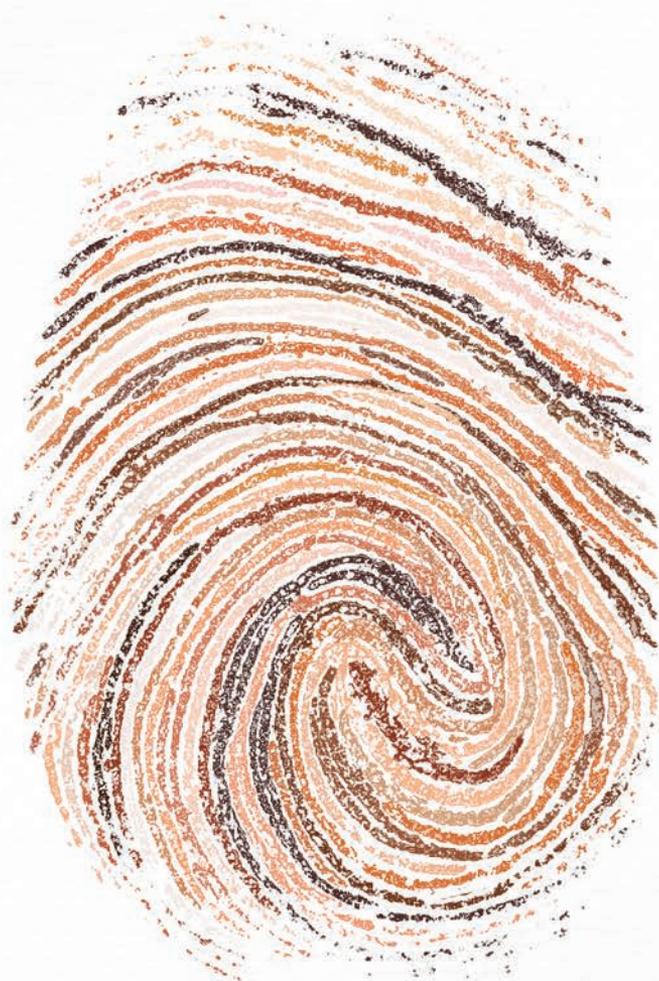


INTENSIONAL

KINGDOM ETHNICITY IN A DIVIDED WORLD



D. A. HORTON

D. A. Horton is one of the great young minds in the American church. *Intensional* is theologically rich, incredibly practical, and inspiring.

DR. DERWIN L. GRAY, lead pastor at Transformation Church, author of *The High Definition Leader*

Horton has blessed Christ followers with a needed exhortation, framed in biblical language and categories. Perhaps this will give the saints pause in the world of needless jabs and barbs on social media. Chapter 7 is especially helpful with its categories and questions. Prayerfully, this book will lead to us ramping down the rhetoric and ramping up the thinking! Horton has served the body of Christ—yea, the Christ that prayed that His followers would be united.

KEVIN L. SMITH, executive director of the Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware

D. A. Horton is the rare Christian leader whose superior intelligence and eloquence are matched and even exceeded by his exemplary Christian character. Those qualities come through in this magnificent little book grounding ethnicity in the imago dei and urging the Christian community toward ethnic conciliation. Even—and especially—for the reader who might disagree with certain aspects of Horton's treatment of this controversial topic, *Intensional* offers much food for thought. Highly recommended.

BRUCE RILEY ASHFORD, author of *Letters to an American Christian*

D. A. Horton is well positioned to address the issue of ethnic conciliation and the reduced gospel that has enabled churches to perpetuate ethnic divisions throughout the North American church. D. A. is an outstanding thinker and missional practitioner, and in this book, he brings these skills to bear on this crucial topic. A worthy read.

ALAN HIRSCH, author of numerous books on missional leadership, organization, and spirituality; founder of 100Movements, 5Q Collective, and Forge International

In my opinion, one of the greatest challenges facing the body of Christ in today's world is how to navigate with grace and wisdom an ever-increasing cultural divide between ethnicities within the church. In *Intensional*, D. A. Horton has given us an incredible work that will help Christians move forward with compassion, humility, and true repentance regarding those longtime ethnic tensions. This is a timely, much-needed book that I cannot recommend highly enough.

MATT CARTER, pastor of preaching at Austin Stone Community Church

When I was an assimilated soldier in the army, I only saw green—and Jesus was green, too, since that's where I thought I met him. When I transitioned out of the army and into full-time ministry, I thought Jesus didn't see our colors, just our hearts. Jesus then began to begin to chip away at me and brought me to the reality of my own heart.

Intensional is a powerfully written perspective for the reader who *chooses* to consider and engage in the conversation about ethnicity and the people of God. D. A. Horton goes into the depths of where the issues are: in the heart. This is a great resource for those who are really willing to look and engage. I'll be chewing on this for a bit; this book has been a breath of fresh air as I've been trying to figure out how to engage and implement these ideas in my ministry. I am encouraged to have had the chance to read this.

VICTOR HUGO PADILLA, *The Navigators*—Military

I'm so grateful for my friend D. A. Horton, who has provided redemptive language that enables us to engage across the ethnic divide in a way that glorifies God and honors our fellow image bearers. His is a needed prophetic voice for such a time as this.

BRYAN LORITTS, lead pastor at Abundant Life, author of *Insider Outsider*

In a world where things are often black and white—even in the church—it’s so refreshing to hear yet another voice, a powerful one, that can add to the greats of our time, saying things others avoid, yet with love. To use D. A.’s own words, “The complexion of America is browning both socially and spiritually.” As a Latino, I’m so grateful for this voice, perspective, and transparency to the church from his heart! #EnHoraBuena

RUDY RUBIO, pastor at Reformed Church LA

D. A. Horton has yet again given the church an accessible work to help Christians pursue the unification of all things and all people in Christ—and to help them make this pursuit a normal rhythm of their Christian discipleship. Readers may not agree with everything herein, but they will learn much from this gifted brother!

