

The Church's Response to Racism

The aftermath from the Trayvon Martin tragedy proves that a new form of racism—one that goes beyond black and white—still lies beneath the surface in America. With the issue more complex than ever, the church remains the only hope for reconciliation.

When Billy Graham was asked several years ago what the greatest social problem in the world was, he answered in one word: *racism*.

It's as true today as then. Though we've seen remarkable progress in America as recent generations have wiped away institutional racism, new racial problems have emerged between not only blacks and whites, but also Hispanics and other minorities. Nothing displayed this more than the heated reaction to the tragic Feb. 26 killing of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Fla., outside Orlando. The case unleashed a firestorm of controversy, media interest, and rallies in Sanford and across the country.

At the time of this writing, much remains unknown about the Martin case and the extent to which racism factored into the tragedy. Yet the aftermath of racially loaded accusations and even hate speech proves that, whether we want to admit it or not, racism is still a serious stronghold in America.

It's also a very personal issue for each of us, and we decided to speak out by jointly authoring this story. In our own ways, we have been fighting racism our entire adult lives. Steve Strang has not only used *Charisma* to fight racism and call for social justice, he's also extensively covered the African-American church for more than two decades. As a pastor and leader in the Washington, D.C., area, Harry R. Jackson Jr. has

articulated Christian positions to the media and government for years, particularly in areas of social reform and racial reconciliation. And Samuel Rodriguez has become a spokesman to the church, media and governmental leaders in his role as head of the National Christian Hispanic Leadership Conference on issues facing the Hispanic community, especially Latino Christians.

We repudiate racism in the strongest of terms. We want there to be justice in the Trayvon Martin case. But the issues run deeper.

As this tragedy unfolds via the conduit of news networks, we must all ask who carries the moral authority to speak into the situation. Do MSNBC, CNN or demagogues with personal agendas that seem to exacerbate, polarize and amplify the voices of anger and hate? Will outsiders continue to stir up racial tension in a small Florida city? Or will the church be an agent of reconciliation and bear witness to what the Bible says we should be during such tumult?

It boils down to a single, key question: *Where is the church amid all this?*

Where Hope Lies

Racism tarnishes the soul of America. The Martin situation once again points the spotlight on a subject matter that many deemed passé in light of the election of an African-American president and the supposed entrance into a post-racial American social landscape.

Yet it shouldn't surprise anyone who understands man's fallen nature when vestiges of racist overtures arise within our communities. For racism isn't a political problem to be solved exclusively by policy but a spiritual violation to be addressed by a Christ-centered church. Racism cannot exist primarily as a hot-button political issue to be exploited by the donkey or the elephant. Racism is first and foremost a sin

to be confronted by the redemptive and reconciliatory work of the Lamb.

Only one entity carries the moral authority to incorporate the Balm of Gilead, the healing and transformative power of reconciliation to situations of racial strife: the church of Jesus Christ.

We believe the time has come for the Bible-believing church to engage in what the apostle Paul deemed “the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18). Followers of Christ must create a firewall against pathetic exploitation of strife and engage in prophetic articulation of peace.

For at the end of day, only the oracles of righteousness can defeat the pathetic with the prophetic. Only the anointed voices of justice can speak into these issues with moral clarity and biblical soundness. Only the followers of Christ carry the anointing to bring good news even into the most difficult circumstances.

... And Where History Speaks

We must not forget that the church has been an agent of change throughout history—and must be one now as well. Slavery in America ended largely through the efforts of white abolitionists, many of them strong Christians who prayed, lobbied, created the Underground Railroad and wrote books such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that forced our young nation to confront the inhumanity and unjustness of slavery.

Across the ocean, Great Britain avoided war when it ended slavery in 1832 throughout the British Empire, largely through the efforts of William Wilberforce, a staunch believer whose principles set him on a lifelong process to abolish slavery (and whose story was told onscreen in the 2006 movie *Amazing Grace*).

The civil rights movement of the last century was

predominantly led by Christian leaders, the most renowned being Martin Luther King Jr. Countless believers—black, white, brown and every shade between—joined King and other ministers in the historic protests to fight for racial equality.

