
THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF RACISM AND RECONCILIATION

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Introduction

“Racial and ethnic hostility is the foremost social problem facing our world today . . . our world seems caught up in a tidal wave of racial and ethnic tension. This hostility threatens the very foundations of modern society” (Graham 1993, 27). In the former Soviet Union there is a powder keg of ethnic hatreds that run deeply in the souls of millions. Violence is just brewing under the surface or in some instances the violence has already spilled over. Some of these ethnic hatreds are manifested in full scale warfare such as in Chechenya between local rebels and the Russian government or Nogorno-Karabakh between the Azeris and the Armenians. Russia alone has twenty-one autonomous republics and eleven more autonomous regions; almost all of these are based upon ethnicities (Johnstone 1993, 466-471). Most of these republics and regions have conflicts within them and with their neighbors. Similar hostile situations exist all over the world.

The Christian church, the Body of Christ, is caught up in the racial, ethnic and class conflicts and hostilities that engulf our world. Little has yet been heard from the evangelical Christian church on the subject of racism, and even less reconciliation has been demonstrated by the evangelical Christian church in the way of solution. To be in the midst of such tremendous racial and ethnic turmoil and not to lovingly address the hostility in the reconciling power of the gospel of Jesus Christ is at best a gross omission. John Perkins’ observations may be right on target: “Something is wrong at the root . . . I believe we have lost the focus of the gospel—God’s reconciling power, which is unique to Christianity—and have substituted church growth. We have learned to reproduce the church

without the *message*. It is no longer a *message* that transforms” (Perkins 1993, 18).

Racism and the Christian Ethic

Racism, defined as an attitude or disposition of prejudice based upon emotion and employing unreasonable judgment, is diametrically opposed to the Christian ethic. The Christian ethic is a valuation of human conduct grounded upon divine revelation or to put it another way: Christian ethics is about how we should live in light of what the Bible teaches. The New Testament teaches that the Holy Spirit produces a Christlike character in the life of the believer (Romans 5:5; 8:1-14; Galatians 5:22-23). “This transformation of men by the inner dynamic of the Christ Spirit of one of the central motifs of Christianity . . . The other is . . . the imitation of Christ . . . defining its inmost meaning as having ‘the mind of Christ’ (1 Cor. 2:16; Phil. 2:5) . . .” (Elwell 1984, 377).

Racism is an attitude or disposition of prejudice. It implies an unreasonable judgment against some other race of persons. Feeling and not fact forms the basis for the prejudice. Mendell Taylor has noted prejudice is: “weighing the facts with your thumb on the scales” (Appleby 1986, 54). Racism is bound together with pride, arrogance, discrimination, ethnocentrism, hostility and hatred.

Racism demands a double standard of its adherents, especially of those who profess the Christian faith. This Christian faith rests upon great historical facts of ultimate salvation significance: the coming of Christ to earth as man; the death of Christ for human sin; the resurrection of this same Christ from the dead. Being based upon fact, the Christian faith has about it a certain reasonableness; it is not determined by nor carried about upon the wings of mere emotion. Racism suffers from this very malady: it has no facts to rest upon, no empirical data to support it, nor is it a reasonable notion.

Racism especially opposes Christianity at its very heart. Love is the heart of Christianity as seen in the words of Jesus and the summation of the commandments (to love God and to love one’s neighbor). Love seeks the good; ultimately it seeks God who is the Supreme Good. Racism, however, does not seek another’s good. It seeks rather, in its crude form, to destroy, to humiliate and to hurt one’s neighbor.

“Any examination of the teaching the New Testament on [racism] must begin with a careful look at the solution of the primitive church to [racism] among Christians in the first century” (Tilson 1958, 79). The early church faced a very real problem of racism just as we do today. Their

issues involved Jews and Gentiles, Samaritans and Gentiles, and slaves and freemen. Racism knows no bounds; while it is discriminating, it is indiscriminate in its hostility, fear and hatred.

Handling Racism

Christians are confronted with a challenge. How do Christians handle racism? The problem for the Christian is that one must respond to the prejudice of racism by opposing it with positive, loving actions (based upon the teaching of Christ) or else ethics faces a compromise with something less than a Biblical standard. If the Christian should compromise ethics, the veracity of the entire Christian gospel is brought into question. If the gospel does not break down the walls of hostility between different groups of people, and if the professing believer's attitudes have not been so changed by the gospel, then is that gospel able to do anything worthwhile for any person? And is there then not a contradiction between the life lived by the believer and that indicated in the New Testament that Jesus Christ lived and commanded His disciples to live?

