

Affirmative Action and Color-Blind Justice: What is the Church's Role?

I have a dream that one day all men will be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. -- Paraphrase of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

*Representatives and direct taxes shall be apportioned among the several states which may be included within this union, according to their respective numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole number of free persons, including those bound to service for a term of years, and excluding Indians not taxed, **three-fifths of all other persons.** -- The U.S. Constitution, Article I, Section 2.*

Introduction

My first encounter with racial issues that touched close to home was before I became a Christian. As a senior in an Alabama high school, I naturally rooted for my school's sports teams. Our nickname was "Rebels." Our symbol was the Confederate Flag. Our fight song was "Dixie." The school year was 1970-71.

My unstudied devotion to such symbols met head on with protests from African-American students who resented the use of these symbols because such images represented for them the memories of slavery, oppression, and abuse. I can honestly say that I had never before that time looked down upon African-Americans by using these symbols. Yet in a high school of roughly 2500 students, the feelings of the African-American students were so strong that protests erupted into two riots during my senior year, one at a football pep rally and one at a basketball game, both of which I witnessed as police came in force with dogs to squelch the mayhem.

This experience illustrates in microcosm the same feelings that have been demonstrated at large in the continuing African-American experience.¹ There are many positive developments over the last forty years that African-Americans can nonetheless appeal to:

- African-Americans have been elected as mayors in large cities such as Birmingham, Atlanta, Los Angeles, etc.
- African-Americans have been elected in greater numbers to the Congress.
- There are percentage-wise more middle class African-American wage earners today than there were forty years ago.
- African-Americans have greater public exposure through the entertainment industry.

¹ Although the issues of this paper involve Latinos, Asian-Americans, and other minorities, I will usually focus on the plight of African-Americans because that is where the biggest rift is in the debate. Since I come from an evangelical fundamental perspective on these issues, I will reject out of hand the attempt of any party such as the Gay Rights Movement to gain minority status based upon behavioral choices. My main concern in this paper is attitudes about skin color.

Yet, there appears to be as much disharmony between the races today in the United States, especially involving whites and blacks, as there ever has been. In fact, the gains which can be highlighted are viewed by many minorities as inconsequential:

Today, across the nation, the African American village is under attack. The sobering statistics point to a crisis of frightful proportions: During the past thirty years, the African American community has experienced a 1,000 percent increase in violent crime, a 400 percent increase in teenage suicides, and a 77 percent increase in households headed by single women.

At a time when 70 percent of the nation's wealth is in the hands of only 10 percent of its people, nearly half of all Black children live in poverty. Crack cocaine has become the king of destruction for African Americans caught in a web of sociopolitical frustration and emotional despair.

White racial-preference networks, a criminal-justice system that is itself frequently criminal in its dealings with African Americans, and a "higher education" system that is thoroughly Eurocentric and proscriptive of other cultures and races--all of these have decimated the fabric of our communal life.²

The disparity in the views of the two groups on the whole can be seen in several facets of American culture. As we analyze these tendencies we must, however, be careful not to think of each group as monolithic in nature.³ Below the distance between the two poles or factions will be summarized with respect to the two areas of *affirmative action* and the *legal system* in the United States.

Affirmative Action

There is a general perception on the part of a large number of African-Americans and other minorities that they are still not given equal access to the opportunities associated with the American dream. There is also an equal belief on the part of a large number of white Americans that reverse discrimination is taking place so that minorities get more than equal opportunity--they actually receive preferential treatment in certain circumstances. Part of this is seen in the belief that educational requirements have been watered down to accommodate a quota system in our universities.⁴

Equity in employment (along with the educational requirements) is the main issue for affirmative action. Ellis Cose argues well for the pro-affirmative action position which depends largely upon the belief that there is no other recourse to help minorities and that whites already get preferential treatment in both education and in economics.⁵

² Cain Hope Felder, "Such a Time as This: Rescuing the Besieged African American Village," *The Other Side* (March-April 1996):40. I do not necessarily agree with everything in this article with its rather liberal slant and tendency for overstatement and playing the blame game. Some of those issues need more thoughtful consideration. However, I do see the article as accurate in portraying current perceptions and also in the appeal to blacks to take their destiny in their own hands instead of waiting for others to deliver them some economic and educational charity.

³ This should become clear later in the paper.

⁴ See Amarury Nora and Alberto F. Cabrera, "The Role of Perceptions of Prejudice and Discrimination on the Adjustment of Minority Students to College," *Journal of Higher Education* 67 (March/April 1996):119-48, for an example of the confusion and searching going on in the arena of higher education to find solutions to problems related to minorities.

⁵ Ellis Cose, *The Rage of a Privileged Class* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 111-33.

With this in mind, "the purpose of affirmative action is not simply to avow good intentions, but to register results. Showing you have tried to find qualified people will not suffice. Rather, its aim is to achieve a visible increase in the number of black men or women at various levels on the nation's payrolls."⁶ In short, quotas are just the necessary measurement to assure accountability for a level playing field economically.

