

TRUE RECONCILIATION

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What Is Christian Reconciliation?

After the American Civil Rights Movement and the fall of South African Apartheid, many Western Christians (mostly from the Protestant tradition) began to see the need for addressing racial issues. They also saw this need as Western society was becoming more diverse, and Churches that were homogenous were facing a new context of ministry. Their communities had been transformed through new groups with different customs and languages, and they had to cross traditional lines to be relevant and effective in outreach. Furthermore, they could no longer worship or segregate services along ethnic lines, and many Christians felt a growing call to live out the words of the Apostle John. In Revelation 7:9 he says:

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. (NRSV)

As their contexts of ministry became more diverse, Western Christians felt the call to be reconciled across ethnic lines. This call was also felt on a denominational level, and there were public confessions from Church leaders for past wrongs when it came to race.¹ So for example:

*In 1994 the Assemblies of God released its *Racial Reconciliation Manifesto*, where they apologized for separating from the Church of God in Christ (a Black denomination) because of race.²

*In 2004 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, now the World Communion of Reformed Churches, adopted the *Accra Confession* which rejected racial injustice.³

*In 2007 the Reformed Church in America adopted the *Belhar Confession* which rejects racial and social segregation. This confession was written in 1982 by the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa as an act of protest against Apartheid.⁴

Following these public confessions, congregations began to partner across ethnic lines and committed to work together to end historic racial divisions. This partnership became known as *Christian Reconciliation*, which is a movement to unite followers of Jesus as one people with all of their differences.

In short, Christian Reconciliation is a call to repentance from racism⁵, and for the Church to be that great multitude that the Apostle John saw in the book of Revelation. It is also a call to desegregate Sunday worship, and to build multi-ethnic Churches that demonstrate harmony and bring healing to society.

¹ Anthony J. Carter, *On Being Black and Reformed*, 105-107

² Carter, *ibid*, 108

³ World Communion of Reformed Churches, *The Accra Confession*, <https://wrc.ch/accra/the-accra-confession>

⁴ Reformed Church in American, *The Belhar Confession*, <https://www.rca.org/about/theology/creeds-and-confessions/the-belhar-confession/>

⁵ The word racism here is used in a general sense, and is not a reference to a specific type of racism (e.g, systemic).

Where Did Christian Reconciliation Fail?

Despite its great achievements, a number of scholars have found that Christian Reconciliation has failed. One such scholar is the Rev. Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes of Columbia Theological Seminary who recently talked about Christians of color leaving White Churches en masse. This leaving is called “The Quiet Exodus”, and she had this to say about it:

“We [Christians of Color] were willing to give up our preferred worship style for the chance to really try to live this vision of beloved community with a diverse group of people....That didn’t work.”⁶

In addition to the Quiet Exodus, there is the “Leave Loud Campaign” in the United States that is led by Dr. Jemar Tisby. This campaign encourages Christians of Color to not leave quietly, but to share their stories as they walk away from White Christian spaces. These stories can be heard on Tisby’s podcast called, “Pass the Mic”, and they echo a sense of burnout and disillusionment with the work of reconciliation. While addressing Black Christians, Tisby had this to say:

If you are Black in these spaces you will either get pushed out, burned out, or sell out.⁷

To be clear, those like Tisby and Walker-Barnes are not seeking to belittle White Christians, or to encourage more racial segregation in the Church. Instead, they are showing how Christian Reconciliation has failed, and are calling for it to be rethought that racism might be properly addressed.

During my time in the Christian Reconciliation movement (from 2005 to 2016) I personally experienced its problems and, for the sake of time, I am going to present three of them that I found to be quite common. These problems are *Forgiveness Without Liberation*, *Missing Theological Voices*, and *Worship Over Fellowship*.

1. FORGIVENESS WITHOUT LIBERATION

As public confessions were made, like the ones mentioned earlier, Christian Reconciliation often stopped at showing forgiveness. This resulted in racism being seen as a spiritual or heart issue, and the solution was to apologize (to God and people) and be pardoned. But as the late Rev. Dr. James Cone pointed out, racism is also a social and systemic issue, and its effects are felt in the daily lives of people beyond the worship place. Therefore, its solution requires liberation which is freeing people from works of oppression through works of justice.⁸

While strongly preaching forgiveness many supporters of Christian Reconciliation failed to equally preach liberation, and this made the movement unable to bring substantial change within Churches and heal the systemic wounds of racism in society. There was also the belief among some people that forgiveness was liberation, and anything beyond accepting apologies was unnecessary. As a result, the work of Christian Reconciliation remained within sacred spaces and stayed “Christian to Christian”, and it did not transfer into the world and touch the daily lives of people (Christian and non-Christian) who experience racism in secular spaces.⁹

⁶ Campbell Robertson, “A Quiet Exodus: Why Black Worshipers Are Leaving White Evangelical Churches,” *New York Times*, March, 9, 2018 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/09/us/blacks-evangelical-churches.html>

⁷ Jemar Tisby, “Leave LOUD- Jemar Tisby’s Story,” interview by Tyler Burns, *Pass the Mic*, Podcast, March 8, 2021, audio, https://thewitnessbcc.com/leave-loud-jemar-tisbys-story/?fbclid=IwAR2zb1Wmx_W8qljDb5VU8dOvKi7v7ZDDTWREcDeiNasBU2-2U6eNAWRzEfg.

