

## **Bradley Initiative for Church and Community**

### **Position Paper**

#### **The Racial and Ethnic Divide**

Early in the twenty-first century, race and ethnicity are still issues that divide the body of Christ. God's position is clear and we have a biblical mandate to deal with this issue. In order to honor this biblical mandate, it is important to understand what constitutes racism and marginalization. It is also important to understand the Church's role as salt and light, and to demonstrate what is possible in the area of people relations when the life-changing power of the Spirit of the Living God is brought to bear.

#### Defining Racism

Webster's Dictionary (Ninth New Collegiate, 1983) defines racism as (1) "a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race;" and (2) "racial prejudice or discrimination." Therefore we can say that a racist is one who believes the first and practices the second.

On the face of it, the majority of those who call themselves Christian would surely agree that racism is sin. There is great disagreement, however, as to what set of actions or attitudes constitute racism. For example, many would agree that denying persons access to public facilities on the basis of race is racism and therefore sinful, but would not agree that denying persons membership to certain organizations on the basis of race or ethnicity is racism and therefore sinful. Furthermore, some would disagree vehemently with the idea of marriage between persons of different races, although denying that they themselves are racist. This problem of definition can only be resolved through reflection on the word of God and being filled with God's Spirit so that we have the mind of God.

It is also noteworthy that many people, who do not think of themselves as racist, are members and/or participants in racist institutions, organizations and structures. As citizens of the United States of America, we should realize that in spite of our noble creeds, our nation was built upon a foundation of privilege and power for the majority group. This privilege and power for the majority group was wrought at the expense of minority groups. Members of these minority groups contributed greatly to the advancement of the nation, but were denied many rights and privileges.

A related issue is marginalization. Marginalization can be defined as "to be excluded from the center." When applied to society, the marginalized are those who are not allowed to be full participants. The marginalized are denied access to health care, are excluded from having voice in power structures (political, economic and social), are victims of unfair and unethical labor practices, and are discriminated against in the job market and in other social, economic and political structures. Marginalization can be based on race, culture, ethnicity and economic stature.

#### Racism in the Church

The fact that discrimination, exclusion and racism exist in the world is no surprise; however the real evil is evident when the Church accepts this oppression as an inevitable result of a fallen world. Even more disturbing is when the Church adopts practices and beliefs that allow it to participate in this social atrocity.

Dealing with racism must be a priority for the Church. Many Church groups have and continue to issue apologies for past positions that were taken on the issues of race and ethnicity that obviously do not agree with God's stated position. A large majority of social analysts and theologians still identify racism as one of the greatest ills of our society. If we are to be the true Church on which God poured out His Spirit, then we cannot live in apathy toward the racial division that exists in our society and in many of our churches. The identity of the Church is centered in this fact: God has graciously created and empowered his Church as a diverse and multicultural body. We have much to offer one another, much to learn from one another, and much to lose if we choose to be exclusive. Is it enough for a local church congregation that has been predominantly of one race to put out the welcome mat and say in effect, "If persons of another race or ethnic group choose to come, we will accept them," or is more required? The answer to the question is that in a society where injustice and marginalization have occurred and where certain quarters of the Church have been supportive of these practices, there is a need to do more. Since the Church has been guilty of deliberate separation and segregation, the Church needs to deliberately set out to correct the problem and repair the damage that has been done to the image of Christ in the world.

Entire denominational groups have been formed in the United States of America simply because members of particular races or ethnic groups were not welcome to worship with and be a part of existing structures. One example of this is the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.), founded by an African American named Richard Allen. The events leading up to the founding of the A.M.E. church are well documented. The following quote is taken from "History of the A.M.E. Church" ([www.amenet.org](http://www.amenet.org)):

The African Methodist Episcopal Church has a unique and glorious history. It is unique in that it is the first major religious denomination in the Western world that had its origin over sociological rather than theological beliefs and differences. The immediate cause of the organization of the A.M.E. Church was the fact that members of the St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia Pa., in 1787 segregated its colored members from its white communicants. The Blacks were sent to the gallery of the Church, to use the venerable Richard Allen's own words. One Sunday as the Africans, as they were called, knelt to pray outside of their segregated area they were actually pulled from their knees and told to go to a place which had been designated for them. This added insult to injury and upon completing their prayer, they went out and formed the Free African Society, and from this Society came two groups: The Episcopalians and the Methodists. The leader of the Methodist group was Richard Allen. Richard Allen desired to implement his conception of freedom of worship and desired to be rid of the humiliation of segregation, especially in church.

This example is typical of the experiences of persons who eventually founded religious groups that were made up of minority citizens. Most denominational groups have similar events in their history. Since there was deliberate exclusion that violated the will of Christ, the Great Head of

the Church, there needs to be deliberate effort to rectify the situation. This deliberate effort needs to be coordinated, taking place on both sides of the divide, so that the barriers that divide us can truly be demolished.

