**What Vigilance Requires of Us: Repair the Broken Walls**

*Isaiah 58:12. Your sons and daughters will rebuild the cities that were destroyed long ago. And you will build again on the old foundations. You will be called, One Who Repairs Broken Walls. You will be called, One Who Makes City Streets Like New Again.*  (NIRV)

Requirements of vigilance call communities of faith to attend to the hidden trap of making “reconciliation” the goal of social justice or conceiving of it as an adequate means to realizing the vision of the beloved community. For, reconciliation cannot be had without the prior work of reparation, repairing what is wrong with race relations. What is wrong with race relations **is** racism, the legacy received and active in all aspects of our lives, in all institutions, including the church.

Reconciliation cannot be had until we address the underlying causes of race-separation and make repair. We cannot repair what we do not first understand to be broken. We start, then, with an open-eyed understanding that we live in a state of brokenness and separation. After acknowledging that, we need to ask, Why is that so? What brought us to this place of separation and alienation and keeps us here? What history? What particulars in that history created injury? We ask, What harm (material and spiritual) the injury itself caused and continues to cause? We need to ask, What ways of conceiving who we are and who the Other is contributes to ongoing separation – what values espoused, what images and beliefs held contributes to racial estrangement? But especially, we need to examine our practices – racial practices that continue to uphold and maintain unjust social arrangements and systems of rewards and distribution of social goods (material, psychological, and spiritual).

Vigilance requires a reexamination of our frames of understanding (our paradigms). Reconciliation has been a central value and frame of understanding for Christians. However, reconciliation absent reparation (repair) has not worked. It must be reexamined.

The following, modified and re-ordered excerpts from Jennifer Harvey 2014, *Dear White Christians: For those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation,* provides the foundational concept, “reconciliation.” This concept will assist us in the re-examination required.

**Reconciliation Paradigm and Its Failure**

A reconciliation paradigm dominates the way justice-committed Christians understand race and think about the problem of racism. This paradigm laments the reality of racial division (or separation) in our churches and faith communities and sees this division as a primary indication of racism. This paradigm thus advocates a pursuit of just racial togetherness across lines of racial difference as a central ethic in Christian life through which racism will be eradicated.

Reconciliation has had a powerful hold on the white Christian imagination. Rooted in our Christian understanding of the beloved community vision, especially as articulated by Martin Luther King, Jr., that emerged during the civil rights movement, as well as in our efforts to better embrace and value the racial differences that seem to divide us, we speak about robust and just interracial togetherness as that toward which we need to journey in our efforts to realize a racially transformed church.

The reconciliation paradigm has failed us. Our emphasis on reconciliation misses critical aspects of what race is, and as a result it causes those of us who rely on it to fundamentally misunderstand important truths about the nature of racism and racial division.

The fact that we have been working for interracial, multiracial, diverse and just reconciled faith communities for some time and **have yet** to see almost any sustained movement toward realizing such communities is a powerful indictment of the adequacy of reconciliation. Moreover, our failure to have realized these communities should also command our attention and lead us to the insight that, perhaps, something different is requires.

More powerful still is the reality that in clinging to a reconciliation paradigm for understanding race, we have basically ignored what actually transpired in this nation. The final years of the civil rights movement were anything but peaceable between Blacks and whites who had been allies in the movement. In fact, racial alienation deepened in this period. It deepened precisely because Black Power’s claim that the civil rights movement had **missed critical pieces** in the racial puzzle was regarded by many Black Christians as fundamentally correct. But white Christians would have none of it.

When we continue in our reconciliation visions today, then, we refuse to remember this history. We ignore the betrayal and devastation Black Christians felt when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated and the fact that even King had begun questioning whether he had misjudged and been overly optimistic about the state of the white soul. We miss that the Black anger and white denial, that characterized the end of the civil rights movement, remain powerful in our relationships today because white Christians have not collectively gone back, re-engaged, and apologized for our recalcitrance.

