

## **The Church and Racism**

I have lived with racism all of my life. I have lived through Jim Crow, segregation, racial atrocities and dehumanizing injustices; many too vile to write about because pain is still an attendant feature with the memory of them.

I do not profess to be a pundit or, by any stretch of the imagination, an authority on racial issues. But I have lived 73 years in the USA; 23 years in the south (Alabama and Louisiana) and 50 years in the north (Illinois) and so I may know a little something about racism.

This letter is a response to the many questions pastor after pastor has asked me about the recent (and current) events that have sparked and intensified the racial tension in the USA. Yet, it is not my intention in this letter to adjudicate these events. But rather to focus on The Church's response to these events. I am convinced that today's racial climate is an opportunity for The Church to address racism. Furthermore, I am convinced that the Lord calls The Church, His Church, to stand firm against racism and to ultimately promote and advocate for racial reconciliation.

Before offering some of my observations about how The Church can accomplish this task, I need to make a few general remarks that are foundational to this letter.

By definition, racism is abusive and aggressive behavior toward another race believing that one's own race is superior and therefore, has the right to dominate another race which results in racial injustice and racial discrimination. Additionally, institutional racism (aka systemic racism) is a policy, a system of government, etc., based upon or fostering such a doctrine. ([www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)) In other words, it is a form of racism expressed in the practice of social and political institutions. Racism is an everyday occurrence in varying forms, including being unconscious and due to ignorance. Hence, The Church should be careful to make a distinction between an act of racism and racism itself. Racism is also defined as intolerance of another race which expresses itself by attempting to silence any and all opposing views through intimidation. (Note: This even occurs within a race.)

One difficulty in addressing racism in the backdrop of the current civil rights unrest is the conflating of many nuanced issues now being associated with racism (e.g., violent protesting, pillaging stores, arson, police brutality, kneeling during our National Anthem, etc.). As a result, caution should be exercised when responding to a question, understanding that the answer

may well not be applied to the nuance intended, leading to a misinterpretation of the response.

Hence, my observations in this letter are specific to racial tensions between African-Americans and White-Americans. These general remarks are the boundaries and context for the remainder of this letter, the observations made and the steps proposed.

For The Church to stand firm against racism and to ultimately promote and advocate for racial reconciliation, The Church should:

#### Observation #1

Stop defining racism in every act and situation. There was a time when racism was being debated. But today that debate is over. It is an undisputed fact that racism is alive and well. Racism is a thread that runs through the very fabric of the USA. Yet, every act of violence, injustice, bigotry, etc., is not racism and does not make someone a racist. Rather these acts are rooted in the human sin nature expressing itself through selfishness; from the Garden of Eden, to Cain and Abel, to the Tower of Babel and beyond. The Church, therefore, should not follow the trend of the day defining every act as racism and every person committing those acts a racist because The Church understands that the core issue is the human sin nature which is evidenced in the acts of all human beings. (Rom.3:10,23)

#### Observation #2

Stop disregarding racism. While racism is not in every act and situation, when it is present The Church must not disregard it. The Church cannot see racism and then disregard it like it is not a reality. All too often when we (The Church) see racism, when we (The Church) see racial injustices, the response is to look the other way, to cross over to the other side of the street like the priest and the Levite in Luke 10:30-37; or we rationalize about how much better it is for African-Americans today than yesteryear; or we say give it a little more time and things will change. Wrong! The Church must stop disregarding the cancer of racism. If not, it will continue to grow, and fester and metastasize.

#### Observation #3

Stop delaying action. The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) immediately went to the rescue of the injured man who was of a different race. He cared for the man and provided for all of the man's needs. The Good Samaritan did not question the man and then decided that they (he along with the priest and the Levite) should have a dialogue with the man about his situation. No! He took action to help the man. While the church is to be applauded for

having the conversation about racism, the conversation has gone on for too long. In fact, today it seems to me that “having a conversation” is simply a code phrase for lip-service only. It is time to conclude the conversation and stop delaying action.

#### Observation #4

Stop disobeying God about racism. The Church knows the truth that Christ’s atoning death and victorious resurrection (biblical reconciliation) have not only provided spiritual reconciliation (the pathway that leads to sinful, rebellious, unholy human beings having a friendly relationship with the holy God of all creation - 2 Cor.5:19), but Christ’s salvific work has also provided racial reconciliation (the pathway that leads to one race having a friendly relationship with another race such that hostility, discrimination nor injustice any longer exist, Eph.2; Gal.3:28). As one commentator said, “... all the divisions and prejudices that matter so much in the world are abolished in Christ.” (IVP Commentary - BibleGateway.com Gal.3:28,29) All humans are created in the image of God. (Gen.2:26) God does not show favoritism. (Acts 10:34,35) This means that racism is sin; that racism is disobeying God. The Church has to remember that “It is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it.” (Jam. 4:17) CHURCH, stop disobeying God about racism!

