

# Priscilla Papers



"Priscilla and Aquila instructed Apollos more perfectly in the way of the Lord"

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## A MORE EXCELLENT WAY

### RACE AND GENDER RECONCILIATION THROUGH CHRIST

Brenda Salter McNeil

I am from Chicago where a white supremacist shooter went on a rampage in July of 1999. He killed Ricky Birdsong, a friend and a member of my church, whom we called Coach. Coach was loving, jovial, very committed to reconciliation, and deeply devoted to his family. He lived in an affluent neighborhood and he was doing great work with his life. Coach was walking home from the playground with his two kids. The white supremacist had just shot at five Jewish people in the neighborhood where I used to live, and then drove to another Jewish neighborhood. My guess is he went looking for a Jewish person, just happened to see my friend Coach walking down the street with his kids, and decided a black man would do.

None of the other victims died, and I could not understand when I was told that Coach hadn't made it. I knew I would have a hard time making sense of a senseless situation, but then I read the obituary written by Ricky's wife:

The violent act that took my husband's life is yet another clarion call to our nation. It is time to wake up America. God is crying out to us the words of Ephesians 5:14—"Wake up old sleeper and arise from your sleep and Christ will shine upon you and give you light." God is giving us yet another wake-up call. Wake up America! It is time to turn back to God, to read and obey his word, to put prayer and the Bible back into our schools and daily family living. Listen, this is not a gun problem, this is a heart problem, and only God and reading his Word can change our hearts.

I agree that violence is a heart problem and that only God can change our hearts. I further believe that God has entrusted to his people the message of reconciliation. At Coach's funeral I wanted to be bitter, but my church, which is called The Worship Center, has a reputation to uphold. I was having a hard time worshipping because I really wanted

to go into the depth of my grief. Yet as I watched Ricky's wife and others worship God, I witnessed a testimony to the Gospel. When reporters asked what we thought and how we felt, one after another answered that we would not allow hatred and evil to overcome the love of Christ. Non-believers watched a grieving community exalt Jesus and left the funeral stunned, wondering what kind of God stands people up straight, keeps them from hate and causes evil to be overcome by good. I left the funeral and said, "God, recommit me again to the ministry of reconciliation and help me not just to talk about it but help me to help your people know what it looks like."

Second Corinthians 5 says that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, so whenever we look at Jesus we are looking at *the* model of reconciliation. By looking at the life of Jesus, the one who came to reconcile the world to himself, we can extrapolate several principles and requirements for reconciliation. One of my favorite stories demonstrating these principles of reconciliation is that of Jesus and a Samaritan woman.

#### A GOD-IDEA

*Now he had to come through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. John 4:4-5*

John says that Jesus *had* to go through Samaria. Is that geographically true? No, Jesus did not have to go through Samaria either politically, geographically, or socially. So why does the text say he had to go? No other self-respecting Jew had to go. In fact, every other Jew avoided Samaria, taking the long way around. It was a neighborhood through which one dared not travel. It was socially unacceptable for Samaritans and Jews to associate. In fact, even if a Samaritan's shadow crossed a Jew's shadow, the Jew was made unclean.

This racial hatred was deep, the same kind of racial hatred that possessed the man who shot my friend Coach. God had given a law in the Old Testament that Jews were not to intermarry. Samaritans were the result of intermarriage between the Israelites left behind when the northern kingdom was conquered and colonized, and Gentiles brought there by the Assyrians. Samaritans were a half-breed, bi-racial people. Just looking at them made the untainted Jews feel justified in their racism. As the years went by the divisions grew greater.

So why did Jesus *have* to go to Samaria? The first thing required for reconciliation across any line—gender, race, denomination, or political affiliation—is a *divine mandate*. Reconciliation begins not with a *good* idea but with a *God* idea. It begins with something inside of you that says *you* have to do what your peers and your contemporaries don't have to do. Reconciliation starts with God and not with you. When we hear the truth, we must bear witness to it, for there will be a day when people will be hard pressed to find a witness. Today it takes courage to be involved in the ministries to which we are called, and it takes courage to stand up and bear witness.

## ARE WE THIRSTY?

*"You don't have a bucket and the well is deep." John 4:11*

A second requirement of reconciliation is *real need*. John 4:6 says that Jesus sat down by a well, tired. The woman's observation in verse 11 was sarcastic, though accurate: "You don't have a bucket and the well is deep." Jesus had walked a far distance and it was the sixth hour, twelve o'clock noon. The sun was hot and it was a desert climate. He sat down by a well and he really *was* thirsty. So when a woman came to the well and he asked her for a drink of water, he wasn't just making idle conversation.

Sometimes when it comes to reconciliation we don't really *need* the other person, so the best we can do is have conversations based on curiosity. When I go and speak in other places, folks will ask, "How can we get more Latino people to come to our group? How can we get more Filipinos in our group?" Generally, I'll stop and say, "Tell me why you need them. What would make your group better because they are there?"

Part of what happens is that we believe that we *ought* to have folks, so we go out there to get us some! But I can tell when I am really needed because I change things. When I am just nice to have around, nothing is going to change as

a result of my being there. To know that I am not only nice but also *necessary* means that my worldview is taken into account when decisions are made and things are done.

We don't generally change our constructs—instead we try to make others fit into our constructs. We say, "It's nice to have you, but you'll have to accommodate, assimilate, become like us, because your ideas are nice but not necessary." When something is necessary, I am willing to make whatever changes I have to make because I am *thirsty*. I don't think we're thirsty enough yet for reconciliation as a church.

I attended Fuller seminary and it was one of the best experiences of my life. But I know if all the black people had pulled out while I was there, Fuller would not have closed down. Not a thing would have changed in the curriculum, in the financial aid office, or with the faculty. I had some wonderful experiences and people liked me. But I also know that I was not *needed* in a way that would make the whole organization have to adjust to my presence or lack thereof. How much do we really *need* people who are different?

I am sensing a real need in CBE and I am praying that the need grows because when the thirst gets greater, we'll do the things we have to do and make the adjustments we have to make. We *are* really thirsty, it *is* really hot and that person really *does* have the water we need to drink!

## GOING TO SAMARIA

*Jacob's well was there and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. John 4:6*

Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman was quite intentional. Jesus sat down by a well in Samaria. Women drew the water. Chances were great that if he sat there long enough he would meet a Samaritan woman. So Jesus intentionally put himself in a situation where he would interact with someone different from himself.

The third requirement of reconciliation is *intentionality*. Often we desire reconciliation, but we want it on our turf. We will welcome folks if they come to *our* group, *our* conference, *our* party or *our* church. But Jesus stands that notion on its head. He didn't invite the outsiders to his conference and he didn't get them to come to his church or even his neighborhood. *He went to Samaria*. He went where nobody else would go, where it wasn't politically correct to go. He intentionally placed himself in a neighborhood where he knew he would meet someone different. I suggest that if

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we really want to take reconciliation seriously, then we must find the Samaria near where we live and make a conscious decision to go there.

## A RISKY BUSINESS

*This Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink, for Jews do not associate with Samaritans?" John 4:9*

*Risk-taking* is the fourth requirement of reconciliation. It is a difficult thing to put yourself in a place where you are going to meet people who are different from you, where you don't know the language, where you are not the head honcho, where your cultural norms are not those everyone else observes. It is risky business to pursue reconciliation. I wish I could tell you that everyone you met in Samaria was going to be happy to see you, that they were going to kiss you and smile and be *so* glad. I wish I could tell you that nobody is going to curse you in Samaria. I wish I could tell you it would be safe and comfortable every time you try to bridge a gap and cross over a void, but those of us who take it seriously understand that it's a risk.

Jewish laws about Samaritans and about women caused their self-esteem to be extremely low. One of these laws was that Samaritan women menstruated perpetually and were therefore perpetually, ritually unclean.

Imagine living in a society where people thought of you as dirty and defiled every single day of your life, 7 days a week, 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year, from the time you were a child until you were an old gray-haired woman. Never could someone else drink from your cup. Never could someone else sit on something you had sat on. Never could your skirt brush against someone without defiling them. Can you imagine what that must do to a person's sense of worth?

That is the situation of the woman in John 4, and Jesus represents the people who have made that decree about her. He is male, he is Jewish, he is all those things that have said to her: dirty, filthy, vile. And now he is in *her* neighborhood, sitting at *her* well, asking *her* for water. The Samaritan woman could have put her hand on her hip, noticed that nobody else was looking, spit in her little bucket and said to Jesus, "How dare you, Jew boy, come up in my neighborhood demanding something! You and your people always think you can get whatever you want."

Today, somebody might not like you coming in their neighborhood and they might not rise up and call you blessed. It may not even be your fault because it might not have been something you did, but what the people you come from represent. Sometimes we get the hurt of hurt people. If you are a minority in a society that discriminates against you, you are a hurt person and sometimes you take that hurt out on people who don't deserve to be hurt.