In both mainline Protestant denominations and in social justice committed evangelicalism, there exist some contradictions in the arguments made regarding the importance of unity and diversity. On the one hand, the reconciliation paradigm seems to claim that racial identities do not innately pertain to who we are as human beings created in God’s image. This version of reconciliation assumes that our separateness betrays a failure to understand our shared humanity as something that transcends our differences. The implications of this assumption seem to be the reconciliation would come if we honored the truth that at our core we are one and the same.

On the other hand, these Christians argue that we must do better at learning about, understanding, and appreciating real differences among racial groups. This claim assumes that separateness comes from failing to value diversity enough. Reconciliation in this version becomes a matter of genuinely embracing *particularities*, or the ways in which *we are not the same*. This is quite a different take on what is at stake in calls for interracial reconciliation than the emphasizing of our shared humanity.

Whether understood primarily as a problem of not recognizing our essential sameness or undervaluing our innate differences, these contradictions are worth noting.

The contradictions might shed light on why so much attention and so many attempts to teach and advocate for racial reconciliation – and the diversity, inclusion, and proliferation of meaningful interracial relationships by which we apparently would know it had it been realized – have failed to result in the kind of Christian fellowship for which many of us claim to long. At this point, however, it is sufficient merely to emphasize that despite the contradictions just named, there is general consensus among white Christians interested in racial justice that reconciliation sought through committed attempts to cultivate just interracial relations of mutual regard, remains a primary appropriate response to the problem of racism.

The reconciliation paradigm is infused with a universalist ethic – notions of a common humanity, a universal humanity, emphasizing basic sameness, downplaying difference and particularity. That is the heart of the problem. This is explains in the two major sections below.

**The Universalist Ethic**

To speak of a *universalist ethic* is to describe a standard presumed to be so truthful and essential (so universal) that it can be legitimately brought to bear in regard to all of us, no matter our particular racial identity. A universalist ethic presumes that the fundamental common denominator on which we should focus is our sameness—on what it is we supposedly all share.

A universalist ethic tends to use a good deal of “we” language to speak about all of us in relationship to racial brokenness and division. The internal logic of its universality means it cannot effectively employ the language of distinction, such as “we whites” and “we African Americans.” Rather, it has to assume at an underlying level that Black and white racial identities are somehow parallel.

Digging more deeply into what race actually is begins to shed light on why a universalist ethic (and the reconciliation paradigm that depends on it) is bound to fail us.

Note, even if it is true on some abstract level that underneath our differences we are the same, none of us actually knows what that means. Have you ever engaged a human who had no sex, no gender, no race, no embodiment? We only ever know people as humans through particularities. In other words, the “truth” of our human sameness has virtually no meaningful impact on day-to-day lives. It is a relatively useless abstraction.

But whether universalism assumes our racial difference is just a veneer of some fundamental sameness or asserts that our differences are equally beautiful and thus to be equally valued, it fails to describe the actual reality of race belying both of those assumptions.

In political and moral terms, “white” is clearly not an identity that is an easy or obvious parallel to Black, Latino, Native American, or any other racial/ethnic identity. What we share in our diversity is not some innate identity category that God created and we therefore need to always affirm. What we share are histories and social structures—and those that mark the white/Black/Native American divide are particularly deep.

We need an ethic that both insists and focuses on the distinct relationship and responsibility of whites for the particular problem of whiteness.

**The Particularist Ethic**

Problems with the reconciliation paradigm and the assumptions about difference on which it rests become most clear when we move away from a “*universalist*” way of talking about race and difference and, instead, bring a “*particularist ethic*” to bear on the discussion. A particularist ethic recognizes that there is **no** one shared standard against which we might measure or interpret our experiences of race, nor one to which we may all be held similarly accountable. Rather, we can begin to speak of the “*particular*” problem white racial identity brings to bear on reconciliation, the particular relationship of white people to matters of race and racial injustice. (As well, we can speak of the particular relationship of people of color to matters of race and racial injustice.)

