

Tony Evans Urges Racial Reconciliation in Zimmerman Verdict Aftermath

Following the decision of six jurors to acquit George Zimmerman of all charges in the death of Trayvon Martin, several thousand protesters gathered in New York City's Union Square, and Reuters reported demonstrations in major cities on both coasts.

In Sanford, Fla., the town of 50,000 where Martin was shot on Feb. 26, 2012, the anticipated unrest did not materialize, but the tension remains. Valarie Houston, pastor of the Allen Chapel . Church, dedicated the following Sunday morning service to Martin. She prayed, thanking the Lord for sending Trayvon Martin "as a sacrifice for all of us."

Tony Evans, author of *Oneness Embraced*, understands the role of black preachers like Houston in African-American communities. In recent decades, Evans says, "the spiritual has taken a secondary role to the social and the political."

But Evans also contends that the racial problem in America continues to be the reason we are not "one nation under God." And he asserts that "the fundamental cause of racial problems in America lies squarely within the church's failure to come to grips with this issue from a biblical perspective."

"Our failure to respond to this issue of biblical oneness," says Evans, "has allowed what never should have been a problem in the first place to continue for hundreds of years."

Oneness Embraced, says Evans, is his "humble attempt to address the matter of the church, oneness and social justice from an overtly biblical perspective."

Many may be familiar with Evans through his radio program *The Alternative View*, which now reaches people in over 130 nations on more than 1,000 radio outlets. In 1985, however, as Evans was starting his radio ministry, a number of major Christian radio station managers told him there was no place for blacks in the general Christian broadcast media because his presence “would offend their white listeners.”

Evans was the first African-American to earn a doctoral degree from Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS). As a seminary student, he was told he was not welcome to worship at a prominent Bible church in Dallas. Since then, Evans has taught evangelism, homiletics and black church studies at DTS. His church, Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship in Dallas, where he has been senior pastor for more than 35 years, now has close to 10,000 congregants and more than 100 ministries.

Permeating Evans’ writing and speaking is his belief that God’s “comprehensive rule over every sphere of life” should be carried out through the individuals, families, churches and in every sector of society. This, according to Evans, is God’s “kingdom agenda.” As born-again believers, we have a citizenship that transcends our national citizenship—we are citizens of God’s kingdom, and that, Evans says, is where our primary allegiance should be.

This is the context for Evans’ challenge to the church to “embrace oneness” in Jesus Christ. If we are spiritually one in Christ, we should be able to rise above the cultural differences that separate us. Evans believes that is the only true path to biblical racial reconciliation. But it needs to start by confessing the sins that have caused the divide and addressing them within the church. Then those who share a commitment to Jesus Christ can bond together across racial lines with the higher goal of kingdom service to others.

Practically speaking, says Evans, this starts as we develop intentional relationships with those fellow believers who are

from different cultures and backgrounds than our own.

Ever since Christ commanded His disciples to be his witnesses “to the end of the earth,” the church has been the most diverse institution on earth. But even the first-century church struggled to reflect that oneness in Christ. In Acts 6, we read that the Hellenist Christians in Jerusalem claimed that their widows “were neglected in the daily distribution.”

Later, Paul had to address this issue in two of his epistles. Paul reminded the Galatians that inside the church, there is “neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

Writing to the Colossians, Paul reiterated this truth: “Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:11). Paul reminded the believers that not only should there be no divisions based on social status (slave, free) or religious background (Greek, Jew), but he also very pointedly identified other cultural differences that might divide them.

Some in the church could have been barbarians—that is, non-Greek in culture. Some could have been Scythians, which was worse. We think barbarians are uncivilized—think of the word *barbaric*. But in comparison to the Scythians, they were like the Greeks or even the circumcised. Scythians were an ethnic group that lived on the north side of the Black Sea and were considered to be the most violent, uneducated and uncivilized people known to the Greeks of that region. Yet Paul told the Colossians that none of these differences mattered: “Christ is all, and in all.”

In His high priestly prayer recorded in John 17, Jesus prayed for unity and oneness among those who would believe in Him in the future: “And the glory which You gave Me I have given

them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me: that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me" (vv. 22-23).

This was Jesus' prayer for us—and for all those who confess the name of Jesus, regardless of ethnic background or racial origins.