JARVIS J. WILLIAMS, associate professor of New Testament Interpretation,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

I’m thankful for the voice of my friend D. A. Horton, for such a time as this. With pastoral care and prophetic courage, he provides an honest assessment of the church’s need for “ethnic conciliation.” *Intensional* is as much a compass as it is a magnifying glass. It helps us better see the sins of partiality and color blindness in the church in America, and it also provides tangible ways for Christians to live out their Kingdom identity. Pick up this book, and you’ll find that there’s much work to do—and a reason for esperanza (hope).

ERIC RIVERA, lead pastor at The Brook

From the very beginning of this book, I sensed that this is what the church needs—honesty, hope, and direction in a fractured time here in America and abroad. Let us remember to be intentional in the midst of the tension.

OSAZE MURRAY, Bowie State campus director, The Navigators

God has lovingly but firmly compelled me to labor for “ethnic conciliation,” D. A. Horton’s preferred terminology, as opposed to “racial reconciliation”—“ethnic” because our construct of race is biblically unsound and practically harmful, and “conciliation” because “reconciliation” assumes we were previously living in unity. This pursuit has sometimes left me feeling like Horton, “flirting with the belief that hate [has] won.” But Horton brings the *esperanza* (hope) of the gospel into everyday experiences. His life experiences and biblical scholarship deliver practical and eternal guidance. By the end of the book, I’d been inspired to engage more deeply, convicted enough to change, and equipped enough to move. Please, my friends, read this book and join us.

BRIAN JENNINGS, author of *Dancing in No Man’s Land*

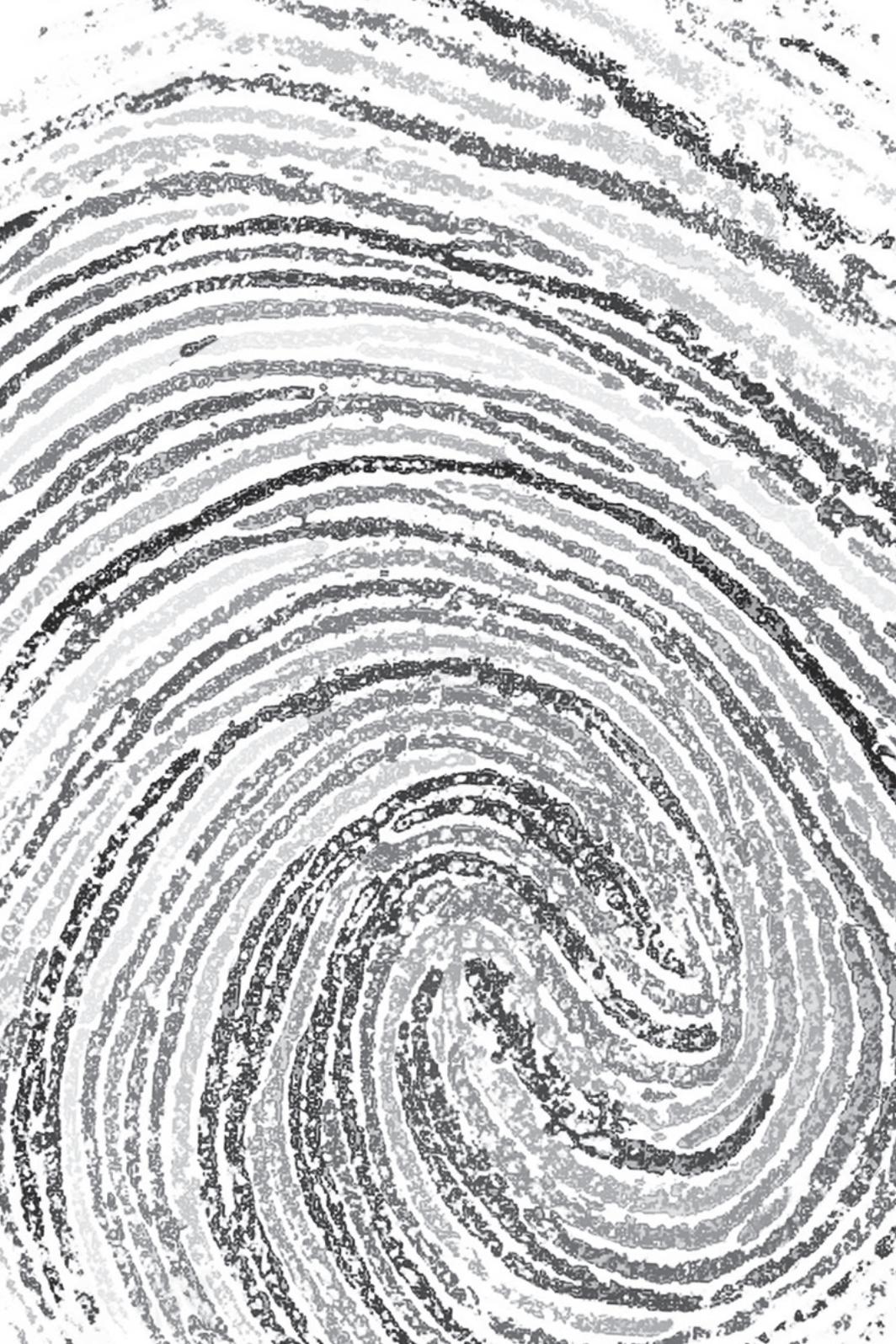
In calling readers to biblical conciliation, Horton challenges the familiar and faulty binary of racial idolization on the one hand and color blindness on the other. If taken to heart, the theological and ecclesial road map offered by Horton will do much to restore the witness and testimony of the church in the United States during this divided time.