On the other side are statements like the following:

. . . we sympathize with some of the imaginable reasons for affirmative action in the workplace and are under no illusions about the ways in which perceptions of racial differences still affect employers' hiring decisions. But affirmative action does not mean just wanting good things. It means specific and often substantial constraints on the employer's ability to make use of the most qualified people. . . We do not require equal outcomes, but we do want fair treatment.⁷

It seems that the possibility of that last statement becomes the real issue. How can I help one person without hurting a second? Differences between black and white Americans and even Christians makes this one of the most difficult issues of application for the Christian life.

The Legal System in America

There was a little boy who grew up on the streets of San Francisco who had the disease of rickets from malnutrition. As a result, he had to wear braces to help him walk. However, in spite of his handicaps the boy was strong-willed and ambitious. This boy's favorite pro football player was Jim Brown, the great running back for the Cleveland Browns. One Sunday when the Browns came to San Francisco to play, this little boy snuck into the game late (he could not afford a ticket) and positioned himself to meet his favorite player as he came toward the locker room. The large running back was confronted and interrupted several times by this pesky little boy who declared rather brazenly, "One day I will break all of your records." Jim Brown looked down at the little boy with leg braces and asked, "What's your name?" The boy replied, "Orenthal James, sir, but people just call me O. J."⁸

Even within the last ten years, the life of O. J. Simpson has been heralded in Christian literature as a powerful example of how a willingness to overcome affliction can lead to great accomplishments.⁹ But today . . . Can any one of us forget the picture of the large assembly of African-American students giving a standing ovation and cheering wildly when the verdict of "not guilty" was read at the end of the "trial of the century"? Can any one of us forget the stunning dismay and loud silence on the part of a majority of

⁶ Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992), 121-22.

⁷ Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 499-501.

⁸This has been written from the memory of this author as he listened to Charles Swindoll's *Insight for Living* radio broadcast. Elements of the story are included in Charles R. Swindoll, *Living Above the Level of Mediocrity*, (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 17-19.

⁹ Ibid.

whites as they felt that a gruesome murderer went unpunished largely because of an appeal to "race" with a jury of minorities?

The initials **O. J.** have now become a byword which, if nothing worse, reminds us of the great racial gulf that still exists in this nation.¹⁰ This chasm is nowhere more pronounced than in the perceptions about proper justice. Most African-Americans apparently tend to view the justice which is dispensed in the American legal system (with its mediating collection of police officers, district attorneys, courts, and prisons) with suspicion at best and, in some cases, outright rebellion.¹¹ In the O. J. trial, O. J. was seen by many of them as a beleaguered black man who had been targeted for unfair treatment by prejudiced and sloppy police because he had married a white woman. They would also cite the case of police brutality involving Rodney King and appeal to the recent clubbing of illegal aliens from Mexico in Southern California.

Most white Americans may also view the legal system as flawed but for different reasons. It is not the same sense of oppression that they would feel, but the frustration of a legal system which is not enforcing the law and keeping the crime rate low.¹² For example, in the recent case of the video taping of the Mexican illegal aliens being beaten by police in Southern California, Scott McConnell offers a counter explanation. To him the video tape did not show the context of the event as the culmination of a reckless, life-endangering high speed chase on California highways. He applauds the restraint of the police officers (whose lives were on the line) and credits them with the fact that "the Mexicans had failed in their efforts to bring about a high-speed crash on a California freeway."¹³

Thus, the disparity of opinions and interpretations of events which are even captured on video tape is genuine and disheartening for those who seek unity. With African-Americans their concerns are more personal -- what is happening to them? With whites the concern is more general -- what is happening to their culture? ***It seems that neither side believes that American justice is colorblind.***

¹⁰ The names of Rodney King and Reginald Denny conjure up the same despair.

¹¹ Again, let me caution you not to take these statements as absolutes. There are many African-Americans such as Walter Williams, Thomas Sowell, and others who recognize both sides of these issues and who sometimes side philosophically and politically with the white majority. There are also those from the white community, usually of liberal political persuasion, which side with the views of the minorities. I write here about the tendencies which tend to show up on popular television and radio talk shows especially those involving discussions of the O. J. Simpson situation.

¹² Recent American experiences with the militias that have been developed across the country show that there is a undercurrent of antipathy to the United States government from whites as well as blacks. There is a growing number of white people in the country who feel abandoned and oppressed by the government. In general, part of what it means to be an American is to be a complainer. See Jeff Greenfield, "Voter Anxiety: A Chronic Condition" *Time* (April 22, 1996):58. However, the currents of disillusionment may be at an all time high since the days of the Civil War. So we must talk to each other.

¹³ Scott McConnell, "The California Beating: The Rest of the Story," *Human Events: The National Conservative Weekly* 52 (April 19, 1996):5. For a popular treatment of the Rodney King affair see Rush Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be* (New York: Pocket Star Books, 1992), 215-29.

