# THE CROSS AND THE SUFFERING OF HUMAN DIVISIONS

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#### Introduction

It is indeed a great honour for me to have been invited to write this paper on one of the most fundamental concepts in Christian theology, namely, the cross and its implications for human suffering of divisions on the basis of race. However, I must also confess that it was with mixed feelings that I agreed to speak on this theme because, for us as black South Africans, the questions of the cross and suffering are not issues that we can discuss in an abstract and theoretical way. For black people the cross and suffering are experienced daily as a concrete and existential communal way of being in the white dominated world. Indeed, for black South Africans, who have been subjected to untold white racial hatred, contempt and wanton violence simply because of their blackness, the theme of the cross and suffering raises the problem of theodicy, namely: How is God really there amidst black oppression? How can God be justified before black suffering which has been going for such a long time?

Perhaps no one has expressed better this perplexing feeling of apparent abandonment by God, which blacks have again and again experienced when they are unable to discern God's presence in the midst of white racial oppression than, Karl Goerdeler, a German conspirator against Hitler who, shortly before his execution, wrote:

In sleepless nights I have often asked myself whether a God exists who shares in the personal fate of men. It is becoming hard to believe this. For this God must for years have allowed rivers

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of blood and suffering, and mountains of horrors and despair for mankind to take place... He must have allowed millions of decent men to die and suffer without lifting a finger. Is this meant to be a judgement?... Like the psalmist, I am angry with God, because I cannot understand him.... And yet through Christ I am still looking for the merciful God. I have not yet found him. O Christ, where is truth? Where is there any consolation? (cited in Mcgrath 1985:179-180).

Black South Africans can easily identify with the sentiments expressed by Goerdeler as he languished in jail awaiting his appointment with death at the hands of Hitler's executioners. For the cross and suffering are for us historical and given realities because we exist as victims of ongoing and, indeed, a long "Good Friday" of racial oppression and domination at the hands of white Christian settlers (Maimela 1985:85). But what is particularly painful in all this is not so much that black people have been experiencing this seemingly unending, long Good Friday but the fact that racist white Christians attempted to abuse the theology of the cross by encouraging their black victims to carry the cross of suffering with dignity and without complaint as Jesus Christ carried his (Buthelezi 1975:46). Indeed, we cannot but agree fully with Moltmann (1974:49) when he perceptively writes:

The church has much abused the theology of the cross and the mysticism of the passion in the interest of those who cause the suffering. Too often, peasants, Indians and black slaves have been called upon by the representatives of the dominant religion to accept their sufferings as 'their cross' and not to rebel against them. Luther need not have recommended the peasants to accept their sufferings as their cross. They already bore the burdens their masters imposed upon them. Instead, a sermon on the cross would have done the princes and the bourgeoisie who ruled them a great deal of good, if it was aimed at setting them free from their pride and

moving them to an attitude of solidarity with their victims.

Therefore, even as I accept the biblical proclamation that the birth, life, suffering and death of Jesus Christ on the cross as well as his glorious resurrection provide the ultimate answer to all human suffering, I cannot for a moment forget that the theology of the cross is a double-edged sword which could either be a blessing or a curse. All depend on who is talking about it, to whom it is addressed and whose interests it intends serving. For it could be a source of solace if it is proclaimed that Jesus suffered and died on the cross as an expression of God's solidarity with the poor and oppressed, taking their side, accompanying them in their search for their humanity, and assuring them that the crosses they bear at present will not be in vain but will be rewarded with victory -- in the same manner that Jesus triumphed over evil by his resurrection from the dead (Maimela 1985:83; 1987:105-108, 114-120). But it could also be a curse if the theology of the cross is used as the "opium for the people" produced by those who have caused the suffering with a view to encouraging the victims of oppression to accept, in a fatalistic resignation, their suffering under oppressive social structures as their fate, a way of life. Yet, as Buthelezi (1975:9) correctly points out, an endurance of such suffering, which cripples the initiatives of the oppressed groups that are aimed at overcoming of it, serves no meaningful or redemptive purpose other than to cultivate a "cult, a form of idolatry and a sabotage of the design of God for the victims". Therefore, while the carrying of the cross and Christian suffering for the sake of our fellows is unavoidable in Christian life, it is absolutely essential that two kinds of suffering should be distinguished in theological discourse. On one hand, there is what could be referred to as an oppressive suffering, one which is not just due to the fateful cruelty of nature but is human made. In racial societies this form of suffering deliberately designed by the dominant white group in such as a way that blacks would be perpetually be dominated, exploited and humiliated when they are denied the political, social and economic opportunities. On the other hand, there is redemptive suffering. This form of suffering is one which Christians take upon themselves after the model of Christ's suffering. Here suffering is not an end in itself but one suffers in order to realize the

