

Growing in Diversity and Reconciliation

// Amos 2:6-7

265 baptisms! Answers to prayer

Open your Bibles to Amos. I want to do something a little different today. I want to talk to you about something that has become increasingly important in our church, something that we are very committed to—and that is **growing in ethnic diversity** here at The Summit Church. **We believe we are supposed to be a gospel movement for all peoples** in the Triangle, not just one kind.

We are committed to this for a few reasons:

- First, **Jesus prayed in John 17** that we would be ‘one.’ It’s what he wants. If for no other reason, we pursue it because it is what our Savior desires and he’s worthy of that.
- **Second, we do it for the testimony of the gospel.** According to Paul in Eph 3:10, a church where people of different backgrounds, different ages and races worshipping in unity testifies to the saving power of God.
 - People should look at us and say, “What brings these people together?”
 - What gives them such love and unity for each other?
 - And the only answer they come up with is a gospel greater than any of our differences.
 - I might add that, in our day, it might be one of the most compelling witnesses to the gospel we could give.
- **The third reason we pursue growth in ethnic diversity** is that we have genuinely learned to love our brothers and sisters color, and we want them to feel like this is our church as much as it is ours.
- The way we say it is, ***“We believe church should reflect the diversity of the community and proclaim the diversity of the Kingdom.”**

Amen? Everybody says “Amen” to that. What I want to do today is take a few minutes to explain where we are with this, then offer a **biblical roadmap** and some reflections for going forward. Then, at the end, I want to bring up a couple of good friends to discuss it.

First, where we are (consider this an extended introduction to the passage)

- Currently, 17% of the people attending our church are people of color. (Experts say that once you cross the 20% threshold you can officially consider yourself a multi-ethnic church. We’re not there yet, but we’re closer than we used to be.)
 - **Now, some of our campuses are there.** I’m not going to say which ones, but 5 of our campuses have crossed that line of being more than 20% people of color. **Which is something to celebrate.**
 - As a staff, we’re trying to lead in this. **A third of both our campus pastors and our worship leaders are non-white.**
 - Here’s the progression we’ve outlined: **Ignorance** (of racial disparities and tensions) → **awareness** → **intentionality** → **gospel community** (*leave up!)

I genuinely believe that most of you want to move forward on this— I really do. You want a society (and a church) where racial distinctions don’t cause any kind of division. (And honestly, I don’t have time for those of you who don’t. If you are the kind of person who feels like it would just be better for all of us to be separate—to go back to the way things were, or you’re tired of talking about racial diversification, I don’t have any time for you. This church is not for you. Save you and me some heartache and just go find somewhere else.)

But, here’s the thing even though we all want this, some of us are stuck in these 1st few phases, so let me take a few minutes and acknowledge some realities:

- First, I read an article in the **NYT in March, 2018** that talked about how many of brothers and sisters of color had begun to grow increasingly uneasy in predominantly white churches, and one of

the reasons they cited was the unqualified support white evangelicals **seemed to give, and continue to give**, to our President, despite persistent moral failures on his part and his ambiguity and sometimes silence on critical issues of race.

- **Here's what we know: 81% of white evangelicals voted for Trump / 88% of church-going blacks voted for Hillary.**
- Neither side could understand the other. Many of you who voted for X couldn't understand how a Christian with any real knowledge of what was going on could vote for X.
- And I understand those reasons. And *vice-versa*.
- **And (as I told you back in November) I know some of you felt like you had no good options this time.** And some of you put things on this side and some of you on this side and weighed it out and you made different choices about who was best.
- But the **question this article presented was whether the 81% of white evangelicals** who voted for Trump have been sufficiently clear in their identification of African-Americans (and other ethnicities) in their struggle.
- **Dr. George Yancey (AA sociologist** and committed Christian, member of the Village Church in TX) says if after weighing everything out you felt compelled to vote for Trump, he says, "I can see where you were coming from," but if that was you, your voice should be the loudest when disparaging things are said about fellow citizens. And, on the other side if after considering all the factors you felt compelled to vote for Hillary, your voice should be the loudest about the sanctity of life, or religious liberty or the ability God has put in each of us to make something of ourselves.)
- **Which leads me to the second thing:** In their book *Divided by Faith*, authors and Emerson and Smith conducted a poll of black and white respondents **asking what contributed most** to racial disparities in our country—the fact that blacks in our country have a lower average household income, lower net worth, lower probability for advancement and etc.
 - You could respond along a spectrum of individual responsibility— i.e. on one side the problem is primarily a lack

of personal motivation; and on the other side the problem is primarily structural bias and discrimination. How you weighted these things in contributing to the disparity.