The Issue of Race and the History of Christianity in America

Before various proposals for church action can be made, it will be instructive to review selectively the history of the church in America as it relates to issues of race. It is at this point that white churches and white Christians must realize that professing black Christians will never accept them and unite with them simply because of an agreement on basic theology. The reason for this is the suspicion which black Christians have for the white organized churches in America which flows out of historical understanding.

In a book entitled *Your God is Too White*, the authors (one white and one black) offer a chapter on what the white Christian should do with his church. The attitude which was mentioned above is clear:

We have demonstrated that "Christianity" has been and continues for the most part to be inextricably bound to racist institutions. "The white church as an institution has not only been supported by but has also *given its sanction to* the other major institutions of the society -- business, education, and government." It cannot be too strongly emphasized that Christianity as an institution (regardless of theological refinements or denominational distinctions) has been the major force in undergirding and approving the values of the socio-political and economic institutions of America. Peter Berger in analyzing the relationship of Christianity to American institutions concludes that "commitment to Christianity . . . undergoes a fatal identification with commitment to society, to respectability, to the American way of life."¹⁴

In short, these authors view white Christians as blinded to the fact that their Christianity is a watered down faith which has come to be associated with the American way of life and not biblical living. In other words, we do things because we are Americans more than we do things because we are biblical Christians.

This same sentiment is captured eloquently by Ed Riddick in a foreword to the above book:

The white Jesus is dead. He was slain somewhere between Hiroshima or Nagasaki and the road to Selma, Alabama. And that Jesus will never be resurrected as the Christ . . . he will remain forever entrapped amidst the images of pristinity which white middle-class America mistakes for purity.¹⁵

From the perspective of many African-Americans, it does not matter if an individual white Christian in this middle-class America has been involved individually in overt acts of racism.

It is therefore all the more tragic that whether one is personally a racist or not becomes increasingly inconsequential, because the silent consensus which institutionalizes the racist ideology makes it normative to the whole culture and entraps us all. The white nonracist is hardly free to be his better self than is the oppressed Black who is the conventional target of racism.¹⁶

¹⁴ Columbus Salley and Ronald Behm, *Your God is Too White* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), 102. The first quote is in this citation is from Lewis M. Killian, *The Impossible Revolution? Black Power and the American Dream* (New York: Random House, 1968), 23. The second quote is from Peter Berger, *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1961), 116.

¹⁵ Ed Riddick, Foreword to *Your God is Too White* cited above, 7.

¹⁶ C. Eric Lincoln, *Race, Religion, and the Continuing American Dilemma*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984), 12.

Consequently, even overt acts of kindness and outreach on the part of genuine white Christians can quite easily be viewed at times as hypocritical because no real, substantive change to the system takes place.¹⁷

The Southern Baptist Convention

In this connection, the Southern Baptist Convention deserves mention. As the largest non-Catholic denomination or fellowship in the United States, its origins lead to the suspicious attitude we have been discussing on the part of African-American Christians. The immediate origin of the Southern Baptists was rooted in a controversy over whether or not missionaries could be appointed who were slave-owners. When a missionary was not approved who owned slaves, the split occurred from the northern group of Baptists in 1845.¹⁸

While such a schism might cast a favorable light on the northern Baptists who adopted an abolitionist posture, some interpretations of the stance read the circumstances differently.

The Baptism schism of 1845 was not so much over slavery as over slave-holding. Like the Methodists before them, the antislavery Baptists were more concerned with ostracizing masters than with doing anything to alleviate the suffering of the almost three million human beings held in bondage.¹⁹

It is not at all clear that the book cited above with its rather strong and unflattering interpretation does true justice to the northern and southern abolition elements including the work of Charles Finney and others.²⁰ However, the experience highlights another reason for the uneasiness that African-Americans feel about white American Christianity. It is important to note at this point that the Southern Baptist Convention, at its annual meeting in the summer of 1995, dedicated its meeting to these racial questions and publicly apologized to the black community for the hateful and slavery-oriented elements

¹⁷ For further discussion, see Herbert S. Klein, "The Negro and the Church of England in Virginia" in *Slavery in American Society* edited by Richard D. Brown (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Co., 1969), 32-37.

¹⁸ For a traditional description of the origin of the SBC and the issues involved, see Robert Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*, 3rd ed. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1963), 282-97.

¹⁹ Forrest G. Wood, *The Arrogance of Faith: Christianity and Race in America from the Colonial Era to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 325. The full account of this interpretation is given on pages 318-32. Wood is white and not an African-American.

²⁰ Another danger of a book like this is that it tends to be simplistic in its overall theme. As I read the book I came away with the view that the author lays the blame for wrong racial attitudes only at the doorstep of "white" Christianity while perhaps only giving lip service to other factors. For example, it is highly significant that Charles Darwin wrote his *Origin of Species By Means of Natural Selection: Or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* in 1859 at a time when America was trying to resolve slavery issues and attitudes. I have given the full title for obvious reasons. For a discussion of the negative affects that Darwinism had in the social realm, including racial issues, see Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (reprint ed., Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 170-200.

in its founding and traditions.²¹ Hopefully some long term good can come of this emphasis.