ROBERT CHAO ROMERO, J.D., PH.D., pastor at Matthew 25 Movement, associate professor of Chicana/o Studies and Asian American Studies at UCLA

Horton’s powerful voice clarifies how the gospel of Jesus Christ exposes and heals racism, hate, and cultural compromise. Horton draws us to ethnic conciliation through Christ’s redemption; his call to the church resounds with unrelenting hope. Readers who long for scriptural foundations and practical expressions of ethnic conciliation in their communities will find insight here. Highly recommended.

DR. HEATH A. THOMAS, dean of the College of Theology and Ministry at Oklahoma Baptist University

I N T E N S I O N A L



INTENSIONAL

KINGDOM ETHNICITY IN A DIVIDED WORLD

D. A. HORTON



*A NavPress resource published in alliance
with Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.*



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INTRODUCTION

Saturday, August 9, 2014. Police officer Darren Wilson shoots and kills Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, igniting a firestorm. Long-simmering tensions boil over. And the church begins to honestly wrestle with the tension between law-enforcement officers and citizens of color, the value of African American lives, and how to respond to the anger in the hearts of Millennials and Generation Z.

As my family and I watched the nonstop coverage in the aftermath of Michael Brown's death, I reached out to a dear friend, activist and rapper Thi'sl. Thi'sl was working to gather the people in West St. Louis, Ferguson, and Florissant together for a time of expressing themselves, lamenting as a community, and hearing a message of hope.¹ I lived in Atlanta, and he asked if my wife, Elicia, and I would be willing to drive up to shepherd bleeding hearts alongside pastors in St. Louis.

When Elicia and I arrived at Friendly Temple Missionary Baptist Church in West St. Louis, we joined longtime friends and other pastors in the back room to pray before the event. Then singer Brian Owens opened with soul-stirring renditions of two of my all-time favorite songs, “People Get Ready” by Curtis Mayfield and “A Change is Gonna Come” by the legendary Sam Cooke. The room briefly filled with comradery and hope—but the optimism was short-lived. Unresolved tension would soon fill the room.

The other pastors and I sat on the stage, and Thi’sl set up a microphone at the base of the stairs for anyone who had something to say or a question to ask the pastors. Within a matter of seconds, the line ran down the middle aisle all the way to the doors of the church. When the young man who was third in line grabbed the microphone, none of us knew that his words would shift the course of the entire evening.

He gripped the mic and looked at all of us pastors. “No disrespect to any of you men,” he said, “but I’m going to talk to my people.” He then turned to the crowd and began to let out his anguish and pain—not only about the killing of “Mike Mike” (as the Brown family and friends of Mike Brown affectionally called him) but also about the hatred that had long held the community of Ferguson hostage.

The people hung on every word that came out of this

young man's mouth. Amid his passion-filled speech, I realized that his turned back represented the community's true feelings toward the church and its leaders.

I'm a Millennial. Many in my generation view the church as an absentee parent. The hostility, hurt, and disappointment I heard from younger Millennials and Gen Zers when they talked about the church that night was similar to what I've heard from young people who grew up without their biological father. These young people were asking, Where was the church when their cousins were killed in the streets, or when their lights were turned off, or when they had no food in the refrigerator? These urban youth grew up just trying to survive the city streets of St. Louis, and the church hadn't been there for them then. Why did they need the church now?

For the next two hours, none of the people from the community acknowledged the pastors on the stage. I listened to a community in pain: members of the Brown family, Mike Brown's lifelong barber, police officers of color. The grief and pain moved me to tears.

And so I stepped into the tension. I took the time to look into the eyes of the hundreds of people in that church, and as I did that, God spoke clarity into my heart. In the first two rows sat civil rights activists of color who had marched in the sixties. I found comfort in the gray hair on their heads and the hope that filled their eyes. They had been here before, and their legacy infused

me with a profound desire to press on. Yet they were in the minority. Most of the people present were my age or younger and often rolled their eyes or shook their heads in disagreement when the older generation spoke hope-filled words from the microphone. I saw hopelessness in the eyes of my generation. Their pain was real, but their disconnection from the generation who had fought for their rights uncovered an entitlement—one that I must confess is present in my own heart. As Millennials, we are filled with zeal and want immediate change. Our hearts often grow discouraged when we do not see fruit from our short-term efforts. The irony is, in our lifetime, we have feasted on the fruit of seeds sown by the generations that came before ours. We inherited privileges that they were hosed down, lynched, shot at, beat up, and jailed for. As I sat in that church, I realized that we have not had to endure half of what our elders had to.

Our entitlement clouds our judgment and often leads to a subjective understanding of justice. That day, I heard three definitions of justice among the younger generation. To some, justice meant seeking retaliation on the officer who killed Mike Brown. To others, justice was finding the officer, having him arrested, tried, and found guilty of murder. Still others believed justice was looting and rioting that would allow them to get what they felt society owed them. If Mike Brown's death was necessary for them to get ahead, then so be it. And in all

of these conversations, I started flirting with the belief that hate had won.

But in that moment of despair, God reminded me that the church Jesus is building will never fall victim to the evil one. In intentional times of dialogue, fasting, fellowship, and prayer, we as believers have the opportunity to meld together, to stand alongside one another against despair and hate. As we go out to live on mission, we hold the message of hope in tension with the hopelessness around us—and as we do, we can plow the hard, fallow ground and sow seeds of righteousness.

But we must do it together. We cannot enter into the tension alone, not when the hatred around us is so strong and the hope is so weak. That night, watching the hope of the older generations in that room, I was reminded of farmers who would yoke together an older and wiser ox with one that was young, strong, and inexperienced. The older would help carry the load, but the brunt was carried by the younger—while the older ox patiently guided the young one, teaching it to plow straight.² The body of Christ is a multigenerational body. We need to work together—the older among us sharing guidance and wisdom with the younger, and the younger using our passion and strength to move the plow. At the end of the day, God is the one who brings the increase (1 Corinthians 3:6-9); our role is to plow, plant, and water.