Perhaps you have gone someplace to volunteer and the kids didn't treat you right, the people didn't think you were wonderful, or called you "white," or questioned your motives, or worse. I remember once I was in Londale, a community in Chicago. I was hanging out with college students and when I left, all four of my hubcaps had been stolen. I looked around and thought, "Now that ain't right! I'm a sister—you're not supposed to steal my hubcaps!" There are times that sin does not discriminate and just because you love Jesus doesn't mean bad things won't happen to you. Ask my friend Coach.

## JUST YOU AND ME

*His disciples had gone into the town to buy food. John 4:8*

Fifth, reconciliation is best achieved *one on one*. John says Jesus' disciples had gone into town to buy food. I think Jesus was strategic in waiting until they were gone, because when they came back they "were surprised to find him talking with the woman, but no one asked what do you want or why are you

talking with her."

The Pharisees had already heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John. They were already questioning whether Jesus was a real rabbi or not, and now he was sitting in Samaria, at a well, with a woman. The disciples were probably thinking, "Bad move. Not good for the theological circle, and you are not going to get respect. They are going to debunk you. They are not going to be pleased with this. Rabbis don't talk to women. Jesus, you're messing up here. Why are you talking to *her*?"

Sometimes it is better not to try reconciliation in a big group or when you are with your church. Those events we do where the whole church goes over to fellowship with the First and Second Baptists are nice, but real reconciliation won't happen that way. Don't confuse fellowship with reconciliation. Reconciliation is when two people meet eye to eye when other folks are not around.

Something happens in a crowd—there is a certain censure that comes when you are with people you know

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even though you are trying to be yourself. Something happens when you feel the disapproving looks behind the back of your head. You can sense when people are saying, “That’s not good, my friend. It’s not a wise move for you to do that.” There are people in your church who would advise you against going into Samaria because they would want you to be safe.

My mother, bless her heart, was very upset when I accepted my call to ministry. Not because she didn’t believe in ministry—she wanted me to preach all over the place just so long as it was near Trenton, New Jersey. When I decided that a seminary 3,000 miles away was my next move, she was not a happy woman.

There will be some things that Jesus will call you to do in reconciliation that might take you away from people who are trying to protect you. You might have to decide that this is an individual decision that calls for an individual commitment. You might want to try reconciliation with one other person with whom you can make a covenant. Reconciliation is best achieved one on one. Try putting a person at ease in your presence where you can be honest and vulnerable and they won’t have to feel the stares of the people who come with you.

## RELINQUISHING POWER

*When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” John 4:7*

A sixth requirement of reconciliation is a *power exchange*. I believe that this is the “standstill place” of the church.

Jesus approached the relationship with the Samaritan woman with all the cards on his side. He was male, he was Jewish, he was a Rabbi. He came with knowledge, a certain amount of affluence, friends, and the privilege afforded to him as a result of being part of the dominant culture.

The woman had been divorced from five different husbands. Keep in mind that women didn’t divorce men—men divorced women. So five times she had been rejected. Five times a man said to her, “I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you.” It is no wonder that she was living with someone—perhaps she didn’t believe that anybody would marry her again.

Jesus comes with power on his side. The Samaritan woman comes with no power except the right to refuse. Jesus asks her, “Will you give me a drink of water?” Helping seems to be such a humble thing to do, yet it is even more humbling to be the one who is helped. *The helper has more power.*



The number one question I am asked when I travel the country speaking on reconciliation is, “What can I do?” This question doesn’t come out of a sinful heart. It comes out of a heart that really wants to do something. But it is a powerful question because it assumes there is something you can do to help.

Jesus doesn’t start as the helper. He comes to the relationship with a woman who is clearly inferior to him, socially. He comes with the power on his side. But instead of saying right away, “I’m so glad you came to the well, I knew you were coming, you’ve been married five times,” Jesus waited. He held back the Messiah card and the prophet card and said to the woman, “All you know about me is that I’m a thirsty man without a bucket and I need your help.” In his one question he changed the power dynamic—he made her the helper and he became the recipient.

I don’t believe there are enough people willing to receive in the church. Most of us want to be the helper. Most of us assume we can help. Jesus decreased his own power and he empowered the woman, putting them on equal footing so they saw eye to eye. She could have said, “No, I will not give you water.” She was given the power to make a decision.

I believe reconciliation will not happen unless people who have power give some up. People who are powerless are empowered when they see themselves as mutual in a relationship. When is the last time you have been in a relationship with someone that society says is inferior to you and you have put yourself in their debt because they had something they could give you? There is somebody without a high school education that could teach you something. There is somebody who knows more about raising kids than you do. But we don’t sit ourselves under those we don’t respect.

A power exchange in the church would mean that when a brother from a different race comes to lead worship, we don’t just tolerate him. Instead, we let him take us into the very presence of God. We let go enough to say, “Teach us how to worship. There is something God is doing in your life. I don’t know how to do it and so you are not just entertaining me, you are not merely a prelude to the speaker. Those who worship God must do so in spirit and in truth. I don’t know how to fully engage God like that, but take me behind the veil. I am a baby, but would you slowly show me how to go into a deeper place with God? I will follow your instruction even if it makes me feel uncomfortable.”

Organizational structures would change because different people would be included in the group. We might even step back and say to someone unlike us, “You run it.” That is risky and scary and we don’t like it because we want to do it exactly the way we planned it. But if we truly need what someone else has to offer, then we are willing to let go and allow change to happen.

## GOD'S PUZZLE

*Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." John 4:10*

After Jesus asks the Samaritan woman for help, he doesn't go into the "I'm so sorry I am a Jewish man... Please forgive me for being Jewish... I wish I were born another race..." thing. Neither does he say, "I didn't do anything to you, so just get over it." Reconciliation is *mutually affirming and empowering*.

Jesus doesn't apologize or defend. Instead, he says to the woman, "If you knew who this was and what I have to offer, you would ask me and I would give you living water." I believe that every single person, male and female, because of our differences, has a unique piece of the puzzle of God. We do not do the conversation of reconciliation any justice by going into "Poor me, I am so sorry." It is self-serving navel-gazing and it is not helpful.

We need enough courage to say, "If you would like, I have something I would love to offer you." For example, I was helped through InterVarsity Christian fellowship. I am so glad they didn't say to me, "We don't have anything to offer you, Brenda. You're just so gifted and so wonderful." Instead they said to me, "We do a thing called manuscript study and we would love to show you how we do that." In doing so, they enriched my study of Scripture.

Reconciliation brings all pieces of the puzzle to the table. You don't do anyone a service if you take your piece away.

## THE BLESSERS

*Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, "Come see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" John 4:28-29*

Finally, reconciliation requires people who serve as *bridge builders* to their community. The Samaritan woman goes back to her people and says to them, "Come see a man who told me everything I ever did. Do you think this guy could be who he says he is?"

Reconciliation needs blessers, folks who say to the people they represent, "I think you should hear her out, even though she doesn't do it our way." We need a blesser who says, "I think God is using her and I think there is something you might need to hear her say." And if you came to Samaria you might need a person to say, "He is really a nice guy. I know you'd never be able to tell by looking at him, but he has a heart of gold."

The movie *Do the Right Thing* is about one of those changing communities in New York where everyone is black except for one Italian pizzeria owner and his two sons. The father wanted to move but couldn't afford to.

One son absolutely hated being there and every day he asked, "Why don't you sell this place?" The other son, Vinnie, decided to get down with the people, so he started hanging out with Mookie, who delivered pizzas for Vinnie's father.

One day Mookie and Vinnie were walking down the street when three black guys came toward them. "Yo, Mollie man, what you doin' with this white boy?" Mookie said, "Man, don't bother him, he's down." One guy's name was Buggin Out, and he said, "No man! What you doin' walking down our street? You don't be with him, he needs to go back, man." (When you don't have much, even your street feels like your property, so you're trying to claim your territory.) Mookie said, "Buggin Out, look man, don't mess with Vinnie because he's down."

In that moment Mookie became a blesser. What Mookie was saying to Buggin Out was, "I can't vouch for every white person but I can vouch for Vinnie. Don't mess with him because this brother's authentic. Don't bug him because this man is who he says he is. Don't bother him and lump him in with all white people because I have tested his heart, I've seen who he is. You can trust this guy and he's worthy to be in our neighborhood."

May it be that when someone says to me, "What are you doing over here talking about reconciliation?," somebody would stand up to my defense and say, "Yo man, don't bother her, she's down!"