GRAPHIC 1 Among the black and white populations and large, whites tended to explain it more as a lack of personal motivation. **GRAPHIC 2** Blacks tended to put it over here.

- **But watch this.** They also had the respondents identify if they were born-again, church going Christians, and then analyzed just their responses, and blacks and whites were even further apart. **GRAPHIC 3**
- **My point is not to try and** get in and explain what the right answer to this question is; just to show you how far apart the perceptions are and why there needs to be a lot of listening.
- **I'm sure there is a lot that we can learn from each other**, but if you're in the white community, shouldn't you want to know why your brothers and sisters in Christ feel this way?
- **When there is something like a police-shooting of** (what turns out to be) an unarmed black man, do we at least understand that there is a long history of racial injustice that is conjured up in the minds with each event?
- And **do we understand that many of our brothers and sisters of color** have to face things that many of us in the majority culture don't face?
- **In our race class I went over several of these:**
 - As a white guy, I **don't have to worry about my name causing me to be overlooked** on a job or housing application.
 - As a white guy, **if a traffic cop pulls me over, I never wonder if it was because of my race.** I don't want to take away from the incredible and brave work our men and women of the police force do, putting themselves in harm's way for us every day, but (almost all POC have stories about this)
 - **As a white guy, when I am told about our national heritage or church history, or "civilization,"** I am shown that people of my color made it what it is—the heroes and role models I'm given are almost always white.

- (The black history moment I often get in social studies class was about George Washington Carver and his peanut.
- Church history: the Jesus and the Apostles I saw... then church history skipped 1500 years to Luther the German. I didn't learn that Augustine and Athanasius were from the region of Africa... First missionary.
- **The result of all this was, even if unintentionally**, I grow up thinking that people who look like me made civilization and church history great, and if people of color contributed to it they were the exception.
- **And can we acknowledge that there is still an extraordinary wealth gap**, on the whole between white and black Americans—and while there are multiple reasons that may contribute to that—can we *at least all acknowledge that the racial disparities of our past* have undoubtedly contributed to that?
 - **BTW, if you are a political conservative**, don't write this off as liberal blather: **Ben Sasse**, a Republican Senator from Nebraska and a rising star in the conservative movement, says in his excellent book *The Vanishing American Adult* that we have to acknowledge that the 200 years of slavery and Jim Crow laws did a number on African-American family structure and severely hampered their abilities for upward mobility in our culture.

Bottom line: The perception of where we are, and how we got here, and why we stay here is pretty different among white and black Americans.

And if we're going to go forward, it's going to be because we're committed to listening to each other...

- One of our AA pastors, whom you'll meet here in a few minutes, *Tremayne Manson: We talk a lot at this church about wanting diversity; but diversity has to be rooted in reconciliation; reconciliation has to be rooted in justice, and justice has to be*

rooted in recognition of wrong, confession and repentance where those things are applicable.

Let me review a couple of really important concepts here, and then I want to talk about this today with a couple of special friends here at TSC.

Amos 2:6–7 Amos is an OT book that is essentially one extended sermon in which Amos talks about God's anger against injustice in the world. **Israel typically loved these justice sermons**, because they loved to hear about the sins of the nations and how God was going to punish the wicked. As Amos started his sermon they pulled their chairs and started to shout, *"Amen, brother! Preach it. Tell them heathens about their sins!"*

But shortly into his sermon, Amos's focus began to change, and he began to talk about injustices *in* Israel. The crowd started to grow shifty, then silent, then outright hostile. God describes the injustice in Israel like this: *"They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and (they) turn aside the way of the afflicted."*