HATE, HOPELESSNESS—AND HOPE

As the event ended, Elicia and I felt discouraged by the task at hand. As we headed for the door of the sanctuary, a man began walking toward us. I had noticed him earlier in the evening. He wore a beautiful body-length dashiki, and gray dreadlocks flowed from the top of his head all the way to his calves. He'd been sitting in the very front row. Every time words of hate were spewed, he was unmoved. Whenever words of love and Scripture were spoken, his eyes would become relaxed, and he would smile and gently nod his head.

He reached out his hand to take mine and asked if he could share a few words from his heart. He walked me through his participation in the civil rights movement when he was young and strong. The bright-burning hope he'd once had for the future of both the church and the American nation was now a low flickering flame. He told me that he had entered the church tonight with a prayer that God would show him that the baton that his generation had carried would not be dropped or thrown away.

That was why he had come to find me. He told me that a few responses I shared from the stage, before the young man turned his back on us, turned up the flame in his heart. He heard compassion in my voice and saw that I shared the Scripture with passion. Then he asked, "What is your ethnic heritage?"

“Mexican American, Choctaw Nation, and various European ethnicities,” I told him.

He smiled. “I have always witnessed that blacks do not want to listen to whites and whites do not want to listen to blacks,” he said. “But I have sensed that God desires to raise up voices of other colors that would be able to reach both sides, because those men and women can sympathize with each side without having to fit the profile of either.” He told me to embrace my brown voice to breathe fresh hope into a conversation that has so often only been about black versus white.

The United States has boasted of being a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) missions-sending powerhouse,³ but it is looking less European and Protestant—and more multicolored—by the day. As Derwin Gray said in *The High Definition Leader*, “The face of America is no longer just black and white, like those old televisions from back in the day. America is in high definition now, filled with different colored people.”⁴ The complexion of America is browning both socially and spiritually, and this is not necessarily a bad thing. Brown is the color that becomes visible when every primary color is mixed together. This diversity provides space for America to be seen for what it truly is: a mission field that is ripe for the harvest—and a place where the beauty of God’s Kingdom can be made more visible.

The pulse of America’s new mosaic rhythm beats to the

tune of relativism, and its compositions sit comfortably at the top of the charts. The ever-confused subgenre of Christianity fights for pole position in the mainstream it once dominated. In 2017, Gallup reported that 48.5 percent of Americans identify as Protestant, which shows a drastic decline from 63 percent in 1975.⁵ The term *Protestant*, as used in Gallup's report, is inclusive of subgroups such as evangelical, Jehovah's Witness, and mainline, each of whom disagree on essential, secondary, and tertiary issues in philosophy of ministry and theology. We've arrived at a time where *Christian* and *Protestant* are being reimagined, and the profile of each resembles the Global South more than the America of yesteryear.⁶

Relativism is leading an exodus of nominal Christians out of the church and into the world. Is it too late for the church in America to engage the culture so she can fulfill her mission? The mission of the church is to preach the gospel of the Kingdom, make disciples of every ethnicity, and socially engage the people in our communities, serving them as representatives of the Kingdom of God.⁷ That mission remains intact despite the spiritual and social changes in America. If the church desires to live on mission and have maximum impact for God's Kingdom, it must shift its methodology but not its message. And the voices who proclaim the message must include Kingdom people, men and women, who are of African American, Asian, European, Latina/o, Middle

Eastern, and Native Indigenous nations descent to reflect the Kingdom of God as we see it in Revelation 7:9.

It's taken me thirty-five years to stop fearing and fully embrace my brownish voice. I say brownish because my story is not the typical Mexican American story. I'm a third-generation Mexican American who was raised in a predominately African American neighborhood in Kansas City. My music of choice was hip-hop. My favorite singer is Sam Cooke. For a period of ten years, I loathed the idea of eating Mexican cuisine and opted only for Chinese, cheeseburgers, pizza, or soul food.

Growing up, I had no desire to learn Spanish because none of my neighborhood friends were Latino.⁸ I never saw myself leaving my neighborhood. Culturally,⁹ my friends and I shared similar experiences, like growing up in poverty, surviving among drug dealers and gangs, and sharing with each other whatever we got legally or illegally.

I empathized with the prejudice my friends encountered. I was with them when we were confronted by law-enforcement officers, shopping-mall or grocery-store security guards, and corner-store owners. I was treated no differently, even though my skin was a few shades lighter than theirs and my hair texture was different. When we were pulled over, I was asked the same questions, and I wasn't spoken to any differently. When I surrendered my heart to the Lord at fifteen, I began being more vocal about the prejudice in our community

and inside the church. But even then, most of my focus was on the African American struggle.

My complexion is light, so my darker-skinned family members would call me *güero* (fair-skinned), but I was too dark to be socially accepted as someone of European descent. I was too American to be Mexican and too Mexican to be American. Too light complexioned to be accepted as African American but a little too brown to be embraced as someone of European descent.

After I met Jesus, my ethnicity wasn't affirmed in the church for years, so I put further distance in my heart toward my own ethnic heritage. I built a wall of self-preservation, where I tried to be as ambiguous as possible with my ethnicity. I wore a short haircut that would not show my bone-straight hair and give people the opportunity to assume they knew my ethnicity.

In 2011, my dear brother Pastor Rich Perez approached me after I preached at the Legacy Conference in Chicago. He told me how much it meant to him to finally see a Latino preaching on the main stage of a conference with a sizable audience. I was taken aback. In my four years of pastoral ministry and fifteen years of public ministry, this was the first time that a Latino had affirmed my preaching ministry. This led to numerous other experiences where *mi gente* (my people) expressed their joy as my presence provided them representation. My fear began dissolving.

