

RACIAL RECONCILIATION AND JUSTICE

By Randy Nabors, January 2011

Racial Reconciliation is the application of the Gospel to our present racial and ethnic situation and circumstance. It is an application of biblical justice, peacemaking, and mercy. At its' theological root it is a statement of faith concerning the common image of God in all human beings, the blood commonality of all nations (Acts 17:26), and the combining of the alienated into one new man and in that one body both reconciled to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility (Ephesians 2: 14-18). It is in addition the sorrowful and repentant acknowledgement of the sins of race pride; those proud thoughts, feelings, and actions of racial superiority and the consequent dehumanization of other races. It is the repudiation of the historic exploitation and cruelty to other human beings due to racial distinctions in the form of man-stealing, slavery, family destruction, sexual and physical abuse, economic and social discrimination with its' attendant segregation in various areas of life.

Conversely it is also forgiveness for those things suffered due to historic group and/or personal acts of injustice based on racism, tribalism, and ethno-centrism.

Christian Racial Reconciliation is the Gospel attack on the sin and activities of racism and its' attendant effects. It is the evidence of the love of God through the repenting, confessing, healing, forgiving, and serving ministry of the saints to bring about peace between alienated believers of different races and ethnicities. It is the extension of that peace to the non-believing community as well who have suffered the pain and debilitation of racial and ethnic rejection. It is the taking of responsibility for the sins of our forefathers and the lingering affects of their actions. It is the repenting of any of our own present attitudes or behaviors that continue to harm others due to race, ethnicity, and their corresponding cultures.

It is the desire to know where offense is or has been, and where it lingers personally or systemically, and the assertive correction of circumstances. It is not simply a desire to get on with things and forget about the past. It is not the denial of race by calling it a mere social construct and thinking that by this denial racism will be ended. It takes racism as a fact of history and life, whatever its' origin.

In the life of the local church it is the active desire to include people through understanding and learning their cultures and enlarging the cultural scope of worship forms as long as they are Biblical. It is the necessary attitude change that brings people to become like Jesus and take the form of a servant to each other and to whole people groups as well. Paul demonstrated this amazing Jesus type love, of becoming a slave to whole people groups, so that he might win them for Christ.

I Corinthians 9:19-22:

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I

became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some."

It is not simply the sitting together in one pew but our life together in friendship; yokefellows in the cause of the Gospel, shoulder to shoulder in the cause of justice, heart to heart in the application of mercy. It is the appreciation of God given differences, the celebration of culture and history, and the tenacity and intentionality of relationship despite that history and those differences. It is the living model of the heavenly vision of the New Jerusalem appearing in the life of the local congregation.

Racial reconciliation is/and are the healing choices we make concerning the effects of race, ethnicity and culture in our society. Those choices include the socio-economic challenges that face our society. True reconciliation is not merely accepting the status quo of resultant poverty populations as if the history of race and discrimination had no relationship to present circumstances. Reconciliation does not invent causes of racial disparity in almost all demographic data, (be it health, violence, or incomes), rather it acknowledges them and sees them as facts on the ground that must be changed. It is the acknowledgment that not all have benefited from the positive changes in our society, for which we can all thank God.

Reconciliation desires to radicalize all classes of Christians so that we might love, share with, and include the poor in our own worshipping community of believers without paternalism or patronizing. It is the active missionary dynamic to raise up indigenous leadership among the poor across racial lines.

Reconciliation is not satisfied with mere welcome of those who are different; it does not leave the timetable of inclusion to coincidence and chance. It is not merely the toleration of others nor is it simply allowing them to carry on in the manner to which they are accustomed. It is the pursuit of others (especially by the majority culture), it is the removal of barriers to others; it is faith tied to imagination and then acted upon to change the current racial makeup of our congregations, schools, and institutions.

At one and the same time it is not nor can it be an arrogant self-righteous demand that all minority groups surrender themselves up to be a minority within the churches of dominant cultural majorities. To demand the dismantling of historic minority cultural institutions such as churches and schools especially in their particular population context of racial and ethnic communities gives no thought to how those institutions preserve culture, provide a healthy self-image, and give avenues to power for those not usually given those avenues in broader society.

While having said that one must not retreat from the call to all believers, especially to all believers in our particular denomination, to participate in meaningful strategies for all of our people to pursue, engage in, and be blessed by racial reconciliation. We need to think not only of reconciliation to be the property or concern of those congregations in

mixed communities or by those missionaries to ethnic communities but all believers in a multi-cultural nation.