The Use of the Bible to Justify Slavery

One of the greatest obstacles to outreach to some who are lost and even to black brothers is the use that has been made of the Bible to justify slavery and later segregation, that is, inferior status. Arguments for slavery from a supposed Christian perspective have been summarized in four categories.²² **First, the institution of slavery is natural and actually benefits those enslaved by taking care of them.** This particular argument does not flow from biblical teaching and is actually impossible to hold in light of later historical developments. The modern black family and culture suffers much today from the disruption caused in black slave families in nineteenth century America.

The **second argument** which is used stems from the Old Testament. **The OT actually prescribes slavery and governs its existence.** If that is true, why could society today not actually prescribe the same practice?²³ For example, the Mosaic legislation in Exodus 21, while somewhat more enlightened and caring toward the slave-servant than was nineteenth century slave practices in America, still recognizes the practice of slavery as part of God's Law. The opponents of slavery would emphasize that the passage refers to indentured servants who are usually dealing with existing poverty or debts and not to forced slavery as in nineteenth century America.²⁴ Also, the passage teaches that the condition of slavery was not to be permanent except on condition of a willing heart on the part of the slave himself. The slave was to be given a choice of freedom on the seventh year (v. 2).

Third, an appeal is often made to the disinterest of New Testament writers in undoing the cruel practice of slavery. Jesus never attacked slavery per se while the Apostle Paul actually gave instructions for regulating the behavior of slaves which seems to emphasize the right of the slave owner. For example, in Eph. 6:5-9 slaves are told to be obedient and masters kind. In Philemon, Paul urges Onesimus to return to his owner Philemon while asking Philemon to forgive him and treat him as a brother. The proponents of slavery would see in these accounts justification for continuing the practice.

Those who opposed slavery might emphasize the different cultures in which the slavery was embedded in New Testament times. Under the Roman dominion perhaps as

²¹ It seems that the SBC is making a long-term commitment to reconciliation with African-Americans. See several articles in the January-February 1995 issue of *Light*, the SBC Christian ethics, public policy and religious liberty publication for the SBC.

²² See Salley and Behm, *Your God is Too White*, 15-26 and David M. Reimers, *White Protestantism and the Negro* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 5-6. The following discussion will appeal to the arguments as summarized here.

²³ Dominion theology with its view of theonomy would have to insist on reinstating slavery as a practice in society. See Greg Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Philipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1977).

²⁴ See John D. Hannah, "Exodus" in *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 141.

many as half of the people were under some form of formal slavery or servanthood.²⁵ The way to deal with such a system was through the development of attitudes which Paul stresses rather than confrontational politics. John Eadie remarks of this long term success:

Now, not only was he [the slave] to look beyond the sepulcher to a region of pure and noble enjoyments; but as he could even in his present servitude realize the dignity of a spiritual freeman in Christ, the friction of his chain was unfelt, and he possessed within him springs of exalted cheerfulness and contentment. . . At the same time, Christianity lays down great principles by the operation of which slavery would be effectually abolished, and in fact, even in the Roman empire, it was suppressed in the course of three centuries.²⁶

The fourth argument used to support slavery (and used today to put down blacks) was the appeal to the curse of Ham, or more properly the curse upon the family of Ham through Canaan (Gen. 9:20-27). The passage refers to the fact that Canaan was to be a servant to his brothers Shem and Japheth (and by implication their descendants). Because the geographical distribution of the three sons of Noah and their families places many of them on the continent of Africa (see 10:6-7), the association is used to impose the curse of servanthood upon blacks who come from Africa. Those opposing this interpretation would perhaps refer to the fulfillment of this curse in the conquest of Canaan or Palestine by the Hebrew children in the Book of Joshua and studies in the racial mix of the Canaanites which preclude such a view.

My point here is not to answer these arguments in detail but to show that there is a tradition in American Christianity that has used the Bible to support the enslavement and/or lowering of the status of blacks. While this is to be rejected, it is to be understood as one of the bases for black resistance to "nice talk" by white Christians.

The General Association of Regular Baptist Churches

In this century the GARBC and associated institutions have not been untainted in race relations. Although I do not consider myself an expert in the history of the GARBC, the refusal of GARB churches to allow black churches entry into some area fellowships has been recounted to me by more than one source. One African-American Christian leader who is a graduate of BBS (entry into which was not without its problems) told me that if the GARB was not going to move quickly on incorporating black churches into their fellowships today, then the black churches he was associated with would move on to do things on their own. They were not going to "wait" for any blessings from the overwhelmingly white GARBC. My purpose for including this paragraph in my paper is to avoid any hint of hypocrisy on my part or the movement of which I am currently a part. We must be honest about the continuing suspicions which the African-American community has concerning our own "white Christianity."

²⁵ John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (repint ed., Minneapolis: James and Klock Christian Publishing Co., 1977), 445.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 446-47.