INTRODUCTION

A few days before my thirty-fifth birthday, my family and I were walking home from a local park. As the kids ran ahead, I shared with Elicia that I've finally realized who God created me to be and how He wants me to serve His body, with a specific emphasis on our *gente* (people). I told her I was embarrassed that it took me thirty-five years to finally be comfortable with my own culture, ethnicity, and skin. I'm a mixture of heritages and hues. As I said earlier, brown is the color that becomes visible when every primary color is mixed together. I am now free to express the fact that I'm Latino and so is my voice. I have sought to become more acquainted with my Mexican American heritage so I can help raise up Latino¹⁰ voices in the church. I'm brownish, and I'm *finally* glad God made me this way.

I'm just one Latino voice in my generation contributing to the browning voice of the church. I cannot and will not be seen as *the* Latino voice. There are just too many complexities and nuances in individual Latino voices in the American Protestant church. But there is an engulfing blind spot with the Latino narrative that the American Protestant church needs to pay attention to.

The Latino population in America has changed drastically over the last fifty years, due to a confluence of economic and geopolitical trends.¹¹ In 1960, when the conversation on race in America was predominately about African Americans and those of European descent,

six million Latinos (3.5 percent of the US population at the time) called the United States home, and most of us lived in the Southwestern region.¹² By 2014, the Latino population had escalated to 57 million (17 percent of the US population) and had spread out to more than half of the three thousand counties in the United States.¹³ This explosion meant that the Latino narrative found space in the mainstream conversation, and careful attention has been given to Latino Millennials' social influence—save in one crucial area.

Latino youth are being reached successfully in the spheres of politics,¹⁴ economics,¹⁵ and education,¹⁶ and yet sadly, they are not being reached in the sphere of religion.¹⁷ Latino youth are distancing themselves from the religious convictions of the older generations at a rapid pace. This reality grieves me deeply—and yet, I also see great hope. The field is ripe for harvest. God longs to reach these young people and to use them powerfully in the Kingdom of God—to show off His power to redeem people from every nation, tribe, and tongue.

My new friend in St. Louis shared this hope with me that night. “How old are you?” he asked me. At the time, I had just turned thirty-four years old. I’m a Millennial—and an older one, at that. The experiences of my life serve as a hybrid of Gen Xers and Millennials.

When I told him this, his smile grew. “My bones are weak, and I move slow,” he said. “I’m growing weaker

and slower—and I stopped praying for strength years ago because I realized that in my weakness, a stronger and younger generation would rise up.” But he feared that he would not be able to pass his mantle to the next generation because many of the young people did not know God or His Word. “Your generation lacks endurance because they are still young,” he said. Mike Brown’s death was one of our first generational tests. Would we stand on the Word of God and remain in the fight, even amid voices of hate that called us away from God?

He was excited that I was neither too young nor too old. “You can keep the strength of your youth to spur on the older ones to keep running their race. And you need to use the wisdom you’ve gained to pour into the ones who are younger than you.” He was calling me to step up as a representative—not only of my generation and my heritage but also of the people of God.

I stood stunned by the words of affirmation that he was pouring over me like anointing oil. He put his hands on my shoulders, looked me in the eyes, and told me to open my heart to God’s will for how He wants to use me to help others lead His church in America toward healing. He then prayed a prayer of blessing over me, asking God for boldness and courage in my speech, longevity in my ministry, and purity in my motives. “You represent a picture of what God wants to do in America,” he said. He gave me a hug and told me that his heart was now

filled with hope about what God would do among His people from different nations here in America. Elicia and I walked away from that moment in awe. And just like that, I was filled with *esperanza*.

ESPERANZA

Esperanza is the Spanish word for hope. In this work of seeking wholeness in our world of ethnic division, proclaiming the gospel of Jesus, and standing against hate and injustice, I often find myself needing to have my hope refueled. Living as the voice of a Latino who is frequently asked to address an issue that has been reduced to involve only those of African and European descent is draining. My presence on panels and stages is often questioned by my generation—and all other living generations. The fact that I’m not “African American” or “from European descent only” is confusing to some and offensive to others. Let’s step into another level of tension here. Because of my skin color, I am operating out of privilege when I prophetically call out certain truths about ethnic tensions in the church: I am seen not as angry but passionate because I’m not of African descent. When others, men and women of African descent, have spoken similar truths from Scripture, they are often written off as angry and divisive. Similarly, being a male provides me with privilege that sisters in the faith do not have.

Privilege is not evil in and of itself. But we should be aware of it, and we should leverage our privilege for the benefit of those in the margins, to amplify the voices of those who are dismissed.¹⁸

There have been times when the plowing gets hard. I've faced slanderous attacks. Stressful seasons that lured my heart into struggles with depression. On a few occasions, I've had to fight off suicidal thoughts. Other times, my generation's silent indifference toward this work, specifically the contributions I've made, echoes in my mind. Being a carrier of hope in a context where hopelessness is dominant is exhausting. Yet God always provides me with hope when I talk with Christians from various ethnicities and generations who are doing similar work. Together, we're striving to see the hope of the gospel realized—God's people together as one multicultural, ethnic, and generational people. Although we're living in the tension of being Kingdom people of different ethnicities, we're called to be intentional in following Jesus holistically—and this includes holding in tension our unique ethnic heritages while being part of a new humanity! This work does not come without struggle, but neither does it come without *esperanza*.

In my moments of struggle, I turn to a hymn that captures this truth. “Canto de Esperanza (Song of Hope)” by Alvin L. Schutmaat¹⁹ reminds me I'm one part of the body of Christ, which has been commissioned by God

to bring light and hope to people in every land and of every ethnicity.