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*This article is adapted from Brenda Salter McNeil's plenary address at CBE's 1999 International Conference. Brenda holds degrees from Rutgers University and Fuller Theological Seminary. She currently serves on the staff of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, and she is founder and President of Overflow Ministries, Inc.*



# WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

Spencer Perkins

*Stripped of all the theological debates and boiled down to its raw essence, Christianity and Christians will be judged by two actions: how much we love God and how well we demonstrate that by loving our neighbor. This is Christianity in a nutshell. But pushing these two great commands to the back pages of our practical theology has allowed Christians to join in with the world in separating along racial lines.*

*A clearer understanding of the priority these two commandments deserve should have us scrambling to figure out creative ways to demonstrate our love for one another. Understanding Jesus' definition of "neighbor" should motivate us to show special love to those who don't love us. Growing up in Mississippi made the "neighbor" application very simple for me: I needed to accept the fact that God intended me to love even "white folks." Until Christians can admit to the importance Jesus put on loving our neighbor—until we can admit that not to do so weakens our gospel—it's unlikely that we will go out of our way to "prove neighbor." Instead, we will continue to pass by on the other side.*

One of the oldest strategies of warfare is to *divide and conquer*. Once you have isolated your enemy, you have robbed him of his strength. Then you can do just about whatever you please with him.

Christians have used a strategy similar to this in our attempts to deal with the hard teachings of Jesus. We have separated basic principles of Scripture that God never intended to be separated, consequently robbing them of their intended power.

The Bible is divided into two broad categories: people and their relationship to God, and people and their relationships to other people. Everything in Scripture falls under one or the other of these broad categories. In the third chapter of Genesis, man and woman broke their relationship with God by disobeying him and eating the fruit. In Genesis 4 we broke with each other when Cain killed his brother Abel. The rest of the Bible is a record of God's attempts to reconcile the human race back to himself and to reconcile us to each other.

If you had to sum up in one word the point God has been trying to communicate to the human race throughout history, that word could very easily be *reconciliation*. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:18-19, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them."

Once Jesus was approached by a religious lawyer who wanted him to separate the two basic thrusts of the gospel (Mt 22:34-40). He challenged Jesus, "Which is the great commandment in the law?" Notice that this lawyer was looking for *one* commandment. If the two could be separated, this would have been the time to do it. This was Jesus' opportunity to say once and for all what the point of Jewish religion was.

The first part of Jesus' response was expected. "Love the lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment." We have a tendency to want to stop here. We hear many sermons that concentrate on this one commandment. But Jesus did not stop here. Jesus says you can't reduce the gospel to just "me and God." There is a second commandment and it is like the first: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Then Jesus goes on to make what must be one of the most overlooked statements in Scripture: "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." Under these two categories falls everything that was taught by Moses and the prophets, and everything that Jesus taught, and everything that was taught by his disciples. Boiling it all down to its raw essence, what God wants is for us to love him and love our neighbor.

As I grew up, my parents tended to look at Jesus' teachings and try to live them—literally. By the time I was in elementary school, I could quote several dozen Bible verses, such as "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Lk 6:31); "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. This is my command: love each other" (Jn 14:23; 15:17); "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" (1 Jn 4:20). All these verses I could quote from memory, but our unsophisticated understanding of these Scriptures created a quandary for me.

I compared what I saw in the Bible to the reality we blacks lived under in small-town Mississippi. And at a very early age I concluded that it was impossible to be a white Southerner and a Christian. Not because I understood all the different theologies and interpretations of Scripture, and not because we had some special kind of black theology,

but because of what I read in the Bible. Since I saw in the Scriptures that if you loved God, you would love your neighbor, and since I knew the white folks didn't love us, it was easy to conclude that there were very few Christians south of the Mason-Dixon line—especially in Mississippi.

Separating loving God from loving your neighbor had cost white Christians a valuable witness to the power of God, at least to the black community.

A while back, I was talking to an old man who lived in a Christian community in New York. This group of Christians takes the gospel as seriously as any group of believers I know. He asked me how they could get black folks to join their community.

"Why is that so important to you?" I asked.

He responded, "If we had whites and blacks living and worshipping together as brothers and sisters, we would make a much stronger witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ."

This old man understood how our lack of visible love for each other compromises our witness of the gospel to an unbelieving world.

Only five of every one hundred black Americans belong to a majority-white Protestant denomination. The number of whites who belong to majority-black denominations is even smaller. These numbers illustrate how hard it is for even the people of God to practice the Christian "prime directive"—love your neighbor as you love yourself. Maybe the problem is that we have misunderstood Jesus' definition of *neighbor*.

## A PARABLE FOR TODAY

Let's say you live in a mostly white neighborhood. You hardly deal with people of other races. You work hard, and you teach your children to love God and other people.

Now suppose you hear about an unusual teacher/activist who is going around preaching that same simple message you teach your kids: to love God and other people. But this teacher spends his time with poor people and members of the other race. You agree with what he teaches, but his lifestyle makes you uncomfortable.

Then one day you hear he's in town, so you go to hear him teach. Afterward, you approach him to ask a question. Your question is probing and goes straight to the heart of the matter. You believe that his answer will probably be theologically unsound, so that you will embarrass him,

discount his lifestyle and in the process affirm your own. "How can I be sure that when I die I will go to heaven?" you ask, going straight for the bottom line.

Instead of answering, he asks you an elementary question. "What did they teach you in church?"

You reply from memory, from the first principles you learned way back in Sunday school: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself."

He smiles and says, "You have answered correctly. Do this and when you die you will go to heaven."

But you feel a little slighted. His answer was too simple. You think, "If we agree, why then does his lifestyle still make me feel so uncomfortable?" And you realize that the difference must have something to do with the "neighbor" part.

Needing to justify your own existence, you decide to probe a little deeper. So you ask *the* question—the one whose answer was as ignored in Jesus' day as it is today: "And who is my neighbor?"

His reply comes in the form of a story.

"One evening a man was driving from his suburban home to his downtown office. Because he was pressed for time he decided to drive the most direct route, which led right through the roughest part of the inner city. It just so happened that while driving through this mostly black part of town he had a flat tire. Because his white face stuck out like a sore thumb in this part of town, he was tempted to continue driving on the flattened tire but

decided it would only take a minute to change it. While he was changing the tire, though, a gang of black youths attacked him, stripped and beat him and left him half dead.

"Now it happened that a preacher on his way to evening service also had to drive through this dangerous part of town. When he saw the car up on a jack he slowed down, and then he saw the man slumped over the steering wheel. But the preacher hurried on his way, deciding that it would be too dangerous to stop.

"A little while later another man, who had been a Christian all his life and was well respected in his community, also saw the injured man, but he too decided not to get involved.

"Finally, an old black man driving a beat-up pickup truck drove up and stopped, pulled the injured white man out of the car, laid him in the back of his truck and drove him to

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When Jesus was asked, "Who is the neighbor I'm supposed to love like myself?" he didn't say "Your family," or "The people of your neighborhood—people who are like you." For all practical purposes, Jesus turned the question into a racial issue. It was no coincidence that Jesus picked a Samaritan to demonstrate the meaning of *neighbor* to a Jewish expert in the law.

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the hospital. He paid the hospital bill and then continued on his way, never seeing the injured man again.”

His story finished, the teacher then asks you, “Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who was attacked by the gang?”

You answer, “The one who had mercy on him.”

And he says to you, “Go and do likewise.” (See Lk 10:25-37 for the original version of this story.)

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For all practical purposes, Jesus turned the question into a racial issue. It was no coincidence that Jesus picked a Samaritan to demonstrate the meaning of *neighbor* to a Jewish expert in the law.

Jews didn’t see the Samaritans as their neighbors. Samaritans were half-breeds, the scum of the earth, outcasts. The Jews believed that if a Jewish person’s shadow happened to touch a Samaritan’s shadow, it would contaminate the Jew. If a Samaritan woman entered a Jewish village, the entire village became unclean.

But in this story Jesus says that our neighbors are *especially* those people who ignore us, those people who separate themselves from us, those people who are afraid of us, those people we have the most difficulty loving and those people we feel don’t love us. These are our neighbors. In Matthew 5:46 Jesus says, “If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?” Anybody can do that.

Christianity doesn’t require any power when its only challenge is to do something that already comes naturally. But it will take a powerful gospel—a gospel with guts—to enable us to love across all the barriers we erect to edify our own kind and protect us from our insecurities.

Sometimes, in my weak moments, I wish the lawyer who asked that question two thousand years ago had never opened his big mouth. But now, because he did, I am without excuse. I cannot plead ignorance to the question of race. Now, because of Jesus’ answer, I have to go beyond my comfort zone and embrace neighbors I would rather do without.

The answer to the question “And who is my neighbor?” has much to say about the priority we place on loving people who are different from ourselves, especially as it relates to our eternal future. Hidden behind Jesus’ simple lesson on helping others is an intense spotlight aimed right at one of our most serious blind spots—race.

## DO YOU RECOGNIZE YOUR NEIGHBOR?

It doesn’t take much imagination for each of us to figure out who Jesus would use as an example of “neighbor” in our own towns and cities.

For an Israeli, how about a Palestinian?

For an Arab, how about a Jew?

For a rich white, how about a black welfare mother?

For a poor white, how about a middle-class black who got where he is through affirmative action?

For a black male, how about a white male—better yet, a pickup-driving, gunrack-toting, tobacco-chewing, baseball-cap-wearing white man who still refers to a black man as “boy”?

For a feminist, how about an insensitive, domineering male chauvinist?

