



*MORE THAN
EQUALS*

*RACIAL HEALING FOR THE
SAKE OF THE GOSPEL*

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Race Fatigue

AS A BLACK CHRISTIAN I THOUGHT OUR FREEDOM STRUGGLE IN THE sixties would lead to reconciliation. I was wrong. Race seems to be one nut that even Christianity is having a hard time cracking. Chris and I believe that the first step in the reconciliation process is admitting that the race problem exists and that our inability to deal with race has weakened the credibility of our gospel.

“I have a dream,” roared the prophet, “that one day the sons and daughters of former slaves and the sons and daughters of former slave owners will be able to sit down at the table of brotherhood together.”

If there was one word that captured the hearts and minds of black Americans during the sixties and seventies, it was *integration*. For many years we fought for it, and many even died for it. “We want our freedom,” we insisted, and integration was one of the ways we were going to get it. “Register to vote.” “We demand our civil rights.” “We shall overcome.” These were the battle cries of a generation of African

Americans who sought the life, liberty and pursuit of happiness articulated so beautifully in America's Declaration of Independence.

Now it is against the law to discriminate against someone because of the color of his or her skin. We have a Fair Housing Act that outlaws discrimination in housing. Black politicians control many of the major cities in this country, and blacks have benefited enormously from the well-intentioned attempt at restitution called affirmative action. But as *Boston Globe* reporter Jonathan Kaufman has concluded, "A generation after the civil rights movement blacks and whites seem to know each other better; but in many ways they seem to like each other less."¹

We are all suffering from race fatigue. Someone forgot to tell us along the way that you can't legislate people's attitudes. Changing laws will not change hearts. The civil rights movement has run its course, and we've gotten just about all you can expect to get from a political movement. The dream of whites and blacks sitting down together at the table of brotherhood is far from a reality.

Historically, American Christianity has failed to challenge racial division. Sometimes we have even embraced separation—if not in theory, most definitely in practice. In 1974 our family and the tiny staff of Voice of Calvary Ministries moved into a West Jackson neighborhood. At that time the neighborhood was about 80 percent white. The metamorphosis that is now so familiar to American cities took place in just six years; by 1980 our community was 80 percent black. It would make me so proud to call myself a Christian if I could tell you that the white 20 percent who remained behind were the Christians. It would make me proud if I could say that these white brothers and sisters decided to befriend us and that their love for God was demonstrated to us by the way they loved us. But only the whites who were too old and too poor to escape stayed behind. Today our community is nearly 90 percent black, like many other inner-city neighborhoods across the country.

I would love to be able to play the part of a Christian real estate counselor (white, of course) who interviews Christians set on moving out of their neighborhood when blacks begin to move in: "I suppose you've prayed about this and concluded that it's God's will to get out. Ever consider the statement you're making to black Christians by leav-

ing? I guess you figure you can do more for the cause of the gospel by moving to the suburbs, right? Ever consider what Jesus might do in this situation?”

Some frustrated blacks have described integration as “the period of time between the first black family’s moving in and the last white family’s moving out.” For the most part, integration has been successful only when it could be forced on the white community. Given a choice, it rarely happens. White parents given the choice to send their children to a mostly black school would most likely choose not to. A white family with the resources to move out of a racially changing neighborhood will usually do so. A white church that can afford to leave the inner city will usually leave. These choices are second nature. I’m not sure if very many white Christians stop to think of the message they are sending to black Christians as they make these decisions.

Whites are not the only ones separating along racial lines. A new phenomenon is growing among blacks who are frustrated with the reality of integration: a call for black separation. Although the idea is not new (Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X taught it during the fifties and sixties), more and more mainstream blacks are beginning to look at it as a feasible alternative. The train of thought runs the whole gamut, from all-black private schools, universities, churches and neighborhoods to a separate black state, federally funded as restitution for slavery. “If we can do it for Israel, why not for blacks?” is the rationale. Although this radical idea is not receiving much popular support, there is growing enthusiasm for the idea of blacks doing business with other blacks, living in black neighborhoods, worshiping with blacks and insisting that their children attend black universities.

The thinking goes something like this: the more we blacks can do for ourselves, the more we will respect ourselves and be respected by the American mainstream. The more we respect ourselves and are respected, the more control we will have over our own destiny.

Compounding this frustration with integration is what many black professionals have been calling a “glass ceiling.” They are convinced that no matter how well they perform, their climb up the corporate ladder is eventually arrested solely on the basis of their skin color. A

growing number of black businessmen and women are leaving corporate America and striking out on their own, starting their own companies. They are refusing to be patronized by white corporations that place blacks in high-profile but limited jobs like vice president of public affairs and personnel director.

On one hand, integration has helped to create a growing black middle class. On the other hand, this middle-class group could and did move up and out of black neighborhoods, taking with them economic, moral and spiritual stability and leaving behind only those who were too poor to move out. It can be said, however ironically, that integration has helped to create a new subculture that is now being called the black underclass.

Separation is a natural path to take when you have bought the concept of integration hook, line and sinker. The problem is that blacks tried integration with a mostly unwilling white partner. It was like being the odd person out at a dance. The hosts and their other guests would reluctantly dance with you, but you knew deep down that they didn't want to. Then, as more of your kind showed up, the original dancers slowly and inconspicuously moved their party to another room. Before you knew it, you and your friends were the only ones left in the room. "Hey! So who needs them? Let's throw our own party, make it bigger and better and not invite them!"

