms that corralled the tar-like mess.

Yet others were out at the place of origination working frantically to cap and seal the leak at its source.

Some worked on the *results* while others worked on the *source*. Attacking the tragedy from both sides was necessary.

Racism has to be attacked from both the “results” and the “source” of inequities. Working on the “results” means things like investing in relationships across racial divides, inviting people to our dinner tables who do not look like us, asking real questions and having honest discussions, and going out of our way to be kind to people of other ethnicities.

Working at the “source” means working on policies, whether that is training and appropriate accountability for police officers, appropriate reforms in the penal system, or insuring fairness in housing and hiring.

It’s not either/or. The Kingdom of God is about both.

This doesn’t end with the heart...but it certainly *begins* with the heart.

To say that Martin Luther King had his detractors is an understatement. And many of those who criticized him most vehemently were proponents of civil rights. They agreed with his goals, but believed the non-violent strategy would not be effective. Roy Wilkins, of the NAACP, felt that King’s strategies were accomplishing nothing. In 1963 Wilkins said to Martin Luther King, “In fact, Martin, if you have desegregated anything by your efforts, kindly enlighten me.”

King answered, “Well, I guess about the only thing I’ve desegregated so far is a few human hearts.”¹⁶

King knew that changing laws alone would not make for a different America. He knew that a changed America would begin with changed hearts.

Such things as the Temperance movement and Prohibition in the 1920’s remind us that changing laws alone merely drives certain behavior underground. The ultimate answer is

changed hearts, for the root of the problem is always our sinful human nature—our innate, overwhelming tendency to do the wrong thing.

Real and lasting change begins with transformed hearts.

But it doesn't end there. The fight against racism is both *cardiological* and *structural*. It's about changes in my heart and in any unfair systems around me.

I acknowledge that the White Church has played a regrettable role in our nation's racist history.

There is no doubt that White churches, meaning churches of White members, have played a role in racism. Northern churches are not innocent on this point, but we will focus here on churches in the South.

For example, one of First Baptist Church of Huntsville's denominational affiliations—our original affiliation, in fact—is the Southern Baptist Convention. The Southern Baptist Convention was founded in 1845...with slavery as the driving issue. Before 1845, Baptists from the North and the South made up one body known as the Triennial Convention. The principle reason for the Baptist divorce, undeniably, was their differing views on *slavery*.

The founder and first President of the Board of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, the seminary from which I received two degrees, and the first seminary of the Southern Baptist Convention, was Basil Manly, Sr. Manly was not only a theological educator; he was the most influential theological defender of southern slavery in the 1850's and 1860's. As Pastor of Montgomery's First Baptist Church, Manly gave the invocation at Jefferson Davis' inauguration as President of the

Confederacy. Lots of Southern Christians looked to the writings of Manly to justify the enslavement of other humans.

Moreover, John Broadus was one of the original faculty members of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Broadus' classic book on homiletics, written a century-and-a-half ago, is one of my favorite books on preaching. And yet Broadus said of African Americans, "the great masses of them belong to a very low grade of humanity."¹⁷

Frederick Douglas wrote a scathing critique of Christians who held slaves and promoted slavery. Douglas' words about the White ministers are particularly stinging for me: "The dealer (slave-trader) gives his blood-stained gold to support the pulpit, and the pulpit, in return, covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity."¹⁸

Were all Southern churches and ministers in favor of slavery? No, there were exceptions. But those exceptions were lonely voices crying in the wilderness. That we have a racist past as a Baptist church in the South is undeniable.

A Statement by Southern Baptists twenty-five years ago acknowledged that. It reads,

Be it further RESOLVED, That we apologize to all African-Americans for condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism in our lifetime; and we genuinely repent of racism of which we have been guilty, whether consciously (Psalm 19:13) or unconsciously (Leviticus 4:27); and

Be it further RESOLVED, That we ask forgiveness from our African-American brothers and sisters, acknowledging that our own healing is at stake.

And our racist past is not just the *distant* past. When I was a little boy, Lester Maddox was the blatantly racist, stridently segregationist, Governor of Georgia. Maddox was famous for

standing in the doorway of his Atlanta restaurant wielding an axe handle to keep Black people from coming in.

I don't know how he pulled it off, but our pastor invited Lester Maddox, Georgia's Governor, to speak in our church on a Sunday morning, and Maddox accepted. It was the largest crowd I ever saw in our church, and I remember the excitement! Yet, even as a kid I thought, "Why would we have this man here? And why are so many people here in such enthusiastic support?"

I love the people of that church, and I'm glad I grew up there; but that is a lamentable chapter in the story of my home congregation.

And what about First Baptist Church of Huntsville? I'm grateful that in the 1960's, when many White congregations decided not to welcome Black people to membership or even to worship, FBC intentionally stated that *everyone* was welcome in our church. That makes me proud.

And yet, if we go back to the 19th century, we see an example of a racist structure, slavery, which our church participated in. In our membership records from 1809-1861 the phrases "belonging to" and "property of" appear more times than I could count.

Here is a sample entry from 1815: "Received a black brother and sister, Toby and Easter, belonging to Mr. Bass, by letter."

By the way, this is an example of what I was trying to communicate above: There is a difference between what I feel in my heart and the structures around me. In this entry, Toby and Easter are referred to as "a black brother and sister." That certainly sounds like a respectful, even endearing, description of the two. And yet, Toby and Easter were described as *belonging to* another human being! Our spiritual ancestors at FBC apparently didn't note the conflict between the concept

of “brother and sister” on the one hand and the evils of slavery on the other.

Interestingly, there are a number of references to “church discipline” of First Baptist members who didn’t live up to the congregation’s moral standards. It seems that every third or fourth entry in our church’s records from the 1800’s is about personal morality. People were reprimanded, sometimes even kicked out of the church, for things like drinking too much, disorderly conduct, absence from worship, dancing, playing cards, or inter-personal disputes.¹⁹

Individual Christian responsibility and morality were taken very seriously. However, members seemingly thought nothing of humans belonging to humans. We can see how they were strict about what they considered to be personal, moral issues, and yet, apparently, did not consider the enslavement of individuals to be sinful.

Now, I need to be transparent: I don’t know what I would have done had I been the Pastor in 1815. Would I have preached against slavery? Honestly, I don’t know. Because I can’t say what I would or would not have done, I cannot condemn those who went before me. (I can lament it though, and we’re going to get to that shortly.)

FBC Huntsville is a different church now, of course. But it is not a stretch to say that White churches have been part of our nation’s racist past.

I acknowledge my disappointment when some people assume, because I am White, I am a bigot.

I was officiating a football game a few years ago when a player on the offense blocked a player on the defense. The

coach of the team on defense, an African American, thought the block was illegal and was very upset. Based on his comments, I observed that the one doing the blocking was White and the player being blocked was Black. I had not noticed that before, but it became obvious why the coach thought I didn't call a foul.

"I see how things are," barked the coach. "Nothing has changed. Nothing has changed." And he wouldn't get off it. "Nothing has changed," he repeated.

Of course, he couldn't make an overt comment about racism without drawing a penalty. But his implications were clear. He was implying I was biased because of my race. And that was terribly offensive.

I de-briefed with three African American friends of mine, one of them a fellow football official. They helped me to see why the coach said that, though they didn't justify his charges of racism. It was in the days immediately following Hurricane Katrina. Racial tensions were high in the country due to what many perceived to be racial undertones in the response to Black people in New Orleans.