For a suburban white family, how about the new black or Hispanic family that moved in down the street?

For all of us, how about the unmotivated, undisciplined, uneducated poor? Or an AIDS victim who contracted AIDS not through a transfusion but through homosexual activity or intravenous drug use?

Who would Jesus use as the neighbor if he were speaking to you?

As I mentioned earlier, when I was growing up I used to ask my parents if loving your neighbor as yourself meant we had to love white people, too. I’m sure you can imagine the answer I wanted to hear. But they would say loving your neighbor meant *especially* loving white folks. Even though sometimes I could see them struggling with the answer, especially after my father was almost beaten to death by white men, they still managed to say and demonstrate to me that loving my neighbor did mean loving white folks.

How are you answering this question to your children—and to the world?

Maybe the question is not being asked in words, but believe me, it’s being asked. Maybe you are not answering in words, but you are answering—if not in words, then surely in deeds. As the old saying goes, “Our lives speak so loudly that the world can’t hear what we are saying.”

Jesus said our witness, our credibility to the world, is demonstrated by our love for each other. There is no greater witness to the genuineness of our gospel.

Think about it. If, because of Christ, blacks and whites could bridge our country’s greatest schism and live out a model of reconciliation that has not been attained by any other force, the world would have to ask, “Why?”

To many blacks the idea of racial reconciliation, given all our problems, is low on the priority list. But here’s a sobering thought for blacks who are still dealing with unresolved anger at white America: Our forgiveness from God hinges on our ability to forgive others (Mt 6:14-15).

On the other hand, for many whites the idea of intentional racial reconciliation may sound extrabiblical. But remember that the “And who is my neighbor?” question clarified the answer to the question “What must I do to have eternal life?” Living out the answer could have eternal significance.

## THE FRUIT OF WORSHIP

At the Lausanne II Conference on World Evangelism, Indian church leader Vinay Samuel voiced this concern. He said,

The most serious thing is the image around the world that evangelicals are soft on racial injustice.... One sign and wonder, biblically speaking, that alone can prove the power of the gospel is that of reconciliation. ...Hindus can produce as many miracles as any Christian miracle worker. Islamic saints in India can produce and duplicate every miracle that has been produced by Christians. But they cannot duplicate the miracle of black and white together, of racial injustice being swept away by the power of the gospel. . . . Our credibility is at stake. . . . If we are not able to establish our credibility in this area we have not got the whole gospel. In fact we have not got a proper gospel at all. (Lausanne II Conference on World Evangelism, 1989)

I experienced the truth of Vinay Samuel's plea in 1989, when I had the opportunity to take part in a remarkable worship service. There were about six thousand Christians present, of whom about 5,990 were white. People spoke in tongues and danced and prayed in the Spirit. They sang beautiful songs about how wonderful Jesus is and how Jesus is the answer to all the problems of their country.

But it was difficult for me to take part in this worship, because the service was held in a "whites-only" area just outside Johannesburg, South Africa. I had just come back from visiting one of the all-black townships only a few miles away. I had seen with my own eyes the extreme poverty in the black townships and the abundant wealth of the white minority. I had seen naked black children rummaging through garbage piles in search of food, while only a few miles away white children were being served by black servants. I had seen very clearly how wealth was divided according to the color of one's skin. I had seen how the laws were designed to support this concept, and how South African Christianity had no effect on it.

Though the majority of the white Christians we talked with in South Africa could demonstrate outward "gifts" of the Holy Spirit, these signs did not translate into concern for the desperate situation of their thirty million black brothers and sisters. Six thousand white Christians, with hands raised, all calling on the name of God, and yet they were not demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit toward their black brothers and sisters. How could this be? If the God they were worshiping gave all this his approval, then there was no way I could bow down to that God.

It is estimated that 80 percent of white South Africans claim to be born-again Christians. As a black man, I have to thank God that we don't have more of such "Christians" in the United States. What I experienced on my trip revived

an old question of my youth: What *is* a Christian, anyway? The Bible is full of sayings like the ones I learned when I was a child:

"If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar" (1 Jn 4:20). "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth" (1 Jn 3:17-18).

Is it possible to have beautiful, authentic worship experiences yet not lift a finger to oppose the injustice that systematically oppresses a whole group of people? It would stand to reason that if our worship of a just and holy God does not lead us to confront the evils in our communities, our cities and our nations, then we are deceiving ourselves when we think we are spending time with the God revealed on the pages of the Bible. If we *were* spending long periods of time praying, singing and worshiping in the presence of this God, then some of his qualities of love, justice, forgiveness and self-sacrifice would certainly rub off on us.

A world confused about race needs to see a gospel with guts enough to break the idols of race, not only through our words but also through our deeds.

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*Spencer Perkins (1954-1998), along with ministry partner Chris Rice, directed Reconcilers Fellowship and edited Reconcilers magazine. This article is reprinted from their book More Than Equals: Racial Healing for the Sake of the Gospel with permission of InterVarsity Press.*



# HABITS OF COMPANIONSHIP

Jo Kadlecek

I used to hate the word lonely. Where I came from, to say you were lonely was to admit weakness. Even to utter the word was to confess vulnerability. You were exposed, out of control. And maybe a little incompetent. God forbid a white, educated, middle-class woman from the great American West should be incompetent!

I could not let the word *lonely* squeak past my lips for years. In my teens, it wasn't included in my vocabulary. Now at forty, I know that to say the word *lonely* is simply honest.

I need people. Honest. Truth is, I am not self-sufficient, though I used to think so. I am not able to handle life alone. Never have, never will. All-American independence is a myth. And a sin.

What is real, I've learned, is that we've been created with an inherent need to have flesh, bones, and language surrounding us in breathing, feeling containers scientists call homo sapiens. I have other, more recognizable names for them: friends, spouses, neighbors, sisters, peers, colleagues, grandmas, allies, pastors, brothers, bosses, coaches, teachers, nieces, and so on. They come in little, big, wide, or thin sizes and are brown, pale, dark, gray, or yellow on the outside. As long as there's red blood running through them and a heart that's pumping it from head to toe, they qualify. Human beings. Friends. People. Community. God's masterpiece. I need them. It's the plain and simple truth.

Puritan writer Nathaniel Hawthorne said it as if he knew me: "It contributes greatly towards a [wo]man's moral and intellectual health, to be brought into habits of companionship with individuals unlike himself, who care little of his pursuits, and whose sphere and abilities he must go out of himself to appreciate."

And so I got out of suburbia's grip, the one that often mistakes space, grass, and big houses for "the good life" and went searching for other "spheres and abilities." Maybe I'd find them in the city. What drove me out of comfort-land, out of suburban life, wasn't any noble cause or radical agenda as much as it was a personal ache for relationships.

Besides the fact that I had always loved being in the city, I moved into Denver's inner-city neighborhood for two reasons. First, I genuinely wanted to be closer to the people I had met volunteering for a children's program called Hope Communities. It made life simpler if we lived next door to each other; that way, I wouldn't have to spend so much time traveling in my car to visit them.

The second motivation was that I had a bad memory. When I was really honest with myself, I knew that if I did not see low-income housing projects, homeless families, or boarded-up buildings on a daily basis, I would easily forget that two-thirds of the world's population lives in economic poverty, primarily in urban areas. I felt that if I ignored or

overlooked their plight, my Christian faith would seem irrelevant, selfish almost. Why bother believing in an incarnational God who cares for the poor and outcasts, and whose Son modeled such compassion, if I wasn't willing to do the same?

Not that I was the Great White Hope. That was abundantly clear when I realized I had no idea what I was doing moving into Five Points Apartments in 1989. I had no plans to organize the people, no strategies for economic development, no husband to share a vision with, not even a roommate, and no talents—that I knew of—to offer the community. I was just a suburban college English teacher who liked working with kids. The only thing I knew for sure was how I wanted to perform some praiseworthy act of Christian charity in the midst of this urban turmoil.

I had a lot to learn.

And lest I entertain any hint of superiority because of my background, my very first living experience in the city provided me a healthy dose of humble pie. When I moved into the old house I would call home for the next three and a half years, it was still being renovated by my Greek landlord and his two workers. The place had been abandoned for over twenty years. That meant mice were crawling around my closet—a frightening thing for suburbanites—and there was no hot water or heat yet; the pipeline wouldn't be connected to the main source for at least three more weeks. I had no choice but to knock on my neighbor Cheri's door each morning, look at the ground, and ask if I could use her shower before I left for the college where I was teaching.

"Of course, Girl, that's no big deal," Cheri would say. Then this strikingly beautiful, thirty-something African-American woman would show me to the only bathroom she and her three children shared in their apartment. For the next twenty-one days, my gracious neighbor never seemed to mind helping her new, sorry-looking blond neighbor.

Human need is a great equalizer.

## A CHRISTIAN NATION?

When my friend Janet moved in as my roommate, some of our neighbors weren't sure what to make of it. Here was a professional, college-educated black woman with no children, sharing a house with a white woman who was a college instructor at some religious suburban campus. Were they gay? Were they nuts? Why in the world would these two live together in *this* neighborhood?