Martin Luther King and Dallas Theological Seminary

One of the sources for the foundation of modern Black Theology (to be discussed below) is Martin Luther King. What many do not know is the fact that King was turned down for entry into Dallas Theological Seminary in Dallas, Texas in the 1950s because of the color of his skin.²⁷ DTS shares the same dispensational heritage as Baptist Bible Seminary minus the Baptist distinctives. How much different would history have been in the United States if King had been a DTS graduate instead of a Boston University graduate where he imbibed somewhat of neoorthodox theology to mix with his evangelical Baptist tradition?²⁸ Can we blame black Christians for being suspicious if one of the largest evangelical seminaries in the country rejected one of the most important, if not the most important, person of their own modern heritage?

The World Council of Churches

Controversy over racism is not limited to those of evangelical, fundamental circles. The World Council of Churches, considered by most of us to be an apostate organization not representing orthodox Christianity, established in the early 1970s the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) and a special money fund associated with it.²⁹ While most of the money went to liberation movements in Angola, Mozambique, Rhodesia, and South Africa (which had the problematic associations with socialism and communism), the organization argued for at least a decade on a definition of racism fueled primarily by Europeans in the WCC.³⁰ The picture obtained when studying the issues of this paper is that even the liberal side of the spectrum has been and continues to be in some disarray on these issues.

Black Theology

One of the responses of African Americans to this ambiguity they see in the pristine white Christianity of America has been to develop a brand of liberation theology which has come to be called Black Theology. It is here that the absence of a monolithic nature to the African American community in the United States can best be seen. However, it is also the place at where confusion for the white Christian is expanded and the frustration of the black Christian thereby intensified.

²⁷ This account is based upon a discussion and answer session at a regional ETS in Dallas held at Dallas Theological Seminary in the middle 1980s. The speaker for the session was Richard D. Bullard (an African-American student at DTS at the time and now a pastor in Arkansas) who spoke on *Theological Method and the Black Experience*. It would be better if there was some written confirmation of this account. To this point I have discovered none.

²⁸ H. L. Willmington reported to me the content of a sermon he heard given by King in a church in Ohio in the early 1960s. His definitions of God, according to Willmington, came from quotations of Barth, Bultmann, and Brunner.

²⁹ Barbara Rogers, *Race: No Peace Without Justice* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980), vi-viii.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

Black theology emerged out of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s and has two fountains for its expression. First, Martin Luther King's nonviolent resistance preaching and organized efforts led to the black Christian expression of liberation. A year after the assassination of King (1968), the National Committee of Black Churchmen (NCBC) in 1969 defined black theology as a theology of black liberation which "seeks to plumb the Black condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the Black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the Black achievement of Black humanity."³¹ Two basic ideas emerging from this definition are the focus on the relevancy of the black experience and the central theme of liberation. The two are brought together in the prototype of oppressed people, the children of Israel in bondage to Egypt (Ex. 19). The elevation of experience as almost revelatory in this scheme would be problematic for the genuine evangelical fundamentalist who wants to filter his theology through the teaching of the Bible in light of the progress of revelation.³²

The second fountain is the Black Power Movement associated more with the message of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam which was frustrated with the lack of progress in King's methods. James Cone highlights the distinction:

Almost without exception . . . black preachers and theologians had been thoroughly committed to Martin King's method of nonviolent resistance as the only way for blacks to achieve justice in America, and they would proudly go to jail with him. Unfortunately we did not listen to Malcolm X and his analysis of the depths of racism in American society . . . In contrast to the south, blacks "up north" had always been able to vote and use public facilities; the riots (Watts, 65) were dramatic indications that they had nothing for which to vote and they could not afford to live outside the ghetto. The riots were shocking evidence that the oppression of blacks was much more complex and deeply rooted than had been articulated by Martin King. Its elimination (oppression) would take more than an appeal to ideas of freedom and equality in the American liberal tradition or the idea of love in the traditional white view of the Christian faith.³³

³¹Richard Bullard, *Theological Method and the Black Experience*, Unpublished paper delivered to Regional ETS, Dallas, TX, middle 1980s, 3. James Cone became the leading theologian of the movement with his book *A Black Theology of Liberation*. See also Deotis Roberts, "A Creative Response to Racism: Black Theology" in *The Church and Racism* edited by Gregory Baum and John Coleman (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), 35-41.

³² Another trend that is problematic from the standpoint of this writer is the approach taken by black liberals and some conservatives that Jesus was actually black and that most of the Bible characters, especially in the Old Testament, were black. This is sometimes taught with dogmatism which is not justified by the historical research. It is not enough to demonstrate that a person lived on the African continent to show that he was black. There were many European colonies especially in North Africa. Anthony Evans, a tremendous African American evangelical preacher, nonetheless declared in a meeting of seminary students that Augustine was black (his home Hippo was in Northern Africa). Richard Bullard, another evangelical, has fallen to the same fallacy with respect to several biblical characters including Moses and Jesus. His assumption is that African territory implies black people, *Tellin' It Like It Is: An African Centered Evangelical Christian Interpretation of Black Life and Issues* (Published by the Author, 1995), 29-32. More historically accurate historical portrayals come from the African American perspective; see Frank M. Snowden, *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 99-108. However, the motive for disagreeing with Evans and Bullard should not be a desire to preserve a "white Christianity" based upon tradition.