While it is true that most congregations no longer exclude persons from their fellowship on the basis of race or ethnic origin, most congregations still do not reflect the diversity of the populace of their communities. In accordance with the observation of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others, Sunday is still the most segregated day of the week. Why is this? And is this an acceptable state of affairs for the Church of Jesus Christ? The reason why minorities are not flocking to the religious institutions of the majority group is because words of reconciliation are heard, but practice does not necessarily support the spoken message. People must be made to feel that they are truly regarded as equal. Glass ceilings and marginalization in the Church are not acceptable. Also, oppressed groups with unique concerns will never be comfortable in a Church environment that does not recognize their unique challenges and boldly address those challenges from the perspective of the word of God. In his famous Letter from the Birmingham City Jail, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote the following:

"Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection" ([A Testament of Hope](#) - The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., Edited by James M. Washington, copyright 1986, p. 295).

The determination to understand the experiences and feelings of others causes ministry and fellowship to be more challenging; but that is one of the great benefits of the presence of the Spirit of God in the Church. He helps us to do those things that are impossible in our own strength.

There is also a very destructive tendency on the part of the majority group to believe that racial reconciliation in the Church should always involve members of the minority group leaving their own structures and coming to the parallel majority structure. Such presumptuousness denies and minimizes the validity of what God has done in the minority Church community. It is quite probable that in some areas, the minority Church community has struck closer to the heart of God's desire for his Church than the majority group. We need each other and we need to approach each other with an openness on both sides.

When and where injustice exists, the Church has a responsibility to address it from the word of God. The African-American Church tradition has always been one of social activism. This is not an inaccurate use of the Church. We see this very activity in the cases of the Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist, the Apostles, and Jesus himself. All addressed justice as a necessary component of human relationships. The gospel of Jesus Christ is nothing if not social. The gospel addresses the vertical relationship between God and humankind, and the horizontal relationship between humans. In 1 John 4:20-21 (NIV), we find:

"If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother."

In deciding who are our brothers and who are our neighbors, let us remember the teaching of Jesus in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

## The Role of the Church

The role of the Church is to carry on the work of Jesus Christ in the world. Therefore in the matter of race relations as in any other matter, the Church needs to ask, "What would Jesus do?" A careful study of the life of Jesus reveals that he went out of his way to make all people a part of his call to salvation. During his days on earth, he proclaimed the gospel to Israel (the Jews). He let it be known that he was called to minister to the lost house of Israel. While dealing with the lost house of Israel, Jesus dealt with all people that he encountered in Israel, across all lines, walls and barriers. He ate with publicans and sinners and shared the gospel with them. He embraced the Samaritans, who were a mixed race, thought by the Jews to be a worthless people. He ministered to the child of a Syro-Phoenician woman and a member of the household of a Roman centurion. He ignored lines of class and race, even while calling the Israelites to return to God. He did not bow to the social norms of his time. He taught a new ethic of the kingdom that placed the will of God infinitely high above human traditions. The rejection of Christ, by the Jewish nation, opened the door for the gentiles and the in-grafting of those considered foreigners and strangers into the family of God.

The early Church struggled greatly with this issue. As he prepared to ascend back to the throne of God, Jesus instructed his Apostles to go into all of the world and preach the gospel to every person. He did not instruct them to set up separate church groups according to race and class. They would definitely have tended toward that error, but the Holy Spirit led them and guided them to be inclusive with their message and their practice. The early Church at Jerusalem had an opportunity to split over an issue of diversity when the Hellenistic Jews claimed that their widows were being neglected in the daily ministrations in favor of the Hebraic widows (see Acts 6). Instead of splitting or allowing the problem to escalate, the Apostles had the people choose seven men to handle this ministry of the Church. Judging from their names, these seven leaders were largely of the Hellenistic group. This matter of allowing the neglected group to have a share in the leadership of the Church is vastly superior to segregation of the congregation or some other ungodly approach. Peter and John followed Deacon Philip to Samaria and the Holy Spirit came upon the Samaritans just as it had come upon the Church on the Day of Pentecost (see Acts 8). The Apostle Peter had his conception of ethnicity challenged again in the matter of Cornelius, a Roman centurion. Peter was ordered by the Holy Spirit to go and minister to this man and his household. The Spirit came in power to this group of Gentiles also (see Acts 10). Philip's ministry to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8) is yet another example. The Church at Antioch (of Syria) was a racially and ethnically diverse Church. The Apostle Paul was set aside for ministry and sent out from the Church at Antioch. He was used to carry the gospel to many places within the Roman Empire and he established churches that were in this same diverse vein. It should be noted that segregated congregations of Gentiles came about when Paul was persecuted by Jews in particular locales for preaching the inclusive and unadulterated gospel of Jesus Christ. In this, the experience of the church in North America is a remarkable parallel of the experience of the early church.

