

Christian Practices for the Journey toward Shalom

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How can Christians come together to talk about matters of race? The problems seem intractable. While the journey toward Shalom will be difficult and often painful, the ancient Christian practices of stability, hospitality, and foot-washing can help us on the way.

Meditation

The lack of safe places to discuss racial issues in the secular world means that Christians should work harder to create safe places in our churches.... Honest dialogue in a Christian setting is vital since our faith teaches us the role of human depravity in the development of racism. We will understand not only that people of other races may be insensitive to our perspective on racial issues, but that we may be insensitive to their perspective as well.

- George Yancey

Reflection

“Race is hard to talk about,” Victor Hinojosa readily admits, “in large part because we carry our cultural and racial expectations with us into the life of the Church.” In America, Christians have not been able to overcome several barriers erected by their racialized culture. One barrier is fear—of being labeled a racist or of not being taken seriously. Another is what Hinojosa calls the vice of ecclesial sloth—the expectation that in church we should find peace and comfort, and no conflict. Most congregations remain segregated by choice, because racial groups find it so much easier to do church with people like themselves. But peace and personal comfort should not be our ultimate goals, Hinojosa insists. Reconciliation is not easy. To be reconciled to one another, we must “practice confession and forgiveness in difficult and painful ways. In the Church we have the chance to take seriously our sins, corporate and individual, and to deal with the structural and individual nature of racism and our racialized society.” Hinojosa commends these three Christian practices that go hand-in-hand with honest confession and forgiveness:

- **The practice of stability**—staying with a group of people when we want to move on—is crucial because racial reconciliation is a longterm process requiring deep and sustained contact with other racial groups. It takes commitment to foster the kind of community where racial issues can be discussed. The vow of stability taken in certain classic and new monastic communities is an example for all Christians of the consistency necessary for racial reconciliation.
- **The practice of true Christian hospitality** is hard work, requiring us not merely to tolerate or be nice to others, but to welcome them into community. This is so different from the sentimentalized and commercialized form of hospitality that is popular in our culture. Rightly practiced, hospitality builds up the Church by uniting individuals’ distinct gifts of the Spirit.
- **The ancient practice of foot washing** is a very uncomfortable experience for everyone—both those who wash and those who are washed. It forces us to admit that we are not self-sufficient—that we must serve others and accept others’ service. When practiced across racial lines, foot washing is a powerful reminder of our unity in Christ.

At our baptism, we take on a new identity as citizens of God's kingdom. This is why the Apostle Paul proclaims, "there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, and free; but Christ is all and in all!" (Colossians 3:11). Our identity in the body of Christ is more essential than any racial, ethnic, national, familial, or professional identity. "When we are called to remember our baptismal vows, we are called to remember who, and whose, we are," Hinojosa concludes. "We do so when we engage in these other formative practices of stability, hospitality, and foot washing as well."