I have to admit that my emotions run in this direction sometimes. And speaking strictly from a human perspective, why not? What's the alternative?

Credibility Gap

White Christians' decisions to choose the comfort of their own race over the Christian ideals of brotherhood and oneness that our gospel so boldly preaches have undoubtedly weakened their witness to the African-American community. Because blacks have not been able to distinguish between white Christians and white non-Christians when it comes to racial issues and separation, major issues like abortion, which should be cut and dried for us, become confused. When white evangelical Christians stand against abortion, the first thought that

comes to the mind of many African Americans is, *What's in it for them? Whatever it is, it must be something bad for us.* Right or wrong, the fact that black Christians would even think like this demonstrates the ungodly mistrust that exists among the people who are supposed to represent a God of love.

The wounds of racism and oppression are still deep. Just how deep these historical scars are etched into our being was made plain to me by the comments of a black single mother as she watched white anti-abortion protesters on the evening news: “Do you think they would care one bit if only black babies were being aborted?” Many other blacks would echo her bitterness. I know her question sounds cruel and calloused, but it demonstrates the size of the gulf between us and illustrates our desperate need for racial reconciliation.

There is a huge credibility gap between us—a deep lack of trust. The historical gulf that lies between blacks and “right-wing” Christians is so deep that it’s hard for some to imagine us being on the same side of any serious issue. Our lives have been so separate that we see issues like abortion from totally different perspectives. Abortion for many white Christians is an issue that can be discussed in a vacuum. Not for us. Even though an overwhelming majority of black Christians are against abortion, they are torn by the painful realities that surround them.

For blacks who have a huge stake in the survival of the black neighborhood, what does “zero abortions” mean? How many more female-headed households would be created? How many more young women would be trapped in the cycle of poverty, totally dependent on welfare? How many more gang members would these families produce? Wouldn’t the ghettos be twice as large in just a few years? Wouldn’t the crime rate soar? Wouldn’t the prisons overflow? Who would take care of all of these children? Why should blacks not assume that as the ghettos become larger and more dangerous, the Christian anti-abortionists will not move farther and farther into the suburbs, taking little or no responsibility for the social consequences of the lives they helped to save?

Let me tell you a true story—a story that illuminates the problems

and illustrates black frustrations. Our congregation is rather unusual for a Southern church in that the black-to-white ratio is close to fifty-fifty. In 1989 some of our members were passionately involved in the antiabortion movement, so a Right to Life meeting was scheduled at our church. One local member of the organization, a white woman, obviously wasn't aware of our racial makeup or didn't prepare her two children for what they would encounter that evening. A black woman who had volunteered to tend the nursery happened to see this family as they walked into the building. When the white boys noticed the skin color of some of our children, one of them asked in disgust, "What kind of church is this?"

His brother's response summed up what these young white boys felt about their black brothers and sisters: "We'd better be careful what we touch while we're here," he said, drawing his hands back as if he feared contamination from some deadly disease.

Issues like abortion should not be too complicated for Christians. Who could imagine Jesus saying that because of social problems it is okay to terminate the lives of the unborn? But because Christians have not been consistent in fighting other social sins such as racism, the motives of antiabortionists are muddled for black believers.

All Bark and No Bite?

From a Christian perspective, integration has been weighed in the balance and found wanting. Even though it has produced a growing class of affluent blacks, it will never achieve the brotherly love Jesus calls us to. And black separation will produce much of the same frustration. Even though it might spark some much-needed self-respect, it falls far short of the Christian ideals preached by Jesus and the apostle Paul. White separation has compromised and weakened the power and witness of the gospel—so much so that it has confused us in responding to abortion and other social evils. And fear of the crime and violence of our inner cities is making opportunities for white and black interaction much more difficult.

Much water has gone under the bridge in the historical relationship between whites and blacks in this country, from the cruelty of sla-

very and the white racism that followed to the “Great Society” that tried to atone for past oppression through legislation like affirmative action. Now as we witness a white backlash and the confusion of a rapidly growing black “underclass,” our mutual fear and distrust have only intensified.

Maybe it’s time to consider some new leadership in this seemingly hopeless relationship. Maybe it’s time for the people who should be the world’s leaders in human relations to start living up to that high calling by seizing this great opportunity.

Every Sunday morning millions of us sit in church and sing that “Jesus is the answer for the world today.” I often wonder whether the words “except for the race problem” should be added to that beautiful song.

My next-door neighbor used to have a little dog named Scottie. Every day when I would walk past Scottie’s house, he would bark ferociously, leaping against the fence that separated us as if to say, “If I had the opportunity, I would rip you to shreds.” One morning as Scottie and I went through our regular routine, he leaped against an unlatched fence. To his surprise and mine, the gate swung open, giving Scottie the opportunity of a lifetime. To my surprise and relief, though, Scottie would not come through that open gate. From that day on, I had no more respect for Scottie.

The tattered relationship between whites and blacks in this country offers Christians a historic opportunity. For centuries we have announced loudly and intensely that we alone had the answers to the world’s problems. If that claim is true, it’s time for us to move through this open gate of opportunity—or stop our barking.