well-being of one's fellow human beings. It is suffering which flows out of love for others and is taken upon by Christians who might resolve to realize some objectives which lie beyond suffering. Looked at from another angle, such a redemptive suffering is an expression of power over one's own suffering because it equips one to set aside one's own security and self-interests in order to serve the interests and security of one's fellow human beings. In South Africa, we have examples of such redemptive suffering exemplified by modern "martyrs" such as Nelson Mandela, Robert Sobukwe and Steve Biko who set aside their security and comforts by sacrificing themselves for their oppressed black masses. Their sacrifices and suffering are redemptive because they were meant to serve a higher cause beyond suffering itself, namely: the liberation of the oppressed blacks (Buthelezi 1975:8-10).

In the light of the foregoing, any theology of the cross which tries to turn human suffering, which in the first place is evil, into to some sort of virtue which is an end in itself must be rejected because it is highly oppressive for those it tries to train to regard as normal the state of being victims of evil and human oppression. Put somewhat differently, the theology of the cross, like every other theology, has been and is always open to distortion and misuse depending on who uses it and for what purposes. Over against this possible misuse of the theology of the cross, it is my contention that the cross must be understood as a symbol for the real human suffering and the crosses which are borne by the people of colour in racist societies -- both of which must be overcome by those who take upon themselves the Christian suffering after the model of Christ's suffering in order to save humanity from sin and not to justify perpetual oppressive suffering on theological grounds.

### A BRIEF OUTLINE OF LUTHER'S THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

It is generally acknowledged that St. Paul was the first theologian to construct and use the theology of the cross to express his rejection of all kinds of human exaltation which often tempts them to try to use reason and works to justify themselves before God. Thus, in the same way in which he developed the doctrine of justification by faith in critical opposition to the doctrine of justification by works in Romans 1:17ff, Paul developed the theology of the cross in 1Corinthians 1:1ff against human wisdom and indirect knowledge of God that might be gained from human contemplation of God's works of creation.

Taking his cue from St. Paul, Luther formulated the theology of the cross in its explicit form in 1518 in the Heidelberg Disputation. In his most important statements in theses 19 and 20 Luther, laying perimeters within which a person may rightly be called a theologian, writes:

That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross (WA 1, 362, 12-13, 30-31).

In formulating the theology of the cross Luther wanted to achieve twofold purposes: First, Luther uses theologia crucis to oppose what he referred to as a theologia gloriae which he identified with scholastic theology. In his view, the theology of glory was nothing but a theology of human self-exaltation because it propounded a wrong conception of human righteousness and what human beings must do in order to become justified before God. Rejecting the theology of glory which encourages the attitude of human pride and all striving after work righteousness as humanity's way to attaining salvation, Luther writes: "He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without works, believes much in Christ" (WA 1, 364). Secondly, the theology of the cross, as opposed to theologia gloriae, was formulated by Luther to express the Reformation insight about the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ in and through whom God deals mercifully with sinful humanity as the crucified and hidden God. For it is in the "humility and shame of the cross" (LW 31, 53) that God unconditionally accepts the sinful humanity, by virtue of the fact that our righteousness was achieved through the cross of Jesus and is now communicated to the sinner through the forgiveness of sins, the forgiveness which

Jesus Christ earned for the sinner by his vicarious suffering and death (Pannenberg 1988:163).

