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reconciling, multi-ethnic, and missional

When the Sanctuary Covenant Church was planted in 2003, there was an intentional plan to develop a core team, a leadership structure, a worship experience, and eventually a staff that was culturally diverse. As the church planter, I began this journey with a heart and vision for a church that would be a kingdom church and a reconciling community. Although I grew up in the Black church, I was inspired by the stories of John Perkins and his ministry of reconciliation and Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of the beloved community, a term he used to cast a vision of racial equality, justice, and reconciliation. Through this lens, I was able to imagine the church in a new way. I deal with this journey and these influences throughout this book.

By “kingdom church,” I mean one that is willing to move away from one primarily shaped by race. I use “matrix of race” to refer to the ways in which we remain trapped by race, which continues to have more power than we like to admit. In many circles, even bringing up the issue of race causes fear, tension, and defensiveness. And

our being trapped in the matrix is also revealed through how natural it seems to be with people who look and act like us and how challenging it is to build authentic relationships and community with people who are different. This seems particularly challenging in the church, and that is why we are in need of a different church—one that is a picture of the kingdom proclaimed by and embodied in Jesus Christ. This kingdom is Christ centered and multi-ethnic because Jesus walked the earth as the Messiah, the Son of God, and was, as Curtiss DeYoung says “an Afro-Asiatic Jew.”¹ The church of the kingdom of God transcends race, yet recognizes the beauty of ethnic diversity because this diversity existed in Jesus, who is the embodiment of the kingdom.

I speak of the post-Black, post-White church as a reconciling community because Jesus is also the ultimate reconciler. Consider this passage from 2 Corinthians (5:18–19): “Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.”

Jesus reconciles us to God through his death and resurrection. We are freed from the penalty of sin, which is death, through Jesus. This reconciling work not only brings us into an intimate and right relationship with God but also empowers us through the Holy Spirit to experience the right relationship with each other.

A post-Black, post-White church unplugs us from the sinful and unbiblical race matrix (in fact, there is nothing about race in the Bible, a topic I turn to in Chapter Three) of Black and White and liberates us to live in an otherworldly, countercultural kingdom church and reconciling community. It’s what Dave Gibbons, senior pastor of New Song Church, a multi-ethnic church in Southern California, refers to as “third culture.” Third culture is the creation of kingdom culture on earth—the beloved community. It is within

the prayer that Jesus taught the original disciples to pray: “The Kingdom to come and God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). Gibbons describes third culture as a biblical mandate for the church to make disciples within this multicultural reality. This ought to be the first reason for the development of the post-Black, post-White church. We pursue a multi-ethnic church because we are passionate about the lost being found in a diverse surrounding demographic. Some shun the multi-ethnic church because they see it as a mark of political correctness. But ultimately, as Pastor Mark DeYmaz points out, “The pursuit of the multi-ethnic local church is in my view, not optional. It is biblically mandated for all who aspire to lead local congregations of faith.”²

We ought to pursue this kind of church because it represents a church after God’s own heart and because as we live in it, we receive a deeper understanding of what it means to be children of God and the bride of Christ. This is why both the terms *post-Black*, *post-White* church and *beloved community* are so important.

The Racial Divide

There are many ethnic forms of church in the United States: Asian, Hispanic, and first-generation African immigrant churches. And certainly these types of ethnic-specific churches move us beyond the church in Black and White as we have known it. But the most visible pictures of the church in the United States are the White church and the Black church. The White church isn’t referred to as “White” most of the time because it is seen as “the church.” That is, the White church is the American church, the average church, and almost all research on churches is based on it.

The Black church reflects the historic divide between Black and White people in this country: it is a forced church that emerged

out of slavery. Both the White and the Black church in the United States are tied deeply to the story of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, the civil rights movement, and even more contemporary stories with race implications, such as Rodney King, Hurricane Katrina, and the presidential election of Barack Obama.

When sociologists want to provide evidence that the racial divide remains, they often look to the church for their facts. In fact, Martin Luther King Jr. called the church “the most segregated major institution in America.” He called Sunday morning, when the congregation rises to sing “In Christ There Is No East or West,” the “most segregated hour of America, and . . . Sunday school is the most segregated school of the week.”³ The question today is, How much has really changed since King spoke? I am an evangelical, and with this comes a belief in the authority and centrality of scripture. With this in mind, how can the evangelical church not see the impact that race has had on it? I don’t believe that the issue ultimately is that the evangelical church doesn’t see it; it does see it, but it doesn’t know what to do about it. Mainline churches struggle with this issue as well even though their theology is more consistent with multiculturalism. Yet their belief that their theology is progressive around issues of multiculturalism causes them not to see their own structural issues of race at times. Still, not knowing what to do about it shouldn’t keep us from confessing the sin of our participation in the trap and desiring something closer to God’s heart for the church.