Our God is for justice. And He is the one who fills His people with love. He has called His people to bring bright light and hope to every land and people group. The tension we hold as a Kingdom people is the hopelessness of our mission field in one hand—and *esperanza* in the other. That's why this book is called *Intensional*: because we, God's people, must *intentionally* step *in* to the middle of the *tension*—*all* of us—if we're going to bring *esperanza* to the world.

Even amid such a daunting task as healing our ethnic tensions, we are a hope-filled people who are called to pray, sing, work, and remain faithful in sharing the hope of Jesus with the hopeless. The gospel's power is put on display when our local churches show our world what a brochure of heaven looks like. God has called us to pray and work for peace. We can live as hope-filled people who have a response to both hatred and racism. The church has both the answer and the cure to racism: the *esperanza* of the gospel!

WHAT IS ETHNIC CONCILIATION?

Our Call as the People of God

Racial reconciliation. This is a term we're used to hearing—but we rarely see positive results from discussions surrounding it. The words *racial reconciliation* usually trigger greater chasms of division rather than healing, repentance, and togetherness.

I'm going to state a hard truth: God's people, representing so many different ethnic backgrounds, seem just as divided as the world around us. Because of this, I have serious issues with how the American church has engaged in the work of racial reconciliation.

Yes, I believe in the full power of the gospel, which, when put into in action, produces evidence that Jesus'

redemptive work on the cross is for people from every ethnicity, gender, and social class. I believe that all those who embrace Him as Lord are made part of the one new humanity He has created and is building.

But my hesitation comes down to the terms *racial* and *reconciliation*.

First, *racial* indicates that there is more than one race, which I see directly contradicting God's Word. And *reconciliation* implies we're trying to get back to what we once had—as if at one point, the various ethnicities within the United States were at a point of conciliation. To me, both terms are misleading, and operating without the fuller perspective means we're dedicating effort, resources, and time to a work that is not supported in Scripture or even a historical fact. If we're focused on the wrong things, the healing we seek will never be accomplished! That's why I believe that we in the American church should reframe the conversation around our efforts toward *ethnic conciliation*.

Ethnic conciliation is accomplished when we affirm (not ignore or idolize) the ethnic heritage of every human being and seek to remove animosity, distrust, and hostility from our interpersonal relationships. I believe that the only people qualified to take up the holistic work of ethnic conciliation are those who follow Jesus—because we are the only ones who have experienced both conciliation and reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:17-20;

Ephesians 2:11-22). Jesus' finished work has not only reconciled us to God but has also brought us—from all different ethnicities—into one family! In Jesus alone, the nations have conciliation.

Jesus has sent His followers on a global mission to make this reality visible. The church has been equipped by God with His Word and the Holy Spirit to embody ethnic conciliation as a method of both evangelism and discipleship. When the watching world sees believers from every nation, tribe, and tongue working through the tensions of life together, nonbelievers will witness a beautiful example of ethnic conciliation.

However, what has happened for hundreds of years inside the American church is the opposite of Jesus' mission. We have refused to tear down human-made walls of segregation that have divided us from one another. Because of our stubborn unrepentance, the world has walked all over our witness.

It's time for us to reestablish a credible witness on behalf of our risen Lord. Let's step back from our status quo approach of reluctantly engaging in arguments regarding "issues of race" inside the church. Just as my wife and I need to sit down and actively listen to each other list contributions and solutions to our unresolved issues, the family of God must do the same in our divisions. We must engage with a fresh perspective that reflects Jesus' rule over the ethnic tensions present inside

His own house. And we can begin by digesting the terms *ethnic* and *conciliation*.

ETHNICITY, NOT RACE

According to the Bible, the *imago dei*—image of God—is equally given to every human being in the entire human race. I believe life begins at conception, so from the beginning of every physical life that God forms in the womb (Psalm 139:13), through the time a child is born, lives, and dies, that person bears God’s image. Because I am whole life as opposed to pro-life—which is often reduced to advocacy for children inside the womb while socially neglecting them thereafter—I want you to know that every person, for the entirety of their life, is privileged to bear the image of God. When people ignore the *imago dei*, the result is social atrocities: not only abortion but also chattel slavery, Jim Crow laws, hate crimes, and much more.

Imago dei provides every human being with God-given dignity and distinction from every other kind of creation God made. Even after the fall of man, every human being has inherited sin equally. This was passed from Adam to our entire human race, not to one or a few select people groups (Romans 5:12). The human race traces back to one common set of parents, Adam and Eve.¹

Acts 17:26 says, “He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.” This one man is Adam, who heads the family tree of every ethnicity on the planet. What’s important to understand here is that Paul was proclaiming this truth to a group of Greeks, who believed they were superior to all other ethnic people groups! Paul debunked any belief that one ethnicity is superior to another, especially when it comes to political and military conquests.²

In Malachi 2:10, the prophet of God says, “Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?” Malachi makes a distinction based not on race but on relationship to God. God is the creator of every human being; we all bear His image. Yet God is Father only to those He has adopted into His family. This is reinforced in 1 Peter 2:9-10; Peter speaks to Christians as God’s “chosen race,” “royal priesthood,” “holy nation,” and “people for [God’s] own possession.” Once again, our race is not what separates us—whether we are God’s own possession is what sets us apart. If we follow Christ, we are to share God’s story with those who know Him only as Creator and not as Father. This is the Good News of the *esperanza* we proclaim: We can each be reconciled to God.

In Scripture, the first divisions between humans come not from different races but from rebellion and

separation from God. At the time of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9), all people on earth shared one language, and they used this shared language to attempt to elevate themselves above God. God brought judgment on them, confusing them by creating various languages, which would prevent humans from organizing global rebellion.

