

Reconciliation: The Now But Not Yet

Reconciliation among people should go first to the great point of rupture, in contrast to reconciliation with God, where we go first to the great point of healing—the cross. For Jews we need to acknowledge the Holocaust, in my limited experience. For some Muslims, the Crusades are at issue. For African Americans, slavery is the gateway for dialogue. Read *The Classic Slave Narratives*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.¹. Included is *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*—one Linda Brent. To escape her masters she literally stayed hidden beneath the three-foot high roof of her grandmother's home, where she was frost-bitten and ant-bitten and came close to losing use of her limbs after seven years there—esteeming it better than the salacious propositions and threats of her professedly Christian “owner,” elderly Dr. “Flint.” For years she could not even communicate with her own children playing in the room beneath, for fear of being discovered before she could escape. Contrasting the situation of poor British peasants around 1860 with that of southern slaves, she wrote,

They labored hard, but they were not ordered out to toil while the stars were in the sky, and driven and slashed by an overseer, through heat and cold, till the stars shone out again. Their homes were very humble; but they were protected by law. No insolent patrols could come, in the dead of night, and flog them at their pleasure. The father, when he closed his cottage door, felt safe with his family around him. No master or overseer could come and take from him his wife or his daughter... There was no law forbidding them to learn to read and write; and if they helped each other in spelling out the Bible, they were in no danger of thirty-nine lashes, as was the case with myself and poor, pious, old uncle Fred. Pp. 497-8

Americans today have no personal guilt from those sordid years. But the effects of this system, ending only 140 years ago—are consequential. The oral history of slave days is still passed down today in some AfAm families. I was on a Christian talk program focusing upon racial reconciliation and when I mentioned slavery as the “first base” for building relationships. The host moved quickly on. We need to say that enormous, egregious and unconscionable wrongs were committed by whites upon blacks for over 220 years.

I have a friend named Moon, but he blasphemes Christ loudly and publicly. We share the respect of boxers in opposite corners. Every time we meet he verbally assaults me with what whites have done, and are doing to blacks. Much of this is true, and to much I must agree. He accuses me of duping any black evangelists that I have with me. He tells them that Christianity is just a tool of European origin to keep blacks down, as was sometimes done during slavery.

A perfidious consequence of slavery is that some blacks doubted and, like Moon, still disbelieve God's goodness. Brent wrote:

Sometimes I thought God was a compassionate Father, who would forgive my sins for the sake of my sufferings. At other times, it seemed to me there was no justice or mercy in the divine government. I asked why the curse of slavery was permitted to exist, and why I had been so persecuted and wronged from youth upward. These things took the shape of mystery, which is to this day not so clear to my soul as I trust it will be hereafter. (p. 444-5)

We can understand why Moon, without benefit of a new heart and renewed mind, can't get beyond slavery. But what are the prospects for black Christians and white Christians?

A black Christian brother told me that we cannot even speak of racial reconciliation, since we were never at peace. At the horizontal level—person-to-person—there may be no experiential reconciliation. At the vertical or theological plane, there is. Sins under slavery are among a plethora of possible sins. Everyone stands guilty before God, for all have sinned and come short of His glory (Rom. 3:23). The issue is not that one ethnic group sins and another doesn't.

If my sins are forgiven by Christ due to His substitutionary payment for them on the cross (1 Peter 2:24), and if a black or Hispanic is likewise forgiven, then we are both reconciled to God. Not only that, but we are reconciled to each other. Being all children of God with one Father, we are then "siblings" and joint heirs of God's Kingdom. In fact, in Christ the "dividing wall of hostility"² (Eph. 2:14, NIV) has come down—or it should. Because I am a sinner, I have no right to withhold forgiveness for sins against my people, particularly if we have both stood before the cross and been forgiven. Christ says that if we do not forgive, neither will we be forgiven our sins (Matt. 6:15).³

If Christ could reconcile Jew to Gentile, then He can certainly reconcile Gentile to Gentile, black to white, Tutsi to Hutu, Serb to Croat. The Jews and Gentiles were divided by culture, oppression, and religion. Jews considered themselves spiritually superior to Gentiles, having the Law and the covenants with God. The Gentiles had enslaved Jews for 400 years in Egypt, followed by Gentile domination and Roman rule. For their part, the Gentiles resented being labeled as dogs. Then entered Christ.

For he [Christ] himself is our peace, who has made the two [Jew and Gentile] one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. (Eph. 2:14-16).

Christ inaugurated the new Covenant in His blood, and common entrance into

that covenant through Himself. Thus He dealt with religion and spiritual snobbery—since He fulfilled and made obsolete the Old Covenant (Heb. 8:13). In Himself, He created “one new man,” dealing with ethnic divisions, tearing down the “dividing wall of hostility” between them. He considered the cross sufficient payment to resolve sin issues between believers, making peace. Yet some Christians act as though the cross is insufficient grounds for peace, while perpetuating enmity, hatred and racism. White Christians sometimes consider themselves racially superior. The freshly chastened Peter said, “God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean.” (Acts 10:28b). Apparently then, between Christians, we can honestly speak of re-conciliation, since we were first brought together at the cross.

We aren't living the reality, or racial relations among Christians would have improved. We live as though the wall is up. For whites the mortar is racism and pride. For blacks it's distrust and resentment. The wall came down for Peter Thomas, a Dominican, whose ancestors were brought as slaves, brutalized and fought over for centuries, yet who believes that we must move beyond history. It's down for Kevin Smith, for Lewie Card, for Bertha Lloyd, Aubrey Fritz, Hattie Riley, Cal Boroughs, Crawford Loritts, Flo Samuels and Joe Novenson and many, many more I could name. Whenever I see it, it's because of the cross.

There's little hope for Moon and me unless he experiences forgiveness through the cross, and rebirth through faith in Christ, then extends forgiveness because of the cross. But Christians need to act as though the dividing wall already came down. We must be Christian first--concerned more to obey the law of love than to conform to ethnic racism. We need to dine, evangelize, worship, and go on mission together. After returning to the great point of rupture, depending upon the history, Christians must then go to the healing place--to the cross. If our overtures of peace are misconstrued or rejected, we can have a clear conscience. Reconciliation flows from the cross, and by God's grace will move to mutual love among forgiven sinners. Maybe even to trust gained from serving Christ together. Rather than rebuilding the wall, brick by brick, our heritage is peace made at Calvary.⁴

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²That wall was probably a reference to the low wall preventing Gentiles from entering the Jewish Temple at peril of their own immediate death.

³Forgiveness does not rule out redress for wrongdoing where appropriate. Also, structural and institutional sin, which multiply iniquity, complicity and callousness, is seen in human chattel. But bottom line, institutions don't sin—people do.

⁴Of course, the same principle covers estranged persons generally.

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