

Ten Ways to Pursue Ethnic Harmony in Your Church

by John Piper

This sermon emphasizes the importance of pursuing Christ-exalting, gospel-driven racial and ethnic diversity and harmony within the local church. It provides practical advice on how to advance this cause, including showing biblical reasons for pursuing diversity, emphasizing that it is a blood issue, using non-traditional texts in teaching, aligning Calvinist beliefs with racial issues, celebrating historical figures who engaged in diversity, sharing personal stories with vulnerability, establishing mission statements and core values, contextualizing diversity in a global and national perspective, building relationships with diverse friends, and intentionally seeking leaders from different ethnic backgrounds.

Scripture: Genesis 1:27, Revelation 5:9, Ephesians 2:16, Galatians 3:28, Romans 3:28, 1 Corinthians 12:13, Isaiah 56:7, Acts 10:34, Colossians 3:11, Psalm 133:1

Topics: "Racial Harmony", "Gospel-Centered Diversity"

Description

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Transcript

Let's pray. Father, I ask for help now that you would cause my mind to be faithful, my heart to be faithful to your word and that whatever counsel is given would be true and would magnify Jesus and honor you and hallow your name and would advance the cause of racial harmony and diversity in our churches and I pray for the audience that they would be alert and wise and discerning in their listening in Jesus name, amen. I came expecting to give one message and totally rewrote it this afternoon because of my sense in listening that the focus tonight is very practically on the local church and that's where I've served for 30 years and I'm very happy to adjust everything and I'm very excited about what I have to say.

So, I'm going to quote from you a sentence from the conclusion of this book. The aim of this book has been to encourage you to pursue Christ exalting gospel driven racial and ethnic diversity and harmony

especially in the family of God, the church of Jesus Christ. So, that's the goal of the book to do what I'm expected to do tonight so it's not an alien purpose that I have undertaken to advance a Christ exalting gospel driven racial diversity and harmony especially in the local church and on pages 260 to 262 there's a list of 34 things that we have tried to do at our local church and I'm going to talk about 10 half of which are not on that list.

So, that's where we're going and I don't have any idea whether I can do this in my time allotted but when quarter of eight happens I will stop and if I'm at number eight I have 10 of these then we'll skip them and you can put on one of your questions what was number nine? Number one. So, these are all my counsel to any of you who will have any influence in local churches at all which I was all of you as to what you might do to advance this, this ethnic diversity, ethnic harmony in local churches. Number one.

Show from the Bible why this should be pursued. Show why it should be pursued and instead of giving the sermons that would back this up I'm just going to sketch a little something with each of these points so you can see the kind of thing that I mean we should be talking about. So, you would say things like this.

These five. Number one. Racial diversity and harmony.

I won't repeat that each time. Illustrates more clearly the truth that God created all races and all ethnicities in his own image. Number two.

It displays more visibly that Jesus is not a tribal deity but in fact is the Lord of all races and nations and ethnicities. It demonstrates more clearly the blood-bought destiny of the church as we see in Revelation 5. Nine. That he bought people from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

Four. It exhibits more compellingly the aim and power of the cross. We all know Ephesians 2. He reconciles us both in God in one body through the cross thereby killing the hostility.

And number five. It expresses more forcefully the work of the Spirit in uniting us spiritually in one body in Christ. So it's Trinitarian.

We're created in God's image. We are reconciled by the blood of Christ and we are engrafted into one body by the Spirit. All the Trinity are involved in producing this and the beauty of that as we see it in the New Testament is why it should be pursued.

Number two. Show that ethnic diversity and harmony is not a social issue but a blood issue. In many of the churches represented here they are conservative churches.

They think social action is liberal and the cross of Christ is conservative and therefore they need to be shown from the Bible. I need to be shown. I'm one of those conservative guys.

I'm a Bible guy. I'm suspicious of people who just try to feed bellies and let people go to hell. I don't like it.

So I need to show people like me that this is not a social issue. This is a blood issue. And I have in mind texts like Revelation 5.9. You were slain and by your blood you ransomed people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

It's worth his blood to have diversity. That's the issue. This is not a small issue.