In fact, the matrix of race in this country is changing. In 2008 history was made with the election of the first African-American president. Some used this historic moment to point to the development of an emerging postracial reality that is global. Religious scholar Phillip Jenkins believes that the future of the church has moved beyond the United States and Europe to Africa and South America. He writes, “Over the past century . . . the center of gravity

in the Christian world has shifted inexorably southward, to Africa, Asia, and Latin America. . . . Christianity should enjoy a worldwide boom in the new century, but the vast majority of believers will be neither white nor European, nor Euro-American.”⁴

So this reality means that the church in the United States must change—not primarily for social reasons but for biblical reasons. You would be hard-pressed to find scripture to justify the social structure of race or the racially divided church.

The Beloved Community

The multi-ethnic and missional church points us to a church where God’s love rescues people from the matrix and sin of racial division and delivers us into the reconciling spirit of the beloved community. These churches alone may not totally eradicate or dismantle our race-based society, but they will provide the alternative that many of us hunger for. The multi-ethnic and missional church as a Christ-centered community becomes the beloved community that Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of. It indeed becomes the beloved church that forges the beloved community in the world.⁵ This is true kingdom advancement.

In the first-century church, kingdom advancement was not separated into Jewish and Gentile, and today it cannot be separated from issues of race and class within a multicultural society. The common denominator here is kingdom advancement. This is the missional side of the multi-ethnic church. The church is God’s primary vehicle for fulfilling his mission in the world.

The beloved community gives us a more biblically based way to talk about evangelism, discipleship, and mission in this changing world. The term *beloved* shows up often in the writings of John in the New Testament in his gospel writing and his letters. As one of

the original followers of Christ, John saw himself as the dearly loved of God. He seemed to find identity in this state of belovedness, and beloved is at the core of God's great love for us. God looked beyond our sins and offered his Son, Jesus, to die on the cross in order that we might come into the full realization of being the beloved children of God. John wrote, "See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know him. Beloved, we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is" (1 John 3:1–2).

Belovedness is also a reconciling force at the core of a multi-ethnic and missional church. God's love for us flows through us that we might live in community and unity outside the race structures of this world and express that love for one another and the world. Again we turn to John: "Beloved let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him" (1 John 4:7–9).

"Beloved" is what connects us in an intimate relationship with Christ, relationships with one another in the body of Christ, and our ability to advance the kingdom of God. We must be willing to honestly unpack what keeps us from loving one another. It may be easier to plant, grow, and sustain a homogeneous church in Black or White, but it's unbiblical. And even though it's harder to plant, grow, and sustain a multi-ethnic and beloved church, it's a biblical mandate. As the Gospel of Matthew comes to a conclusion, the resurrected Jesus set forth the Great Commission: he called his followers to go beyond just reaching their own Jewish people, to making disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). The homogeneous church model narrows both the Great Commission and the gospel.

The post-Black, post-White church should frame the future of the church in the United States. I have been a part of and listened to too many discussions about the postmodern church that are limited by White church theology, philosophy, and practice. Many of the so-called emerging, missional, and monastic discussions, conferences, books, and blogs are mainly about the current state and future of the White church. Similarly, the megachurch in the United States is accepted and marketed as the best practice model for church development, planting, and revitalization. But many of these megachurches are also stuck in the matrix of Black and White. Yet neither our current reality nor the future is White. We need to include or replace the models, language, and approaches with post-Black, post-White theology and practice because they will lead to the development of kingdom churches.

The Church's Struggle with Race

The good news is that some of the most respected megachurch leaders are now lifting up the importance and the biblical mandate for multi-ethnic and missional churches. One such leader is Bill Hybels, senior pastor of Willow Creek Church and president of the Willow Creek Association of Churches. Over the past few years at the Leadership Summit Conference, he has been transparent about Willow Creek's intentional journey to be more missional through a focus on deep discipleship and by becoming a multi-ethnic church. We can only hope that more megachurches will move in this direction.

The discussion on multi-ethnic churches is the most important one that those concerned about the church in post-Christendom should be having. But many of these discussions are limited by not acknowledging that the theological constructs and frameworks

being used are stuck in Whiteness and more rooted in philosophy than theology. I don't put the blame totally on European-Americans because at least they're having the discussion. Most times when I bring up this issue with European-American pastors and ministry leaders, they readily acknowledge the problem of being stuck in White church ideologies and structures. I've also had some fruitful discussions with members of the emergent movement, missional church movements, and leaders of denominations about the importance of multi-ethnic church and ministry development in today's multicultural reality.