On the other hand, the real life situations in which the Christian believer may be found does not present themselves for any easy solutions. At this point the Christian may finally decide to do nothing. This is a state of co-existence in which racism is not opposed outwardly, neither is the Christian ethic allowed to operate explicitly. This puts the Christian believer in the position of at least implicitly giving approval to racism. Neutrality is not an option. "If we do not attempt honestly to apply the Christian spirit and Christian principles to race relations, how can we expect others to respect our Christian claims or to hear and accept the message we proclaim?" (Maston 1957, 95).

Hatred of others on account of race (or neglect or indifference because of ethnicity), pride because of race or class, and greed manifesting itself in people taking advantage of others of another race through the power of majority social pressure, can, and should in the light of Biblical Christianity, be cleansed from the life and experience of the Christian community. In the more conservative evangelical churches which tend to take the Bible literally and seriously it would seem ethnic prejudice and racism would have little place. Unfortunately this is not true. "Race prejudice has been one the persistent problems of society . . . Notwithstanding the high ideals and clear teachings of the equality of man and the unity of the body of Christ, the Church has not infrequently stood self-condemned as a result of her racial attitudes that have closed the doors of the Kingdom of God to the souls of men" (Carter and Earle 1978, 145).

Many incidents of prejudice in action could be mentioned within my own denomination. “Honesty compels admission that the sin of snobbery is almost universal in the Church today . . . Dr. P. F. Bresee . . . felt his former denomination was too committed to seeking the upper middle class . . . It is the poor who are neglected. James shows no hesitation in naming this kind of discrimination *evil*” (Purkiser 1974, 142). Often our racism and discrimination has resulted from neglect or indifference, but sometimes from our unresolved fear, hostility or pride. Tony Evans reminds us,

The net result of this benign neglect is that the gospel is either hindered or rejected, as people view as untenable a message that seems to have little effect on how people relate to their neighbors. This leaves the Christian community with a theologically accurate message but an empirically deficient model (Perkins and Rice 1993, 8).

It is sad, but true, that conservative evangelicals who take their Bibles seriously are the very ones who tend to be more racist than their more liberal counter parts. This certainly includes holiness church groups which teach and profess such a high state of Christian living.

“Sociologist Rokeach declared: ‘My research reveals that the more conservative one’s theology is, the more bigoted and prejudiced one is likely to be’” (Appleby 1986, 55). This is a situation with which evangelicals need to come to grips. Repentance is certainly in order. It is not the kind of accusation evangelicals should attempt to excuse or deny.

Further understanding about how conservative evangelicals in general apply their Biblical knowledge and their theology might prove helpful. There are emphases within this group which reveal two very different camps. All that is called “Christian” or “holiness” or “godly” or, indeed, truly “evangelical” needs to be understood in the light of at least two major categories or systems of thought and practice which may not be apparent to many.

Gordon Allport’s research discovered that increased bigotry and prejudice among theological conservatives is true only of what he termed “extrinsic” conservative church people. This part of the evangelical church is most interested in religious comfort, getting things, rules, and outward appearances. “He points to ‘intrinsic’ conservative Christians as those who manifest interest in challenges, giving, people, and inward condition. Allport further points out that intrinsic conservative Christians tend to be far less prejudiced” (Appleby 1986, 55).

It is the condition of the “heart” which is all-important. The Bible says about a person: “For as he thinks in his heart, so is he . . .” (Proverbs

23:7). Jesus indicated that the issues of life flow out of the inner being of a person (Mark 7:21-23). Those who emphasize outward conduct will run the risk of becoming preoccupied with rules and regulations, and may well miss the vital importance of the inward attitudes and dispositions.

The Christian cannot be governed in the actions of real existence solely by culture. There are points at which culture may be in open conflict with the very heart of the Christian ethic. The Christian ethic is of higher rank than the cultural ethic. "There is too much 'cultural Christianity' these days. Such Christianity is respectable, decent, lovely, indulgent, and sentimental, but is as weak and ineffective as adolescent daydreams" (Gilmore 1971, 68). While Christianity must speak to all cultures or to any culture to be relevant to humankind in its real existence, it need not become a "cultural Christianity." This type of situation implies that the content of Christianity is determined by the culture it is in or that it is significantly modified to accommodate any given culture. The culture may modify the mode of expression of the Christian ethic, but it must not modify its essence. Christ is the one who can change our cultures at their points of failure.