You say that to conservative people who love the cross. You love the cross. What did he buy? Or texts like Romans 3.28 which goes to the doctrine of justification which is blood bought and shows how ethnic diversity, global ethnic diversity is woven into the doctrine of justification.

For example Romans 3.28 following, we hold that one is justified by God, justified by faith apart from works of the law. Or is God the God of the Jews only? Is he not the God of the nations also? Yes, of the nations also since God is one who will justify the circumcised by their faith and the uncircumcised through their faith. So right at the heart in Paul's mind of the doctrine of justification which all of us conservatives love is the global extent of crossing all those barriers to all the uncircumcised justified by faith.

Or one more illustration on this point. You know that in Galatians 2 Peter was eating with Gentiles. He was breaking the rules of the conservatives in Jerusalem and he was eating catfish with uncircumcised people as a Jew and he was free.

He'd been bought for this. He'd been bought for this. And here comes some fellas from James in Jerusalem and Peter loses it.

He loses his grip and he backs up, pulls out a fellowship, pulls out a fellowship. So picture your, you know, your favorite dangerous ethnicity, and you pull out a fellowship with them when the wrong kind of people show up, and Paul gets livid. And the language he uses is very significant.

When I saw that their conduct was not in step with the Gospel. That's the phrase I want you to grasp. This is a Gospel issue.

There's some steps you can take like into fellowship with Gentiles, eating anything they offer you, and not in any way drawing any attention to circumcision or uncircumcision, but establishing unity in Christ and then pulling out of it. And Paul says you pull out of that, you pull it out of the Gospel. This is a big issue for Paul.

So point number two is help churches that are Bible churches. And I'm one of those. A Bible people show me in the book, show me it's close to the cross, show me it's close to the center.

That is not hard to do with this issue. So that's number two. Number three, use non-traditional texts when preaching or teaching.

In other words, when you walk into a group like I did this morning, surprise them. I chose my topic this morning because I thought you wouldn't be expecting it. That's one of the reasons.

I went at it the way I did because I didn't want you to go to sleep on me, you students. I don't want to just use, I don't want to preach on Ephesians 2. It's overworked. So what would you do? And so every year as Martin Luther King Sunday rolls around in my church and I'm preaching a new sermon on this, I'm trying to come at it from a new angle.

For example, just give you one example. One year I went to Luke 4. Real familiar text in one sense. Jesus goes to the synagogue and he reads Isaiah 60, the Spirit of the Lord is upon me.

And then he says, as he closes the scroll, this is fulfilled in your hearing. And they say he speaks with such gracious words. He's not this Joseph's son.

And then Jesus, what's he doing? He says, you will say physician, heal yourself. And he tells them story of Elijah. Though there were many widows in Israel, help the widow of Sidon.

And Elisha, though there were many lepers in Israel, homeboys, he heals a leper from Syria. And what do they respond? They want to throw him off a cliff. And you just read that you say, what? Why? You were just saying nice things about him when he said this scripture is being fulfilled among you.

I've came to heal you. And Jesus can smell a problem. He smells it.

He smells ethnocentricity. He smells pride, Jewish pride in this particular case. And so he tells an Old Testament story to show how God just passed over Israel, went straight to Sidon, passed over Israel, went straight to Syria and did healing work there.

And they were livid and wanted to throw him off a cliff. So you preach from that. And people never thought about that before.

So you surprise people. The Bible is a wonderful book. This is a very thick book and it is full of amazingly relevant stories.

So that's number three. Come at it from different fresh ways whenever you have a word. Number four.

If you're a Calvinist, now it's just for the little tribe, I know, like me, then, and you can just adjust this to your angle. If your angle, okay, if your sense of how the Bible fits together and how God makes sense in the world doesn't address this issue, you've got the wrong angle. Which means as a Reformed guy, I've got to make the five points speak to this, which is not hard.

So I've preached sermons on the five points and how every one of them is a racial issue. So here's, for example, look at a sentence maybe on each one. Total depravity.

We are all in one great desperate camaraderie of condemnation. This is massive to look into every ethnicity on the planet and say, you are dead in trespasses and sins. And so am I. What a camaraderie.

No puffed up superiority here. You're dead. I'm dead.