True racial reconciliation in our context means that the majority has to begin an active repentance of ignorant bliss in terms of the racial history of our own denomination, and the re-ordering of created institutional, political and social barriers that hinder the inclusion and progress of minorities into the mainstream of denominational life.

True racial reconciliation means that minority congregations cannot and must not assume they can remain aloof and distant from majority culture congregations, presbyteries, and denominational life. They must take the risk of challenging their own people to “own” the denomination; to learn its’ culture, its’ systems, its’ politics and fully participate in its’ life while preserving what it best in their own culture. While reconciliation cannot mean pure assimilation into the majority and then the obliteration of minority culture it cannot happen at all if minorities will not take the risk of entrance, interaction, and fellowship, and the possible involvement of majority representatives in their community and institutions.

The challenge in the book of Galatians is to be able to celebrate our oneness and unity in Christ without forcing Gentiles to become Jews. Men don’t become women in our theology, they simply but meaningfully become one in Christ.

“Behold how they love one another” is especially poignant when there have been historic events providing reason for hatred and alienation. This is a powerful witness to unbelievers. Doctrinal unity without an organic unity is not much unity at all and the world has a hard time knowing we are Christians by the love they don’t see between us (John 17:23).

One of the barriers to reconciliation is when the oppressed or injured deserves justice, but does not receive it. Justice sometimes requires retribution and restitution. To restore the balance, the equity between persons or groups, there is often a payment due. Individuals and groups can feel this requires reparation in blood, money, vengeance, or if possible replacement and/or restoration of what once was. Some may feel it means they deserve their turn at the top or at the trough of resources.

We cannot bring back the lives we have ended, or the quality of life someone deserved but has forever lost. It is difficult to go back and undo all the damage and all the changes from that damage. Do we take African Americans back to Africa, do we give the Indians their land back, do we unravel every wrong, every piece of property, every advantage given unfairly due to color of skin, family name, or because we were well armed? Can we give to generation after generation that lost a chance at a good education literacy after they are dead; do we give them science, and medicine, and political and civic position and inclusion after they are gone? Can I make up to generations of despairing people deliverance from alcoholism and restore the broken families and give life back to the suicides?

There is much we cannot do, but there is also what we must do, what God has chosen for us to do,

to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke, to share our food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when we see the naked to clothe him. To rebuild the ancient ruins and raise up the age-old foundations; to be a repairer of broken walls, and a restorer of streets with dwellings. (Isaiah 58:6-12)

Yet, sometimes justice cannot be vindicated. Sometimes it must be covered, it must be replaced with the only thing that can do that effectively and that is the miracle of love, and the mercy of forgiveness (Proverbs 10:12). The mercy of forgiveness is unfathomable and inexplicable, yet it is absolutely effective in making relationships right. It is a moral power which does not gloat in its power. It simply cancels the past; though it might always remember it, be able to articulate it and have a realistic appraisal of the full extent of the damage it has done, it no longer is oppressed by it. It is freedom, for both the perpetrator and the victim, so that one is freed from guilt and the other from shame and bitterness.

Shane Claiborne in his foreword to John Perkin's book, Let Justice Roll Down, says,

“There is no doubt that we need justice to roll down like water; those words of the prophets drip from Perkin's tongue. And yet justice without grace still leaves us thirsty. Justice without reconciliation falls short of the Gospel of Jesus. Love fills in the gaps of justice. John has lived for us what it looks like when justice and reconciliation kiss. After all, he did not just call for an end to the hate crimes of the Klu Klux Klan, but he became friends with a reborn Klansman.”

We are made dumb in the face of love, we stand in awe of it's power; to nail Jesus to a cross and to hear him pray that the very ones doing so would be forgiven. For Saul to hear Steven cry out as he died, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” (Acts 7:60) It is God at work in the making of saints and it is what saints do. It is more than turning the other cheek; it is giving mercy for murder, kindness for killing, and even absolution for genocide. How can that be done? It cannot, without the power of God. That kind of love is so foreign to us that we even need God's power to grasp how wide, and long, and high, and deep is the love of Christ. We need the power of God to love, and the power of God to know love. Reconciliation is peacemaking love, and it a living example of the power of God unleashed in the world.

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