Love That Changes

According to Augustine, "Christ is the transformer of culture. . . in the sense that he redirects, reinvigorates, and regenerates that life of man, expressed in all human works, which in present actuality is the perverted and corrupted exercise of a fundamentally good nature . . ." (Niebuhr 1951, 109). A change of heart is essential to bringing about ethnic harmony and to eliminate racism. The Christian gospel contains the remedy for this heart change. To say that a change of heart is the answer alone is not complete. The heart change must produce a change in the outer social structures if it is to be of real value. Racism can only be dealt with successfully, and ethnic harmony can only come from a heart change which brings about a change in the ways we relate and act toward one another (Beach 1969, 166).

The love ethic of Christ transcends every culture and every personal situation and in so doing produces right relationships and peace. "Dr. E. Stanley Jones once asked Mahatma Gandhi, 'What can we Christians do to help India?' Without hesitation Gandhi replied, 'Live like Jesus lived. *Don't adulterate or tone down your religion. Make love central*'" (Seamands 1981, 56). The Christian ethic of love for God and love for neighbor—whoever that neighbor may be—commands true love from the Christian believer even if his cultural or society ethic, mores or taboos demand prejudice toward some certain neighbor or group of neighbors.

The sad alternative to a love ethic is essentially racism. Racism circumvents the love ethic. Christian believers can get caught up in the use of power, manipulation and discrimination.

Thus the racist, who is also a Christian, says in effect to the outraced person, 'Meet the criteria which I prescribe and relate to me on precisely the terms which I dictate and I will love you.' Accordingly, neither the racist nor his victim are ever able to commune as fellow Christians. Racism is 'interposed' between them so that Christian faith cannot find fulfillment. The terms of meeting are not love, but power and submission. The neighbor never comes to be regarded as a member of God's universal community of creation or the Body of Christ. He never becomes a Thou; he is permanently It (Kelsey 1965, 148).

This degrades both persons and is a contradiction of the love ethic of Christ.

The corporate body of Christians, the church, is a community of brotherly love grounded in the love ethic of Jesus Christ. In a sense the church is Christ's representative on earth today. It should thus represent to the total community of humankind the love that Christ manifested. This is at once both a grand opportunity for the church to demonstrate its validity and the truth of its message, and, on the other hand, a danger if it fails to reflect the attitude and actions of Jesus. "The church does not cease to be the church because it errs or because its members continue in sin. The institution may be able to neglect its mission and remain the church. But there is real doubt that it can both neglect its mission and deny its very nature and yet remain the church" (Campbell 1962, 10-11). This is the danger: that the church may allow racism to keep it from the mission Christ gave it and cause the very essential love in the church to become ineffective or inoperative, and therefore, a non-functional dynamic as far as both the church and the world are concerned. Unless the church faces the issue squarely, it may be possible that future historians will write that the present day church did little to bring about harmonious race relations through their supposed love, while others for money did very much for improvements (Maston 1959, 41-42).

The Scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit fills the life of the Christian believer with God's love (Romans 5:5). Since this is so, that love of God must both be experienced by the individual person, and by the community in which he lives out his life. "The observable characteristic of love between Christians, particularly love across racial lines (according to

Colossians 3:11-13), is one way we authenticate God's power in our lives" (Washington and Kehrein 1993, 212).

The love must be greater than any individual's person love. This love must have a dimension which surmounts the affects of sin upon the human condition. Naturally it is relatively easy for most people to love those who like them or those who are like them. It is naturally quite difficult for most people to love those who hate them or to love those with whom they have little or nothing in common. The love that is required is the divine love.

Respect and love should characterize our every attitude. . . This love is more than just our puny, finite love . . . It is the divine . . . love of Christ operating with us and flowing through us into the lives of others. This sort of love is not natural to us, neither can it be self-generated. It has to be received as a gift from God and poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given unto us (Rom. 5:5) (Seamands 1981, 56).