Beyond that, however, my friend helped me see that there is the genuine sense among many that things haven't changed all that much. As much as I disagreed with, and resented, what that coach said, I wonder if maybe there is truth in his charge.

Oh, we've come a long way from the dark days of the African slave trade. We've come a long way from the separate water fountains and separate restrooms, and a long way from restaurants where Blacks couldn't eat and hotels where they couldn't sleep.

It goes without saying that we still have a long way to go. And, yet, it is more than disappointing when someone looks at the color of my skin and assumes I am a bigot.

I acknowledge the “pile of dry wood.”

Candidly, I understand the reference that a friend of mine made to Black people’s frustration as a “pile of dry wood.” She was talking about four hundred years of history, and the resentment that has been building, making for an “incendiary” situation. Sometimes an act of injustice ignites that metaphorical pile of dry wood.

One example of something that has contributed to the combustible situation (the “pile of dry wood”) goes all the way back to the years just after Emancipation. The Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution abolished slavery. But look at the wording of the Amendment:

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

Notice that phrase, “except as a punishment...” That meant that people could be enslaved as punishment for crimes. Consequently, in many cases, Black people who had been freed by the Emancipation Proclamation were arrested for minor crimes like vagrancy and “mischief,” or on altogether false charges, and taken right back to the Plantations.

Furthermore, many members of the infamous Slave Patrols (White men who enforced compliance by slaves before Emancipation) became police officers after the Civil War. The same men who had rounded up and punished slaves in earlier days now were arresting Black people again, often on made-up charges.

Such memories die hard, and help explain the underlying distrust that many in the Black community have of police officers. History helps provide context.

That history does not, however, mean such activities as looting and destruction of property are excusable. Indeed, they are terribly regrettable. Nothing justifies innocent property owners, for example, being robbed of their livelihoods by people who take advantage of an injustice to go on a rampage. Furthermore, nothing justifies the abuse that good police officers have experienced.

Anger misdirected is not helpful.

Moreover, violence will not change things. The images that changed the world during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's were of Bull Connor's dogs, of Alabama State Troopers beating peaceful marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing by members of the Ku Klux Klan.



Changes in the 1960's did not come because of protesters looting and destroying property. And I believe violent behavior neither honors those unfairly killed nor furthers the cause of racial unity.

“Too often we judge other groups by their worst examples.”

I don't want to be identified with white supremacy.



Therefore, I will not identify Black people with radical politics and violent behavior.



It is not helpful when White people are automatically associated with the Radical Right. And it is not helpful when Black people are automatically associated with the Radical Left.

In 2016, Micah Xavier Johnson shot and killed five white police officers in Dallas. He was angry over police shootings of Black men and declared he wanted to kill White people. Two Black men had been killed by police and there was a protest in Dallas. Johnson targeted White policemen and killed five.

Former President George W. Bush spoke at the funeral for the five slain Dallas policemen. As part of his speech, he said, “Too often we judge other groups by their worst examples while judging ourselves by our best intentions.”

Let’s neither judge other groups by those we consider their worst examples nor ignore our own sins.

“Sing for us.”

To be completely transparent, I’d prefer African Americans celebrate more with me the fact that we’ve come so far! I’m wondering lately, though, if maybe my desire for celebration is, at least in a small way, a desire to assuage my shame. I now feel a little like the Babylonians who said to the captive Israelites, “Sing for us.”

*Our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”* (Psalm 137:3, NIV).

Huntsville’s own Esau McCaulley described the Babylonians in his recent bestseller, *Reading While Black*: “They did not want to see the impact of their crimes on the faces of Israelites. They wanted the Israelites to accept their place joyfully.” McCaulley went on to note the parallel between the Babylonians’ desire for the singing Israelites, and America’s “dancing and jolly negro...in fiction, advertisements, and film.”²⁰

I *do* think we have a lot to celebrate! But we cannot gloss over injustice with a party. We have to face the truths of a history of unfairness.

I acknowledge that some racism is unconscious.

The Statement by Southern Baptists twenty-five years ago acknowledged that. Look again at this section of the 1995 resolution regarding race:

Be it further RESOLVED, That we apologize to all African-Americans for condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism in our lifetime; and we genuinely repent of racism of which we have been guilty, whether

consciously (Psalm 19:13) or unconsciously (Leviticus 4:27);

Regarding unconscious racism, the resolution references Leviticus 4:27. So, let's look at Leviticus 4:27-31 (NIV).

If any member of the community sins unintentionally and does what is forbidden in any of the LORD's commands, when they realize their guilt and the sin they have committed becomes known, they must bring as their offering for the sin they committed a female goat without defect. They are to lay their hand on the head of the sin offering and slaughter it at the place of the burnt offering...In this way the priest will make atonement for them, and they will be forgiven.

The point, of course, is that we *do* often sin unintentionally. But we must not choose to remain in our ignorance. We ought always to be praying, "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." (Psalm 139:23-24, NIV)

I acknowledge there are likely remnants of bigotry remaining in my heart of which I am still unaware, and I continue to ask God to reveal the ways I continue to see through prejudiced eyes. "Oblivious" does not mean "excusable."

I acknowledge the frustration that so many White people feel when they hear the phrase "White Privilege."

When I was a child, my Aunt Gladys was drawn over somewhat, with a slight hump on her back. I asked my

father why she looked that way. My father answered, “I guess it’s from all those days picking cotton.”

So, one can imagine my disappointment when I heard that references to picking cotton are often interpreted as disparaging of Black people.²¹ *My people, White people,* were humble cotton farmers on Sand Mountain. Although the legacy of slaves picking cotton is deplorable, the fact remains that there were lots of poor White people picking cotton too.

My parents and their immediate families were poor. Dirt poor. They clawed out a meager living on small farms. My paternal grandfather was a sharecropper, and my immediate ancestors barely had enough potatoes for the table.

Merriam-Webster defines “white privilege” as “the set of social and economic advantages that white people have by virtue of their race in a culture characterized by racial inequality.”²² That is a benign definition of a reality that is hard to argue with. The term becomes offensive, though, when the implication is that White people have success handed to them on a silver platter.

John Perkins, a Black man, has done more for the holistic development of communities than anyone I know. In his book *One Blood: Parting Words to the Church on Race and Love*, he wrote,

*We need to get beyond our ignorance of the other. We need to move beyond the thinking that white privilege means that all whites live a privileged life. This perspective ignores the reality of class in this country...According to the 2013 data from the US Department of Agriculture 40.2 percent of food stamp recipients were white; 25.7 percent, black.*²³

I acknowledge that practices such as “redlining” (see above) gave me an advantage—an advantage that I inherited and did

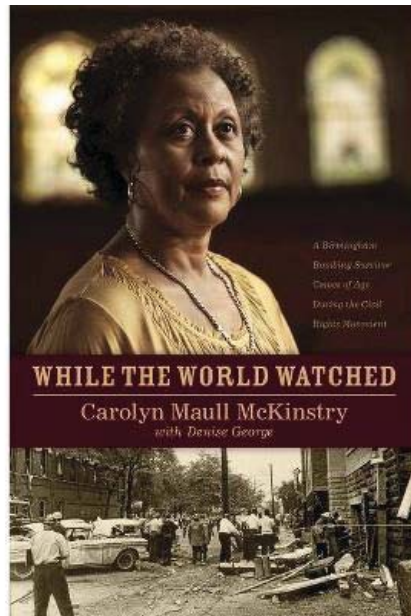
not work for. And there is no questioning that White people do not face discrimination because of their skin color as so many Black people do. I haven't seen any stories lately about Black people getting all the good views of the river, while White people are stuck somewhere in the back of the housing development (see the above story from Decatur). There are definite privileges that come from being a White person, and a White male especially.