We're hopeless. That's huge. Number two, unconditional election.

That one speaks for itself. Nobody pulls rank on God in getting elected. Nobody pulls out their white card, black card, smart card, any other card.

It's free, totally free and unconditional. When God chooses me from eternity to him, nobody can boast in their election and nobody can despair. I'd love to preach on election right now and how it is unbelievably relevant in counseling situations for people who think they've sinned themselves out of hope.

You get in God's face and say you've sinned yourself out of hope. He chooses without any reference to your sin whatsoever and he did it already a billion years ago and already all you have to do right now is trust him and you're in. Definite atonement means not that Christ didn't die for everybody, but that he didn't die for everybody in the same way.

He purchased his bride including purchasing her faith and therefore he did it without even any reference to her faith and her cultural possibilities of producing it because of where she grew up. Irresistible grace not

only is your ethnic distinctives contributing nothing to your election, nothing to your ransom on the cross, it contributes nothing to your rise of faith because God produces that and draws you irresistibly to himself by creating your inclination to come. Whatever background inclines you one way or the other doesn't stop God in the least from raising you from the dead and perseverance of the saints.

Those whom he calls he keeps and if he called you freely he'll keep you freely and on and on and on the glory goes. I am a reformed guy because I see it in the bible and because I find it confirmed in the most unbelievably relevant ways. Number five, celebrate historical figures who engaged with this issue and I suppose we would all default to William Wilberforce, kind of the poster boy of evangelical get it right.

Very few people know that William Wilberforce, I suppose you do know that he devoted his life in an amazing perseverance to overcoming the slave trade in Britain, but what you may not know is that he only wrote one book in his life. The name of the book was A Practical View of Christianity, and even fewer people know what the thesis of the book was. You know they probably think, oh it's all about mobilizing people to, you know, kill the slave trade.

Well it was, but that's not what he talked about mainly. It's a book about justification. His thesis was that morality in England had sunk to the place where it was because the people lost their grip on justification and the order between justification and moral life.

The order is those who are justified bear fruit in works that vindicate their justification. Britain had turned it around and become a moralistic people who did their good works in the hope that God would then look with favor upon them. And you know what happens when you do that? And it happens, by the way we were talking about this a little bit beforehand and so dangerous I was showing.

When you get bent out of shape about people who do the race thing disproportionately in relation to the gospel, that is race goes here, gospel goes here. Here's the sad thing about that. The gospel in the long run is the source of power for the long-term painful obedience it takes to do this.

If in the name of getting it done quicker you reduce gospel, reduce justification, and all the details of doctrine that go with it, and start pumping on this issue, you lose it. You lose it. You lose the issue.

The liberals of the 1920s are not affecting racial reconciliation today. They're dead. They're dead.

And the evangelicals will go in exactly the same way if we start thinking it's really, it's really justice issues and not gospel issues that sustain just justice issues. So I'm pleading with you for the sake of racial diversity and harmony, for the sake of justice issues, for the sake of trafficking issues, which is the hot end thing to be in favor of today, for the sake of all that, believe the details of biblical teaching concerning justification by faith alone apart from works of the law which give rise to a kind of obedience that'll weather all the storms of your life. Got all that from Wilberforce and John Newton, his good friend, who gave him wise counsel in that regard.

Number six, tell your story with all of its warts and horrors. I tried to do that in the first two chapters of this book, made a video of it to just lay the ugliness of my first 20 years out and let it be, and here's the point. Tell your story by loving the gospel, loving the cross, loving substitutionary propitiation.

That's J.I. Packer's definition of the gospel, propitiation by substitution. I just think that's grand. Love that so much.

God's not mad at me anymore because of Jesus. My sins are covered and therefore I have no more guilt. I have a righteousness not my own.

I am safe in Jesus. Go there, love that so much that you can confess all your sins in front of anybody. You can tell your whole story and don't be afraid.

You got nobody to impress. God's for you. This is what Christians ought to be.

Pastors, leaders, model, secure vulnerability. Texts that have made a difference for me in that regard. When Chaplain Evan Welch, about a hundred yards that way, that used to be the infirmary, whatever that building is right there on the other side of that, whatever, somewhere over there.