We see throughout the rest of Scripture that people are often described not in terms of racial categories as we use today but rather by ethnicity, language, or geographic proximity. As Dr. Jarvis Williams notes,

The category of race has a broader use in the Bible than in modern terminology. One important distinction is that the biblical category of race was not constructed with pseudoscience for the purpose of establishing a racial hierarchy. Racial categories were employed apart from any consideration of biological inferiority rooted in whiteness or blackness. In fact, Genesis 11:6 in the Septuagint identifies humanity as one *genos* (race/kind/class/group). The Greek term *ethnos* (nation, Gentile) overlaps with *genos*. Both terms function as racial categories.³

When we look at Acts 2, we see God the Holy Spirit beginning a new and unique work in the lives of Jesus'

followers, providing them with the ability to speak in languages they did not know. In this passage, people groups are identified by languages connected to their geographic dwelling:

They were amazed and astonished, saying,
“Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?
And how is it that we hear, each of us in his
own native language? Parthians and Medes
and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia,
Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,
Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of
Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from
Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and
Arabians—we hear them telling in our own
tongues the mighty works of God.”

ACTS 2:7-11

The Holy Spirit’s work at Pentecost was a foretaste of the gospel being proclaimed in languages and places beyond the geographic limits of Jesus’ earthly ministry. The Holy Spirit empowered believers to make Jesus known globally and locally. The gospel’s power is made visible when human beings from various ethnicities hear the gospel clearly communicated in their known language and are given opportunities to embrace Jesus as their Savior.

The Bible proves that there is one human race and that within this one race is a beautiful array of different ethnicities. The racial categories we often use today in America are human-made social constructions slanted toward partiality and manifested in superiority and inferiority complexes. In *Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America*, Anibal Quijano boldly declares that the Spanish creation of racial categories was mere code language between the conquerors and those they conquered. At its inception, racial categories were a way to declare who was superior and who was inferior. Quijano says, “The idea of race, in its modern meaning, does not have a known history before the colonization of America” and “it was constructed to refer to the supposed differential biological structures between those groups [conquerors and conquered].”⁴ He also argues that history shows “race as a category was applied for the first time to the Indians, not to blacks. In this way, race appears much earlier than color in the history of the social classification of the global population.”⁵

One of the strongest arguments for the systemic racial caste system we have in the United States is evidenced by the color-coded language we use. In his book *Working toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White*, David R. Roediger traces how immigrants from Europe exchanged their ethnic identity for the created term *white* to secure employment, housing,

and other social benefits. The idea behind this term was to create an American identity. Today in America, it's nearly impossible to speak clearly on the issues of ethnicity without having to use the socially embraced terms *white* and *black*.⁶ These terms were not normally used prior to colonization.⁷

In Spain, starting in the sixteenth century, the *casta* system created systemic segregation between those with pure Spanish bloodlines and all others.⁸ A royal Spanish decree in 1563 declared that the lower classes of society—which included the indigenous natives, African slaves, and those with mixed blood—could only live in approved *barrios*. (Needless to say, these barrios were comfortably placed away from those who lived in the higher tiers of the *casta*.) This system also prevented those with mixed blood from upward mobility, not only in society but also in the church.⁹

Prior to the Reformation, in 1512, Spain passed the Laws of Burgos, which provided a framework for protecting their indigenous labor and ensuring their Christianization. These laws were rarely enforced, and Dominicans Antonio de Montesinos and Bartolomé de las Casas mobilized to fight for the stated rights of the indigenous peoples who were now slaves that were treated worse than animals.¹⁰ Between 1550 and 1551, Bartolomé de la Casas debated the known Spanish scholar Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda about the horrible

treatment of the indigenous image bearers. Sepúlveda's arguments were rooted in Aristotle's doctrine of natural slavery, which said, "one part of mankind is set aside by nature to be slaves in the service of masters born for a life of virtue free of manual labor."¹¹

We must understand our history if we want to understand the world we inherited. Before American Protestants charge racialized language and segregation to the Roman Catholic institution alone, we need to note a sobering truth: Much of the same systemic segregation was repeated by Protestants during the colonization of what we know as the United States of America. In American church history, the social construction of race was built by the Europeans who migrated to the new world, looking for cash and converts. In the Americas, people of color have been marginalized not only in society but also the church for nearly five hundred years. Jesus once told us that we are "the salt of the earth," the taste of God for the people around us (Matthew 5:13)—but because of this systemic sin, our saltiness has lost its flavor. Losing flavor is one reason our witness is being trampled on by the feet of the world.

This socially constructed idea of race that is normal in America today doesn't find its beginnings in Scripture. In fact, Paul rebuked this foolishness in Acts 17. The church must work to not only renounce this social construct but also tear it down, because it does not reflect

Kingdom ethics or human flourishing. For far too long, God's people have normalized the sin of partiality, the false belief of different races, and the practice of segregation. We must learn to stop using color-coded language and replace it with new language that expresses the reality of *imago dei* in every human being. We must also affirm the richness of different ethnicities and keep ourselves from either idolizing or ignoring ethnicity all together.

CONCILIATION, NOT RECONCILIATION

Conciliation takes place when conflicting parties overcome their animosity, distrust, and hostility to operate as one united group. When I speak about ethnic conciliation, I'm often asked, "Why do away with the term *reconciliation* when it's a gospel term?" But the term *reconciliation* actually furthers my case for *conciliation*. Before the Fall, the entire human race (in Adam and his wife) were in a state of conciliation with God. There was no animosity, distrust, or hostility. In the Fall, sin separated the entire human race from God. During our separation, because of our sin, animosity, distrust, and hostility came between our entire race and God. Through the redemptive work of Jesus, every human who embraces Jesus as their Savior is reconciled to God. But reconciliation cannot take place without conciliation—and the reality of our history means that conciliation has never taken place

in the United States of America, let alone in American churches en masse.