It simply is not helpful when phrases such as "White privilege" are thrown around casually.

I acknowledge that liberation from racism is liberation for us all.

Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was not only for those held in the bondage of slavery. It was for the slaveowners to be freed, too.

In fact, in the 1800s, before the Emancipation Proclamation, the idea of a Mulatto Messiah was popular. "Mulatto" referred to someone of mixed ethnicity. The Messiah, many black people believed, was to be part Black and part White because, as they said, "If he's truly a Messiah he will make no difference between the slave and the owner, because both need to be set free.".



Carolyn Maul was a little girl and present at Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church on September 16, 1963. In the brief interval between Sunday School and the morning worship service, Carolyn stopped by the ladies' restroom and spoke to her friends, Cynthia Wesley, Addie Mae Collins, and Carole Robertson, all 14, and Denise McNair, who was 11.

Carolyn left the restroom, walked up the stairs to the church office, and answered the ringing phone. A man's voice said simply, "Three minutes." He hung up.

Carolyn walked into the sanctuary, where the clock hanging on the wall read 10:22. Then she felt and heard the blast of a bomb planted by White racists. By the time the smoke cleared, Carolyn's four friends lay dead.

Carolyn Maul McKinstry spoke at Huntsville's First Baptist Church a couple of years ago and did a beautiful job. In her book *While the World Watched*, Carolyn wrote, "Little did I know that the loss of those girls was, ironically, the real beginning of hope for blacks and whites in Birmingham."

Notice she wrote, "and whites."... "Hope for blacks AND whites."

The shackles of prejudice weigh heavily on both the subject and the object of the prejudice. We all need to be freed.

I acknowledge that I use to think racially diverse congregations were the answer.

Don't get me wrong; I still believe our segregation as predominantly White and predominantly Black congregations is disappointing to God. I also believe such segregation is going to be a major hindrance to evangelizing America in the years to come. The people who worship on Governors Drive have heard me say a hundred times how much I long for our congregation to reflect the scene in Heaven described in Revelation 7:9, with people from various ethnicities, worshipping together.

I witnessed the church I served in Richmond become increasingly diverse ethnically, and that was a blessing. At one point, four of our thirteen ministers were Black, and a growing number of our members were Black or Brown. That did not come without its challenges, but the benefits were tremendous. I had hoped to see that happen in Huntsville, and proclaimed the value of multi-ethnic congregations even as an Interim Preacher.

And yet, I now acknowledge that my passion for a diverse congregation is on the back-burner, at least temporarily. If God blesses us with that, I will be thrilled. But I now see that addressing the inequities between Black people and White people, and speaking to the division, prejudice and racism that still haunt our nation, are more important than how many people of color join our congregation.

In fact, inviting people of color to join our congregation without serious discussions about racial divisions and

inequities would be somewhat disingenuous. Asking Black people merely to assimilate into a White culture is not true integration.

I acknowledge that I don't have a lot of answers

I'm in learning mode; not advice-giving mode. I do believe a deeper understanding of our situation is a first step toward genuine change, however, so if I can continue to learn, and perhaps raise awareness, I pray that will be a positive contribution to this ongoing conversation.

Lamentation

To lament is a necessary and healthy spiritual practice. Here I offer some of my lamentations, my griefs, my regrets, and my contrition surrounding race.

John Perkins acknowledged his own prejudice and the freedom that came from confessing that prejudice:

Almost immediately God began to do something radical in my heart. He began to challenge my prejudices and my hatred toward others. I had learned to hate the white people in Mississippi. I hated their control over our lives. I hated them for what they had done to my brother, Clyde. I hated them for refusing to see me as a person deserving of respect just because I was a human being. I had so much hate! And if I had not met Jesus I would have died carrying that heavy burden of hate to my grave. But He began to strip it away, layer by layer. He reminded me again and again that I could not hoard His love. And I could not be selective about who I would share it with. The love He had shed abroad in my heart was meant to be shared with others regardless of their color.²⁴

I don't want to carry the burden of even an ounce of prejudice, or the heavy weight of any participation in racism. So here I lament.

I lament my own sin.

I lament the sin of my prejudice. I still make assumptions. I still suffer from knee-jerk reactions. God still has work to do in my sinful heart.

It has been disappointing that some in the First Baptist Church family have perceived my sermons against prejudice and racism as self-righteousness. If I have implied that I have “arrived”...if I have implied that I have moved beyond bigotry and am looking down my pious nose at those who have not attained racial enlightenment as have I...then I have seriously miscommunicated.

I still have sins of prejudice and bigotry left in my heart. I lament those sins, and I ask for forgiveness from both my Father and my Black friends.

I lament the sins of so many who went before me.

The Bible says that the sins of the fathers will be visited upon generations (e.g. Leviticus 26:39; Isaiah 14:21). Does that really mean God punishes people because of bad things their ancestors did? Well, those words about sins and the generations have to be balanced by Ezekiel 18:20, which reads, “The one who sins is the one who will die. The child will not share the guilt of the parent” (NIV).

So, a child does not bear the *guilt* of the parent. But the child often bears the *scars* and suffers the *consequences* of their parents’ sins. Sometimes, one even *benefits* from the sins of his or her ancestors. Consider, as an example the heir to a fortune earned in illegal ventures. He or she is a beneficiary of ill-gotten gains. The same is true of an economy built on slavery, is it not?

So, there is a tension. Something of a paradox. On the one hand, I am responsible for my sin alone. On the other hand, I am part of my larger “tribe” and there is such a thing as communal responsibility (which non-Westerners understand much better than we do).

In Scripture, one's spiritual connection to others, even one's forefathers and foremothers, is more obvious than it is in my personal American experience.

Consider this, for example, from Daniel 9:7-8 (NIV):

Lord, you are righteous, but this day we are covered with shame—the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, both near and far, in all the countries where you have scattered us because of our unfaithfulness to you. We and our kings, our princes and our ancestors are covered with shame, LORD, because we have sinned against you.

Notice that the writer's shame is not merely personal. It is shared with people near and far. And notice the reference to his ancestors. "We have sinned against you," he laments.

Now consider this, from Ezra 9:6-7 (NIV):

"I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens. From the days of our ancestors until now, our guilt has been great. Because of our sins, we and our kings and our priests have been subjected to the sword and captivity, to pillage and humiliation at the hand of foreign kings, as it is today."

Ezra is ashamed and disgraced over what he refers to as "our sins." These are sins committed, he acknowledges, "from the days of our ancestors until now," and he continues, "our guilt has been great."

And then there is the story of Josiah. I was studying for a sermon on Huldah not so long ago when I had an epiphany. Let's read the text that arrested me, 2 Chronicles 34:18-21 (NIV):

Then Shaphan the secretary informed the king, "Hilkiah the priest has given me a book." And Shaphan read from it in the presence of the king. When the king heard the words

of the Law, he tore his robes. He gave these orders to Hilkiah, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Abdon son of Micah, Shaphan the secretary and Asaiah the king's attendant: "Go and inquire of the LORD for me and for the remnant in Israel and Judah about what is written in this book that has been found. Great is the LORD's anger that is poured out on us because those who have gone before us have not kept the word of the LORD; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written in this book."