I was in the hospital. He came when I was between sophomore, just beginning my junior year, and he said, Johnny—they called me Johnny in those days—got a life verse. I remember he asked me that.

I mean, this is 45 years ago. I remember he asked me that, and I answered—I never even thought about this, life verse—but I answered, I am crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

In the life that I now live, in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me. There's very few times in all of Paul where he uses a singular me to talk about the love of God. It's usually us and you and they, but here he says, he loved me.

He loved me and gave himself for me. And since that time, I'm just curious, like, God must have given me that. God must have given me that.

I wasn't thinking that was a life verse. It just seemed like a good verse to quote to the chaplain. And it has been so, so sweet.

He loves me. And Paul was a murderer. Pharisee, or 1 Corinthians 321, let no one boast of men, for all things are yours, whether Paul or Cephas or Paulus or life or death or the world or things present or things to come, all are yours and you are Christ and Christ is God's.

I mean, just think if you believe this, think of it. God, Hassan, Christ, I belong to Christ and in Christ and therefore God's and therefore since he owns everything, I will be an heir of everything. Now, you know what conclusion he drew from that? Why do you boast in man? This is the opposite of what a lot of people would think.

Like, I'm the heir of the universe. Notice that's not the way it works. You don't get it.

You still totally don't get it. If your theology of belonging to the King of Kings produces that, it breaks you to say, why would I need anybody to make much of me? I'm home. I'm safe.

I own everything. You're trying to impress me with your car. I own the cars.

I own all the cars. And there are so many others. The point is here, be vulnerable with your story and tell it like it is.

Be vulnerable with your present story. And I want to stir in here, be vulnerable with your hero's story. So Vince, this is Kuyper, right? And Jonathan Edwards, okay? Kuyper for you, Edwards for me, slave holder

and whatever that stupid sentence was, you just quoted to me from Kuyper.

Better to be an Aryan than a Hottentot. This is really hot in the blogosphere right now. I don't know whether you read the ones I read, but you know, the hip-hop artist Propaganda has just produced an album called Excellence and On It, a song called Precious Puritans, right? And he wails on us, me, for quoting from our precious Puritans, and I do, and I understandably do.

Don't you realize how that comes down on us because they were all slaveholders? That's really important for me to hear, okay? Really, really important. And the point I'm making here is, not only confess your own sins, your history sins, your school sins, your hero's sins, there aren't any other kind than failures. If it's not race, it's going to be something else.

You might as well do it, because you're going to wake up someday and say, oh shoot, I thought Kuyper was clean, or whoever. Mark Knoll's book, God and Race in America, in American politics, was for me on this issue extremely helpful by showing that the Christian worldview is the only worldview that can account for the failures to live that worldview. Very interesting thesis.

Number seven, get a mission statement and core values in your church, or whatever your group is. Now, I'm going to tell you the story here about how I came about, and just as an illustration of how it relates to racial harmony. Our God, if He wants to get a hold of you as a church, and spank you, and fix you, and turn you around, He may do some horrible things.

For us, it was the early 90s, and I discovered a tape of one of my staff members talking romantically to another female staff member, and I pursued this for six weeks, making hundreds of enemies, because they thought I was unduly suspicious, until He repented, and they'd been an affair for seven years. That cost us 230 people, it cost us four years of no growth, it cost us loss of income, and it disillusioned dozens of people, both with the faith and with me, and with worship, because I was so involved with worship, and it was a dark, dark season, and God knew exactly what He was doing. About two years into it, we had a first year we called the year of tears, just grieving, that's all we did, trying to keep everything from falling apart, and the next year we began to ask, who are we? What did we do wrong? What is the Lord saying? And in seasons like this, the church is not popping with growth, there's no great story to tell, it's just languishing and trying to stay alive, and we formed a team, you don't have to do it this way, this way we did it, of 23 people.

I think there were four staff on that, and the rest were lay people, and those 23 people met bi-weekly for about six months, asking, who are we? Where are we going? Is there a future? What should define us now? Musically, what should define us? And out of that came the question, racially, what should define us? About five months into that process, they sent me away for two days and said, create a mission statement, bring it back, we'll take it apart. And I did, and after being taken apart and put back together, it's been our mission statement since 1997. It's on the wall at the church, it's the mission statement, I'm happy to say, of my life.