Sometimes leaders within the Black church are more resistant to this kind of multi-ethnic and biblical discussion. As the world is becoming more and more multi-ethnic and multicultural, a significant portion of the Black church seems stuck in survival mode instead of being the innovative force behind a multi-ethnic and missional church. This may be because race is still a large a factor in our society. Many argue that the Black church is still needed—not because the White church is not welcoming to other ethnicities but because of a power dynamic that promotes assimilation. The unspoken question is, “What will African-Americans lose by being in a multi-ethnic community, specifically with European-Americans?” Sociologist Korie Edwards addresses this issue of power dynamics within what she calls interracial churches:

In short, I propose that interracial churches work, that is, remain racially integrated, to the extent that they are first comfortable places for whites to attend. This is not to suggest, of course, that the congregational life of interracial churches only represents the interests and preferences of whites. Indeed, these churches need to also appeal to the racial minorities in their religious communities. Nevertheless, whiteness plays a critical role in how interracial churches are organized, ultimately producing churches that reflect a congregational life more commonly seen in white churches than in others.⁶

With this in mind, why would African-American leaders want to abandon the Black church for a multi-ethnic church that could eventually become a church mainly catering to Whites? A number of questions have to be answered: Can there be a fruitful focus on issues specifically facing African-Americans and the African-American community within an interracial church? When European-Americans enter an interracial church, does it cause the other congregants to assimilate into Whiteness and lose their distinctive racial or ethnic characteristics, values, and gifts? These are important questions that have to be answered, which is why a discussion on a post-Black, post-White church is necessary. Within these discussions, we can't pretend we can have color-blind visions for a different kind of church. We have to deal with the issues of Blackness and Whiteness that drive why the church looks the way it does. This is why I choose to use the term *multi-ethnic* and not *interracial*. This book deals primarily with the issue of finding identity in race, which is not of God. Multi-ethnicity is a more biblical and God-honoring way of being a Christ-centered and reconciling community than race. At the same time, we cannot ignore the daily implications of race in our society.

I realize that the church is already much more than Black and White, but it is still struggling to break out of the matrix of race, which is very much rooted in the historic Black and White conflict. There are churches that I've attended that are predominantly Asian or Hispanic, but with the exception of the language difference in the first-generation churches, they tend to take on Black or White characteristics, and most of the time, it's White characteristics. I sat in a worship recently at a second- and third-generation Asian church, and when I closed my eyes, the praise and worship sounded as if I was in a contemporary White worship service. Clearly other ethnic churches in the United States are stuck in this race matrix of Black and White, and maybe more than we'd like to admit. These cases of ethnic churches functioning as White churches go back to my

point of the White church in America being considered the “normal church.” The question then becomes, What is going on in society that causes some second- and third-generation ethnic groups to lose their sense of a unique cultural style of worship practice that could in turn be a blessing to other ethnicities?

The church must recognize that this matrix exists, unplug from it, and become a truly reconciling and kingdom-building force. This will not happen if we stay in denial about how much the race matrix is influencing the church. To a degree, in fact, race has a larger influence on the church than the Bible does.

In order to take advantage of the kingdom-advancing opportunities before us, we must plant and develop post-Black, post-White churches. The question then becomes, What does this look like? That what’s this book is all about.

What This Book Is About

This book begins with a multi-ethnic and missional church planting and revitalization movement that is intentional about doing the hard work of developing post-Black, post-White churches. I realize that this is not the first book written on the development of multi-ethnic and missional churches. What may be unique about this one is that it combines multi-ethnic and missional.

Mark DeYmaz has laid the foundation for the development of multi-ethnic churches. He is the lead pastor of an intentionally multi-ethnic church in central Arkansas and the leader of a movement, the Mosaix Network, to develop more multi-ethnic churches. He locates the biblical mandate for the multi-ethnic church in John 17 when Jesus prays to the Father that his followers will remain unified as he prepares to go to the cross. He is thinking about how his disciples will be about kingdom-advancing work when he is no longer with

them. DeYmaz presents the multi-ethnic church as a vehicle through which unity can be realized by the followers of Christ. This prayer provided a communal framework for Christ's Jewish and Gentile followers to live in unity. Within Acts, we see the transformation of Peter in a second conversion experience that leads him to the house of a Gentile named Cornelius. We see the diverse multi-ethnic leadership in the church at Antioch as well. DeYmaz concludes this biblical case by sharing the words of Paul to the Ephesians. Paul also deals with the local church of the first century as multi-ethnic, reconciling, and bringing unity between Jew and Gentile.