I didn't care what they thought (though I have to admit I was glad when Janet started dating a great guy from church); I was just thankful to have a roommate, someone to process

things with and pray with. Janet ignored the “meddlin’ ” about us and continued serving as a consistent role model for many of the youth around us and at church.

One night Janet invited me to join her for a political rally and fundraising dinner where she was the featured singer. When I arrived at the ballroom of the huge suburban hotel, I noticed that 99 percent of the thousand or so people who had come this night were white. (Living in a diverse community makes a room full of sameness stand out.) Red, white, and blue balloons hovered over miniature flags on each table of the banquet room. This was one of those meetings where white evangelicals were seeking to “restore America to her original purpose.” It was fall of 1992, and this particular conservative Christian political group was just starting to recruit support from around the country.

As the rally began, we were asked to pledge allegiance to the enormous striped symbol that hung behind the podium. Then Janet led us in a few “America the Beautiful” tunes. We were served a dinner of meat and potatoes and then listened to the evening’s guest speaker.

My program read that he was a “nationally acclaimed historian and evangelist.” Tonight his mission was to teach us of our country’s Christian roots and to walk us through several history lessons that confirmed this. He cited the Battle of Valley Forge as a heroic symbol of loyalty in founding this country, the techniques of early American educators who used the Bible to teach children the ABCs, and, of course, the righteous faith of our founding fathers. And though it was a fiery sermon with an ardent appeal, it stirred an uneasy reaction in my gut and raised several questions in my head. I suddenly felt anything but patriotic.

Janet saw me struggling; she smiled and reminded me that these were, in fact, “brothers and sisters in Christ.” She always was more gracious than I.

I wondered how this “acclaimed historian” could be so culturally selective in describing America’s past. How did the handful of people of color listening that night feel, hearing only half the truth of our country’s noble and horrible heritage? Why hadn’t the speaker told us that the conditions slaves (and other “minorities”) endured were far worse for far longer than what those brave soldiers who *chose* to be at Valley Forge endured? Why hadn’t he told of the shameful laws that forbade black children from learning to read *at all* while their white counterparts were learning from the Bible? Why hadn’t he revealed the truth that many of our “righteous” founding fathers, committed to liberty and justice for all, *owned* other human beings and called them slaves?

Why hadn’t this speaker told *all* the truth?

“Girl, they never do,” Janet told me. “You get used to it. And you keep challenging it by loving them.”

When I got back to our urban home, I couldn’t sleep. Not because of city noise—it was a welcome lull compared to what I had just heard. In fact, the only enjoyable aspect of the evening was hearing Janet sing. I wrote a letter to the speaker, asking him these same questions, encouraging him to take advantage of his opportunities to speak to predominately white audiences. Maybe, I said, this could be an exciting time to discuss racial reconciliation in the church, to give a more balanced view of our country’s history to white Christians who had long overlooked it. I dropped it in the mail the next day.

About a month later, I received a personal response from this renowned speaker. He thanked me for writing and raising these issues. However, he said, he did not have “sufficient time to talk about the attitudes of our founding fathers toward slavery” or the history of slavery in America. Besides, his historical expertise and personal calling uniquely qualified him to work toward restoring our original vision as a “Christian nation,” not to discuss “black/white relations” in this country. And he had to take issue with me that there were “two Americas” as I had claimed in my letter. “It is rather naïve,” he wrote, “to expect that these social sins will not be present in every society on the face of the earth. . . . Historically, ethnic groups that have come to America have slowly assimilated themselves into the American culture.”

He ended his letter with another astonishing statement: “I could understand how you as an African-American woman would feel deeply about these issues, but I must be faithful to what God’s called me to. Let me recommend some books that might help you understand.” I read it again. This man assumed I was black because I had encouraged him to discuss the racial history of our country! Even with a Czech name like mine, he presumed my concern was based on my own experiences as a woman of color!

I had to write him back.

I assured him I was as European American as they came. “True, racial reconciliation and unity in the Body of Christ is unique to most Anglos but I don’t believe these issues ought to be,” I wrote. “Wasn’t Christ about crossing cultures by identifying with societal ‘outcasts’ and regarding all people with dignity? The Bible confirms for me that Christians should allow God’s love to transcend cultures while at the same time affirming the individuality of each.”

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As to the idea of two Americas, I admitted that “perhaps I am more sensitive to racial issues because I live in an urban community where I have seen first hand many black friends denied jobs or harassed by the police simply because of their skin color. And I have seen our community denied economic development because major retail corporations refuse to build their stores in our neighborhood. That’s why I try to encourage Christians, the only true agents of change, to realize the reality and manifestations of racism and to take intentional steps to affirm the qualities and contributions of all of God’s children in our wonderfully diverse country.” I recommended some books (especially the books of John Perkins) to help him understand and mailed my letter.

I never heard from this speaker again.

Did most white evangelicals really think that only people of color cared about racial justice? This was a new kind of loneliness for me.

## LIKE LITTLE CHILDREN

Even before I had moved into the city, I noticed that some of the children in Five Points did not have the opportunities to play during the summers as I had always been given in the suburbs. It bothered me that there were parks and tennis courts nearby, the mountains only an hour’s drive away, and yet the children’s parents didn’t usually have the transportation means to get them there. It bothered me, too, that the local swimming pool cost only fifty cents, yet many of my neighbors—whom I knew loved to swim—would sit on their porches or play on the sidewalk all day long. Fifty cents was hard to come by.

One spring day in 1990, I was talking with a few of my students in the campus center about this reality. Like me, they, too, had been given youthful summers to play, and they, too, were troubled that these urban kids didn’t have the same opportunities. They were eager to commit when someone came up with the idea of organizing a week-long summer day camp for the children on my block. We would make sure each child had a Bible, a T-shirt, a lunch, and a fun camp experience. In the mornings, we’d play games and teach Bible lessons in the gym of a church. In the afternoons, we’d pile into whatever cars we had and take a field trip to the zoo or a mountain lake or an amusement park.

Our summer J.A.M. (Jesus and Me) camps were a surprising testimony to the Almighty’s provision. We asked churches to donate money for camp T-shirts, women’s groups to make lunches, business clubs to pay for our field trips, and congregations to donate Bibles. We recruited children we already knew and asked their parents to register them, pay a two dollar camp fee, and join us if they could for a week of camp fun and organized chaos. JAM Camps never grew to more than forty children living on or nearby our block. We weren’t interested in building numbers but relationships. So, for the next seven years, the same African-American and

Latino children and many of the same white and black college students spent a week of each summer together at day camp.

One of my white college students in particular was deeply affected by the friendships she built with some of the children and their mothers. Kathy had grown up much the same way I did—blond, suburban, athletic, churchgoing—but developed a growing restlessness in her early college years. She had heard from other students that I lived in the city, so she tracked me down to see how she could get involved.

“What makes you think you have anything to offer these kids?” I asked her the first time we talked. It was a hard question, insensitive now that I think about it, but one I struggled with often. What made any of us think we could “do” anything for anyone? The last thing I wanted was for white college students to feel sorry for, or think they were better than, their urban neighbors.

“I have no idea. But I want to learn,” Kathy responded. With that, she helped plan JAM camps and became one of our first counselors during a summer when she was working two jobs to earn tuition for the fall. During the days of that first camp, Kathy taught Bible lessons during the day (though she barely knew the stories herself) and waitressed late each night.

And she became friends with seven-year-old Freddy Mae. One day while we were at the zoo, Kathy and Freddy Mae walked hand in hand past the lions, zebras, and elephants. They laughed and talked and pointed at the different shapes, sizes, and colors of each animal. Then all of a sudden, Freddy stopped, looked up into the white face of her camp counselor, and said, “Kathy, isn’t it neat how God made all these animals different? He’s pretty amazing, huh?”

Kathy could only nod her head at the truth of this child’s observation, but Freddy’s comment stayed with her the rest of the day. She couldn’t shake it that night either when she went home. She had been given the night off of work, and now she knew why: to get right with God. Kathy cried on her bed and asked God to give her faith like Freddy had shown her.

I was never quite sure who really benefited more from these urban/suburban friendships—the children who had special big brothers or sisters or the college students who had entered another world and discovered how much they had in common with their neighbors across town.

Or me. I got to watch the whole transaction.

I was changing. And Lonely was seeming a long time ago.

## SPIRITUAL APARTHEID

One day I got a call from the CEO of a company that published a biweekly news publication called the *National and International Religion Report* (NIRR). Was I interested in reporting for them part time?

I began traveling across the country to cover evangelical Christian conferences and events. From denominational meetings to missions or association conventions, from Orlando and Los

Angeles to Minneapolis or Chicago, I spent January of 1993 to August of 1994 writing daily news pieces for the NIRR.

