

Racism vs. Gracism

Pastor David Anderson has a radical remedy for our nation's racial ills.
Interview by Edward Gilbreath

Recent headlines, like the Don Imus controversy or the Supreme Court ruling on school diversity, remind us that race is still a dividing point in our nation. In his new book, *Gracism: The Art of Inclusion*, David A. Anderson explains how a commitment to diversity and inclusion in the body of Christ can help us overcome our cultural divisions.

Anderson is the founding pastor of Bridgeway Community Church, a 2,000-member, multicultural congregation in Columbia, Maryland. His church's cultural and racial blend has made him a leading voice of racial reconciliation in the evangelical community. He spoke to us about racism, gracism, and unity in the body of Christ.

Whether it's Don Imus, the immigration debate, or Barack Obama's presidential bid, it seems racial tension is still alive and well in our nation. What do some of these current events tell us about the condition of race relations?

The ongoing racial tensions we have in our nation show how we're still on the problem side and not on the solution side of the racial divide. It's important for us to get on the solution side, so we don't continue to respond to these controversies the same way, with the same voices saying the same things over and over again.

"Gracism" is the answer to racism. When a Don Imus says the sort of things he said about women and African Americans, our normal response is to slap his hand, call him a racist, twist his arm to apologize, and then demand that he lose his job. That's how we normally deal with the issue of race. But that response is still problem-centered. It's still reactionary. How about practicing gracism instead? What is "gracism"?

Gracism is the positive extension of favor to people, both in spite of and because of color, class, or culture. It's not affirmative action but intentional actions of grace and affirmation. So whenever we see a racist act, instead of responding in a way that is punitive, gracism calls us to respond in the way that God—that Jesus—might respond.

How does gracism behave differently than racism?

Racism is to speak, think, or act negatively against someone else based solely on his or her color, class, or culture. Grace, on the other hand, is God's unmerited favor extended to humankind. Something you can't earn, you don't deserve, and you can't repay.

Gracism turns racism on its head. It reaches out to people in a way that desires true understanding. It means thinking positively about others, in spite of the labels and

stereotypes that have been attached to their skin color, economic status, or cultural background.

Some folks might wonder, What about justice? Isn't grace without justice a cheap grace?

Justice and repentance are important, but we must get first things first. True reconciliation begins with forgiveness. It doesn't say, "First, you apologize and grovel, and then maybe I'll forgive you." We've not found the sociological or spiritual healing that we need in our world because we have not done this one important thing, and that is to forgive. Forgiveness begins the healing process.

When you think about it, God is the biggest gracist of us all. He was making the first step and extending grace when we were still in the midst of our sin and not even thinking about Him, and yet he wants to be in relationship with us and include us in His plans.

So in practical terms, what will gracism look like in our churches, communities, and institutions?



David A. Anderson

It should look like the majority population, whoever that is, reaching out and into the minority population to serve, learn from, and partner together for common purposes. It should involve fellowship across racial and economic lines. It will play itself out through what I call "graceonomics." This is when knowledge, as well as relational and financial networks, is shared freely to help others succeed.

In the book, you talk about "The Seven Sayings of a Gracist." How can they help us live out gracism?

The seven sayings grow out of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 12 about the interdependence of Christ's body and the special role each member plays. If we could cling to them, and not only say them

but do them, they can give us practical principles for making gracism real.

For instance, the fifth saying is "I will stand with you," and is based on Paul's teaching about there being "no division" in the body (1 Cor. 12:25). If I'm in the majority culture or a position of power, what this means is, I have chosen to stand with those in the minority culture or with those who are in a weaker position of influence. So if a board of directors has ten people who are male and two that are female, and we're about to make a major decision, the gracist in the room says, "How is this decision going to affect the women in our organization?" If I make a corporate decision to expand my company into an urban area, the gracist in the group might say, "What will this mean for the people who live in that neighborhood?" See, it's standing with people and considering people before you make the final decision.

There have been other Christian books and movements that have preached a message of racial unity and reconciliation. Promise Keepers, among others, led the way in the 1990s. Then the thrill began to fade. How do

you envision gracism being worked out in our churches in a way that lasts beyond the hugs and apologies and feel-good declarations?