³³ James Cone, *For My People*, 151 cited in Bullard, 2.

Hence, the black nationalist philosophy of Malcolm X was gaining headway as the struggle continued in the 1960s. Over twenty-five years later we are watching this played out in the teachings of Louis Farakan. In a recent sermon recorded live on CNN after his African trip, Farakan received a standing ovation when he shouted that Jesus was not the Messiah. Yet he headed the "Million Man March" with black Christian leaders in attendance. Such a mixture will make it hard for any headway to be made among white evangelical Christians who will find it hard to embrace solutions coming from someone who openly ridicules the One they believe to be God and Savior.

Politics and Religion Today -- Republicans and Democrats

Ambiguity also abounds in the political coalitions that currently exist in the United States which promotes the suspicious attitudes that exist in race relations. In a recent clergy survey reported in *Christianity Today*, it was clear that the more conservative a denomination or fellowship the more the pastors were aligned with the Republican Party. For these ministers the issues of abortion, pornography, and homosexuality had more prominence in their preaching than civil rights. It was also clear that the more liberal a denomination or fellowship the more the pastors were aligned with the Democratic Party. For these ministers the issues of civil rights and the environment held sway in their preaching. Yet it is common knowledge that a large majority of black voters, Christian or not, vote for the Democratic Party while an overwhelming number of white evangelical fundamentalists vote for Republicans.³⁴ This disparity rooted in the philosophies of government seem to have correlation to theological interests. Because this is so, political involvement will also be added to the list of issues which promote and aggravate the suspicions related to the race issue.

Summary

In this section of the paper we have tried to show the basis for the suspicious attitudes which African Americans, even those who are Christians, have toward white Christian institutions. The entire historical experience in America regardless of geography and denomination seems to be infected with skeletons or questions which can be raised in the mind as to the genuineness of any overtures that are made. It was my desire to highlight those for you since white American Christians are often unaware of these dynamics in our culture.

³⁴ "Politics and Pulpit: A Real Connection," *Christianity Today* (April 29, 1996):58.

PROPOSALS TO THE RACE QUESTIONS INCLUDING AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Below are several proposals which give basic principles, attitudes, and pragmatic actions to be taken which can help the church come to grips with the race issues in the United States. They are, of course, only preliminary and sketchy and need living out in the real world. Taken as a package they will provide some direction as churches face issues like affirmative action and the inequalities of the criminal justice system.

Proposal # 1 -- Both black and white Christians along with their churches must never surrender belief in an inerrant Bible which is propositional truth given by God Himself.

God's wisdom must be brought to bear on the issues of affirmative action and the criminal justice system. There must be absolute agreement on where God's wisdom is found. Many of the articles and books I researched sought for the answer in sociology and experience. Consequently, all Christians of whatever race or economic background must fall back upon truth that transcends their own thinking and which is sufficient (2 Tim. 3:16-17). This must be firmly practiced even in the face of false charges of racism. For example, some Jewish writers have tended to charge Christians with anti-Semitism just because they try to evangelize Jews.³⁵

Proposal # 2 -- Both black and white Christians along with their churches must never surrender belief in the uniqueness of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah King who is God in the flesh and the Creator-Redeemer.

In light of aberrations appearing in the writings of black evangelicals (cited in notes above), the rise of the nation of Islam, and continued pressure from the Jesus Seminar, it is imperative that genuine believers in Jesus reaffirm the truth about who Jesus is and what He came to do. He is God in the flesh and He is the only way to God. There is no other. Pluralism is to be rejected.

Proposal # 3 – The Church in America must reject the notion that America is the present kingdom of God.

In no way should the American way of life be confused with God's ways. Christians must be biblical in their philosophy of ministry as well as doctrine. Decisions should be based upon what the Bible teaches not upon what the average person in America is doing. Practically, this means that patriotism in our churches must be subservient to our devotion to God. I am not arguing for an anti-America campaign --

³⁵ See David A. Rausch, *Building Bridges* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988).

that is the mistake of the other extreme. I am arguing for a balance in attitude concerning the role of America as a nation when compared to God's overall plan outlined in the Bible. It is doubtful that any headway will be made in discussions which cloud biblical issues.

Proposal # 4 -- The Church must remember its own nature as a body of believers.

The Bible teaches in Pauline images that the Church is a body of believers in both a universal and local sense (1 Cor. 12). This body consists of both Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2). The nature of the body is that it admonishes, encourages, protects, grows together and builds up the members of the body (Eph. 4). Since black and white Christians both make up the body, it is necessary for that Pauline picture of the church to be lived out with respect to the relationships which exist between the races within the church.

Proposal # 5 -- The Church must model the church at Antioch not the church at Jerusalem.