⁸ James H. Cone, *Theology and Revolution*, pg. 6-9

⁹ The Bible makes calls for this transference in passages such as Isaiah 1:11-17.

2. MISSING THEOLOGICAL VOICES

Much of Christian Reconciliation's theological grounding came from White and European voices of the Western Church tradition, and furthermore as Chanequa Walker-Barnes states, male voices of the Western Church tradition.¹⁰ While engaging racial issues the movement often invoked names such as Martin Luther or Jean Vanier, but the names of female theologians and theologians of Color were given little to no mention (their validity was sometimes questioned). There was also the constant mentioning of "comfortable" voices of Color, such as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. whose message has been stripped and sanitized of its radical elements.

Though there is nothing wrong with White and European male voices, which are important and needed, female voices and voices of Color are equally important and needed. A lack of these voices kept Christian Reconciliation from powerful resources that could greatly enrich its discourse on racism and its engagement with racial issues. In short, though the movement called for diversity, its theological grounding was not diverse and was Western in scope. Because of this Christian Reconciliation was unable to address areas where racism and other issues intersect (e.g., racism and healthcare for women of Color) and non-Western issues (e.g., the exclusion of Somali Bantus).

3. WORSHIP WITHOUT FELLOWSHIP

One emphasis of Christian Reconciliation was Churches becoming the multitude of Revelation 7:9, and this led to multi-ethnic Churches that focused on worship. In these Churches one could find flags from many nations and people of different Colors singing songs in different languages. One could also find a staff with multi-ethnic clergy, often led by a White senior pastor or a majority White Council, but their role was not to be a prophetic voice that spoke out against injustice. Instead, their presence was meant to help a collective imitation of John's vision, and to lead different groups in services that praise the name of Jesus. To be clear, there is nothing wrong with having such services, but being multi-ethnic does not create a reconciling community. I often say that just as having different flavors of ice cream does not make a grocery store an ice cream shop, having multi-ethnic worship does not make a Church a reconciling community.

What creates a reconciling community is the active pursuit of justice, which leads to liberation within and beyond the sanctuary. Dr. Cornel West defines justice as "what love looks like in public"¹¹, and without a pursuit of justice Christian Reconciliation failed at showing love to the world. It also failed to see why the great multitude praises Christ in Revelation 7:9, and it is because they have been delivered or liberated from the brokenness of the world. Salvation is more than simply saving the soul from sin it is also saving people from the physical manifestations of sin which include unjust systems. And when Churches, be they multi-ethnic or homogenous, seek justice as they worship, they proclaim God's love and give the world a reason to praise the name of Jesus.

How Can the Church Have True Reconciliation?

Because the work of reconciliation is ongoing there is no simple answer to this question, but in light of what I have presented today, here are my thoughts. We can only have true reconciliation by seeking liberation, and we need not be in multi-ethnic Churches with lots of cultures to do it. Furthermore, liberation will not be the same in every context, and it must go beyond the sanctuary, touch daily living, and be driven by integral voices that are often ignored. One

¹⁰ Chanequa Walker-Barnes, "Until All of Us Are Free How Racial Reconciliation Fails Black Women," hosted by Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, July 31, 2018, public lecture, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FxNB3W9I6n4>.

¹¹ Tobias Endler, *After 9/11*, pg. 189

example of this is Glenn Roberts who lives in South Carolina and owns a company called *Anson Mills* that grows golden rice.

In this region of the United States, there were a number of plantations with slaves that supplied rice to the empires of Europe and made great profits during the colonial era. Many descendants of the plantations' slaves live near Anson Mills, and some of them still work the fields that their ancestors worked long ago. The reality of this harsh history moved Roberts to take action, and he decided to seek liberation by acknowledging the wrongs of planters before him. He also dialogs with voices calling for justice and gives golden rice seeds to anyone who asks while teaching about his industry. During interviews he often says (I am paraphrasing him):

This rice does not belong to me. It belongs to the Africans, from Senegal, Mali, Gambia, that were enslaved to work Southern fields for profit.¹²

Of course, there is much more that Roberts still needs to do, but his work has fostered true reconciliation that touches the daily lives of others, heals their wounds from racism, and sets them free with works of love. Cornel West defines love as “a steadfast commitment to the well-being of others”¹³, and one can see this commitment as Roberts seeks to right the wrongs of the past.

And I pray that it would be same for all Churches and all Christians. May we, in our worship and fellowship together foster a true reconciliation that touches the daily lives of others, heals the wounds from racism, and brings freedom with works of love. And may we never close our ears and hearts to the many integral voices that call us out when fail to do this. May we have an open spirit that seeks to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God¹⁴, and become that great multitude that the world needs now and is longing for us to be.

¹² *High on the Hog: The Rice Kingdom*, Directed by Roger R. Williams, Netflix, 2021

¹³ Endler, *ibid*

¹⁴ This is called the “Biblical Injunction”, and can be found in Micah 6:8