Every time I covered one of these meetings, I wondered why they were attended by predominately white men. Why were there so few people of color in these Baptist or Presbyterian denominations and even fewer in missions agencies or parachurch ministries? And almost nil in positions of leadership? Surely the Body of Christ in North America reflected more than white suburban evangelicals, didn't it?

My own experience said it did. But as one black seminary professor explained to me, I was witnessing America's great "spiritual apartheid."

This selective and dominant white Christian subculture was confusing to me as I read the Scriptures, and as I continued to interact with neighbors in our urban community. It seemed to me that many Old Testament passages, the ministry of Jesus, and the Book of Acts all reflected God's desire for unity—not separatism—in the church. Jews and Gentiles in all regions of the world in the early church days seemed to reflect a culturally diverse church.

Not a red, *white*, and blue one.

I read the apostle Peter's speech as he repented of his racism in Acts 10:34-35: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right." I knew the men and women I interviewed at these conferences would never claim to be racist, nor discriminatory. They believed that race and color weren't important, they'd tell me. I wondered, though, why I rarely saw people of color at these conventions, meetings, and conferences, or in leadership roles.

I also wondered why the predominately white evangelical subculture in this country, that is, the leaders of many international ministries, the publishers and editors of many Christian publications and publishing houses, and the pastors of megachurches had done so little to work toward racial justice. Why had there been no evangelical voice in the 1960s civil rights movement? Why had this not been placed on the agenda? And why, now in the 1990s, were so many of the headquarters of these evangelical organizations located in homogenous suburban areas like Wheaton, Illinois, Colorado Springs, or Grand Rapids, Michigan, away from even the possibility of diversity? Why did they have so few people of color on their staffs, telling me that they would hire African Americans—"Ours is a color-blind employment policy"—but *they* "just haven't applied"?

Who goes where they know they're not welcomed?

Being comfortable is easier than justice.

## LET'S BE REAL

For the next few years, I also wrote articles for *Urban Family* and several Christian magazines about cross-cultural ministries, urban issues, and racial reconciliation efforts happening among evangelicals. Editors recognized that I was concentrating my freelance writing efforts on these issues and began assigning me stories. This encouraged me that maybe we were getting somewhere after all in regard to race relations; still, I knew we had a long way to go.

Especially when a white managing editor from a major Christian women's magazine called me and asked me to write a piece for them about race relations in the church.

"But let's be real," she said to me, suddenly whispering as if someone had just bugged the phone, "there's not a race problem anymore in this country, is there?"

I tried to "be real" as I told her stories: of an African-American teacher friend of mine confronted by two older white women in one of Denver's suburban malls for being in the "wrong" place and how they missed "the good old days when niggers knew their place"; of my roommate's fiancé, a thirty-year-old business manager who refused to drive through some wealthy, white parts of town any time of the day because he has been pulled over so many times by white police officers for "looking suspicious"; of an African woman attending a Christian conference and asked repeatedly during the fellowship time in the hotel's lobby for "more coffee"; of a young black couple, both with high-paying jobs, who

were told by white realtors that no houses were available in the new suburban housing development where they wanted to buy, even though they saw eight "for sale" signs as they drove through the community.

Yes, I said to this editor's silence, I think there's still a race problem in our country.

(This editor, coincidentally, has since become a good friend, whose sincere desire to learn about the race issue and respond accordingly has really encouraged me. She's made a conscious effort to be far more culturally inclusive in her Christian magazine than others have.)

## HOW LONG, OH LORD?

In 1996, I decided to pursue a lifelong love affair I'd had with New York City, the city of all cities. I would move to the

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Big Apple, the capital of the world and the mecca of the publishing world. By February of 1996, I packed up another truck and recruited a friend to help me drive east. The view of the New York skyline from the George Washington Bridge stirred a strange excitement in me, as if I were coming . . . home.

The next week I met a short, athletic African-American woman named Elvon. We lived in the same building in a neighborhood called Washington Heights, and I was thankful that I had “instant” neighbors. When she invited me over to play cards and talk, I realized this woman’s vision for unity sounded pleasantly familiar. She told me about the racial reconciliation ministry at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, a church I immediately felt drawn to when I visited, and about her work on staff there.

Soon after we met, Elvon invited me to join her and some other women for an evening of racial dialogue in Brooklyn. The room was crowded with a mix of white, Asian, and black women and men eager to discuss the principles and points Elvon and her team brought up. When a black woman raised a concern about how to continue on this road, others chimed in with equal passion. She continued by telling us of a recent time when she visited her college-age son in upstate New York one weekend. She took him to a church there, wanting him to find spiritual support during his college days, but when they walked into the sanctuary, the white usher asked whether she and her son were in the “wrong church.”

The woman’s story slugged me in the stomach. Hurt so bad I couldn’t help but cry.

How long, oh Lord?

I put down my head, trying not to let my shoulders shake. The discussion continued all around me as I tried to dry my face. Then I felt a gentle hand on my back, stroking it like a mother does a sad child. Elvon had made her way through that crowd of people, sat behind me, and without saying a word, touched my ache with dignity and understanding.

## COMING HOME

I eventually conquered the subway system, picked up some writing projects, and settled into church life in a city known more for its “rude New Yorker” stereotypes than the kindness I was encountering. By Easter, I was invited to a potluck at a friend’s apartment down the street, where I ran into one of the white women who had spoken with Elvon that night in Brooklyn. I couldn’t help but notice how she interacted with the various people there; her gentle eyes focused, head nodding in support, questions coming from her heart as if that person she was talking with was the only—and therefore the most important—human being on the planet.

I wondered if this wasn’t what Jesus would have looked like when he listened to his friends.

Her name was Andrea.

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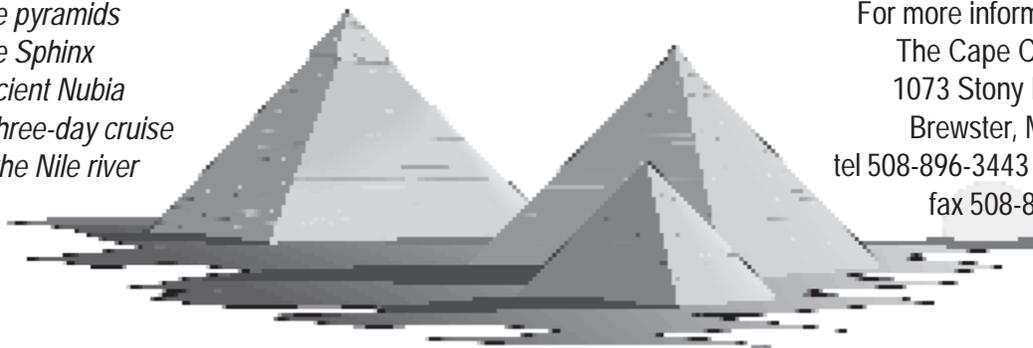
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It wasn't often I encountered white Christian women who seemed to care so deeply about people of color or racial issues, so I was curious about what motivated this woman. She told me about growing up in Baltimore with parents who always made sure she was exposed to people from different cultures, even though she struggled much of her life with her dad's decision to leave her family for a homosexual lifestyle. Now, her faith in Christ led her to explore these problems and challenges as an adult; her friendship with Elvon had personalized many of them for her, and both had given her a deep sense of gratitude and empathy.

I wasn't sure if it was the spicy Spanish food or the conversation that made tears roll down Andrea's cheek then. She took off her glasses, rubbed her eyes, and apologized, "I'm sorry. Sometimes I just can't believe how much God has done in my life."

The beauty of a broken, tender heart is an engaging thing.

That first conversation grew into many, many more. Soon we began a home fellowship group to help build the kind of cross-cultural relationships we knew the gospel required. When Andrea told me she was thinking about relocating into a low-income neighborhood, either Harlem or the South Bronx, I asked her why she wanted to do that. Like me, she had been affected by John Perkins's philosophy of ministry and relocation, by her study of Scriptures, and by her conversations with others. Consequently, she was feeling more and more drawn to live among the people with whom she worked. I was missing life in a neighborhood (as opposed to a big apartment building) and asked if I could join her search for a new home.

We talked many hours about what it would mean for two white women to move into a black neighborhood—how could we communicate our desire for reconciliation without appearing patronizing or offending the community? How could we become neighbors without coming across as privileged or arrogant? How could we keep the door and the conversations opened when there was so much "racial residue" to confront?

How in the world could two Wasy Christian women find a home in Harlem?

The combined support of friends—along with the direction of the Almighty—made it easier to move. Again. I was ready to stop moving and get rooted.

Denver was a suburb compared to Harlem. Though it was a community I had long admired from the literary pages of the Harlem Renaissance, I have to admit, I struggled with moving into this predominately African-American section of Manhattan; I was intimidated by its reputation and density. Was I ready to return to minority status for the sake of interracial dialogue in this intense world of concrete high-rises and brownstone houses?

Harlem. A place loaded with historic romance and contemporary rage, a place where working and middle-class families live next door to crack houses, where Japanese and German tourists pay big bucks to attend black church services,

while youth centers struggle to pay their staff. Harlem is what sociologists call a study in despair, what politicians call a symbol of urban decay and territorial tensions, and what television reporters call a crime-infested area. By their accounts, you'd think no real human beings lived here.