In other word, the most deepest and central questions that Luther wrestled with, when he formulated the theology of the cross, were the age-old questions which humans keep asking: What must we do to be saved? How can sinners be justified before a righteous judge? Luther's answer was that the true knowledge of God which is apprehended via the suffering and the cross of Jesus has nothing to do with human wisdom, indirect knowledge of works creation and ethical works, but has everything to do with what God wants to give and to do in order to deliver humanity from sin and death and thereby save them. That is, sinful human beings become just and righteous not by developing an attitude of priding oneself in one's lawful behaviour or laying claim to superior wisdom both of which have no use for the cross of Christ, but by faith in the crucified Christ. For the truth of the matter is that "nobody finds salvation within oneself: it comes from outside, without any condition from our part, without any merit, gratuitously and freely granted" (Vercruysse 1989:50) to those who through faith accept God's forgiveness of their sins. Indeed as Luther (LW 31, 351f, WA 7, 54f) with deep insight points out, the salvation of the sinner is possible only because:

> through a sweet exchange and a royal marriage, God takes our humanity with all its weakness, temptation and sinfulness and makes us share in God's justice, grace and life.

It is because Jesus was crucified for us that he is now the only mediator between God and sinful humanity. Therefore, to know Christ is to know the cross and to understand God under the crucified flesh. To sum up: just as Paul contrasted the wisdom of this world and the folly of the cross and, in parallel with this, contrasted the righteousness by the works of the law and the scandal of the cross, similarly Luther brought together the religious way to knowledge through contemplation of the works of God, and the moral way of self-affirmation through human's own works, and directed the theology of the cross polemically against both. Luther correctly saw that in so far as ethical works and religious

speculations are considered to be ways to God they have to be equally rejected. Thus by using the term theologia crucis in opposition to theologia gloriae, Luther has succeeded in unmasking the common root of both moralism and rationalism, namely, the human self-glorification and desire to attain personal righteousness by works or knowledge rather by faith in God's own action in the cross of Jesus (von Loewenich 1976:18-24). As the theologian of the cross, Luther recognized that the solution to human quest for salvation lay not in self-glorification through human knowledge and virtue but in the knowledge of God via the suffering of Christ. This knowledge of the "crucified and hidden God" is capable of effectively destroying human pride and self-deification. Moltmann's perceptive comments in this connection are helpful and worth recalling and we shall quote him at length:

The knowledge of thew cross is the knowledge of God in the suffering caued to him by dehumanized man, that is, in the contrary of everything which dehumanized man seeks and tries to attain as the deity in him. Consequently, this knowledge does not confirm him as what he is, but destroys him. It destroys the god, the miserable in his pride, which we would like to be, and restores to us our abandoned and despised humanity. The knowledge of the cross brings a conflict of interest between God who has become man and man who wishes to become God. It destroys the destruction of man. It alienates the alieanted man. And in this way it restores the humanity of the dehumanzied man.... The knowledge of God in the suffering of Christ destroys man who abandons his humanity, for it destroys his gods and destroys his supposed divinity. It set him free from his inhuman hubris, to restore his true human nature. It makes the homo incurvatus in se once again open to God and his neighbour and gives Narcissus the power to love someone else (Moltmann 1974: 70-71).

## HUMAN RACIAL DIVISIONS AS A THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM.

The diversity of human race and their different cultural manifestations in themselves have not always been and need not be understood as problematic in the church when they are accepted as gifts that the Creator has endowed humans beings for their

mutual enrichment. This was certainly true in the early church which was an ethnic and social admixture of different races that reflected the pluralism of the Hellenistic world. This healthy coexistence of different races in the Church of Christ in which "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female" (Gal.3:28), because they are one in Jesus Christ, did not last for long for many reasons. Among others, one need to mention but two important ones. First, the church underwent a major transformation during the Constantinian era, when it reflected a change from being a scarcely tolerated and often persecuted minority missionary movement into an established, official institution with the power to determine life within its members as well as in society. Once the Emperor became a Christian, he began to assert his power on behalf of the church when he opened the entire society for christianization (Driver 1986:29). In gratitude to Constantine, the church and its religious authorities were taken over and coopted by the ruling class which expected them to construct a theology whose purpose was to advance and legitimate the cause and interests of the Roman empire (Maimela 1987:134).