When we move away from “*universalisms*” and begin to attend to a “*particularist ethic,”* incoherence is not the result. Rather, allowing particularity or distinction to be our starting point allows us to analyze and meaningfully discuss the differences between blackness and whiteness. As well as to ascertain the different work required of differently racialized groups in the context of white supremacy.

Another important outcome of attending to particularism is that the structures, histories, and injustices that result in such particularity—that, in fact, give our identities (and our agency in response to those realities) distinct meanings—become central in our attempts to envision and work for racial justice. This focus leads us to a very different and more adequate paradigm for responding to race than the reconciliation paradigm can offer. In short, given the construction of race and U.S. racial history, only a particularist ethic is able to support the kind of understanding imperative for meaningful and effective responses to our *actual* racial situation.

The racial problem, or the problem of racism—the actual racial situation in our communities—is not separateness itself. And togetherness is certainly no solution. Separateness is merely a symptom.

The real problem is what our differences represent, how they came to be historically, and what they mean materially and structurally still. Racial separateness is evidence of the extent to which our differences embody legacies of unjust material structures. Racial separateness is a to-be-expected outcome of the reality that our differences literally contain still painful and violent histories that remain unredressed and unrepaired. Racial separateness reveals that our differences are the very manifestation of ongoing forms of racial injustice and white supremacy.

Racism and racial injustice are actual material conditions that shape all of our lives and mediate all of our relationships with one another. These material conditions, which began in the era of enslavement and continue powerfully still today, are the source of our alienation from each other. Loving difference without addressing these conditions as a way of demonstrating that love is a recipe for failure.

If race is produced in significant part by the social structures in which we live, the histories we inherit, and our agency-filled responses to all of this, then it is fair to say that the white soul is in great peril. Race connects our face to our soul.

Recognizing that race is a social construction helps us to be clear that setting our souls right is not, and cannot be, merely a matter of coming to the right ideas and attitudes on difference. …Setting our souls right can be done only through justice-filled engagement with and responses to those very same structures that racialized our human bodies in the first place and continue to racialize us on a daily basis.

In order for us to meaningfully and coherently develop a vision of justice-filled responses to the realities of race that exist in the distinct meanings, structures, and histories our identities represent, it would seem we need at least two things. First, we need to embrace an ethic that can meaningfully take up the particular problem of whiteness. Second, we need to embrace the shift in focus this particularist ethic demands.

Rather than setting our sights on the other who is racially distinct from us and from whom we are alienated—seeing transformation of that relationship as primary in our justice work—we need to set our sights on the sources of the alienation: seeing transformation of unjust structures and disruption of our complicity in those structures as primary in our justice work.

In turning our attention ***away*** from racial difference as the ethically meaningful nodule, ***to*** race as a social construction, turns our attention toward the specific, concrete material and structural realities contained in race; toward what race means in the day-to-day living of those of us who are racialized (which is all of us in this nation). These realities become the primary focus of our racial justice work in ways that disentangle us from the problems and conundrums in which we find ourselves when reconciliation (and inclusion and diversity) is our primary focus.

Rather than attempting to explain how and why we must appreciate the difference of whiteness, we learn to speak of the meaning of whiteness in terms of the criminal justice system. We can say that to be white means it is more likely our white children, siblings, or parents will be given the opportunity for substance abuse treatment if they need it or let off with a warning if for some reason they are stopped and found in possession of illegal substances.

When we say this, we bring to the surface the profound intersection between white supremacist structures and our own racialization as white people. But rather than being immobilized and confused by our identity, our lens focuses on the structures that create the moral crisis of being white.

Race as a social construction turns us away from abstract attempts to improve our relationships with people of color and toward concretely engaging the material realities that mediate and alienate our interracial relationships.

Non-Native Christians are remiss if we focus the bulk of our attention on attempting to appreciate and value the diversity and beauty of Native American lives and communities without concretely challenging the structures and systems actively devastating Native communities. Likewise, without clear, sustained attention to the actual nature and historical record of white relations with Native, Black, Latino, Chinese, and Japanese peoples, reconciliatory attempts will ring hollow at best.