By teaching gracism, you're not just teaching white people to be kind to blacks, or black people be kind to whites. You're creating a culture where everyone is thinking all the time, "How can I be one who includes? How can I be one who lifts others up?" And so, what you're teaching is Scripture—it's the theology of Jesus.

Bridgeway is very multicultural. How did you achieve such diversity in your congregation?

We teach on it and we preach on it every chance we get. But we also live it out in our church and small groups by including different kinds of people on our staff and in leadership roles. We celebrate multicultural unity by featuring a variety of musical styles in our worship and hosting international dinners for the congregation. Ultimately, it requires a commitment to intentionality.

Bridgeway was planted as a multiethnic church, but any church can develop a heart of gracism and inclusion. If you are a mostly white church and you realize you have Latinos and African Americans and Asians in your community but they're not coming to your church, the gracist church leader and layperson say, "Why not?" It should bother them.

The racial reconciliation message tends to emphasize whites reaching out to other races. But it works the other way as well. Absolutely. Reconciliation is a two-way street. If a white person visits an all-black church, the gracist in the room will say, "I have the responsibility to reach out and welcome that white person."

But it's also important to understand that gracism is bigger than race. We can show gracism to anyone who is on the fringes and needs to be invited back into our communities. A community of gracists will always be thinking about how they can reach out and show favor to those on the fringes, whether it's the homeless, the disabled, the divorced, or the ex-convict.

How did you develop your passion for gracism?

Gracism is really a crystallization of a vision that started when I became a Christian at 18. It was one of those Damascus Road experiences, where I immediately knew what God wanted me to do for the rest of my life. I knew I was called to be a pastor, but I also knew that I wasn't being called to minister to just one portion of the church. I wanted to build bridges of reconciliation so I could bring my friends who were white and Asian and Hispanic to the same church.

Did you grow up in a multicultural church?

No. I grew up in a black church, and I thank God for that heritage. But as a young Christian, it felt limiting. I was reaching out to people of all races, trying to lead them to Christ. But I didn't have a church to bring them to where they could feel at home. I realized that most of the churches around us were either all black or all white. So I felt a burden to do something about that. As a kid, I had several racial experiences that shaped me and prepared me for where I am today.

Tell us about one of those experiences.

When I was 12, there was a white kid on the school bus who

used to always call me the n-word. I tolerated it for a while, but one day I lost it and beat the guy up. I took my time walking home from the bus stop that afternoon.

When I got home an hour later, my mom confronted me at the front door. The boy had come to the house and told her that I bloodied his nose.

I pleaded my case with my mom, and told her he had called me the n-word. I thought she'd take my side. Instead, she told me, "David, that's not how we act as Christians. When someone hurts us, we do not try to hurt them back." Then she said, "You need to turn around, walk to that boy's house, and apologize to him and his mother." I couldn't believe it! But that experience sowed the seed in my life that you don't respond to hatred or injustice in the way your flesh wants you to.

How can we keep the call of gracism in front of us?

We have to figure out for ourselves what it means to be a gracist in our daily lives. Once you internalize it, you'll know what to do when the opportunity hits.

In the book, I share an e-mail that I received from a white woman who had been listening to me teach about gracism for a long time. She talks about how she was standing in line to board a Southwest Airlines flight.

Southwest seats are unassigned, so passengers line up in groups of A, B, and C to board the plane. As this woman was standing with her group, she saw a Mexican family of five trying to butt their way into line. They spoke only Spanish, and they didn't seem to know where they should stand. All the other passengers repeatedly blocked the family from getting in and gestured them to go to the back of the line. But the family was confused.

At this point, the woman began to wrestle with the Holy Spirit, as God brought to her mind the message of gracism. She felt like all the other passengers; she didn't want this family cutting into the line. But once the Spirit spoke, her heart began to soften. She waved the family to get in front of her. When they got into the line, she said she looked at the Mexican mother and saw tears in her eyes. She was so grateful. The woman who wrote me the e-mail said she was ashamed that it had taken her so long to do the right thing. She eventually figured out that gracism was calling her to reach out to this family.

Like this woman, we all have opportunities to be gracists. Whether it's helping people from a different country or responding in love to some hateful remark, we are called to act the way Christ acted.

Edward Gilbreath is the editor of *Today's Christian* and the author of *Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical's Inside View of White Christianity*. For more information about David Anderson's ministry, visit www.bridgewayonline.org.