Secondly, the collapse of the churches in North Africa and Asia Minor under the assault of Islam transformed the church into "the church of the white nations, of the Christian Occident and Orient" (Gollwitzer 1979: 154) with dire consequences for the coloured people of the world. With deep insights, Gollwitzer (1979:154) points out that this transformation of the church from its ethnic pluralism into a western, white church offered:

the white people, endowed with the mobility and activity characteristic of the temperate zones and especially of that peculiar continent of Europe, an unheard of self-confidence which first "proved itself in the struggle against Islam and in the crusades, but then reached out over the entire globe in the age of great discoveries 'empowering' the Europeans to regard all non-christian people as destined by God for domination and exploitation. So the coasts of Africa and India were plundered by the Portuguese. The Pope

divided up the New World between the Spanish and the Portuguese. The Aztec and Inca peoples were destroyed in a manifold Auschwitz.

The upshot of what is being claimed here is that racial problems have their roots in the Constantinian takeover of the church and its subsequent christianization of the white nations which, during the modern European colonial period, resulted in a theological self-understanding of the western world that equated Christianity with western culture. Concomitant with this was the belief that those who belonged to western Christianity were superior to non-christians who happened to be the people of colour (Gollwitzer 1979: 155). Once religious privilege of belonging to the church of Jesus Christ who is Saviour and Lord of the universe had been transformed into the political, economic and social privilege of God's chosen people who happened to be white, it was a matter of time before social structures were created through which white people would enforce white supremacy and thereby subject the people of color to white plunder, domination, exploitation and oppression. It was during the European colonialization of Africa, Asia and Latin America that a colonial theology was developed to give religious sanction for slavery and sociopolitical and economic bondage to which people of colour have been subjected to in racist societies over many centuries up to the present (Gollwitzer 1979: 156-167).

Therefore, in order not to speak to you on the problematic nature of racial divisions in general, I want now to focus attention on the South African racial situation of which I speak as a product and victim, to illustrate how the Constantinian model of a triumphal church and state have worked hand in glove to create the racism from which we are still struggling to liberate ourselves from. The problem of racial division was exacerbated by the fact that a white colonial tribe which wielded all the political and economic power appropriated for itself the symbol of Israel in a sense that white people in South Africa were specially chosen by God for a mission in the world. Therefore, the whole group of white people qua people came to regard themselves as God's chosen race or anointed, called upon to govern and spread western civilization and Christianity even at the cost of fanatical persecutions of those who

are regarded as unworthy human beings, the so-called the heathens who happened to be the people of colour.

Because the Apartheid system of white racial domination has its origin during the British rule in the seventeenth century and was merely perfected by the Afrikaners in 1948, it is important that we discuss the phases of its development.

In the first phase, it were the British imperialists who undergirded their colonial activities by understanding the British people as the elect of God who felt called upon to a mission history of bringing freedom to humanity. This mission was expressed in political and messianic terms whose best representative, Cecil Rhodes, declared that 'only one race,' his own, 'was destined to help on God's work and fulfil His purpose in the world ... and to bring nearer the reign of justice, liberty and peace' because they as English people qua people approached God's ideal type (cited by van Jaarsveld 1964: 3-4).

Put simply, the British imperialism was underpined by the belief that they were a "new" Israel chosen to fulfil a divine mission, and more importantly that their election was determined by their racial, cultural superiority over those they were destined to rule. Concomitant with this was that the British people had a certain rightness to be elected to dominate the world, to spread the British civilization even at the cost of intolerable persecution of the "heathens' who must be made British at all costs or die at the hands of the anointed ones and with the approval this domesticated British "God" (Maimela 1987: 8f, 30, 38). Commenting on the marriage between the throne and alter which enabled such a small island to rule over 500 million people during the height of its power, de Gruchy points out that there existed an inseparable relationship between God, the Church and the British Empire. As a consequence, de Gruchy (1977: 45) could with justification conclude that:

Few, whether Anglicans or Non-conformists, apparently found anything incongruous about the Union Jack coexisting alongside the Cross and Altar, even when tattered and blood-spattered

from encounters with the natives ... in the service of God and Queen.

Of course, de Gruchy's perceptive observations refer to the brutal British rule that managed to bring both the Boers and Blacks in South Africa to their knees by repressive forces, believing that the expansion of British imperialism and exploitation of the so-called inferior races were serving divine providential purposes of bringing the gospel and civilization to the 'pagans' and uncivilized Boers. In consequence, the God the British churches talked about was nothing but a fine and loyal 'English' God who regarded the Crown and the British people as 'his' anointed or chosen race called upon to govern and spread British civilization.

