

It is an opinion transcending age, gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, religious affiliation, academic discipline: racism is still active and present in the United States of America. In a study exploring the interaction between this problem and evangelical Christianity, Michael Emerson and Christian Smith argue that it is the very characteristics of evangelicalism that allow it to continue. Insofar as they are correct about evangelical characteristics, I agree with their conclusion. What Emerson and Smith highlight is the conclusive reality explored by Marsden demonstrating the evangelical camp as a conserving power in American culture. It is the author's contention that the prophetic call of Martin Luther King, Jr. for a new community, with a return to Biblical values, is necessary to end evangelicalism's marriage to the socio-political status quo.

Emerson and Smith begin their argument by defining what is meant by "evangelicals": individuals for whom the "ultimate authority is the Bible [...] that Christ died for the salvation of all, and that anyone who accepts Christ as the one way to eternal life will be saved. [...] They] believe in the importance of sharing their faith" (Emerson 3). Because of this emphasis on proselytization, the trend among evangelicals historically has been to be cultural chameleons of a sort: not accepting the social mores of the culture as such, but adapting its historical values to the tenets of their faith (21). This, Emerson and Smith argue, is what has allowed the racialized elements of American culture to go largely unchallenged by evangelicalism in its history.

Emerson and Smith find this characteristic of historical evangelicalism in a survey stretching from 1700 through 1965, with the passage of the Civil Rights Act (ibid). Highlighting the statements and ministries of such evangelists as George Whitefield,

Charles Finney, and Billy Graham, it would seem that this pattern is present. But for these authors, the end was written from the beginning:

Evangelicals usually fail to challenge the system not just out of concern for evangelism, but also because they support the American system and enjoy its fruits. They share its Protestant work ethic, support laissez-faire economics, and sometimes fail to evaluate whether the social system is consistent with their Christianity (22).

These shared values are the very thing which Marsden calls “The American Paradox” in *Religion and American Culture*. Lacking the Catholic roots and definitions that defined even scanty European limitations on the institution of slavery that ruled the Continent, the British Isles, and Latin America, the American culture’s understanding of slavery was established on the basis of racism and economics (Marsden 75). Thus, it was segregated from whatever teaching evangelicals had in favor of the common dignity due to human beings.

These assessments by Emerson/Smith and Marsden have merit in any basic survey of American evangelicalism’s history, its significant figures, and the current realities of evangelical demographics. Although the Civil Rights Movement and, particularly, the leadership of men like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. began to mark some changes in evangelical actions and attitudes towards racialized institutions, and the work of men like John Perkins continues that to this day, the passivity that so much has characterized the evangelical response to racism in American culture is in a lamentable state. It is imperative, then, for evangelicals to recover some of King’s vision and the Biblical mandates for the community of peoples reconciled to God and to one another in the work of Christ on the cross (Ephesians 2). Only through the Gospel can the work of reconciliation and the end of unjust passivity come.

King scholar and writer Charles Marsh believes that King's vision of reconciliation is captured in the notion of the "beloved community." In his book on the topic, Marsh summarizes it in this way:

King did not so much strike a balance between prophetic religion and the American dream as he imagined democratic possibilities from the perspective of Biblical hope. [... In this vision,] God remains from beginning to end the ultimate agent of human liberation [...] In other words, the brotherhood and sisterhood of humankind radiates out from the fellowship of the faithful (Marsh 49-50).

The burden of reconciliation and the community where there was no longer any segregation was to be displayed, in King's opinion, is the churches. In an interview with the Rabbinical Assembly of Conservative Judaism, King declared:

Racism is the myth of an inferior race, of an inferior people, and I think religious institutions, more than any other institutions in society, must really deal with racism. Certainly we all have a responsibility—the federal government, the local governments, our educational institutions. But the religious community, being the chief moral guardian of the over-all community should take the primary responsibility in dealing with this problem of racism, which is largely attitudinal (King 676).

The beloved community is vision of an integrated, just society, where people could live together harmoniously, each having the ability and opportunity to contribute to the good of their fellow men. Essential to that, for King, was Calvary (Marsh 50) and the once-for-all work of Jesus Christ. Even while capturing the grand scope of reconciliation, however, King's perception and doctrine lacks the robustness of an orthodox theology that, truly, could only serve to enrich and strengthen it and motivate the work of redemption in the world around us. An inheritor of the richness of both traditions, Thabiti Anyabwile brings the Biblical framework necessary to achieve the change that our evangelical churches so desperately need in order to better demonstrate and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Thabiti Anyabwile is a child of the Civil Rights Movement and of Southern heritage. He testifies to a lot of things, good and bad, that came from growing up in the South. He has a background in racism, in the Black Power movement and witnessed a radical transformation of his own life by the power of the Gospel. In fact, that change in him is one of the greatest evidences of God's grace that he sees in his life:

One of the reasons I know Jesus Christ has invaded and transformed my life is that I am no longer a committed racist or racialist. I had no need for white people whatsoever. I hated them bitterly. One of my favorite sayings was, "Some of my best friends ... have friends who are white." I would have told you that I wasn't a racist, that I could love African people or black people without hating white people. What I was expressing was love for black people, not hatred for whites. I've heard skinheads, members of the Nation of Islam, and even some more garden variety people say things like this.