In spite of its call to be the Kingdom of God among humanity, the Church has often been guilty of bowing to the social norms of the time and place. This is not pleasing to God, but it is definitely not new. In addition to the near misses listed above, Paul recited another instance in

his  
writing to the Galatian churches.

Galatians 2:11-14 (NIV)

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"

In spite of having been instructed by the Holy Spirit and in spite of all of his experience, the Apostle Peter still erred at Antioch. This points out how difficult it is to resist peer pressure in the matter of sin. This particular sin is also very contagious. Once Peter erred, even Barnabas (Paul's one time missionary partner) followed.

This issue is in large part one of moral courage. The Apostle Paul had the moral courage to openly confront another leader of the Church in order to maintain the integrity of the Church. This moral courage is what the Church has lacked that has led to acceptance of the racial and ethnic segregation of the Church. Many leaders who have risen to great heights in the Church have lacked the moral courage to take on this tough issue and have sold out to the popularity that comes from embracing human traditions. Our convictions should be fixed by the word of God; and then we should walk in the courage of those convictions.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once characterized and summarized the feelings of many minority group members as they considered the position of the religious majority group.

"I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. I have looked at her beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlay of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over again I have found myself asking: 'What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? Where were their voices...'" ([A Testament of Hope - The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), Edited by James M. Washington, copyright 1986, p. 299).

We must be ever careful lest the mere ability to bring together large numbers of people and resources, and erect beautiful and large edifices is mistaken for righteousness and godliness. Worldly institutions do no less. With the power of God among us, we should do much more. God absolutely does use flawed individuals and groups. Indeed that is all that he has when it comes to humanity. God continues to move in the Church in spite of the fact that we have mishandled this crucial issue. Rather than continue in error, it is now time to straighten out our crooked paths so that God can get all of the glory that he is due in and through his people.

The role of the Church in this matter is to be salt and light, and to show the world what is possible in the matter of race relations when the life-changing power of the Spirit of the Living God is brought to bear. We should not hang back and allow the world to claim more progress in this area than the Kingdom of our Christ on earth. How shall we explain that to our Master when we stand before his Judgment Seat to receive our rewards? Quoting again from Dr. King's Letter from the Birmingham city jail:

"So here we are moving toward the exit of the twentieth century with a religious community largely adjusted to the status quo, standing as a taillight behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice." (A Testament of Hope - The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., Edited by James M. Washington, copyright 1986, p. 299).

The Church has a responsibility to be right on this issue. The issue of responsibility is tied to the revelation of the Church's identity and character" a sketch of which is seen in Acts 2. Traditional readings of this text have focused on the Spirit's empowering of the Church for mission. However, a reading from the margins may provide additional insight via its method of: (1) identifying with characters in the biblical narrative who are marginal; and (2) listening to interpretation from marginalized readers. Identification with the marginalized in the text begins with the statement that "...God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven" were gathered in Jerusalem (2:5, NIV). The text moves on to give a roll call of immense ethnic diversity, language and culture ("both Jews and converts to Judaism" vv. 9-11). The question then ensues: "What does this mean? (v. 12). Peter answers by first quoting from Joel: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people" (v. 17). Samuel Solivan, a Puerto Rican scholar, comments on the cultural and ethnic mix of the event:

The Good News was that Christ had reconciled us to himself and to one another. No longer would our cultural differences and languages serve as barriers to fellowship. The Holy Spirit did not suspend God's cultural gifts, rather he empowered us to use them wisely and lovingly for the good of all people. Who we are in our diversity is an expression of God's graciousness. Any claim that one culture or racial group is superior to another is a direct assault on the justice and grace of God. We were all created equal and good, for the glory of God. (Cultural Glossalalia in Acts 2: A Theological Reassessment of the Importance of Culture and Language, p. 18).

If we cannot appreciate the diversity of God's creation and desire to tear down the walls that separate us, how can we truly appreciate God?

The Church must strive to stay in touch with God and be His relevant and timely voice in the world. Quoting once again from the writings of Dr. King:

"Yes, I see the Church as the body of Christ. But oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and fear of being nonconformists. There was a time when the church was very powerful. It was during that period when the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days, the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society... Things are different now. The contemporary church is often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the

arch-supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are. But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If the church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club..."

These words that were written so many years ago are still prophetic today.

It is our position that the picture of the Church that we see on the pages of the Bible presents us with a picture of people of diverse backgrounds coming together for the purpose of worship and service directed to Almighty God. Their diversity was a clear testimony of the power of God to rectify the alienation and segregation that sin creates. It should be the aim of God's people everywhere to allow the Spirit of God to duplicate this situation in every Church congregation.