In second stage, the Afrikaners too coopted the Dutch Reformed churches to provide them with spiritual resources to meet the threat of British imperialism on one hand, and the black majority who through intermarriage would dilute their white group identity. In the process an Afrikaner nationalism emerged and the Church, wishing to have unquestioning loyalty and authority over the lives of its followers, was just too willing to wed itself to this Afrikaner nationalism. Just as the British had done before, the theology that was propounded by the Dutch Reformed church gave the Afrikaners a theological sense of being a chosen people with a mission, namely, to create a new "white" nation in dark Africa as a beacon of Christian civilization. The Afrikaner leaders became men of calling to fulfil God's will, and this was true from Piet Retief in the nineteenth century in his struggle against the British 'Pharaohs' to Dr. Hendrik Verwoerd, the architect of Apartheid policy in the twentieth century in his struggle to prevent black majority from engulfing his "volk" (van Jaarsveld 1977: 17). Believing that part of their mission was to preserve the chosen white race in its pure form, and therefore that it is against the divine will to be cast into a melting-pot through interracial marriage, a leading Afrikaner, Dr. Mansvelt, in 1892 reminded the white race that:

.... after their having opened the way for the spread of the Gospel and civilization, I do not believe that Providence has destined (the

Afrikaner) to disappear from history without trace and to give it to others (cited in van Jaarsveld 1977:22).

It is against the background of the Afrikaners' understanding of their divine calling that Apartheid was formulated and carried out. Theology was used to underpin this ideology when it was argued that God has sharply divided human races and the Afrikaner's calling was to help this goal of permanent separation of races attainable, thereby prevent the admixture of races which would destroy 'western civilization' and the 'God-given' identity of the white race. Rationalizing their subjugation and oppression of black people, the Afrikaners argued that they have been placed in Africa by God and commanded:

... to act as the guardian, master and spiritual leader to the black man. To do that the white man has to have at his command the authority needed to uplift, christianize and evangelize the black man; the purpose is that the black man who is still a child from the point of view of civilization, shall grow and develop in due course in his own area, with his own language according to his nature and traditions (van Jaarsveld 1977:25).

Carrying out the policies of Apartheid which were believed to be in accordance with God's will the Afrikaners could, for a long time, not understand why the entire world faulted them for what they were doing in service of God. Here again, as in the British imperialism, we are confronted with a triumphal white nationalism and triumphal white church -- both of which have tried to create God in their own image, a God who is a loyal white-bearded Monarch who is giving 'divine' tasks and missions only to white people while at the same this God is not bothered about the enormous suffering that the racial policy of Apartheid has subjected black people.

Put somewhat differently, the racial divisions that South Africans have suffered over the years are a product of European cultural

and religious triumphalism that has given rise to and feeds on the theology of glory, a theology which has to do with the "success motif" of Western Christendom which has forgotten its origin in the crucified Christ, by allowing Christianity to be transformed into a religion of the successful, and the mighty who exercise power to determine life both in church and society. This theology of glory has encouraged South African whites to develop an attitude of priding themselves as worthier persons than the people of colour by virtue of belonging to Western civilization and by being the elect of God to promote Christianity. Thus, unable to pass judgment on white humanity which has become proud and triumphant because of their alleged superiority of their cultural and educational achievements, the theology of glory has allowed itself to be used as an alibi for the justification of the concrete and unjust suffering of the people of colour in a world dominated by whites solely because of their colour.