We exist to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things, like race relations, the supremacy of God in all things, for the joy of all, and we could have said people, but we said peoples, and the s on the end of peoples was a explicit people groups of every ethnicity are being pursued for the joy of supremacy in God in this church. It's going to be who we are, both globally and locally. And then we produced, that committee produced about a 12-page booklet with two columns called Values, or Core Values.

That's been edited twice in the last 20 years or so, what, 15 years? And there's a section in that, one of the 10 core values is racial harmony. And I don't have time to read, but those are the about the eight issues that are there under racial harmony. But the point there is, at some point in the life of your church, don't make God spank you like that.

Just gather people around and say, let's figure out our identity, at least in regard to these key things. Let's come up with some kind of mission statement and core values that will guide us in these regards. Number eight, put your situation for the people in a global and national context.

You know, if you just start, if you just start talking about your neighborhood, or just start talking about your situation, people are going to feel this is narrow, this is small, it's not really relevant for them, relevant for them where they live, etc. So I think it's very helpful for leaders to put this in a global and historic context. Like, when we say racial or ethnic disharmony, what do we mean? Like saying something bad at work? Well, no, things like the Armenian genocide in Turkey with a million people slaughtered, or the Holocaust in Germany, six million, or the Soviet gulag, or the massacres in Rwanda.

It's totally ethnic, right? They were both Christian. Japanese slaughter of six million Chinese and Indonesians and Koreans and Filipinos and Indochinese, and the litany of hatred goes on and on and on. You need to help your people see, oh, oh, oh, I see, I see, and then it's not like, oh, we dealt with this in the 60s, didn't we? You're in another planet.

You're not even alive on the earth. You don't know what's going on, if that's the way you think. We're talking about something massively relevant in every country of the world, and some countries way more painfully than other countries.

Or America. Minorities make up roughly a third of the U.S. population, and that 30 percent, they say, get this from the U.S. Census Bureau, will be 50 percent by the year 2042. What's that? 30 years away.

You'll be alive, most of you, the students anyway, probably. Twelve years from now, half the babies born in America will be non-white. I'll be alive, I hope.

Talking about this. So, half the babies born, non-white. You know, the people in Dalbo, Minnesota, who don't think there's any reason to think about this, perhaps, because there's nobody around like that.

No, different from them. They need to know the realities that the world deals with. The Hispanic population projected to triple from 46 million to 132 million by 2050.

Hispanics will jump from 15 to 30 percent, they say. The black population from 41 million to 65 million, up to 15 percent. Twin cities.

So, I'm talking to my church now. Give them a feel, what we're talking about here. Not just a little thing here and there at work or whatever.

In the twin cities, the Hispanic population doubled from 1990 to 2000. It's the eighth fastest Hispanic city in the world, growing fastest growing city in the world. The light rail system in Minneapolis has four languages on the machines, English, Spanish, Hmong, and Somali.

Philip's neighborhood, where I live, have 100 languages spoken in Philip's neighborhood. In the twin cities, there is the largest Hmong, Oromo, Liberian, Karen, Anuak, Somali population in the country, and the

second largest Tibetan population in the country. This is the reality of Scandinavian twin cities, and our people need to be shown that.

Number nine, reach out to friends different from you and listen. Now, I know, I know this is going to be criticized. Oh, here goes another white person in a project, you know.

Look, that kind of talk doesn't help. Rather, what we need to say is, how about just trying blatant honesty? So, I call up the black pastor down the street, say, Arthur, we've hardly met. We have lunch.

I want something I want to ask you. Sure. You meet and say, you know, I hardly know any blacks in this city, and I know the first thing you're thinking is, he needs a black project, and I'm him.

I'm the project. I know that's what you're thinking, and if you don't want to do it, I totally understand, but mainly, I want to listen. I want to learn.

I don't know where to turn to grow, and he just might have some mercy toward you. I just don't see anything. I mean, why make it anything else? Why not just be flat-out honest? I'm broke.