The Jerusalem church seemed to have a race problem of its own which we can learn from. In Acts 6 there were grumblings from the Greek contingent in the church over the treatment of Greek widows. Apparently they were left out of the care system being provided for the Jewish widows. This is a complaint not unlike the complaint of minorities today with respect to the white community's treatment of them. The Church resolved this issue by the establishment of what became, in this author's opinion, the office of deacon.

Later the Jerusalem church still struggled with these issues. One interpretation is that God had to send the persecutions to get the Jerusalem Christians to leave the homogenous safety of the Jewish climate to begin to spread the gospel as intended.³⁶ Continuing problems are seen in the confrontation of Paul and Peter spelled out in Galatians 1. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) shows that the Jewish elements in the church there were struggling with the Gentile mission not unlike the struggle of Jonah's struggle with his OT mission to Nineveh.

Fortunately, the church at Jerusalem corrected some of these problems. However, it is the church at Antioch which provides the best model for how the church is to function in a cosmopolitan setting with no race divisions. In Acts 13:1-4, at the church where followers of Jesus were first called Christians, the leading prophets and teachers of the congregation are named:³⁷

- Barnabas -- Paul's Jewish companion
- Simeon -- the one called Niger or "black" which appears to be an obvious reference to the color of his skin

³⁶ Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (revised ed., Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984), 197-213.

³⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 259-261.

- Lucius of Cyrene -- Cyrene (in North Africa) was known to have a Greek colony so it may be best to see Lucius as a Greek Gentile
- Manaen -- a foster-brother of Herod the tetrach which may imply some Gentile blood although it is not altogether clear
- Saul -- the great Jewish rabbi

In light of this list, it is clear that a variety of men from different races and backgrounds was characteristic of leadership positions. This mixture implies that the church at Antioch had overcome any racial problems which may have existed and which plagued the Jerusalem church.

Much of this spirit may be credited to Paul who later reminded the racist Athenians that all men came from one blood (Acts 17) and told the Galatians that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

Thus, the church must be open to a racial mix in its leadership as well as in its membership.

Proposal # 6 -- The Church must teach the whole counsel of God.

It is so easy for pastors to be selective in the teaching that goes on in all phases of church life. However, the church must be committed to Paul's example of teaching the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). In reference to the command in Matt. 28:19-20 to teach "all" that Jesus taught, one writer noted the following:

Christians should therefore be taught to do those actions which promote the good of all men. Christians should act on behalf of justice and righteousness in the social and political spheres and *not* neglect proclaiming salvation through the reconciling death of the God-Man, Jesus Christ. The example of Christ means that Christians must be involved in ministering to the whole man. It is totally inconceivable for a Christian to say that he loves men if he does not attack those forces which destroy men themselves.³⁸

At this point some examples of teaching the whole counsel of God will suffice:

- The justice inherent in the Mosaic legislation, the provision for the poor provided in the Pentateuch (e.g., Lev. 25), God's displeasure with the oppression of the poor and down-trodden clearly expressed in the prophets (e.g., Ez. 16:48-50; Amos 1), the teaching of Christ concerning the poor especially emphasized in the Gospel of Luke, etc., all point to the fact that the church must be proactive in these areas which get little attention in some evangelical fundamentalist preaching.
- The theological significance of work stems from the Cultural Mandate given in Gen. 1:26-28. Man who is made in the image of God reflects Him at least with respect to the capacity to rule on earth. This significant concept points out the worth of all individual men even after the Fall in Genesis 3 (see Gen. 9:6; I Cor. 11:7). An

³⁸Columbus Salley and Ronald Behm, *Your God is Too White* (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), 107.

application of this truth in church life would be the acceptance of all on an equal footing but would also highlight the personal responsibility each man has for carrying out the purpose intended by God for him. There can be no blaming of environmental factors completely for failure. The implications of the image of God in man and how that affects man's working in the world must be explored by the church in this debate.

- The Bible teaches that men are clearly dead in trespasses and sin and need new life (Eph. 2, John 3). The ultimate solution begins with regeneration by faith in Christ --a cleaning up of the inside before the conditions on the outside are changed. This focus on individual redemption found in evangelical fundamental circles must not be eliminated in favor of an approach to redeem society. Redemption of society will not come about through any outward programs and plans by the church or by the government apart from the change that takes place inwardly in men when they come to Christ.

Proposal # 7 -- Christians must repent of any prejudice and racism they have possessed in attitude or action.

Affirmative action as a government policy and outward attempts to change the perceived inequality of the criminal justice system must be seen as only Band-Aids. At the heart of the matter are attitudes which must be checked and rechecked to make sure that no racial ill will abides in the heart. The Christian must be a witness to those around him of the true and proper posture in the race issue. Consequently, the believer must love the entire world as God loves the entire world (John 3:16). This would require complete repentance on the part of any believer as he deals individually with his own sin of prejudice. Christian churches must lead their people to this self-examination and option for repentance.

Proposal # 8 -- Christians must recapture the cities by planting churches and performing outreach ministries to those who are different and less fortunate than them.