Put somewhat differently, racial divisions have become a theological problem for the people of colour simply because racism is not merely a racial prejudice or negative attitude towards a person whose colour differs from one's own. Nor is racism merely a vague feeling of racial superiority in relation to other people. Rather racism is a social, political, economic and cultural system of domination which white people employ to exclude the people of colour on basis of race for the purpose of subjugating them. It creates beliefs and myths about the cultural and biological superiority of the dominant racial group in order to justify the unequal distribution of resources between the dominant and the dominated groups (Boesak 1983: 3). It exalts a particular biological characteristic to a universal principle determining what it means to be human. Not surprisingly, the colour of one's skin and race become salvation principles, determining whether a person is declared justified or unjustified to enjoy certain economic, political and cultural rights and privileges. Because colour and race are salvation principles, it is not enough to be baptized after confessing Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Rather a person is expected to posses yet another attribute, which in the nature of the case, must be reserved only for a select few. Hence, Apartheid was designed and practiced in such as way that the people of colour would be continually reminded that they are

unworthy persons, regardless of whether or not they are Christians, simply because they do not possess that extra attribute, namely: white skin. The consequence of elevating the genetic and factors of race into the criterion of determining between the worthy and unworthy, and between the superior and inferior human beings has been devastating for the people of colour who were made to feel inadequate. Condemning the negative effects of the Apartheid system on the blacks, Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1983:46-47), with deep insight, writes:

Apartheid is instrinsically and irredeemably evil. For my part, its most vicious, indeed its most blasphemous aspect, is not the great suffering it causes its victims, but that it can make a child of God doubt that he is a child of God. For that alone, it deserves to be condemned as a heresy. Real peace and security will come to our beloved land only when Apartheid has been dismantled.

At the same time, Apartheid system taught whites, regardless of whether or not they are Christians, that they deserve a particular life-style and enormous political and economic privileges which are due to them by some natural right: that is, by virtue of their right colour.

## THE RELEVANCE OF THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

As much as it would be unacceptable to try to transform Luther's into a modern theology of liberation, it would be unfair to expect Luther's theology of the cross to give answers to the problems of the suffering of human divisions which modern racism has brought sharply into focus (Featherstone 1988:50). For even though Luther knew something about ethnocentricism and a vague human feeling of superiority over others, he certainly knew nothing about racism as a system of domination and attempts of the apostles of racialism of trying to transform race and colour into salvation principles that would compete with God's saving work in Christ. Nonetheless, I believe that Luther's theology has some relevance and can shed some light on the problem of human division as we

have come to know it. Indeed, I am persuaded that if Luther were living in a racist society that oppress and exploit others solely on the grounds of their colour, his theology of the cross and doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone would have forced him to make a preferential option for the downtrodden. Indeed, Luther's keen sensitivity to the many crosses and humiliations, which millions men and women have suffered throughout the world, led him to speak of the God of the poor and the humble (Deus pauperum/Deus humilium) in his Commentary of the 50th Psalm. Here he speaks of God's preferential option for the oppressed and express the solidarity God with the humble and the poor who, unlike the powerful and proud who are smug and secure, are aware that they are nothing before God (Vercruysse 1989:10). Therefore, Luther's theology of the cross which rejects human self-glorification of work righteousness or self-deification, on the grounds of race, sex and class, can meaningfully address human suffering of divisions.

Our discussion of white racial domination in South Africa leads to conclude that all the talk about divine election of white people, on the basis of which their domination of the people of colour has been justified, is nothing but an attempt to theologize politics and thereby transform politics into an instrument of self-justification, self-salvation, and self-preservation for the white people. Put simply: Apartheid has taught whites to take their lives and future into their own hands, and to believe that through some human wisdom and work they can save themselves in the face of real or imaginary dangers that the black majority posed for them. In so doing, the system of racial domination was transformed into an idol that would give white people life rather receive it from the true God, the Creator of life.

Over against the wrong conception of how persons can become righteous, the theology of the cross reminds us all human beings are unworthy, unacceptable and sinners before the righteous God, and therefore that no race or group is any better than another. Therefore, instead of pleading one's racial worthiness, all human beings are challenged to confess that daily need God's grace and mercy through which the righteousness of the Christ, the Crucified, is communicated to them. Directing itself against human concern

for self-deification through knowledge and works, the knowledge of the cross of Christ destroy all human hubris and the divinity that is presumed to reside in the so-called superior races. For the cross compels the sinful humanity to discover that all human beings equally live by God's grace which challenge them to forgive and thereby be reconciled to one another.

While my brief was that of discussing the cross and its implications for human suffering of divisions on the basis race, I trust the conclusions we have drawn are applicable to other problems of human suffering of divisions such as class domination, sexist domination, and denominational divisions that have prevented Christians from reconciling themselves to one another.

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