#### Observation #5

Start dealing with racism. Christ’s reconciling work at Calvary secured racial reconciliation. According to Dr. John Perkins, a Christian African-American civil rights leader:

“... racial reconciliation needs to be brought back into the Gospel, in the sense that much of the church had previously accepted a state of affairs in which concern for the Gospel didn’t necessitate concern for racial reconciliation.” (From an address at Trinity International University, Oct. 2014).

The Church has the cure for racism: Reconciliation. The Church, therefore, has some work to do to make racial reconciliation a reality. The Church must resolve to start dealing with racism because God has called The Church, His Church, to stand firm against and to effectively deal with racism. This is The Church’s responsibility and obligation. Since the cure for racism is reconciliation, following are some steps to get The Church there. The Church must:

#### Step #1

Resolve to Reclaim and Restore the power (dunamis) and authority (exousia) of The Church. It appears as if The Church has surrendered its power and authority to effectively deal with racism and all of its associated expressions. The events in recent weeks in the USA have revealed, in no uncertain terms, the animosities, the prejudices, the social injustices, and the cancer of racism that continue to fester and to metastasize and plague the USA. No one can deny the extreme difficulties that our country faces. However, The Church should not deny and underestimate the power of the Gospel. Only when the Gospel has changed hearts can and will strife, civil unrest and racial tension in the USA begin to resolve resulting in justice and equality as prescribed in The Declaration of Independence "... that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness...."

### Step #2

Resolve to resist the paranoia. To give a few examples, resist the delusion of African-Americans being inferior and hostile and therefore should be feared. Resist the delusion of White-Americans being right and superior and should be held in higher esteem than African-Americans. Resist the delusion that the actions of some African-Americans are indicative of all African-Americans. Also be aware that each African-American may have a uniquely different understanding of and response to racism based on factors like age, education, socio-economic status, life experiences, geographic area growing up, etc. Resist the delusion that all African-Americans are Democrats. 84% of African-American voters are registered as Democrats.

(<https://www.factcheck.org/2008/04/ncs-african-american-population/>)

For some practical steps on how to resist the paranoia see African-American attorney, author, radio and TV personality Larry Elder at <http://larryelder.warnerbros.com/racism.html>

### Step #3

Resolve to remove the barriers. When the power and authority of The Church have been reclaimed and restored, The Church can begin to remove the barriers that allow racism; barriers like intolerance, cultural traditions, ethnic (segregated) neighborhoods, stereo-typing. A barrier that is gaining momentum is "white-guilt." White-Americans are being challenged (being required, forced) to apologize to African-Americans and ask for forgiveness (to repent) for the sin of slavery and subsequently the sin of racism.

However, a brief perusal of Scripture clarifies that there is only personal judgement and accountability for personal sin. The one who sins is the one

who is held accountable. If a child does right, the child is not held accountable for the father's actions. (Eze.18:1-3;17-20; Deut.24:16) A race does not sin; individuals within a race sin. Therefore, a race cannot be racist, but individuals can be and are. (In Micah 3:1-12, the leaders, individuals were acting unjustly.) If you did not sin against me, then you and I are reconciled; no apology or repentance is necessary. "White-guilt" is a barrier that can come down immediately.

For some ideas on how to remove barriers, visit the website above. Here are a few of my ideas:

- \*have events where African-Americans can interact with the police force in a friendly setting before a contentious situation develops
- \*highlight African-American contributions during Black History Month
- \*partner with an African-American congregation to implement your ideas

#### Step #4

Resolve to get involved. If The Church is to stand firm against racism, The Church must resolve to get involved. This means that believers must get involved in the political arena. It means that believers (The Church) must take action that begins with speaking out against racism. Larry Elder made this point crystal clear when he wrote, "First of all, speak out against racism. Otherwise your silence may be interpreted as tacit approval.... You have the... responsibility, to speak out." Before speaking out, however, be sure to clarify and verify that a specific situation is, in fact, truly racist.

While involvement begins with individually speaking out, there are many civil rights organizations one can align with to have a corporate expression in speaking out. However, be sure that you know the mission statement of the organization you choose, that its actions are consistent with the stated mission, that it affirms the equality of all people, that it advances the cause of social justice and does so in legitimate and legal ways, and that it does not violate any biblical mandate.

I realize that getting involved can be quite intimidating and can create deep fears and paralyzing uncertainty. Yet, we, The Church must resolutely resolve to get involved.

I trust that these observations and steps will motivate The Church to take its rightful place in a world searching for answers. May The Church assume its responsibility and obligation to bring to reality biblical reconciliation, the spiritual and racial reconciliation, for which the Lord Jesus Christ died. This is the only hope for the world.

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