The forgotten cities are where many of the minorities live and which most white American Christians are complacent to let go to hell. It is someone else's problem. What might be the ultimate rewards for the Christian who abandons the easy street and truly sacrifices for Christ?

I have known many Christians who left the suburban, middle-class congregations they grew up in to serve the urban poor. Unfortunately, many of these urban workers live out their faith among the urban poor *in spite of* their home congregations. Because of their relocation to these places of pain, they have suffered criticism for being irresponsible ("Your parents spent \$80,000 to send you to college for *this?*") and even rebellious ("Have you become one of those radical social gospel types?"). Usually these workers are led to the urban poor by a desire to answer what they see as

the true calling and mission of the church. But many end up living out their Christian faith unsupported by the very congregations that ought to be nurturing and sustaining them.³⁹

This approach would entail a whole different set of circumstances to be dealt with than the suburbs possess. Whole new areas of Bible truth would have to be lived out that do not become an issue in most of our churches on a daily basis such as the illiteracy and hunger of much of the inner city.

Proposal # 9 -- Pastors (especially white pastors) must add racism and the needs of the poor as major preaching items.

I know from my own collection of sermons that my preaching ministry was selective -- I had (and continue to have) my own peculiar interests when it comes to expositing God's Word. It may be that racism and the needs of the poor do need more attention in the exposition of the Word of God. Some thoughtful person asked the question, "What would happen in our society if racial reconciliation became an evangelical agenda as important as abortion?"⁴⁰ All evils in society must be addressed by the Church as it functions as salt. This would be a corollary to proposal # 6 above.

Proposal # 10 -- Christians must be willing to share their wealth as did the early church to help others.

The New Testament Church was known for its generosity in many cases. In Jerusalem there was a sharing of wealth (not mandated by government) to help those in need (Acts 4:32-37). Paul took up an offering to assist those in financial need. Of special note were the churches of Macedonia who apparently gave financial assistance which went outside of their immediate circles (2 Cor. 8). In short, there is plenty of Scriptural justification to support the idea of churches having clothes closets and food pantries to assist those in and outside of the church. It may be that in our society the Church needs to recapture that function from the government.

Proposal # 11 -- Christians must engage the culture and not separate from the culture.

With this proposal I am not trying to water down any biblical doctrine of separation. I am just trying to affirm that we must not withdraw from the debate about ideas and truth in our society. Some implications might be the following:

- Be willing to do jury duty
- Be willing to serve in governmental offices
- Pastors must encourage others to do the above

³⁹ John M. Perkins, *Beyond Charity: The Call to Christian Community Development* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 42.

⁴⁰ Cited in Ronald J. Sider, *Cup of Water, Bread of Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 71.

- Make appeals to those in authority to do right based upon God's Word
- Stand against the crass materialism of our day

Proposal # 12 -- The Church must kindly affirm the policy that reverse discrimination is to be rejected.

The Church must abide by principles not pragmatism. The eternal Scriptures must be the driving force behind our applications and solutions to social problems. We must not simply decide to do something because it is the practical or pragmatic thing to do. In this light I must reject one of the aspects of affirmative action, namely, the elimination of opportunities of one person to favor another person.

In real life this may not be so easy to determine. One African American responded to a white man's objections to preferential treatment this way:

I took the occasion to observe that it seemed more than a bit hypocritical of him to rage on about preferential treatment. A person of modest intellect, he had gotten into Harvard largely on the basis of family connections. His first summer internship, with the White House, had been arranged by a family member. His second, with the World Bank, had been similarly arranged. Thanks to his nice internships and Harvard degree, he had been promised a coveted slot in a major company's executive training program. In short, he was already well on his way to a distinguished career -- a career made possible by preferential treatment.⁴¹

Thus, there may be preferential treatment already existing for some in the system. However, black Christians should not make the mistake of assuming that this is normative for all whites in the country. We will all do well to remember that positions and policies which are based only on experience will have no absolute base on which to be established. Thus, my appeal to principle -- the principles of Scripture. Two wrongs do not make a right. If it is possible to identify reverse discrimination, it should be considered just as wrong as any racial discrimination which is encountered.

Proposal # 13 -- Christians must not put faith in any one political party to provide solutions for the problems.

Enough said?

CONCLUSION

The difficulties of the issues involved are clear after my sketchy presentation. All of the above proposals taken as a package would make some progress but it is unlikely that most Americans would receive these things. However, the difficulty of the issues involved may be a blessing in disguise. It seems that there is no solution humanly and socially possible. That may make us look outside of ourselves a bit more. **Perhaps the**

⁴¹ Cose, 111.

gospel will one day soon begin once again to look like good news instead of old news. If so, may the Church, composed of all of the races, take advantage of the opportunity.

It is also true that only God can change attitudes. White, black, yellow, red -- no matter what color one is, he is affected by the curse on planet earth due to the Fall. The ultimate answer is a visitation from God upon this nation. What we need is revival in which the hearts and minds of people are transformed by the living God. ***When was the last time that you prayed for such an occurrence?***