It's also impossible to talk about the church's role in fostering racial reconciliation in America without specifically mentioning the Pentecostal movement. As many historians attest, Pentecostalism has been one of the most significant movements in the U.S. in which African-American culture has impacted the larger culture rather than vice versa. Indeed, Pentecostalism's very roots—beginning with the Azusa Street Revival in 1906, led by African-American preacher William Seymour—express an interracial ethos marked by the exuberant style of worship and preaching steeped in most black churches.

Fifty years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. famously called 11 o'clock on Sunday mornings "the most segregated hour in this nation." While that remains true of many evangelical churches today, Pentecostals continue to lead the way in establishing a more integrated church.

The "Memphis Miracle," named for a 1994 meeting in Memphis, Tenn., serves as a prime example of this. The gathering brought together black Pentecostal leaders with an association of white Pentecostal denominations called the Pentecostal Fellowship of North America (PFNA), which had excluded black denominations from joining since its formation in 1948.

When the black denominations rebuffed invitations 50 years later, white denominational leaders voted to shut down the PFNA and create a new organization, the Pentecostal Charismatic Churches of North America, with an equal number of black and white members on its board and a black leader elected as its first chairman.

Few organizations have closed down to undo a discriminatory

past, and the Memphis Miracle was a remarkable prophetic sign of the role the Spirit-empowered church must play in reconciliation.

Beyond Black and White

Yet the Trayvon Martin case proves reconciliation is not just a black-and-white issue—literally and figuratively.

Only four years ago another 17-year-old black youth was murdered in Los Angeles, a tragedy that received a starkly different reaction. On March 2, 2008, high school senior Jamiel Shaw Jr. was only steps away from his house when two men drove up in a car and asked him if he was in a gang. Before he could respond, he was gunned down.

A talented football player, Shaw had scholarship offers from Stanford University and Rutgers. The man who shot him was Pedro Espinoza, an illegal immigrant and member of a gang with a history of extensive violence against African-Americans. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Espinoza had been released from jail 28 hours before the shooting, after serving time for an earlier gun-related offense.

Why did the nation not mourn Jamiel the way we are mourning Trayvon? Why did his death not spark the media coverage that Trayvon's has garnered? Was it purely because a sense of justice was more immediate, given that Espinoza was arrested days later, while the arrest of Martin's shooter, George Zimmerman, took more than a month and a half? Indeed, many have claimed the Martin case has nothing to do with race and that the media are responsible for stirring up racial tension.

Try telling this to the black and Latino communities, which have dealt with the Pandora's box of emotions opened by both the Jamiel and Trayvon cases—and countless underreported cases between. In recent years, Hispanics have endured xenophobic attacks and nativist rhetoric as the nation continues its debate over immigration reform. Blacks of previous generations

remember all too well a harsher reality, when one of their own could be lynched by whites and law enforcement would look the other way. Those were terrible times in our nation's history, and for many African-Americans, Trayvon's death was the tipping point that solidified their belief that nothing had changed.

We are deeply sympathetic to the outrage felt by African-Americans over this tragedy, but we must point out that this is not our grandparents' world.

Things *have* changed.

When the Trayvon story broke, the media led us to believe that he'd been hunted down like a dog by a skinhead white supremacist gun nut. In reality, Trayvon's killer was part Latino and part white—an emblematic blend of how layered today's racism is, whether found via overt racial profiling or unspoken prejudices. Zimmerman was relatively light-skinned but hardly a wealthy child of white privilege and certainly not a member of a Latino gang known for violence against blacks as Shaw's killer was.

To the degree that race was involved in this crime, its involvement was undoubtedly complex—far too complex for reporters determined to fit the tragedy into their predetermined narrative.

The reality involving blacks and Latinos is, in fact, more complicated than most media members or politicians care to contemplate. For example, several studies have shown that when immigration laws are enforced more strictly, black employment rises. The fact is that many Latino immigrants undercut black wages in lower-skilled jobs. Conversely, government quotas for minority-owned contracting have been shown to discriminate against Latino-owned businesses in favor of black-owned businesses. The Hispanic Chamber of Commerce recently filed a complaint in Milwaukee alleging that they were being punished

for their industry and success. This doesn't even begin to explore the competition for college admissions spots made more complex by racial quotas.

