



Exposing Our Hidden Fears

How the church can help us move beyond talk to begin realizing a post-racial society

PETER CHIN

I was raised in a largely white culture. I even thought I was white until I was directly informed by a classmate, “You aren’t white—you’re Chinese!” It was a revelation I found rather puzzling, considering that I am Korean.

Even more strangely, I am a Korean American who can speak hardly a word of Korean. As a result, my relatives often call me “dummy” (which is the only word I can recognize in Korean). And now my family and I live in a largely African American neighborhood, where I serve as interim pastor of a multiethnic church in one of the poorest neighborhoods of Washington, D.C. So I’m not sure how to identify myself anymore: I’m a vaguely Asian person who grew up listening to Pearl Jam and trying to play hacky sack but who sings Fred Hammond on Sunday morning. I think that makes me “post-racial”!

I first heard that phrase in January 2009, at the inauguration of President Barack Obama, which I watched on TV. That may sound strange given that I live only a few miles from the Mall, but it was a bitterly cold January day in D.C., and there was no way I was braving both the cold and the crowds to see this historic event. So I settled for watching it from my recliner while sipping hot tea.

I remember watching the inauguration with a deep sense of pride and rising hope. Commentators kept mentioning that this historic moment marked our transition to becoming a post-racial nation, a society where race no longer played the divisive role it had played throughout our history. We were finally beyond the whole race thing. Although I brimmed with excitement at that possibility, at the same time I knew that this analysis was hopelessly optimistic. The election of our first African American president would not be enough to put the issue of race to rest.

Fast-forward three and a half years—we are definitely not a post-racial society. That became especially clear to me several months ago when a candidate for U.S. Senate named Pete Hoekstra posted a campaign ad that featured an Asian woman wearing a stereotypical rice paddy hat and using broken English to thank Americans for sending jobs and money overseas. This sparked an outcry from many within and outside the Asian American community.

To me, what was particularly vexing about this advertisement was not that it was made in the first place. After all, cultural perspectives can be so unique that it is not uncommon for a person to be completely ignorant of what offends another. I can understand ignorance. What angered me was that even after being informed of exactly how and why his advertisement denigrated Asians, Pete Hoek-

stra insisted that it was not offensive and refused to apologize in any way. In my mind, there could not possibly be a clearer demonstration that we were hardly a post-racial nation.

But I was wrong. There was Trayvon Martin.

The facts seemed clear at first, but soon they were muddled by political pundits and media moguls on all sides of the spectrum. An unarmed black youth, carrying nothing more than Skittles and iced tea—or an imposing teenager who thuggishly assaulted a man? An overzealous and prejudiced vigilante who ignored calls to not fol-

We need a place where we can walk alongside a person who is outwardly very different but at the core still be connected to that person as a brother and sister.

low Trayvon—or a responsible neighborhood watch captain who defended himself against physical violence? Videos were doctored, email accounts hacked, expert opinions thrown about with reckless and inexperienced abandon. The blogosphere ignited, the Twitterverse raged, and when the dust settled, the only thing that was clear is how very far we are from being anything close to a post-racial society.

Although I have strong opinions on this case, I am not writing to take sides. I don't think that any greater purpose can be served by further demonizing those involved. Suffice to say that there are no winners in this situation. The only winners in this tragedy are death and hatred. Instead, what I want to point out is the central role that fear played in these events.

You see, candidate Pete Hoekstra is afraid. He is afraid that good jobs are going overseas to an alien and foreign culture, leaving Americans unemployed. And he capitalized on that fear in his campaign advertisement. George Zimmerman's zealousness as a watch captain was motivated by fear as well, at least to some degree—fear

of crime and of unfamiliar people, stoked to epic proportions by ubiquitous news reports of violence that forever threatens all that we hold dear. Trayvon Martin was surely afraid as well—of the man who ominously followed him, and that he was being singled out because of his race, and perhaps his choice in clothing, a fear that many young black men share. Surely there are elements of prejudice and hatred in all of these stories and people. But fear is the constant. Fear of the unfamiliar is the deepest root of prejudice in our country.

And therein lies the problem. Fear

is not a complex human emotion—it's a primal one. It originates from the most buried and hidden portions of our mind, geographically the furthest from the more complex and nuanced parts of our brain. So you cannot tell a person not to be afraid, or that they are foolish to feel frightened. If they are truly afraid, it is for nearly subconscious reasons that they themselves may not be able to discern.

That is probably the biggest oversight we make—assuming that a good education and balanced laws are enough to erase the fear of the alien and foreigner that we all harbor deep within our amygdala. These are of course worthy and necessary goals, but we must admit that there are emotions and thoughts that not even the most highly regarded professors and most enlightened degrees can touch. We cannot legislate or educate the fear out of people.

I have learned this firsthand. Three years ago when I planted a church in

Peter Chin is a Covenant pastor who serves in the inner city of Washington, D.C. He blogs at www.peterwchin.com and can be found on Twitter at @peterwchin.

Washington, D.C., I assumed that my fine liberal arts education and leftist political leanings had eradicated all my prejudices into nonexistence. I assumed I was immune to the irrational and ignoble fear that drives narrow-mindedness. But in the three years we have lived in D.C., our house has been burglarized twice. Our car has been broken into so many times that by this point we no longer lock the doors because there is nothing of value left to steal. An older resident advised us to put our children's bedrooms facing away from the street as a precaution against random gunfire.