Josiah tore his robes in profound lament. Why? This was his lament: "...those who have gone before us have not kept the word of the Lord; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written in this book." Josiah lamented the sins of "those who have gone before us."

Can there be any serious doubt that the Bible describes communal responsibility for sin? And is lament for the sins of one's spiritual ancestors not biblical? Daniel, Ezra, and Josiah would encourage me in my lamentation for the sins of those who've gone before me.

In her book, *Be the Bridge*, Latasha Morrison speaks of a growing awareness on the part of a lady named Elizabeth Behrens:

*Elizabeth has come to see that none of us are disconnected from the sins of our culture's past. Though she'd never lynched anyone, though she'd never owned a slave, she recognized how she'd been afforded better educational opportunities, increased access to services, and increased earning power. She says, "My current reality isn't untethered from my family's past and from everyone benefiting from systems of injustice. And so it's okay to feel connected to the sins of the past."*²⁵

I believe, like Elizabeth, I am not disconnected from the sins of my culture's past. Therefore, I lament, seriously lament, the sins of my forefathers and foremothers. I do not confess

sins of the past as if I committed them, but I lament them because they are part of my story, and have inevitably affected, even shaped, me.

I lament the evils of slavery. I lament the injustice of legalized segregation. I lament the racial jokes and slurs and the offensive words with which I grew up (and sometimes joined in on).

I lament that so many White ministers—good people—chose to remain silent in days when Black men were lynched based on accusations, when water fountains were labeled “Colored” and “White,” when Black people were told to move to the back of the bus, and when neighborhoods were redlined.

Do you remember that quote from Frederick Douglass above? He wrote, “The dealer (slave-trader) gives his blood-stained gold to support the pulpit, and the pulpit, in return, covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity.”²⁶ Frankly, that haunts me.

I lament the sins of “my people” who went before me.

I lament my personal burden of prejudice and bigotry...yet I cannot, casually and quickly, simply “move on.”

I heard a story on NPR about Nora McInerny who lost her husband after his long bout with cancer.²⁷ After her husband died, people tried to encourage her. Well-meaning people—people with good intentions—tried to say the right thing. But often what people said was hurtful.

Mrs. McInerny explained that the most hurtful things people said were about “moving on.” They said...

“You’ll move on.”

“You need to find a way to move on.”

“Just move on.”

“I can’t just move *on*,” she said. “I didn’t *want* to move *on*! To move *on*,” she explained, “would be to forget, to deny those memories, so I didn’t want to move on!” Her deceased husband was part of her story. She didn’t want to forget the joys or the grief or the one she’d loved and lost.

“I did, however, want to move *forward*,” she declared. To move *forward*, explained Mrs. McInerney, is to carry the memories, the good stuff and even the bad stuff, even the grief, with us, but to move forward with our lives.

That story strikes me as applicable to race relations. We cannot just move *on*. But we can, we must, move *forward*.

There are well-meaning people—people with good intentions—who say about the atrocities of our racist pasts, “Let’s move on.” But we cannot just move on. We cannot just sweep the injustices of the past under the rug. We cannot just move on.

But we can move *forward*. We *must*.

There are those who say we *cannot* move forward. That is a skepticism to which we must not surrender.

There are those who say we *should not* move forward. That is a racism to which we must not surrender.

We can move forward. We must do better at doing better.

We cannot merely move on. But we can, we must, with the strength of Almighty God, as brothers and sisters, move forward.

Action

Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. (1 John 3:18 NIV)

In the words of Robert P. Jones,

White Christians, and even my own childhood denomination (Southern Baptists), are gradually beginning to face the bare fact that white supremacy has played a role in shaping American Christianity. But they have been too quick to see laments and apologies as the end, rather than the beginning, of a process.²⁸

Regrets and better attitudes are not enough.

Acts 10 tells the story of Peter, whose prejudice was challenged in a vision of a sheet full of things he had previously considered “unclean.”

Peter believed down to his bones that the Jewish people were “in” with God, and the Gentiles were “out” with God. But he slipped off to sleep, and God showed Simon a surreal smorgasbord suspended in a sheet!

“Eat!” said God.

“No way,” said Peter. “I consider this cuisine unkosher. I deem this dinner undesirable. I find this food unfit.”

“Easy now,” God answered. “Don’t call anything that I have made unfit.”

Peter was still scratching his head when there was a knock on the door. Representatives of a Gentile (non-Jewish) man named Cornelius had come to invite Peter for a private spiritual consultation in Cornelius’ home.

Reclining on his roof, Peter was experiencing the beginning of a new insight—an insight that would rock his Jewish-centered, anti-Gentile, world.

But it was not enough to be enlightened. Peter had to *do something*. Peter had to get off his roof. Peter had to get off the roof and walk into a world where he was uncomfortable and where he didn't know if he'd be welcomed. And, when he did, Christian history changed.

It's too easy to just sit on the roof. But nothing ever changed because someone sat around on his or her comfortable roof pointing out problems, wishing things were better, or assigning blame.

We've got to get off our roofs.

I will do what I can to make things right.

I remember waiting and waiting on Keri to come home one Saturday night when we lived in Nigeria. She and another young lady had taken the two-hour trip to Ibadan from our home in Ogbomosho to do the monthly shopping. That was before cell phones, so there was no way for her to check in. It got dark, and I knew she would not be on those dangerous roads after nightfall unless something had happened. I was terribly worried.

When she finally arrived, Keri told me the story. She had hit a Nigerian man, a pedestrian, with her car in Ibadan. The streets were crawling with people. He wasn't watching where he was going and stepped right off the curb into her car.

We missionaries had been told never to stop in case of an accident. Onlookers often assumed the driver was at fault, and sometimes a mob mentality would take over.

But Keri did stop. She stopped and took care of him.

He wasn't hurt too badly. Keri and her friend helped him into the car and drove to a nearby medical clinic. When she saw he was being treated, she left money for his care.

Keri could have rolled down the window after hitting him and called back, "I'm sorry!" That would have been more convenient and less risky. But that would not have been right for her.

She couldn't go on until she went back.

So, why did she take him to the clinic? She hadn't hit him on purpose, after all. And what did the money she left behind for the man's care represent? It was not a fee for her unintended harm to him. Hers was not payment of a penalty. It was simply something substantial to help him get better. She wanted to make things right.

Our history of racism, and its ongoing scourge, has hurt African Americans. And I want to help make things right.

It might begin with reading books and watching movies! Yes, one way to make things right is for people like me to read some books we might not normally read. The following are books I would recommend (particularly for my White friends). You might not like or agree with everything in these books, but I've found that reading only those things that affirm what I already believe doesn't teach me anything.

Parting Words to the Church on Race and Love, by John Perkins

Be the Bridge, by Latasha Morrison

White Too Long, by Robert Jones

Rediscipling the White Church: From Cheap Diversity to True Solidarity, by David W. Swanson

And what about movies? Keri and I have learned a lot by movies such as *Selma*, *Just Mercy*, *42*, and *Harriet* (about Harriet Tubman).

The following brief videos are helpful in understanding what is called “systemic racism.”

Tim Keller:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EhJJcTKTVGo&feature=youtu.be>

Phil Vischer (Creator of VeggieTales):

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2611898429058130>

A visit to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice (sometimes called the Lynching Memorial) in Montgomery would be a great learning event.