One of the high points of my life last year was the privilege of speaking at the Twin Lakes Fellowship in Jackson, MS. It's a gathering of PCA pastors ... which is a polite way of saying there weren't many bros there.

There I was ... an African American ... with 200 white men ... in Mississippi ... in the woods ... at night.... Now you know Jesus did that! Getting me to Mississippi from my racist past was a supernatural demonstration of the power of the risen Christ! (Anyabwile 09/10/08).

In a series of four articles published by Boundless.org in the fall of 2008, Anyabwile, presently a pastor in the Cayman Islands of a church that includes up to thirty ethnicities, provides a succinct summary of the theories of race and ethnicity and outlines clearly why the theory of race generally put forward in biology, anthropology, and popular social science is problematic for the Christian.¹ In short, the theory of race,

- leads to the abuse of people and scripture,
- inevitably leads to racism,
- prevents meaningful engagement with others,
- undermines the authority and sufficiency of Scripture,

¹ These articles were closely based on a message delivered April 15, 2008 at Together for the Gospel 2008 (Louisville, KY) entitled "Bearing the Image: Identity, the Work of Christ, and the Church."

- is a form of resistance to the Holy Spirit,
- and undermines the Gospel (ibid.)

What Anyabwile proposes should shape our framework of perceived differences in opposition to the theory of race is a theory of ethnicity that assumes a Biblical reality which Martin Luther King Jr. had articulated years before: “in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile (Negro nor white) and that out of one blood God made all men to dwell upon the face of the earth.” (King in Marsh 50). Ethnicity respects and affirms differences and acknowledges the goodness of their Creator and, rather than looking to those differences to determine our status, privilege or “where we belong.”

The fundamental basis, then, is bound up in what Scripture reveals as our common lineage in Adam and Eve, Noah and his family. The New Testament continues this teaching in many places. The passages that King cited come from Galatians 3:28 and Acts 17:26 and they are quite clear. Just as significant, however, is Paul’s declaration in 1 Timothy 4:10: “For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.” This is the verdict: it is in the Gospel that we find the utter eradication of our prejudices and the uniting of ourselves with people “from every tribe and language and people and nation” through the finished work of Christ on the cross (Revelation 5:9). For evangelicals, then, our responsibility and what we will be held accountable for, is our faithfulness to the Gospel. If we are to rightly understand the Gospel, we are to believe and live the reconciliation that God has provided in Christ.

In large part, the reason the Gospel has this power is due to the fact that, in Christ, there is, in a sense, a “new ethnicity” that God has created: the people of God. In the words of the apostle Peter,

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Peter, in this passage, uses three different Greek words that would have been used to highlight differences between groups in the past (translated in this passage as “race”, “nation”, and “people”). The work of the cross, according to Peter, has given us an identity and “home” that transcends and redeems our differences for the purposes of God’s glory and the exaltation of His grace. For this very reason, I would echo the words of Thabiti Anyabwile: “Our local churches are to be the penultimate display of the new humanity created in Christ Jesus” (11/06/08).

The simple point is this: Christians — congregations and leaders alike — have a responsibility to pursue the demonstration of the Gospel in regards to ethnicity. If we are not committed to living this out in the local church, to display God’s glory and the power of Christ in all of our differences and heritages as the One Bride of Christ, we cannot expect to see a change in the attitude of Christians. It is only when we begin to operate as the people of God, unified in Christ, that we will truly begin to be a counter-cultural force in the issues of racism, prejudice, abuse and oppression. A prophet can only be accepted if the life that he lives is consistent with the words that he preaches (Matthew 7:15-20). In short, Western society will never be able to shake off the bondage of these prejudices against “the other” until the Church has attained the unity that is found in Christ and manifestly demonstrates the greatness of the Kingdom and the power of the Gospel, which God has so intended for the glory of His Name and the good of His creation.

These are the same principles embodied in Geneva College's position paper, "A Christian View of Diversity." These same principles can be found at work in Covenant Church of Pittsburgh, Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, and other like minded fellowships across the United States. The foundations are there. The movement is growing. If we are going to see the conclusions reached by Emerson and Smith in *Divided by Faith* become outdated, and a matter of historical past, the most practical thing that we can do is to persevere, pray, and trust that God will continue to give His bride the maturity and faithfulness required to be true to the Gospel that has changed us from people who were hostile to God and others, to those who have been reconciled in Christ to both God and our fellow men (Ephesians 2). And, by the grace of God, that is exactly what will happen.

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