And then my wife was diagnosed with breast cancer.

We may be invited to come as we are, but we are never allowed to remain mired as we have been.

Despite my Yale education and my theological training, blind fear found its foothold. At every sound in the night I would bolt awake and peer suspiciously through the blinds of my bedroom, clutching a giant Maglite, wearing my fuzzy slippers. I would stare suspiciously at every person who passed by our car, assuming that they had come back for the chewing gum they had left in the glove compartment. My mind quailed in fear at the thought of a future without my wife. I was deeply afraid for the safety of my family, my possessions, and the sanctity of my home. I feared those I didn't know, those who differed from me physically, culturally, and chronologically. And, to be completely honest, I was a little frightened of God as well. I knew I shouldn't be, that such fear was irrational and unbiblical, but I couldn't help it. Despite my degrees and desires, I was Pete Hoekstra, George Zimmerman, and Trayvon Martin—I was afraid.

So I know that fear cannot be educated or legislated away. But that does not mean it cannot be addressed in any way. Instead, a more subtle and personal approach is needed.

We need a context in which we can realize through firsthand experience with different kinds of people that our fears are unnecessary and unfounded. We need a place where we can walk alongside a person who is outwardly very different but at the core still be connected to that person as a brother and sister. It would have to be a place that is safe but stretches us at the same time, a place where both acceptance and challenge can coexist. If we could find such places, then perhaps the roots of our prejudices could be teased out and loosened, and eventually removed altogether. If only we could find such a place!

But such a place does exist in the

church.

In the church people who are incredibly different from one another can walk into a room and feel instantly connected, not by virtue of their ethnic or racial or cultural similarities but by the fact that the name of Jesus instantly brings a word of worship to their lips. It is a place where grace and acceptance are preached, but so are mission, calling, and commission. We may be invited to come as we are, but we are never allowed to remain mired as we have been. And church, at its best, is a place where we do not temporarily intersect with others; rather, we walk alongside them and share life together, a wonderfully natural way in which our fear of the unknown—of the other—can be naturally massaged into nonexistence. Church presents us the ideal environment for our hidden fears and prejudices to be exposed, weakened, and nailed to the cross with eternal finality.

That is exactly what I discovered on my own journey. Fear had taught me to view with suspicion anyone who was unlike me, racially, culturally, or economically. Yet in the

church I found brothers and sisters who could not have been any more unlike me, except for the fact that Jesus had given us all new life. We prayed together for my wife's cancer to be healed. We stood shoulder to shoulder, fighting for more education and less crime in a city notorious for little of the former and much of the latter. These people were not "the other," ones whom I could not understand and thus had reason to fear—they were my family in Christ! Slowly but surely the fear of the "other" that had taken root weakened, shrinking into nothingness, much like the tumor that had afflicted my wife. Hallelujah! It was in that particular context of the believers' corporate life together that my fears were finally loosened and relieved.

This is not to critique mono-ethnic or monocultural churches in any way. I have served many churches that fit that description and have been frustrated when people judge such ministries with the shallow assumption that diversity is something that can be photographed and shown off to friends. In truth, there are many levels of diversity, and there is definitely a place for churches that specialize in ministering to those in specific cultural, linguistic, and ethnic contexts. I celebrate and appreciate such ministries because I know that not even the best multicultural ministries can adequately address all the distinct cultural needs that global people have. So while I believe that we all have a responsibility to be educated about multiculturalism, not all are called to establish multicultural ministries.

Instead, I would like to encourage the body of Christ to consider that our churches may be, by the nature Christ has endowed upon them, the ideal context for racial and ethnic reconciliation to take place. For too long we have waited for a panacea to the issue of race to arrive from without—the election of the perfect president, the creation of a perfect bill, or the

release of a really good movie (something like *The Blind Side* but even better). We are forever leaving the task of reconciliation to the so-called experts, perhaps not realizing that there is no better place for reconciliation than a place that honors the great Reconciler.

Of course, such an end will not come easily or naturally. Sharing the gospel with others is neither easy nor natural, but we are hardly allowed a pass based on difficulty! Rather than focusing on how hard the road will be, we should instead focus on how glorious the goal: *a truly post-racial society*.

It is not only the universal church that is gifted in this regard, but we as a denomination. The Covenant Church becomes more and more multiethnic every year, especially among the numerous church plants. We have incredible resources that address the issue of reconciliation: the Journey to Mosaic program held by the Pacific Southwest Conference, the academic work of Soong-Chan Rah and Brenda Salter McNeil, Sankofa journeys offered by the Department of Compassion, Mercy, and Justice, and many others. We need to consider the possibility that we in the Covenant have an important role in bringing deeper understanding and healing to the issue of race in America.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said that it is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning. That has been true for too long, but it doesn't have to be this way. Sunday morning can instead reflect the beautiful diversity that we will witness when Christ comes again, the most diverse and post-racial day of the week, a paradigm for the rest of our nation to model. I believe this because if the church can change a suburban, fearful, and stubborn person like me into someone who lives his life post-racially, then there is great hope for us all. ■