In addition to learning, we can take some practical steps toward “making things right.” Latasha Morrison, in *Be the Bridge*, talks about some of those steps. She speaks of creating opportunities for people whose educational, social, or career opportunities are limited. She tells the story of John Cummings, who bought Whitney Plantation in Louisiana and turned it into a place where guests could experience plantation life through the eyes of slaves. She suggests a predominantly White church could hire a person of color. Morrison also suggests one could take a job where he or she would be in the minority.

There are countless beautiful ways to make things right.

It might mean intentionally including historically black colleges and universities in the mix when a company is recruiting, or intentionally including minority-owned businesses when seeking bids for jobs. It might mean establishing scholarships for minority students. It might mean doing what a friend of mine in Virginia did—teaching young Black students to learn the game of golf, so they would have more opportunities in the world of sales.

People like me can help make things right, much like Keri did in Ibadan, Nigeria. Not because I *have* to, but because I *want* to. I can do something substantive to ensure equity, equal opportunity, for everyone.

I have worked with friends on a Statement of Unity and Calls to Action.

Some of you know that Dr. Darius Butler and I have been in a conversation among White and Black pastors around Huntsville, working sincerely toward unity among our races. One of our goals was the production of a Statement of Unity, and Action Steps that will take us forward. You will see that document as the Appendix at the end of the booklet. At the top of that Statement are found the words of Jesus' prayer in John 17: "*My prayer is that all of them may be one...that they may be brought to complete unity.*"

We ministers understand that the congregations we serve are Christians who have direct access to God. We know we speak for no one except ourselves. Yet, we have a calling and a responsibility as ministers to say "We believe." And every line in this statement begins with those two words, "*We believe.*"

Much of the Statement involves lament and repentance from White Pastors. That is because, at this juncture of history, the onus is on *us* to take the initiative toward healing.

That Statement, however, is only the beginning. It is something to rally around. Our intent never was to say something and then move on. Our intent always has been to work together, over the long haul, for positive change. We are now working on, and expanding, the "Calls to Action."

I am an advocate for the relocation of the confederate monument.

Many know that I spoke at a meeting of the Madison County Board of Commissioners, advocating for the relocation of the Confederate monument that sits on the grounds of our County Courthouse.

I always like it when people know exactly what I said about something. If you want to see the video of what I said, you may find it here at:

<https://www.facebook.com/WAFF48/videos/301086774396796>. (My comments begin at 49:35.) Oh, and apparently, even my prayer that opened the Commissioners' meeting (a prayer I had not planned on giving until the County Commissioner spotted me and invited me to pray) may have been misquoted. So, if you'd like to see that prayer, it is the first thing on the video.

Let me acknowledge that I believe the "destroy the statues" movement somehow got out of hand. It got so bad at one point I thought, "It's getting so crazy, people are going to want to tear down the statues of everyone except Jesus!" Then I heard there is a statue of *Jesus* in Europe someone indeed wanted to tear down! Yes, the "destroy the statues" movement got out of hand.

Nevertheless, I do believe the Confederate Monument on our Madison County courthouse grounds should be relocated.

Let me say a word or two about the soldiers it represents. Most of the boys in grey were not slaveowners. They were tradesmen, farmers, paupers. They were fighting for the only life they knew, defending their mother soil. Looking back, it is obvious their cause was immoral. They were products of their time, however, and it seems wrong to cast them all as heartless oppressors.

The social and political leaders of the South, on the other hand, knew the score. Their wealth and status were built on the pain and toil of people who had been dragged from their homes, sold in the market, and beaten into submission. We can claim no innocence on their behalf.

It's true that the Confederate soldiers were fighting for pride. I guess there always has been a commendable (and stubborn) Southern pride that resents being told what to do...or who we are. Candidly, the hair stands up on my neck when folks from the North make uninformed, elitist, stereotypical statements about my South.

It's also true that the Confederate soldiers were fighting for states' rights. Even today there are topics, such as marriage, that many would argue should be decided by states. And yet the primary *right* that Southern states were defending was the right to own slaves.

I would like to think that, had I been a pastor in the mid-1800's, I would have preached against the enslavement of humans. I would like to think that, had I been a young man, I would have refused to fight for slavery. Or that, had I been a Southern father, I would have refused to allow my sons to fight so that people could own other people.

Yet, deep in my heart I know that the pressure would have been so great, the realities of life so complex, that standing on high moral ground would have been difficult. So, I cannot condemn that Confederate soldier in whose memory the monument was built. Had I lived in his day, I probably would have fought alongside him, or at least supported him. I'm not proud of that, but I suppose it's true.

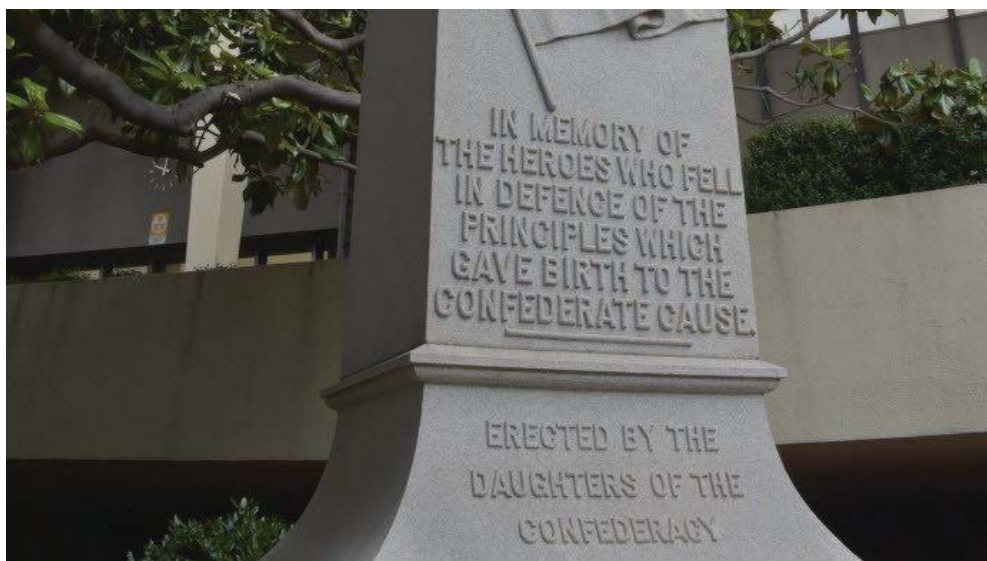
Having said all that, it is time to relocate the confederate monument.

For me, at a surface level, the monument represents a history I had nothing to do with. Frankly, had people not called my

attention to it, I would not even have known it is there on the courthouse lawn. And yet...

On the base of the confederate memorial are these words,

“In memory of the heroes who fell in defense of the principles which gave birth to the confederate cause.”



So, the monument is not just about young farmers and tradesmen laying down their tools, hugging their Mamas, and going off to fight for the Southland. It is about *the principles which gave birth to the confederate cause*.

I know in my heart that the primary and driving principle which gave birth to the confederate cause was not Southern pride or states' rights, but the willingness to divide our country over such a horrible thing as slavery.

I know in my heart the statue commemorates my Alabama ancestors being on the wrong side of a bad war.

And I know it is a painful image for my black friends.

Thus, I believe it should be re-located where it can represent our history in a suitable setting. There is a place for such an historic marker as that. But not at the very seat of our county's government.