Yet the analytical framework I have built to this point works, nonetheless, if we recognize the analysis that categories of difference are constructed through histories of violence and structural relationships and that a reparations paradigm demands acute response to and redress for these.

*Constructionism* (i.e., attention to how a social, material reality is constructed in historical time and place – acts, laws, events, wars, norms, policies) enables a reparations paradigm to hone in on what our differences mean and enables complex and realistic readings of these meanings. Such readings enable us to make decisions about where to focus our activism and anti-racist challenges, and in regard to which issues. For example, we might ask, How are relationships between whites in location “X” constituted in relation to “Y” ethnic or racial group? What is the history and structural nature of that relationship? Which social issues and material realities need to be targeted for transformation as a first step in a journey toward a different, reconstructed interracial relationship?

**Shift toward a Reparations Paradigm:**

Constructionism invites specific and concrete answers to these questions. Thus, the material and concrete meanings of constructed racial categories—as opposed to the interesting differences that seem to naturally go along with different phenotypes—is always to be the starting point for how we think about justice. This criterion already shifts us away from the reconciliation paradigm and toward a reparative one.

Second, the reparations paradigm is constituted by an ethic of particularity. Insisting we speak in particular terms about race makes it possible to contend directly with whiteness and to engage in racial justice work that takes seriously the different responsibilities we have in that work.

White racial identity is, in our national context, an identity of domination. Particularity, therefore, relieves us from the need to talk about race in such flawed, universalist terms. Thereby, the morally and politically meaningful differences between whites and Native peoples (or between whites and other racio-ethnic groups) become the entrée point for addressing our race and our relations. That entrée point will always reveal and demand specific and distinct responses to those material structures relative to our different relationships to them.

Addressing and dismantling the material structures that underlie the systemic racism and the domination system and creating just structures, undoing and giving the resources to reconstruct are all the work and focus of the reparations paradigm.

Reparations as a paradigm necessarily and immediately invokes a perpetrator and a victim, an unjust beneficiary and an aggrieved party in ways that reconciliation simply does not. Recognizing this truth, one may put it this way, reparations are not a guilt offering or stewardship… Reparations are a simple call to begin paying back that which has been stolen, what is justly owed to those stolen from.

The moral logic of reparations is justice. A debt has been incurred, it remains owed and repayment of that debt is morally due. The moral logic of reparations is decidedly not charity or compassion.

A reparations paradigm assumes that unjust material conditions structure the relationship between perpetrator and victims, and as a result it calls for bi-party participation in a process seeking justice. It insists that healing the relationship between perpetrators and victims requires restructuring the material conditions through which the parties relate to one another (repairing and redressing the specific conditions that caused and continue to cause harm). Such healing work is particularly incumbent upon the harm-creators.

The reparations paradigm insists on a particularist ethic for approaching race. This ethic acknowledges our real differences as the only places from, and through, which we can and must begin to understand and reconfigure our relationships to one another. It insists that our differences are a result of a history we share, one that puts us in intimate relationship with one another. But this is the intimacy of oppressor and oppressed, a relationship of a deep alienation. Unredressed histories and social structures continue to mediate our lives, leaving us with violent, alienated, harmful (to Indigenous Peoples, Black folk, and other oppressed People of Color), and unjustly enriching (to whites) relationships.

Reconciliation thus is not – and cannot be – the first goal or work required. Repairing those structures and attending to those living histories is the first work. And it is work for which we are differently responsible, work that insists a repentant posture of repair and redress is incumbent on the oppressor. It is work that we have no right or ability to morally “see beyond” (e.g., demand that forgiveness come first), unless and until we have done the work with all our might, because this work should fill the entirety of the lens through which we see ourselves and our actual situation for now.

Because the reparations paradigm recognizes the brokenness comes from specific harms done, whiteness come plainly into view. We must embark on a journey in which we contend with the actual history out of which our racial identities and relationships emerged, and with the way this history lives on in the present.