Reconciliation

Reconciliation is the bringing together of God and man, and man and man. It is the repairing or healing of broken relationships. Reconciliation is the primarily the work of God through Christ to us. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19). "Reconciliation is a biblical word. It is *our* word, and its ministry *our* enterprise" (Pannell 1993, 136).

Love is what makes reconciliation possible. The first love is God's initiative. God's love becomes operative in the believer's life and is the power which enables reconciliation to take place between persons. "Reconciliation initiated by the love of God, has man as its object. It is man, not God primarily, who needs to be reconciled . . . This is the objective phase . . . A whole new set of spiritual and ethical relationships prevail . . . hostility is gone and loving submission is generated. This is the subjective phase of reconciliation" (Purkiser, Taylor and Taylor 1977, 404-405).

The work of reconciliation of person with person in this divided and often hostile world is given to Christian believers. Can a Christian leader effectively affect reconciliation among competing ethnic groups unless he is able and willing to enter into those cultures and come to understand some of the symbols, aspirations and problems of those of differing ethnicity? The answer is no (Herrera 1992, 10). There must be a willingness to have empathy with others.

Anthropologist, Paul G. Hiebert, suggests empathy as the first of four solutions for ethnocentrism (I think we may safely consider racism, ethnocentrism, and classism as having common features and as bound together with favoritism, pride, and hostility in general):

The solution to ethnocentrism is empathy. We need to appreciate other cultures and their ways. But our feelings of superiority and our negative attitudes toward strange customs run deep and are not easily rooted out. One way to overcome ethnocentrism is to be learners in our ignorance of others. Another is to deal with the philosophical questions raised by cultural pluralism. If we do not examine them, we will be unconsciously threatened by accepting another culture, for to do so calls into question our implicit belief that our own culture is right and others are wrong. A third way to overcome ethnocentrism is to avoid stereotyping people in other cultures, but rather to see them as human beings like ourselves. The recognition of our common humanity bridges the differences that divide us. Finally, we need to remember that people love their own cultures . . ." (Hiebert 1985 98-99).

These suggestions may well help us toward a solution for ethnocentrism, and even racism. However, even more is needed. Reconciliation is needed. "He has committed to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:19b). The message Christian believers have is reconciliation through love. This love must characterize the believer's person; he must be a loving person, not just do loving things. The love in the person will motive the person to act out love through promoting reconciliation as a personal ministry. Doing is not the most essential thing: being is the most essential. "Instead of demanding, What can the Christian *do* . . . we should be asking, What must the Christian *be*?" (Campbell 1968, 4). The answer is obvious: we must be authentic Christians full of God's love.

Spencer Perkins and Chris Rice have suggested three critical steps to the reconciliation process:

Admit the Problem. The first is to *admit* (that separation exists, that the relationship is uneasy, that it misrepresents what God intended for his people).

Submit to One Another. The second is to *submit* to one another (especially by building loving relationships across ethnic and racial barriers). This is a difficult thing to do for many, but it is essential if reconciliation is to be a reality.

Commit to a Lifestyle of Love. The third is to *commit*, especially to an intentional lifestyle of loving our ethnically different neighbors as ourselves (Perkins and Rice 1993, 18-19). These three steps are excellent guides for an individual or group to use to bring about reconciliation. Without recognition of broken relationships and hostilities we will do nothing about reconciliation. Submitting is a two way street. “The old fight of racial equality did not require any give and take. It demanded change only from Whites. But reconciliation is more costly; it demands change of us all” (Perkins and Rice 1993, 237).

Commitment is essential to bring about reconciliation. Reconciliation is more than just a nice idea; it is the crying need of our world. The key is *intentionality*. Christian believers must *intend* to bring about reconciliation if they are to be personally involved in it happening. Reconciliation will not happen automatically. Christians must be personally committed to involvement. “Intentionality is the locomotive that drives racial reconciliation. It must become part of our attitude. We must want to know the other race, to contribute to the other person’s spiritual, social, and emotional growth” (Washington and Kehrein 1993, 127).