I long for, and believe it's time for, deep conversations.

At a gathering in Nashville, a group of pastors, denominational leaders, and theological educators had an honest conversation about race. We had gathered to talk about the evangelization of North America, and realized that we'll have to be united racially to do that. But we felt we needed to hear from each other first. An informal sharing of perspectives followed.

A Hispanic man talked about what it is like to feel the angst that he feels nowadays in light of the immigration talk. He spoke of the fear, rational or not, that he is being watched. He noted that many people look at his brown skin and hear his accent and assume he is in the country illegally. It was helpful to hear that.

An African American man told us, "When I say 'Black Lives Matter' I am assuming all lives matter. But unless I name 'black lives' it feels to me like black lives do not matter." He was helping us know what it feels like when the color of one's skin makes him or her less of a person in the eyes of some.

A White man, a seminary professor, said, "Honestly, if you are a White man trying to get a position in academia you get frustrated with what feels like unfair quotas. It's challenging, in the world of academics, to be a White male and get passed over time after time for women and for people of color."

It was a beautiful moment...a moment in which people of three different ethnic groups were honest enough, and the room was safe enough, to be candid. We learned a lot about each other.

Is it time our two congregations started having similar conversations? Is it time we took our fellowship to the next level and shared our hearts as well as our refreshments? It seems so to me.

The Bible demands that God's people not just sit around talking about doing something...or go about our business...or remain in hiding.

Judges 4 and 5 tell the story of the oppression of Israel at the hand of the Canaanites. Judges 4:3 (NIV) reads, "Because he (Sisera, the Canaanite general) had nine hundred chariots fitted with iron and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the LORD for help. For twenty years the people of Israel had been subjugated by the Canaanites.

There follows the story of Deborah, spiritual and political leader of Israel, along with Barak, the military leader, and the battle between Israel and the people of Canaan over Israel's freedom.

For me, one of the most striking points of the story is the apathy of so many of the Israelites.

The nation of Israel was divided into twelve tribes. The tribes who joined in the fight are applauded in Judges 5. In the same chapter, those who did not join in the fight are raked over the coals.

We read, for example, in Judges 5:15 (NIV), "In the districts of Reuben there was much searching of heart." (The members of the tribe of Reuben sat around talking about what to do so long that they did nothing.) Verse 16 (NIV) reads, Why did you stay among the sheep pens to hear the whistling for the flocks? ("Why did you let yourselves get distracted?")

The chastisement of the uninvolved continues in verse 17 (NIV): "Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan. And Dan, why did he linger by the ships? Asher remained on the coast and stayed in his coves."

“Your brothers risked their lives,” the Bible says of the apathetic people, “while some of you either hid out or just went about your business.”

It is a shameful thing to sit on the sideline when there are urgent needs to be met and work to be done.

A time for action: It’s about flavor, not color.

When I think about a time for action, and what that action will require, I remember a story about Sylvester Croom.



Croom played football at Alabama. His first year on the team, 1971, was only the second year that African American young men played for Bear Bryant. Croom became an All-American.

In 2004 Sylvester Croom became the head football coach at Mississippi State, becoming the first Black football coach in the Southeastern Conference. When one of my favorite writers, Rick Bragg, interviewed Croom in his office in Starkville, the big man had a hard time not crying as he told of those who had given him a chance.

Sylvester Croom is a wonderful man. But Croom’s story began with his father...The Rev. Sylvester Croom, Sr.

Rev. Croom grew up in the 1940s in Tuscaloosa. Lynchings of black men were common enough that he grew up afraid that was how he was going to die.

He came to Huntsville for college, and became an All-American football player here at Alabama A&M.

When Sylvester Junior went to play at Alabama, his dad, Rev. Croom became the chaplain for Alabama's football team. In the words of Rick Bragg, "He invoked God on behalf of whites and blacks...but rarely Auburn."²⁹

Years earlier, Rev. Croom was raising his family in Tuscaloosa. At the time, like the rest of Alabama, it was deeply segregated. And there was a White man with an ice cream truck. He had the best ice cream in Tuscaloosa. So popular that White people and Black people lined up to get ice cream.

The White people were served out the front window.

The Black people were served out the back window.

And the White ice cream vendor believed that was wrong. He thought everybody ought to get their ice cream out of the same window. So, he went to Rev. Croom, and asked for advice.

Rev. Croom encouraged the ice cream man and told him, "Serve it from one door. And make it about flavor, not about color."

If our land is going to heal, it's going to require some White people saying, "I'm going to help make sure everybody gets served out of the same window." And it's going to require some wise Black people to help us figure that out.

I want to be part of that.

Conclusion

Frankly, my work on racial unity over the past several weeks has been difficult. To understand the perspective of my Black friends...and to help my White friends understand my perspective...has not been easy. To go deeper than we have gone before, to have conversations that previously have seemed taboo, to risk (and experience) disapproval from multiple directions has been tough.

It would have been much easier to issue platitudes, to say rather general things that every member of FBC Huntsville could agree on. But things that everyone can agree on are rarely substantial. Every significant social, cultural, or spiritual change I know of in history has resulted in disagreements, even division. It would never be my intent to hurt people, to shame people, or to divide people. But if I had watered down my words such that everyone in the congregation I serve could embrace them, I would have said nothing of real consequence.

At the same time, I have not been able to affirm everything that some of my Black friends, and even some of my fellow Black pastors, were saying. After all, everyone sees things from his or her particular perspective. I stretched at times, but I could not violate my understandings for the sake of agreement.

And yet, I had to say *something*. Remaining silent for fear of saying the wrong thing, or for fear of saying the right thing in a wrong way, would have made me complicit in racial disunity and inequality. I would not have been able to sleep well had I been spinelessly silent.

Lately, I have looked into the eyes of a number of my Black brothers and sisters, and I have felt the burden of their hearts. They are not Antifa. They are not anarchists. These are good,

faithful Christian pastors and laypersons who feel the weight of our still-divided country. They have experienced the negative consequences of that division in ways I have not.

I don't know the answer to our racial divide. And, undoubtedly, unavoidably, I will get some things wrong in my attempts to do right. But I will not do nothing. I will be in the arena, while the spectators' stands would be much more comfortable. I will preach, speak and write about this topic until I have no more breath.

When the last chapter of my life is written, if God gives me an opportunity to look back, I will be glad I stood in the gap. For I believe it was for that gap that God created me and to which He has called me.

Latasha Morrison wrote of an event atop Stone Mountain in Georgia. Though Stone Mountain sits on soil owned in the past by a KKK leader, and though for fifty years the KKK met atop that mountain for cross burnings, and though it symbolizes the Confederacy...

In the park, hundreds of pastors stood on top of Stone Mountain, that historic place of racism and white supremacy where crosses had once burned. There were pastors of all ethnicities: White, Black, Hispanic, Asian. White pastors confessed their churches' historic complicity in racism. Black pastors confessed their own prejudices, hate and anger. We heard one another, extended forgiveness to one another, and promised to change our ways. (Isn't change the core of repentance?) We lifted a new cross on the grounds where so many crosses had been burned in hate, a cross of unity representing hearts reconciled to God. It was a beautiful beginning, a hopeful step toward dismantling and deconstructing the deep roots of racism in our congregations and country.³⁰

I dream of that sort of unity.

And I am hopeful about our future.

