

Question: In view of the recent church shooting in South Carolina, what would Jesus do to promote racial harmony and unity?

The inauguration of an African-American president in 2009 led many of us optimists to believe we might have finally put behind us much of the racial bigotry and prejudice of the 1950's and 60's. To some extent, Martin Luther King's dream has been realized that "little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." But while there may have been the external appearance of unity, racial prejudice has remained in the hearts of many people.

That we continue to have serious racial prejudice and hatred in this country was demonstrated by the recent killing of nine people in an African-American church in South Carolina. When the calls came for an end of public displays of the confederate flag, an old symbol of racial and national strife, we soon saw that many hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan and other racial separatist groups are still alive. The young man who did the shooting in South Carolina was apparently influenced by some of these groups.

The Bible teaches that people of all races and nations were created in the same image of God and share in the blood given to our first parents (Genesis 1:27; Acts 17:26). We are also told that God sent his only son into this world to confront the sins of hatred, injustice and willful ignorance along with other harmful thinking and actions. The Son taught his followers about caring and responsibility for others by telling them the story of the Good Samaritan. This Samaritan, who was of an ethnic group considered outcasts by the Jews, stopped to help a Jew who had been beaten, robbed and left for dead. Earlier a Jewish priest as well as a Levite had passed the wounded man without stopping to help (Luke 10:25-37). From this teaching, we know that Jesus wanted his disciples to be helpful neighbors to everyone regardless of their ethnic, racial or religious background.

This oneness that Jesus sought did not mean people would need to abandon their racial, national, or ethnic heritage. Although some of the early believers mistakenly tried to make Gentiles become Jews before they could be accepted as Christians, this was rejected by Christian leaders in Jerusalem (Acts 15). Jews and Gentiles were told to "accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you" (Romans 15:7).

Instead of expecting people to abandon their racial heritage, the early Christians were taught that they should become one with each other by their reconciliation with God through faith in Jesus Christ. In the book of Acts, we read about a man from Ethiopia, presumably black, who was among the earliest converts to Christianity (Acts 8:26-39). Through the death of Jesus on the cross, we can all be made one—not by human treaties, laws, color of skin or racial heritage—but by our common faith in Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:14-21; cf. Galatians 3:28). This message of reconciliation to God and to one another as the family of God is the only approach to unity among all people on earth that transforms us from the heart outward. I believe this is the way Jesus wants his followers to promote unity and harmony among the races of the earth. If we would be faithful to Jesus, we must get the message out, “Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight.” If they are precious to Jesus, then they are also precious to his faithful followers.

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