When it comes to crime, Juan Williams rightly pointed out in *The Wall Street Journal* that young black murder victims are far more likely to be killed by other blacks than by members of other races. He correctly calls the entertainment industry to task for perpetuating the stereotype of young black males as violent gangsters. And in fact, it *is* difficult for black crime victims to find justice, whoever their assailants.

The black community clearly has a different set of challenges to face today than it did in the days of lynching, and it will only make progress when those challenges are honestly addressed.

When Believers Respond

That's exactly what many Pentecostal/charismatic leaders of various races have tried to do as the conversation of racism reemerges and the church guides believers and nonbelievers alike toward the ultimate source of reconciliation and healing, Jesus Christ.

Ed Montgomery, an African-American pastor of Abundant Life Cathedral in Houston, preached in March wearing a hoodie to make a statement about racial profiling. Tommy Tenney, a white minister from Louisiana, did the same on what was dubbed nationwide as "Hoodie Sunday."

At Faithful Central Bible Church in Los Angeles, Bishop Kenneth Ulmer hosted a rally a week after the Trayvon Martin shooting. (Coincidentally, an article written months ago about Ulmer appears on p. 52 in this issue.) During the four-hour rally, which included Christian pastors and Muslim leaders, frustration flourished as speaker after speaker recounted other incidences of African-Americans being shot by police officers—including the recent death of a black man at the

hands of Pasadena police—with alleged inadequate expeditious accountability on the part of law enforcement. Chants of “No justice, no peace!” frequently echoed from the audience of more than 1,500 attendees. Ministers such as Ulmer responded by calling for unity among the various religious communities and for a unified stand for justice.

Across the country, Sanford pastors crossed racial and denominational lines to unify and prove the unthinkable: that God could bring good from the Martin tragedy. While the mainstream media spotlighted large outdoor rallies led by national figures such as the Rev. Al Sharpton and Rev. Jesse Jackson, another story was developing—one of hope, healing and reconciliation.

Promise Keepers President Raleigh Washington, who’s been involved in racial reconciliation efforts from Chicago to post-Apartheid South Africa, called the unity among pastors in Sanford “unprecedented” and one of the greatest examples he’s seen of the church fulfilling its John 17 call to “be one.” (For more on this story, [click here](#))

As pastors, Harry Jackson and Samuel Rodriguez are delighted to have blacks and Latinos worshipping side-by-side in our churches; and as a business owner, Steve Strang is proud that his staff is comprised of 43 percent minorities. We’ve each learned on the job that you can’t lump Puerto Ricans in with Mexicans or Guatemalans any more than you can lump Nigerians in with Kenyans, or blacks from the Bronx in with blacks from South Carolina.

Race relations are complicated, far more complicated than the “whites oppressing blacks and others” narrative allows us to appreciate. There is no cheap policy fix for racial ignorance and hatred, and we’ve learned that the only way trust can be built between people of different backgrounds is through meaningful dialogue and authentic relationships.

Yet if the church won't take the lead on establishing this common ground, who will? If believers won't stand up and offer a voice of reconciliation, forgiveness, healing and love, who will?

A cable news network recently commissioned a study on how American children develop their perceptions of race. Researchers found that white children were almost twice as likely as black children to have a negative interpretation of a generic image involving black and white subjects. A racial chasm developed in white children as young as age 6, mainly because their parents did not talk about race at home and, for the most part, maintained a racially homogenous circle of friends.

If the church chooses to remain silent when it comes to racism, we can expect similar results. We *must* speak out and boldly address the issue for the evil it is, and we must combat the spirit of racism with intentional efforts of reconciliation.

This is a spiritual issue far bigger than Trayvon, George, Jamiel or any other case. "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age" (Eph. 6:12). Racism is one of the enemy's primary means on earth to bring division, particularly within the church—and has been for generations. Long after the Trayvon story is forgotten, racism will still be around.

Yet we happen to believe—and are seeing living proof fleshed out across the nation—that the church is the answer and that its response of Christlike love has the power to change this nation. May our voices be heard and an awakening take place, in which all races will come together in the spirit of Revelation 5 to declare: "Blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever!"

And as we come together in unity, may *all* God's people say, "Amen!"

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To watch leaders talk about the church's role in fighting racism·[click here](#).

Covering Race

Since the 1980s, *Charisma* has intentionally crossed racial lines to cover God's diverse church. Here's just a sampling of some of our most memorable covers involving race in America.