I don't, I'm not effective in relationships like this, and I just need all the help I can get. Giving you a little illustration. Melvin is a part-time staff member at Bethlehem, African-American friend.

Been at Bethlehem since Hebrews 9. So, compute that. Eight years in Romans, four years in John, seven years in Hebrews, so about 15 years ago. That's the way he dates his time for there.

I came in Hebrews 9. So, I took him out to lunch not long ago. I wanted his feedback on the book, okay, and he gave me his feedback. Yes, but kind of feedback.

You know, you should have done a little more here, a little more here. I said, got that, understand, helpful, thank you, and then I said, okay, Melvin, help me understand so-called gay marriage in the black community. What's going on here in the Twin Cities? So, what I'm illustrating is, I need this friend because I'm not getting it.

I said, what's going on? He said, okay, here's the deal. I was at the pastor's meeting, all right? Every black pastor in the Twin Cities just about was there, and this was being talked about. I was there.

To a man, none of them affirms so-called gay marriage, none of them. I said, okay, I hear that. So, what about Obama? He said, they're all going to vote for Obama.

I said, okay, can you talk some more? And for the next 20 minutes, I get an education. I mean, this is gold, absolute gold. I just need to hear what this guy's saying, because I can't compute.

I mean, my, you know, my little criteria of, nope, nope, that's it, he's out, you know, I ain't gonna go there. And he's giving me, and you can ask me later what he said, but I just, I didn't push back at all. I got, you know, probably some political differences with Melvin.

I'm just, this is, the point here is, I'm listening, because I live in a world of white majority culture, and I get everything through filters, and hardly ever get it from the horse's mouth, and so that was a golden opportunity. So, I'm saying number nine is have those friends and do serious, long, long listening. The longer you have them, the more you can push back and have the rough and tumble that good friends have.

Lastly, number ten, my time's up, but I'll do one minute on this, well, maybe three. Pursue leaders different ethnically from yourself intentionally, okay. We're talking the dangerous language here of racial preference and affirmative action.

Loaded phrases, right? So, you're a pastor. You have some influence over who your colleagues are. You live in an area where there's a significant diversity of various ethnicities, and you'd like to have some color on the staff for the reasons I gave at the beginning, not because it's the thing to do, and your conscience will be relieved, and people would admire you for being cutting edge, and blah, blah, blah, but because it's right, it's helpful, it displays more of the kingdom, and more of the gospel, and the people need it, and the kids need to grow up seeing it, and all kinds of reasons.

Now, what do you do? Now, I wrote down four things here. Number one, you pray like crazy that God will arrange things and do wonders for you. Number two, you prepare the people.

This may take years by teaching the kinds of things that I've been saying. And number four, you begin to probe like crazy on the internet, among all your friends, gathering. You don't even know anybody maybe who would qualify, and you seek to assemble a coterie of people that you can know, and that might be possible staff members, and then comes this most troubling of all.

Number four, in interviews, you make it matter. You make it matter, and you don't buy. Well, competency is all the matter here.

It's not all that matters, because part of competency is how well will we say what we want to say by being who we are. So that figures in, and I'll end with this. Nobody gets hired at Bethlehem for their color.

We don't make it the top priority. The Bethlehem elder affirmation of faith is the top priority. Doctrine trumps race.

Now, we can talk about that on the panel if that sounds wrong to some of you, but I think race is sold down the river in the long run if race becomes our God. If it becomes our gospel. There is a gospel, and there is a whole council of God around that gospel, and that gospel is the power source by which we will be able to pursue this issue until Jesus comes with gospel and Christ-exalting forcefulness, and if you switch it around and start hiring people who aren't with you on the gospel because they're with you in diversity, you won't have the gospel in the long run.

I have seen agencies go that way, and churches, and I could name at least one that's very painfully involved with me. End on this. Christ died for this.

That's the main point. Christ died for this, and we need to make that plain to our people. Father, I pray that the panel discussion now will be fruitful, and that understanding would grow, and that if I've said anything misleading or hurtful, that it would be checked and corrected, and that your name would be honored, and that we would all move forward on the issue of racial harmony and racial diversity that is Christ-exalting and gospel-driven.

I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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