



Marching on

The complexities of race and civil rights could stop us from talking—or forge a conversation finally worth having.

WE US Christians often portray the civil rights movement as a one-size-fits-all movement, or at least a one-time occasion. In our dominant cultural narrative, the civil rights movement was for black people, and it centered on the 1950s and 1960s. The civil rights movement was “back then,” and now we have an equal-opportunity society. We even have a black president. We can move ahead under the assumption that we are all on a level playing field.

But everything about this approach is wrong.

The playing field isn't level. Statistics from the World Bank, the United Nations, and the Census Bureau confirm it. In-depth reporting by the *Economist*, the *Atlantic*, and other media attest to it. Whether discussing women, people of color, gay and lesbian people, transgender people, immigrants, or poor people, the fact remains that the playing field is lopsided.

The civil rights movement is plural, and it is ongoing.

We in the United States have fooled ourselves into believing that there are only two races when it comes to civil rights: black people and white people. This framework allows for an oversimplification of our problem with race. The black-white approach ignores the civil rights problems of Latinos/as, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Arab Americans, and Native Americans and other indigenous groups such as Native Alaskans and Native Hawaiians. The black-white approach undermines multiracial coalitions and perpetuates the ways in which racism has all of us caught up in its legal and cultural grasp. There is no such thing as ending racism against one group while allowing racism to persist against others.

And yet when the conversation is limited, when there's only so much time allotted and only so many scraps tossed our way, any expansion of the approach—any time or effort made for other stories—poses a real threat. The challenge is not to undermine the particularity of the black-white experience or the efforts to address it; it's to break down the imposed limits so that we're not *taking away* but *adding to*.

Race is hard to talk about, though. Most of us have some experience of talking about race and somehow making a mistake, no matter how careful we were. Race is a cultural third rail. Touch it, and you'll probably get

hurt. For people of color, this often means that discussing the realities of living as people of color in the presence of white people will label us as “obsessed with race.” I hear white people say that when they discuss race, they run the risk of making an innocent mistake and offending people. Immigrants step from their own contexts right into the US construct of race, often without realizing what they have entered, which words are off-limits, and what stereotypes exist. Immigrants often lack the tools to resist playing into the system of racial inequality.

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White people often become invisible in this conversation. Even our church's terminology in reference to people of color, *racial-ethnic*, presumes that whiteness is the invariable norm. The implication is that only people of color are racial or ethnic, when in fact white people also have a race and an ethnicity. The privilege of being normal, while the rest of us are marked as “the other,” is largely an invisible privilege to most who experience it.

Most of us have been caught up at some point in the myth of color blindness, pretending we don't see differences. Most who claim they don't see color, or differences, believe that color blindness is preferable. This is pretense, and it goes against brain science. Scientific research shows that our capacity to control our reactions is much less than our almost instantaneous recognition of physical differences. Society is legally and culturally constructed to recognize race and ethnicity, and individuals pretending they have the capacity to ignore race simply end up ignoring the barriers that people of color face and the privileges that white people experience.

Many Presbyterians engage in civil rights movements. Our work for justice, with its theological underpinnings in the vast and fierce love of God, is one of our strengths. In reality, we know that the civil rights movement is plural, ongoing, and an important aspect of our Christian witness.