- **What is most noteworthy in these verses** is that there is no talk of thievery, or corruption, or murder, just turning away from the poor; living lives of ease, comfort and luxury in the face of suffering.
 - **Injustice according to Amos is leveraging**—even by legal means—your positions of privilege in a way that either exploits or ignores the suffering others.
 - **The word "justice" in the OT goes hand in hand with the word "righteousness,"** which means to be in right standing with God and in with others—which Jesus summarized as loving others as you love yourself, which means more than just being fair; it means leveraging your positions of power and privilege to help others.
- **I point that out because we tend to put helping the needy** under the heading of charity. I.e. If you don't do it, you are stingy. **But**

according to Amos, God sees a failure to help the poor as injustice, a more serious thing. The word “justice” (mishpat) occurs over 200 times in the OT, and usually when you see it you’ll see **four classes of people brought up**: widows, orphans, foreigners, and the poor—what one scholar calls “the quartet of the vulnerable.”

- (BTW, this is the marching orders for our local outreach ministry. They have **contextualized the quartet of the vulnerable** to the Triangle: homeless, orphan, prisoner, single mom, disconnected youth, refugees and immigrants and strategic neighborhoods.
- We are a **just and righteous** people only if we are **involved helping** these groups.
- **Deut 10:18**, Moses, talking about the righteous man, says, “He executes justice [mishpat] for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.” –Deuteronomy 10:18
- One scholar said: “In the OT, ‘justice’ is not just putting down the oppressor, it’s also helping to lift up the oppressed.”
 - Tim Keller: “The just person, in the Old Testament, is one who sees his or her resources as... a gift they’ve been given to steward for the benefit of the whole community.”
 - (Note that Keller here is not talking about some kind of forced Marxist redistribution scheme—there are other things in the Bible would challenge that idea—**this is not about the government but the people of God** and the attitude believers should have toward their privileges).
- **With the blessing of privilege comes the responsibility to leverage it for those without it.**

And here was Amos’s second point which has particular relevance to our discussion: **Silence in the face of injustice is regarded by God as complicity in that injustice.** It’s not enough that we are not guilty ourselves of injustice. Silence and complacency when it is happening around us is regarded by God as being guilty of it ourselves.

- Amos’s words remind me of those of Martin Luther King, Jr. in “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” many of whose sermons are based on Amos: **“I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. [By this he meant white people who chose not to engage.] I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the ... Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice... Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.”**
 - And let me note: **This wasn’t just a problem for people 50 years ago.** It is a problem for us today, for **me today.** I have to confess that I have not always spoken up when I should. I thank God for my minority friends who have been patient to walk with me, because I have often been a terrible student and a bad listener. None of us are where we should be on this, but I believe we can walk forward in this *together*. I’ve been helped by friends and brothers of color... like Dr. Terrance Ruth and Tremayne Manson you’ll meet in a minute. Bryan Lorrits. Chris Green. Brothers I love and have so much to learn from.
 - I’m often stumbling forward clumsily in this—but learning more every day.

So, **we have to wrestle with the implications of justice** and what righteousness looks like in our society for this conversation to progress.

Galatians 6:2 “Carry one another’s burdens; in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ.” Part of being one body in Christ is being committed to feeling—and seeking to understand—the pain that others are going through. That starts with listening. **The famous psychologist M.**

Scott Peck said, “To listen to someone is to love them.” Bearing one another’s burdens begins with listening and ends with fighting against injustices our brothers and sisters in Christ are experiencing with as much fervency as if they were happening to us or our children.

So, to that end, let me bring up a friend of mine, and member of our church. **Dr. Terrance Ruth.** *Dr. Terrance Ruth is the former Executive Director of the NAACP of North Carolina, and currently the senior adviser to William Barber, member of the national board of the NAACP. Dr. Ruth is a former Administrator for Wake County Public Schools and now serves as an education consultant for low performing schools. He is also an author of several articles and academic journals. We are grateful to have him and his wife Kiara as a member of our church—they have been attending faithfully now for three years.*

Tremayne Manson and his wife Alicia, and their (now) 4 children have been members of the Summit for 8 years. He graduated from UNC and has worked there and NCCU in public service work. He’s been a lay leader in our church for years and joined our staff as the Associate Pastor for Community Development and Outreach in March of last year.

Welcome them?