But they do, of course. Mothers raise their children in inner city America. And Harlem, I discovered the day I moved in, is a personal neighborhood in the midst of an often impersonal city. It is full of individual human beings who struggle and laugh and hope and bleed—like I do.

Could I go back to living as one of the few white women on the block, knowing the stares and questions and wonderful tradeoffs there would be? Could I handle the crowded dirty streets, boarded buildings, and the rich African cultures that had migrated to central Harlem much like southern blacks of the 1920s did? I'd see a group of African-American teenagers laughing and joking, rapping to each other and dancing to some hip-hop—safe just to be teenagers in one of the greatest black communities in the country. Would my white skin dampen their spirits and invade their heritage?

We could be neighbors, friends reminded me, chastising my guilt, helping me remember how much I needed these young people in my life, needed their unique talents and perspectives, needed to encourage them to succeed. I knew that learning and growing is never one-sided—it's always reciprocal.

So maybe these teenagers would see in me one white woman who didn't clutch her purse in fear and hurry by when she passed them on the street. In Harlem.

I met Maurice, Dwayne, and Junior that first day we moved, three eight-year-old neighbors who stood by watching us carrying boxes, clothes, and lamps. I shook their hands, introduced myself to them, and asked if they lived close by since I was going to be their new neighbor. Down the street, they told me, pointing with proud arms and eager eyes. They mumbled that they'd see me later, that they were going to the store for their mom. An hour later, when I was carrying another box, I heard a joyous sound I hadn't heard since I left Denver: "Hiiiiii Jooooo! Can we help?" Maurice and Junior smiled at the door.

And I was home.

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*Jo Kadlecak's columns on urban, cross-cultural and religious issues have been widely published. Her books include Resurrecting Hope with Dr. John Perkins and Feast of Life: Spiritual Food for Balanced Living. This article is adapted from I Call You Friend: Four Women's Stories of Race, Faith, and Friendship (Broadman & Holman, 1999) with the author's permission.*



# A BIBLICAL RESPONSE TO AMERICA'S RACIAL AND ETHNIC CRISIS

Steve Nicholson

*In the wake of the Los Angeles riots, I began to prayerfully study the Bible, looking for a scriptural response to ethnic conflict. I knew the Bible had hundreds of scriptures about the poor, but I never suspected it had so much to say about the problems of a multi-ethnic society. However, I found dozens of scriptures that spoke very directly to the ethnic problems we are facing as a nation. As a result, I have become convinced that God has a plan for a multi-ethnic society, and that racial reconciliation is the most important social need of our time.*

**T**he problem we face is not primarily political: It is first and foremost a spiritual problem. I therefore have no hope for lasting racial reconciliation apart from an approach that first deals with its spiritual dimensions. Hope lies with the church. Though in the past the church has been as separated on this issue as the rest of society, the church must move into the forefront of reconciliation if there is to be genuine healing.

Of primary importance is that we become more biblical people, and thereby more reconciled, loving people. We need to become more aware of all the dimensions involved in racism and ruthlessly root out the fears, misunderstandings, defenses, and prejudices that feed racial and ethnic separation and hostility. We have to learn how to live together as God's people, and shape our values according to biblical rather than cultural norms.

Perhaps you recognize one of these oft-repeated statements: "But I've never discriminated against anyone," "I've never owned any slaves," or "Why does this issue of racism keep coming up—why can't we just forget about it?" or "Why should I pay for what happened in the past, before I was even born?" or even "Why can't 'they' just work harder and climb up the economic ladder like my ancestors did?"

Each of these statements reflects an individualistic lens. The biblical viewpoint is community-oriented. The abolition of slavery over 130 years ago did not end the problem of racism. We are not just individuals completely separated from the sins of our nation or our forefathers. We live in the effects of those sins. And God says that if the land is to be healed, the people who are called by God's name must humble themselves and repent and confess their sins (2 Chr 7:14).

There are dozens of scriptures throughout the Old Testament demonstrating that God sought to address the difficulties of incorporating into the Israeli nation people who were ethnically, culturally or racially different. God knew that human nature would use these differences for evil to create division and oppression. But God wanted this new "nation under God" to be holy, set apart. Therefore, scriptures provide guidance for accepting "aliens" and "strangers." The word "alien" literally means "non-relative,

someone strange or different, foreigner." We can learn a great deal by exploring the Bible as we seek a better understanding of God's desire for racial reconciliation and a multi-ethnic society.

## LEGAL EQUALITY AND EQUAL JUSTICE

*The community is to have the same rules for you and for the alien living among you; this is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. You and the alien shall be the same before the LORD: The same laws and regulations will apply both to you and to the alien living among you. Numbers 15:15-16 (cf. Lev 24:22, Dt 1:16, 24:17, 27:19)*

We are required to practice the same laws and the same justice for both the alien and the native-born. As a nation, we still have a long way to go toward achieving equality. It took us two hundred years to repent of slavery. Another hundred years passed before a serious attempt was made to implement legal equality. One wonders whether we are under a curse for failing to follow God's plan in a land where God's intention for the nation is perhaps best expressed in the words on the Statue of Liberty.

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

## PROVIDING FOR THE POOR AND ALIEN

*When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow.*

*Deuteronomy 24:19-21* (cf. Lev 23:22, 19:10, Dt 26:12, 14:28-29, Ez 47:22-23)

We are all citizens of heaven and aliens and strangers on this earth. We are therefore commanded to serve the poor and needy as servants of Christ. We should do our best not to hoard our possessions, but to help the disadvantaged.

## LOVING THE STRANGER

*When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God. Leviticus 19:33-34* (cf Dt 23:7, Ex 22:21, 23:9, Jer 7:5-7, 22:3)

We must not tolerate personal prejudice or mistreatment of ethnic minorities. Instead, we are told to love “the alien” as ourself, even though they may be very different from us. Invite the Holy Spirit to search your heart and expose your stereotypes, fears, suspicions, prejudice, hatred, or apathy to the pain of others. Confess what is in your heart. Ask for God’s help and power. Ask Jesus to give you his eyes and heart for those different from you.

Commit to the painful process of true reconciliation. Cultivate sensitivity through education and relationships. Read the stories and histories of those who are different from yourself. Spend time with people from other ethnic groups. Be prepared to face and hear hurt, anger, and fears with love and understanding. Lay aside all your instinct for self-justification. Talk about minority experiences. Get to know people who are different as real people with a whole variety of interests, not just as representatives of a group. Learn how to live together and give our nation an example and a hope for a better day.

## HEALING THE HEART

*He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt. Deuteronomy 10:18-19* (cf Zech 7:10, 1 Cor 13:4-7)

Government is powerless to change hearts and relationships. All our human effort seems only to increase polarization and hopelessness. There is only one hope—a

massive repentance and turning to God, with the church of Jesus Christ leading the way.

Unfortunately, the Christian church often reflects social divisions. Even many so-called “social action churches,” while committed to political involvement, are not actually providing a vital example of multi-ethnic people living and working together, understanding and loving each other.

God’s intention is for the church to be the place where those who have formerly lived in hostility can come together under the Lordship of Christ. The church, filled with God’s power and living out God’s plan, is to be a light in the darkness, a beacon of hope:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations.

His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together

and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. Ephesians 2:14-22 (cf. Gal 3:26-29)

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## TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR ACTION AND INACTION

*This is what the LORD says: “Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place. For if you are careful to carry out these commands, then kings who sit on David’s throne will come through the gates of this palace, riding in chariots and on horses, accompanied by their officials and their people. But if you do not obey these commands, declares the LORD, I swear by myself that this palace will become a ruin.” Jeremiah 22:3-5*

The thrust of this passage is that not only must you refrain from doing wrong to those who are weak or powerless, but you must also take an active role in rescuing them from the sins of others. God holds us responsible for what we do, as well as what we do not do.

The New Testament reinforces that doing right is a matter of taking positive actions, not simply of refraining from negative ones:

Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins. James 4:17 (cf. Lk 6:31)

The parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us that if we stand by silently or passively while a neighbor is injured or beaten or spit upon, then we have failed to love our neighbor as ourself. If we see hatred and evil and prejudice, yet stand by and say and do nothing, then we have committed the sin of silence.

We have a communal responsibility for what happens in our midst, even if we are not the ones committing overt acts of evil. God holds us responsible both for what we do and for what we do not do.

Edmund Burke pointed out that all that the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing. In the days of Nazi Germany, most Germans were not Nazis. But they stood by and watched in silence and passivity, shutting their eyes and closing their ears, while the Nazis took over their country and attempted to wipe out the Jewish population of Europe. Sadly, most of the church in Germany also stood by passively while a country was destroyed and millions died.