I hope and believe my grandchildren will not experience race in the same way that my generation and previous generations did. They will not struggle, I hope and believe, with segregated places of worship, segregated institutions and segregated neighborhoods. In their adult world, I hope and believe, there will be unity and equity.

But I don't want to wait for that. I don't think we *have* to wait for that. It would be easy to say, "Let our grandkids solve the problem," but I believe we'd miss out on something beautiful if we were to do that.

I'm not Dr. Martin Luther King, but I have a dream too. A dream of racial unity and equality, and of the biblical version of justice. Like many of you, I have a dream...but dreams don't come true without the blessing of God...and I doubt God will bless us unless we roll up our sleeves and work hard, and endure criticism, and risk failure, and celebrate victories, and weep and laugh together.

A few months ago, I was playing golf with General Willie Williams, a good friend and a member of First Missionary Baptist Church. My drive had not gone as far as I wanted it to, and I was a long way from the green.

"I'll just lay up," I said, rather pitifully I imagine, looking at the big sand trap in front of the green. "I'm not going to go for it. I just can't get there."

Willie went into "General" mode. He walked over, looked me in the eye, and declared with authority, "You can *do* this."

Well, I reached into my bag and took out the only club that gave me a chance at hitting the ball far enough to get near the hole. And I took my best shot.

But I didn't land the ball on the green near the hole...

I landed it a little bit *beyond* the green! Farther than I thought I could!

“You can *do* this,” said the General. And I exceeded my expectations.

Well, Friends, we can *do* this. And this can be the time. We can be among the ones God uses to unite our races. And 2020 can be known in history not just as the year of the Coronavirus, but the year things changed in North Alabama. This can be the moment when hearts are transformed and structures are amended. This can be the era of racial unity, equality, and equity.

Empowered by Almighty God...redeemed by His grace...we can *do* this.

A Closing Prayer

The following is a prayer by Mary McLeod Bethune, the daughter of former slaves. Let's close with that...

Father, we call Thee Father because we love Thee. We are glad to be called Thy children, and to dedicate our lives to the service that extends through willing hearts and hands to the betterment of all mankind. We send a cry of Thanksgiving for people of all races, creeds, classes, and colors the world over, and pray that through the instrumentality of our lives the spirit of peace, joy, fellowship, and brotherhood shall circle the world. We know that this world is filled with discordant notes, but help us, Father, to so unite our efforts that we may all join in one harmonious symphony for peace and brotherhood, justice, and equality of opportunity for all men. The tasks performed today with forgiveness for all our errors, we dedicate, dear Lord, to Thee. Grant us strength and courage and faith and humility sufficient for the tasks assigned to us.³¹

APPENDIX

A Statement of Beliefs Surrounding Race and Inequality by White and Black Clergy in

North Alabama July, 2020

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, **that all of them may be one**, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, **that they may be one** as we are one—I in them and you in me—so **that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know** that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

(Jesus, in John 17:20-23)

Preamble

To formulate a statement on an issue as historically complex as race is challenging. Inevitably, some will find the statement below to be insufficient, while others will find it to be a bridge too far. Some will believe, for varying reasons, it does not express their convictions and thus will be unable to sign.

And yet, we have to start somewhere. The time is right for positive change; to delay would be negligent. Those of us who sign this statement invite our brothers and sisters into a conversation. We humbly offer this statement as an incentive for introspection, an invitation to a coalition, and as a catalyst for a movement that is bigger than all of us.

Our intent is to unite, not to divide...but to unite around matters of substance.

May God’s Spirit bless our imperfect efforts, and may His Kingdom come on earth.

The Statement

We believe the most fundamental human problem is sin.

We believe deeply, and preach passionately, that Jesus is the answer to our most fundamental problem.

We believe Christian discipleship is a lifelong process, and that we are at a critical moment of discipleship for the Church in America, particularly the White Church.

We believe the murders of such Black people as Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd have held up a mirror to our society, and that our reflection there has been sobering.

We believe white supremacy is not only a lamentable element of our history, but is also an undeniably horrific reality of our present. We stand against any expressions and symbols of white supremacy from yesterday or today.

We believe it is time to recognize and acknowledge the racial elements of our nation's history, and to lament the role that White churches have played in those realities.

We believe, particularly as White pastors, that White Christians who continue in their sins of prejudice and racism should repent and ask for God's forgiveness, and the forgiveness of our Black brothers and sisters, for our silence, complicity and any vestiges of racism remaining in our own hearts.

We believe the truth that Black lives matter, for the dignity, humanity, sanctity and equality of *all* lives are granted by God.

We believe we all need to be educated about the underlying structures of systemic racism, especially educational, health care, judicial, economic, religious, and governmental systems. And we must work together to eradicate any inequities.

We believe White and Black clergy must be guided by God's Spirit and the authority of Scripture. We further believe that White clergy have much to learn from the experience of Black clergy in identifying the problems and potential solutions needed to bring about racial justice and unity.

We believe it is time for all Christ-followers to act. It is especially time for clergy to use our pulpits, our pens, and any influence God may grant us, to effect change.

We thus commit ourselves to the work of healing the wounds of racism and injustice in all of their forms, and work toward a day when all of God's children will be treated with the dignity that is due to those of sacred worth.

We further commit ourselves to work toward the transformation, by God's grace, of both ourselves and our faith communities.

Signed*,

Calls to Action

Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. (1 John 3:18)

We believe it is time for action, and following are recommendations...

1) We call for intentional partnerships and fellowships between individual Black and White churches. Examples include First Missionary Baptist and First Baptist, Church Street Cumberland Presbyterian and Weatherly Heights Baptist, Union Hill Primitive Baptist and Latham United Methodist Church, and so on.

2) We call for the formation of a task force from among this group, made up of White and Black clergy, to work toward the relocation of the confederate monument presently located at the Madison County Courthouse.

3) We appreciate the difficulty of police officers' tasks, and the courage and integrity of most officers. Yet we call for the formation of a task force of White and Black clergy from among this group to advocate for rigorous training in area law enforcement agencies. We further support the independent review of police actions, when necessary, by the Huntsville Police Citizens Advisory Council.

4) We call for the formation of a task force of White and Black clergy to lead us in establishing ongoing opportunities to pray together, that God might continue to heal us and show us intentional steps we can take toward racial justice, equality and unity.

* We speak our individual convictions; not on behalf of our congregations.

¹ John Perkins, *One Blood: Parting Words to the Church on Race and Love*, p. 164

² 1 Corinthians 13:12, KJV

³ Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long*, p. 171. The “Racism Index” appears on pp. 167ff. of *White Too Long*. It includes attitudes on these topics: Confederate Symbols, Racial Inequality and African American Economic Mobility, Racial Inequality and the Treatment of African Americans in the Criminal Justice System, and Perceptions of Race, Racism, and Racial Discrimination.

⁴ *White Too Long*, p. 159

⁵ See also Michael Luo, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/american-christianitys-white-supremacy-problem>

⁶ See Phi Vischer’s video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGUwcs9qJXY> (Vischer is the creator of Veggie Tales.)

⁷https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/the-state-of-healthcare-in-the-united-states/racial-disparities-in-health-care/ The report continued: “In 2005, the Institute of Medicine—a not-for-profit, non-governmental organization that now calls itself the National Academy of Medicine (NAM)—released a report documenting that the poverty in which black people disproportionately live cannot account for the fact that black people are sicker and have shorter life spans than their white complements. NAM found that “racial and ethnic minorities receive lower-quality health care than white people—even when insurance status, income, age, and severity of conditions are comparable.”