In many ways, I hope to build on the work that DeYmaz has done. I also believe that by connecting multi-ethnic with missional, this book is providing both a biblical and holistic model of church development, planting, and revitalization. I would say that I'm combining the writing of DeYmaz with that of John Perkins, one of the founders of the Christian Community Development Association and a heroic Christian leader for reconciliation in Mississippi. Perkins's writings around the principles of reconciliation, relocation, and redistribution planted the seeds in me that grew into a passion for the missional church. I first read Perkins's book *With Justice for All* as a teenager about a year after I became a Christian. I know now that his writings and preaching played a significant role in my initial theological development and my burden for a church beyond Black and White. Through Perkins, I discovered that the missional church is about the church being a vehicle of kingdom justice. Perkins captures that idea well:

I believe that justice for all can become a reality in America. Government alone though, however good, can never bring justice. I am convinced that the promise which our nation's laws alone have been powerless to fulfill can only be fulfilled in one way—through the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yes,

the gospel has this power. I know, for I have seen it bring hope to the hopeless; I have seen it empower the powerless to break the chains of oppression. I am persuaded that the Church, as a steward of this gospel, holds the key to justice in our society. Either justice will come through us or it will not come at all.⁷

I believe that Perkins is an overlooked voice when it comes to understanding the missional church. He is mostly seen as a voice for reconciliation, which he is. He is also seen by many as a voice for Christian community development, which he is. But he is also a pioneering voice for the multi-ethnic and missional church.

Perkins's missional strategy was centered around relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution. The relocation part of this strategy is about being among the lost and hurting of the world. This is what God did over two thousand years ago: he came from the heavenly realm and relocated to this broken and fallen world as the Son of God and God incarnate, both at the same time. The missional church is positioned among those in need of a savior. But we must remember that this Savior came to save the lost and to set us free as well. Jesus began his public ministry by speaking these words: "The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me because He anointed Me to preach the Gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18–19). He then put those words into action: he forgave sins, gave mobility to the paralyzed, gave sight to the blind, and removed evil spirits. He did all of this and more as he showed us the holistic gospel. This is what Perkins is getting at in his missional strategy.

In the reconciliation part of his theology, Perkins points to the work of Jesus as he walked the earth among us, leading to his death and resurrection, as reconciling work. We are both reconciled to God through Christ Jesus and made ambassadors of reconciliation that we

might have right relationships with one another. Perkins makes his case for the post-Black, post-White church here. In the 1960s and 1970s, he was questioning how the church can represent the great reconciler Jesus and not deal with race, the great dividing line during that time. This led him to plant a post-Black, post-White church:

To carve out of the heart of Jackson, Mississippi, a community of believers reconciled to God and to each other—that was our dream; to bring together a fellowship of blacks and whites, rich and poor, who would live together, worship together and reach out together as the people of God. We believed that if we would faithfully be the people of God in our neighborhood, we could make a positive difference in the lives of people enslaved by poverty and racism.⁸

The post-Black, post-White church is a reconciling church that answers the call to justice, which is part of a holistic approach to the whole gospel. I believe this is where all missional church discussions should begin today. How is the church including kingdom justice in its approach to evangelism and outreach?

The combination of the biblical mandate for the multi-ethnic church presented by DeYmaz and the biblical framework for the missional church from Perkins provides part of the foundation for the post-Black, post-White church. Perkins's work was burning deep in my soul when I had the opportunity to plant the Sanctuary Covenant Church. He inspired a vision within me for a church in Minneapolis, where I grew up. DeYmaz provided similar inspiration for me in my role now as superintendent of the Pacific Southwest Conference of the Evangelical Covenant church. This relatively new leadership opportunity allows me to serve with a team to lead a movement of multi-ethnic and missional church development in California, Arizona, Hawaii, Nevada, and Utah.

This book provides biblical foundations, personal stories, church models, challenges, and encouragement for the planting of and the revitalization toward multi-ethnic and missional churches. Advancing the kingdom of God in the global and multi-ethnic realities that surround us is not about taking the easy road. And to be honest, if we look at the state of the majority of churches in the United States, that easy road really isn't getting us very far. The majority of churches in our country have fewer than one hundred people in the congregation, and many are dying. It's time to be intentional by developing post-Black, post-White churches that eventually become beloved communities of transformation in an increasingly multi-ethnic world. This will take a new discussion about the state of the church, as well as its vision, purpose, and core values. My hope is that the multi-ethnic church will become the norm of the church in America and beyond. The chapters that follow offer this hope.