Navajo speaker and writer Mark Charles has communicated regularly about the doctrine of discovery, which addresses how the founding documents of the United States of America used language that placed the *imago dei* only on landowning men of European descent. He says that while we often look to “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal” in the Declaration of Independence as proof that the founders valued equality, thirty lines below, the indigenous people of Turtle Island are identified as “merciless Indian savages.”¹² Other historic American documents strip the *imago dei* from African slaves.¹³ The Constitution had to be amended to provide rights to women and people of color; if women and people of color had been considered equal from the beginning of our nation, there would be no need for constitutional amendments for women and people of ethnic heritage outside of Europe.

The perspective of American (and white) supremacy permeated the church in profound and troubling ways. Professor Donald Scott said that Second Great Awakening Protestant preachers like Lyman Beecher and Charles Finney told Americans that America was the site of the millennial reign of Christ, so Christians were to assume it was their destiny to usher in the Millennium by providentially expanding from sea to shining sea.¹⁴

Diplomats, journalists, soldiers, evangelical activists, abolitionists, and pacifists leveraged such language to frame Mexico and the Roman Catholic church as enemies to American Republicanism.¹⁵ The resulting conquest took more than half of Mexico's land—including precious oil in Texas and California and gold in California that would be discovered later—and quashed the rights of Mexican families who owned it. In the aftermath, the Mexican American citizens of the newly formed United States were not given the same rights as its citizens of European descent, as “Mexicans of color returned to a racial order where they had few civil rights.”¹⁶ Similar to Adam renaming Eve, Mexicans living in the United States had their names sound more “American.” My great-grandfather Aurelio Conchola was renamed “Joe Canchola” by the US government on entering the United States. And as we know, this is only one example of the attempt to diminish and control other ethnicities within the United States.

The term *white supremacy* is commonly understood as the belief that the “white race” is superior to all other races and that “white people” should have control over people from all other ethnicities. Often, when this term is tossed into a conversation, it causes an explosion of emotions. But if we as the people of God desire to show what conciliation looks like, then we must be willing to first recognize the realities of the world around us. Records

from our nation's history—from the founding documents through our current era—show that men of European descent have always held power and therefore provide us all with the freedom to name white supremacy.

This is where the pastor in me wants to speak tenderly. In America, we are encouraged to think individualistically our entire lives. In my personal experience, when I speak on white supremacy, my brothers and sisters of European descent feel the need to exonerate themselves from the collective reality of white supremacy. At the same time, generally speaking, people of color, who often think communally, can go to the extreme and say that every white person is a white supremacist.

Neither of these extremes represents my motive for naming white supremacy. My goal is not to indict every person of European descent as a white supremacist, and neither is it to place them in a position of blame for this construction of power in our nation's history. No one should feel guilty for their ethnicity. God has created each of us to be who we are. This includes those of European descent, some of whom have approached me to apologize for being “white.”

Instead, my goal here is to call us to recognize the power systems in place, both in society and the church, that work against conciliation.¹⁷ This power structure was the reason Bishop Richard Allen planted the historic Mother Bethel AME Church in Philadelphia.¹⁸

This power structure is also the reason why, at least in conservative, evangelical spaces, there is a scramble to diversify conference lineups, student enrollment, and church-leadership positions.

The proper response for Jesus followers of color is not to do what has been done to us and create spaces with power structures that exclude our white brothers and sisters. Neither is the proper response to continue acting as if this power structure doesn't exist. This power structure can and should be destroyed, so that unity among God's people, who are diverse culturally, economically, ethnically, generationally, and even politically, can become a visible reality. Our goal in accomplishing this is not to achieve a Marxist utopia but rather to create a straighter path leading toward the conciliation of God's people. In doing this, we can regain our saltiness and begin to flavor our communities so they will taste and see that our Lord is good (Psalm 34:8).

TOWARD OUR REALITY

Animosity, distrust, and hostility among believers from the various ethnicities have always existed in American history—and in American church history. If we desire to pursue true healing between ethnicities, then our focus as the church in America should be to remove animosity, distrust, and hostility en masse. I'm not talking about

ridding society of such ills—that is not possible. But it *is* possible within the family of God—among churches made up of Holy Spirit–indwelling believers! When this happens, legitimate ethnic conciliation will become a present reality. And I truly believe that the American church stands at the threshold of becoming the first generation to actively present ethnic conciliation to the American landscape.

Right now, though, we do not reflect what Christ’s work has accomplished on our behalf. Positionally, ethnic conciliation is our reality. Revelation 5:9 and 7:9-10 provide a snapshot of the multiethnic, multilingual, and multigenerational citizens who dwell in the City of God. Jesus’ sacrifice applies to every imaginable ethnicity, gender, and social class and brings each of us who follow him into the family of God (Galatians 3:26-28). Christ’s finished work obliterated the walls of division that separated Jews and Gentiles as well as males and females and brings us together as a new humanity, a unique spiritual ethnicity (Ephesians 2:11-22). But the American church’s present reality couldn’t be any further from this truth.

Power structures in the American church have built walls that divide God’s people from each other: ethnic segregation, classism, sexism, and theological tribalism. If we desire to pursue ethnic conciliation and bring our positional reality into a practical existence, we must

pursue three practices: (1) American church and parachurch leadership in current power structures must acknowledge the lack of Kingdom representation in their hierarchy; (2) leadership must confess and repent if the sin of partiality is present in the culture of the executive-level leadership; and (3) we all must work with diligence and in long-lasting, two-way partnerships with competent and qualified people of different ethnicities to produce fruits of repentance (2 Corinthians 7:9-11). If we do these things, we will properly address the tensions of our day while bringing forth a clearer preview of the coming Kingdom.