The results of the Holy Spirit renewing a life in Christ Jesus is a “new birth” (John 3:3-8). God’s purpose is not individualistic, but community in nature. Ephesians 2:14b reads: “His purpose was to create in Himself one new humanity from the two, so making peace”

Howard Snyder has defined the Church in terms of individuals and community. He says, “I believe the most biblical definition is to say the Church is *the community of God’s people*. The two key elements here are the Church as a people, a new race or humanity, and the Church as a community or fellowship—the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit” (Winter and Hawthorne 1981, 119). God creates a new kind of loving humanity out of the old hostile humanity. This new loving humanity is the Christian Church, the Body of Christ. “Is God content merely to end hostility? Never. There is a second step, ‘. . . that he might create in himself one new man’ (Eph. 2:15) . . . In the church there is neither Jew nor Gentile . . . both bring what they are . . . they discover . . . a oneness, a fellowship, a union, a beautiful relationship . . . a sense of belonging to one another . . .” (Stedman 1976, 158-159). Reconciliation finds its fulfilment in transformed lives that shed hostility and become part of a new living organism and deep and wide sharing known as the Body of Christ.

Holiness is the Answer

God does not necessarily destroy the cultures, but he refines them and filters out the elements of hostility, animosity and hatred which have penetrated them all. “Ministers must teach that God does make a difference in our lives when we are converted. The Holy Spirit at work in us can permeate to the deepest attitudinal levels. However, we must realize that prejudice (though built on sinful attitudes) is taught largely by culture” (Appleby 1986, 55). We must not stop here as though sinful culture is some insurmountable obstacle beyond the power of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps for too long many have spoken and acted as if this were true.

Even some who have professed a sanctified life have excused racism and ethnic hostility on cultural grounds rather than yielding these areas to the transforming power of God, and rather than personally entering into the ministry of reconciliation committed to believers by Christ. The truth is that the Christ not only justifies the believer through faith, but through the Holy Spirit Christ also sanctifies the believer through faith. The Christlike life, the holy life, is the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer. This sanctification is both the privilege and the obligation of every believer.

The reality for the Christian believer is that he has become a new *creation*. In Christ we are not our old selves; we have become someone new. Part of this newness is a new attitude toward Christ, and consequently toward others. It was His love which touched us and made us new persons; that same love propels us toward others. Christ died for all so that he might reconcile us to Himself and to God, and reconcile us to each other. This ministry of reconciliation is given to us to share with others just as we have received it. “In New Testament theology reconciliation is both a completed act and a yet-to-be-actualized reality. . . . Furthermore, reconciliation is both present and future” (Dunning 1988, 341). Christ has completed reconciliation on the cross; it is yet to be actualized by those yet to believe on Him; Christ is presently reconciling the world unto Himself, and all things are yet to be reconciled in a complete way in Christ.

Sanctification is the miraculous work of God which transforms the individual and remakes a new humanity. There is “the reality of new life in Christ and what that new life can bring about when people are willing to put . . . Christ before culture . . . The truly amazing thing, however, is that in the process, one’s race, culture and background are enhanced because they are sanctified” (Perkins and Rice 1993, 8). The humanity is not destroyed but brought back to a more purified, sanctified state. The enhancement which takes place is a result of the refining which takes place—a removal of sinful, unloving strains, so that the new humanity may appear.

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are

Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:28-29). Divisions are divisive no longer in Christ. The promise to Abraham is fulfilled in Christ. "For Paul, the gospel is not a culmination of what had begun with Abraham; Jesus' death is not just a climactic event in salvation history . . . God's dream is not realized in the history of Israel, but in the community of Jews and Gentiles whose faith-trustful obedience is like Abraham's" (Ogilvie 1982, 8:61). The old categories become meaningless for Christians. There is a unity of purpose and spirit, and a unity which transcends all else. "The universality of the Church is rooted in the work of Christ as inclusive of all persons" (Dunning 1988, 532). The statement by Paul is powerful. It sweeps away the barriers humans have erected and turns them into nothing. Things are different: "for in Christ all social stations, all cultural labels, all races and nationalities are made of no account in the economy of God" (Ogilvie 1982, 8:79).

Christ is making a new humanity in Himself. "The Christian church should have no barriers of nationality, race, education level, social standing, wealth, gender, religion, or power . . . Nothing should keep us from . . . accepting into our fellowship any and all believers . . . Christians should be building bridges, not walls" (Barton 1991, 2166).

The Christian community through the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit is the answer to ethnic hostilities all over the world and at all levels. "Holiness, as an ethical reality, does not make one less human, but more fully so" (Dunning 1988, 499). In fact, the reconciling ministry of Christ makes us into what God intended us to be as human beings - active, participating members of a transformed humanity.

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