

**A Sacred Conversation on Race, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 01080518**  
**Galatians 3:25-29 and Matthew 28:16-20**  
**Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 18 May, 2008**

My last name, Kuhn, is a homonym for a derogatory word referring to a Black person. I remember in about fifth grade, a boy named Gary coming up to me with what he thought was a pretty cool joke. “Do you know what a cocoon is?” he asked.

I said, “Yes,” because I knew what a cocoon was, but that didn't stop him.

He went on with what he thought was funny. He said, “It’s a c- colored person.”

I didn't think it was funny, and it was the first of many racial jokes I heard in reference to my last name that sensitized me to racial jokes. To this day, when I'm speaking over the phone with someone who isn't familiar with me, I say, “My name is Daniel Kuhn, k-u-h-n” so they don't misspell it or mistake me for trying to be funny. Mind you, I grew up in a pretty enlightened suburb of a northern city. It was racially mixed and perhaps as tolerant a place as any at the time. So, you see, racism is not confined to the south. It is pervasive in our society.

I had a friend, Harvey, who was a pretty funny guy. We'd work on our math homework together. It didn't make any difference to me that his skin color was darker than mine. He was just one of the guys in the shower room after a sweaty and tiring gym class. His humor was his way of trying to be accepted and to fit in to a predominantly white society.

Sam was the custodian at my church. He had his office in a small closet where he kept a radio and listened to a worship service broadcast from another church on Sunday mornings. The music and the preaching sounded quite foreign to my ears, but it was meaningful to him. I always enjoyed my conversations with him and he had an ability to accept and care for me and all the youth in that church.

I remember my first conscious exposure to North Carolina. In the days before interstate highways, my family were driving to Florida for spring vacation. Our route took us across the Pennsylvania Turnpike and down through the Shenandoah Valley. “Can I see the Triptik,” I'd ask, so I could check our progress toward our goal of Daytona Beach. Somewhere between Emporia Virginia and Rocky Mount, North Carolina, we began to see a distinctive red dirt along with small tin-roofed shacks and fields of broad-leafed green plants. There were signs posted on the utility poles, “Where will you spend eternity?” There, on the edge of a field, just before the tree line was this huge billboard stating, “This is Klan Country.” During later journeys, that billboard was joined by one that said, “Impeach Earl Warren.” Stopping for gas and a potty break, I noticed three restrooms, one marked “men,” one “women” and one “colored.” I have, therefore, a great respect for how far the people of this state have come in matters concerning race during my lifetime.

However, we all, in every corner of this nation, have a long ways to go to fulfill the declaratory statement that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”<sup>1</sup> Some members left this church six years ago when it called an African American Associate Minister.

It is a long story of how I got there, so I'm not going to tell it, but one of the formative events of my life was standing on a street corner on the outskirts of Montgomery Alabama in March of 1965. As marchers who had the simple desire of the right to vote approached the capital, whites were gathered all around me jeering, swearing, and spitting at the marchers. Little children of six and seven years old were giving the finger and cussing. Never before had I experienced such hatred based on race.

“Racism” is a noun signifying “The belief that race accounts for differences in human character or ability and that a particular race is superior to others.” It is “Discrimination or prejudice based on race.”<sup>2</sup>

My last name, Kuhn, is derived from the German word for “bold.” I am not proud that people of my

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<sup>1</sup>Declaration of Independence of the United States of America, July 4, 1776

<sup>2</sup>American heritage Dictionary.

heritage, led by Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), Count Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882, and Heinrich Himmler (1900 - 1945) developed the theory of racial superiority in which members of the Aryan race were born leaders, or the master race. This theory culminated with Adolph Hitler and the Holocaust.

How absurd is the concept of race! Carolus Linnaeus (1707-78), a Swedish botanist, physician and zoologist, who is known as the “father of modern taxonomy” (the science of describing, categorizing and naming organisms) was also a pioneer in defining the concept of “race” as applied to humans. “Native Americans were reddish, stubborn, and angered easily. Africans were black, relaxed and negligent. Asians were yellow, avaricious, and easily distracted. Europeans were white, gentle, and inventive.”<sup>3</sup>

Mildred Loving died last month. She, a black woman, was married to Richard Loving. They were arrested in Caroline County, Virginia for being married. In hearing their case, the Supreme Court in 1967 struck down the last of the laws prohibiting interracial marriage. I mean, when you get down to it, how do you tell the difference between a Black person and a White person? There are “Blacks” who have lighter skin than I have!

White people in our society are by and large unaware of the privileges and benefits they enjoy simply because they are white. We don't notice those privileges of place because they accrue to us like the air we breathe. My minister friend John Harvey was stopped by the police while he was driving to our house in a suburban Detroit neighborhood. This is the crime Black folks are familiar with, known as DWB: driving while Black.

Paul said, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>4</sup> In Christ Jesus, there are no racial differences among us! Jesus breaks down the barriers among us. We are to love and respect one another as children of God.

When Jesus told the eleven to go out and make disciples, he didn't say, “but just go to the whites.” He said, “make disciples of all nations.”<sup>5</sup>

We are invited by our denomination to have a sacred conversation on Race. We need that sacred conversation within ourselves. I am guilty of racist thoughts when I hear certain varieties of audio entertainment. Where am I making distinctions based on stereotyping? When we hear a racial joke, we need to say, “I'd rather not hear that, thank you.” Do not put someone else down based on race. Do not put someone else down, period!

We need to have sacred conversation with members of other races and cultural groups. Our president John Thomas wrote,

Relying on God's healing Spirit, let us covenant to treat the wound of our people with the care it deserves. For those of us who are White, neither the sins of our ancestors nor our own past failures to confront racism need mire us in guilt. For those of us who have suffered the ravages of racism, neither our rightful indignation nor our temptation to despair need keep us from trusting once again. We are each blessed by the abundant grace of a forgiving God, a God who knows our pain and will be present in our healing. Our call is to trust that reconciliation is possible, but can only be achieved by beginning the process together. As Christians, we profess and proclaim the outrageous conviction that nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Set free by that unconditional love, and emboldened by the faith of our sisters and brothers, we can find the courage to raise our voices for justice and make America and the church all that they ought to be.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Linnaeus, Carl. *Systema Naturae* (1767), p. 29

<sup>4</sup>Galatians 3:28

<sup>5</sup>Matthew 28:19

<sup>6</sup>Pastoral Letter on Racism, John Thomas et. Al. May, 2008