

# A Conversation on Race

## CHESTERTON HOUSE, CLARITAS HOST DISCUSSION

By Zachary Lee, Cornell '20

September was a difficult month at Cornell University as a couple of racially-charged incidents occurred on or near campus. On September 6, a fraternity member from Zeta Psi chanted “Build a wall!” around the Latino Living Center. A few weeks later, an African-American student was walking down the streets of Collegetown and was attacked by a group of white men who repeatedly hurled racial epithets. These events reflected a painful reality that even an institution like Cornell deals with very real issues of race.

It was into this climate that Michael Chen came to Cornell for the “Claritas Conversation on Race and Rhetoric.” Chen, Dartmouth '01, is the director of cross-cultural ministries for the Coalition for Christian Outreach. The event was sponsored by Chesterton House and *Cornell Claritas*, a Christian journal.

Chen began by sharing his first experiences with racism. He grew up in Minnesota in a majority Swedish and Lutheran culture (he humorously referred to himself as a “Scandan-Asian”). His parents, immigrants from Taiwan, sent him and his siblings to church because the only Chinese students in the area also attended. Michael hilariously stated, “I became a Christian because my parents wanted me to meet Chinese people.”

Although he heard the Gospel message, he still found himself searching for his identity in sports or academic abilities. He also experienced very direct racism within his community. As Chen grappled with a sense

text, then we’re not seeing them.” Citing Galatians 3:28 (“There is neither Jew nor Greek...”), he explained how many people often use this verse as a justification to say that race is not important. Instead, Chen shared how



Michael Chen, Dartmouth '01, is the director of the cross-cultural ministries for the Coalition for Christian Outreach.

of belonging, his sister asked him a poignant question, “What does God think about your situation?” He was flabbergasted. “I could not conceive of a God who would be thinking me,” he said. Soon after, he resolved to understand and know the heart of God and turned to the Psalms. Chen realized how deeply loved and accepted he was by God, and his life trajectory was forever changed.

When asked why it is important for Christians to engage race issues, Chen boldly proclaimed, “If we are not seeing people in their racial con-

the beauty of the Gospel is that people can come from diverse backgrounds and cultures and still enter into purposeful and intentional community; they do not have to “stop being a part of” their culture.

“God calls us not just to coexist with one another, but to delight in and embrace one another,” Chen said. “What would it look like for the Cornell community not simply to move on from the (racial) tragedies, but instead to see the young man and his attackers reconciled?”

In terms of practical steps, Chen

shared three strategies. Reconciliation begins with the discipline of lament, he noted.

“Too often, people want to be polite and safe, but as Christians, we

*“If we are not seeing people in their racial context, then we’re not seeing them.”*

are called to lament and not just feel sad or bad, but turn those emotions into action,” said Chen.

The Psalms of lament give language to true anger and sadness. As Christians go through these scriptures, they can begin to hear the same cries

of lament come from their friends and loved ones.

Chen also encouraged the Cornell community to recapture the practice of hospitality. He recalled how he once

*—Michael Chen*

invited a homeless man to dinner. While it was at first terrifying, it was enriching and life-giving to hear the man’s story, he said. Chen urged students to extend hospitality to “those whom the world despises” because God showed love to us when we were

most unlovable.

Lastly, he spoke on mutuality: “What would it look like to practice real dependence on one another—that if someone in our community is not doing well, then I’m not doing well; that if someone is rejoicing, I can rejoice.”

The conversation on race gave hope to the Cornell Christian community.

“We have been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation,” Chen shared. “The Gospel has the reconciling power to build bridges with the marginalized and be an invitation to those who do not know the kingdom of God to enter into that family.” | [cu](#)

.....