“...For example, one study of 400 hospitals in the United States showed that black patients with heart disease received older, cheaper, and more conservative treatments than their white counterparts. Black patients were less likely to receive coronary bypass operations and angiography. After surgery, they are discharged earlier from the hospital than white patients—at a stage when discharge is inappropriate. The same goes for other illnesses. Black women are less likely than white women to receive radiation therapy in conjunction with a mastectomy. In fact, they are less

likely to receive mastectomies. Perhaps more disturbing is that black patients are *more likely* to receive *less desirable* treatments. The rates at which black patients have their limbs amputated is higher than those for white patients. Additionally, black patients suffering from bipolar disorder are more likely to be treated with antipsychotics despite evidence that these medications have long-term negative effects and are not effective.”

⁸ <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/hsph-in-the-news/health-disparities-between-blacks-and-whites-run-deep/>

⁹ <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/11/912044887/challenges-of-ensuring-diversity-in-coronavirus-vaccine-trials>

¹⁰ <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/nation/2020/09/09/as-black-woman-when-youre-pregnant-your-own-advocate/5754938002/>

¹¹ https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2019/p0905-racial-ethnic-disparities-pregnancy-deaths.html?_ga=2.67710677.510408404.1599882970-1818166147.1588876274

¹² There is a Johns Hopkins study titled “*Unconscious*” racial bias among doctors linked to poor communication with patients. The study reveals “new evidence that physician attitudes and stereotypes about race, even if unconscious, affect the doctor-patient relationship in ways that may contribute to racial disparities in health care.” See *Implicit Racial/Ethnic Bias Among Health Care Professionals and Its Influence on Health Care Outcomes: A Systematic Review*

¹³ See *Are Emily and Greg More Employable Than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination* (<https://www.nber.org/papers/w9873>); also <https://blog.criteriacorp.com/the-research-on-unconscious-bias-in-hiring/>; and <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/talent-acquisition/pages/researchers-new-study-method-catches-resume-bias.aspx>;

¹⁴ <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2010/08/03/data-show-racial-disparity-in-crack-sentencing>;

<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/sp/1003.pdf>;
<https://www.freedomworks.org/content/fair-sentencing-act->

[retroactivity-addressing-sentencing-disparity-crack-cocaine-vs-powder](#);

¹⁵ In his State of the Union address in 2018, President Trump said this about the “First Step Act,” an attempt at criminal justice reform: “This legislation reformed sentencing laws that have wrongly and disproportionately harmed the African-American community.” See also <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/one-year-after-the-first-step-act/>

¹⁶ Philip Yancey, *Soul Survivor*, 36.

¹⁷ *White Too Long*, p. 57.

¹⁸ *White Too Long*, p. 86.

¹⁹ There are at least two incidences of slaves being turned out of the church: An entry from August 5, 1820 reads, “Excluded Mr. Kinard Peter for the sins of running away from his master.” The May, 1811, entry reads, “Censured Brother Pruet’s Frank for stealing corn.” Frank, a slave belonging to Mr. Pruet, was excommunicated, but restored in 1816.

²⁰ Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, pp. 124-125.

²¹ As an example, see <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/when-decor-is-more-than-decor>;
<https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/breaking/ct-met-petition-art-merchandise-mart-20180509-story.html>

²² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/white%20privilege>

²³ *One Blood: Parting Words to the Church on Race and Love*, p. 117.

²⁴ *One Blood: Parting Words to the Church on Race and Love*, p. 37.

²⁵ Latasha Morrison, *Be the Bridge*, pp. 78-79.

²⁶ *White Too Long*, p. 86.

²⁷ <https://www.npr.org/2019/06/21/734385329/nora-mcinerney-what-does-moving-forward-look-like-after-loss>

²⁸ *White Too Long*, p. 54. Jones describes a moment at the 1995 annual convention of Southern Baptists: “The 1995 convention also

saw Reverend Gary Frost of Youngstown, Ohio, elected to second vice-president, making him the first African American to reach that level of leadership. Shortly after the resolution passed with only twelve minutes of discussion, Frost rose to the podium to play out a piece of contrived cultural theatre that seemed to imply that a kind of magical reconciliation had instantaneously occurred. Frost issued a brief declaration: ‘On behalf of my black brothers and sisters, we accept your apology, and we extend to you our forgiveness in the name of our Lord and savior, Jesus Christ.’ Enthusiastic applause erupted from the overwhelmingly white delegates. In less than fifteen minutes, 150 years of Southern Baptist white supremacy was seemingly absolved.”

²⁹ Rick Bragg, *My Southern Journey*, p. 241.

³⁰ *Be the Bridge*, pp. 128-129.

³¹ *One Blood: Parting Words to the Church on Race and Love*, p. 150

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

THE *Messenger*

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No. 3

WE ACCEPT YOUR INVITATION, DR. SCRUGGS

March 1, 1984



Dear Ralph,

... our people enjoyed you and your choir very much also. Each one with whom I have spoken shares the same feeling. I would like for us to continue this type of feeling. I would like for us to continue this type of fellowship. In fact, it would be great if you could bring your entire congregation to be with us on the 4th Sunday night in February of 1985.

(Excerpt of a letter from Dr. Julius Scruggs, Pastor, FBC Blue Springs)

FBC Blue Springs and FBC Huntsville
Joint Worship
February 24, 1985 — 7:15 p.m.



“IT HAPPENED BECAUSE OF A FUNERAL.”

THAT’S HOW DR. RALPH LANGLEY DESCRIBED THE LONG-LASTING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OUR TWO CONGREGATIONS. IT WAS EARLY 1984, AND FIRST BAPTIST HAD A GENTLEMAN, A MEMBER OF FIRST MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH, ON THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH PRAYER LIST. DR. LANGLEY, THEN PASTOR OF FIRST BAPTIST, TOOK A LARGE PILE OF PRAYER CARDS TO HIS ROOM IN THE HOSPITAL. DR. LANGLEY TOLD THE STORY...

WHEN HE DIED HIS WIDOW TURNED TO ME AND SAID, “WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO HELP WITH HIS FUNERAL?” I ANSWERED, “YES, BUT I WILL ONLY DO IT AT YOUR PASTOR’S REQUEST.” WELL, AFTER THE WIDOW SPOKE TO HIM THE PASTOR CALLED ME ON THE PHONE—DR. JULIUS SCRUGGS—AND HE SAID, “I WOULD LOVE FOR YOU TO CO-OFFICIATE WITH ME.”

WE DID AND IN THE PROCESS I SAID TO HIM, “DR. SCRUGGS, I WISH YOU WOULD COME FILL MY PULPIT SOMETIME.” HE SAID, “I WOULD BE HONORED...CAN I BRING MY CONGREGATION?”

THAT BEGAN THE MARRIAGE BETWEEN FIRST BAPTIST—BLUE SPRINGS AND FIRST BAPTIST—GOVERNORS DRIVE. IT MADE A FRONT-PAGE PICTURE STORY HERE IN THE PAPER. IT HELPED TO BUILD A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE RACES AND I THINK IT HELPED TO KEEP BULL CONNER IN BIRMINGHAM.

OUR FIRST JOINT SERVICE WAS ON FEBRUARY 26, 1984. THE TRUST AND FELLOWSHIP THAT HAVE DEVELOPED OVER THE YEARS MAKES THIS CONVERSATION ABOUT RACIAL UNITY POSSIBLE.