Elie Wiesel, Nobel Peace Prize winner and survivor of a Nazi concentration camp said, "Take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented." We can't simply say, "Well I am not the one who is fostering hatred. I just keep to myself." We are responsible before God not to be passive in the face of evil, hatred and oppression.

What do you do when someone makes an ethnic joke at another's expense? What do you do when someone is picked on because of the color of their skin? What would you do if you went to a hotel with a minority friend, and the hotel would let you in but not your friend?

Racism, whether active or passive, is simply a form of self-idolatry that exalts one kind of person over another on the basis of outward appearance. For much too long, the church of Jesus Christ in this country has not stood up to

the racism and hatred that has been a blight on this land. It is true there were some Christians who stood up to slavery in the days before the Civil War, and it is true that some were involved in the civil rights struggles of the late fifties and sixties. But even then the majority of evangelical, Bible-believing Christians stood by, or worse yet, reacted negatively to efforts to bring about a greater measure of racial justice.

Let us repent not only for any evil we have done, but also for the good we have failed to do.

## SINS OF THE FATHERS

*"Do not pollute the land where you are. Bloodshed pollutes the land, and atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed, except by the blood of the one who shed it. Do not defile the land where you live and where I dwell, for I, the LORD, dwell among the Israelites." Numbers 35:33-34*

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In the 130 years since the end of slavery, we have continued to oppress the weak and live in hatred and prejudice in many ways. Today we are bearing the effects of these sins—in our nation, our cities, our neighborhoods, our churches, our minds, and our hearts.

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God holds the nation and the land responsible for past sins which have not been confessed and repented of, and for which restitution has not been made. The land itself can be polluted by violence and oppression, and this can ultimately lead to judgment. King David encountered this during his reign, long after his predecessor, King Saul, had been killed.

During the reign of David, there was a famine for three successive years; so David sought the face of the LORD. The LORD said, "It is on account of Saul and his blood-stained house; it is because he put the Gibeonites to death." 2 Samuel 21:1

If collective sins are not repented of and justice established, those living in the land will suffer the consequences. In urban society, we often lose our connection with the land and its sins and blessings, but we should pay attention. We cannot remain untouched by sin in the land. The Bible says that unjust blood cries out from the ground. Abraham Lincoln spoke of just this in his Second Inaugural Address during the Civil War:

And the war came. One-eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the Southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the

war. ...The Almighty has his own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses! for it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." ...And he gives to both North and South this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn by the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

Lincoln recognized that the terrible Civil War was the judgment of God upon the nation, and anticipated that its destructive effects could continue until all the sin of 250 years of slavery in North America was fully paid for.

The legacy of 250 years of slavery cannot be wiped out in a year, or a decade, or even a generation. You cannot tear families apart for hundreds of years and then expect the victims to suddenly live normal lives. Slavery's effects have permeated the mindsets of the descendants of both masters and slaves. In the 130 years since the end of slavery, we have continued to oppress the weak and live in hatred and prejudice in many ways. Today we are bearing the effects of these sins—in our nation, our cities, our neighborhoods, our churches, our minds, and our hearts.

## REPENTANCE AND CONFESSION

*I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed: "O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws." Daniel 9:4-5 (cf. Ezra 9:7, Neh 1:4-11)*

We are called to repent and confess the sins of the nation, present and past. Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah were righteous men who never personally polluted themselves with idolatry, and yet confessed to this very sin—the sin of their forefathers. In the same way that we are part of the current community and part of the land, we are also part of the historic community of our forebears. The sins of the fathers (and mothers) have an effect on the children, and we need to acknowledge and confess and repent of these sins. Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah all participated in the restoration of their people, but it began with this confession of the sins of the fathers.

## STANDING IN THE GAP

*The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice.*

*"I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none. So I will pour out my wrath on them and consume them with my fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the Sovereign LORD." Ezekiel 22:29-31*

Many of us cannot fully repent and confess the sins of our forebears because we are not fully aware of what happened. We think, "Oh yes, there was slavery back then, and that's bad, but it's gone now."

But the struggle is far from over. Even today, the evangelical church is largely separated along racial and ethnic lines. Minority people still live in the shadow of hatred and prejudice. Even in the church, people from non-European ethnic backgrounds often encounter misunderstandings, stereotypes, fear, avoidance, and a whole variety of insulting comments. While we may not be burning crosses, and may even be glad for the diversity in our churches, we need to work actively to eradicate the vestiges of our divided and prejudiced society. We *must* learn to live together in true love, understanding and mutual respect.

We must continually work toward racial equality, allowing God to heal our hearts and our relationships, and taking responsibility not only for our own actions, but also for those of our forebears.

Who will stand in the gap, committed to being part of the solution rather than part of the problem? May God grant us conviction, courage, perseverance, and commitment.

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# HIDDEN AFRICANS OF THE BIBLE AND EARLY CHURCH

Catherine Clark Kroeger

*How seldom are we made aware of the special promises that God has given to African people! Psalm 68:31 declares that “Cush shall reach out its arms to God!” (The early Church loved this promise, for they considered Cush to be a metaphor for the gentile Bride of Christ.) The Psalms predicted that one day people would recognize the spirituality of the Cushites, and declare that they had been born anew in Zion (87:3-6). Isaiah foretold that God would bring forth a remnant from Cush (11:11), and a redeemed people bearing gifts to Zion (18:1-8). Zephaniah proclaimed that from beyond the rivers of Cush, God’s people should bring offerings (3:10). Amos expresses God’s concern for Cush: “Are you not like the Cushites to me, O people of Israel?” says the Lord” (9:7).*

**B**iblical scholars are aware that “Cush” sometimes refers to all of Africa, sometimes to all of Africa except Egypt, and sometimes to ancient Nubia, stretching from modern Aswan in the north to Khartoum in the south. Today most of this area lies in the Sudan. But how is the general reader to understand that Cush and Cushite (used 57 times in the Hebrew Bible) are in fact a designation for an African nation and people? Some versions of the Bible translate “Cush” as “Ethiopia,” but this does not ordinarily designate the modern country of that name. David Adamo has suggested that the best translation is simply “Africa.”

All of us have a right to know and applaud the important biblical role played by Africans. People of African descent may claim the deep roots of their ancestors in the Bible.

## AFRICA IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

We read in Genesis that one of the rivers of Eden ran around the whole land of Cush, and another encircled the land of Havilah that yielded gold and onyx and bdellium (2:10-13). These products were found in antiquity principally in the area now known as the Sudan. If the Tigris and Euphrates rivers are located in Babylonia, then there is good reason to believe some of Eden lay in Africa. We are now told that the oldest human remains may also be traced to Africa.

Hagar, the Egyptian concubine of Abraham, may well have derived her ancestry from south of Egypt, and she alone of all the Bible characters gives God a name (Gen 16:13). Like Abraham, she meets God in the form of an angel and is given a promise that her progeny shall become a great nation (Gen 21:18).

Moses’ Cushite wife aroused the bitter jealousy of his sister Miriam. (Num 12:11-16). Amusingly, Miriam, who resents her black sister-in-law, becomes white with leprosy until she mends her ways. If this Cushite wife was Zipporah, then the Moses’ father-in-law is Jethro the priest, who instituted the judicial, administrative and sacrificial patterns of Israel (Ex 18:1-27). He and his family had received the exiled Moses during Moses’ forty years as a shepherd in Sinai.

Zipporah had understood the importance of circumcision and performed the ritual on their sons (Ex 18:1-27). Even if the Cushite wife refers to a second spouse, then Moses also looks to his new father-in-law for guidance and direction (Num 10:29-32; Jdg 1:16).

When the Israelites settle the land of Canaan, there were Africans among them. Some may have left Egypt along with the Israelites at the time of the Exodus; others came with military invaders (1 Kg 14:25-28; 2 Chr 12:2-3; 14:9-15; cf. 16:8). Apparently an Ethiopian colony was created at Gerar as a buffer between Egypt and Judah. Thus, the Ethiopians became permanent residents in Palestine, remaining there until time of Hezekiah (715-685 BCE).

Accordingly we read, “They journeyed to the entrance of Gedor, to the east side of the valley, to seek pasture for their flocks, where they found rich, good pasture, and the land was very broad, quiet, and peaceful; for the former inhabitants there belonged to Ham” (1 Chr 4:39-40). Further, a group of Philistines and Arabs were said to be settled “near the Ethiopians” (2 Chr 21:16).

Persons of African descent appear to have taken an active role in Israel’s social and political life. The bride in Song of Solomon is “black and beautiful” (Song 1:5). A Cushite who possessed tact, discretion, and a high position in the royal court appeared as a trusted courtier sent to tell David news of Absalom’s death (2 Sam 18:19-32).

Africans continued to enjoy royal favor, as Solomon married an Egyptian princess (1 Kg 9:16, 24; 2 Chr 8:11) and received the Queen of Sheba (1 Kg 10:1-13; 2 Chr 9:1-2). This influential queen ruled dark-skinned peoples on both sides of the Red Sea, and she may well have initially come to Solomon to negotiate a trade treaty with his growing maritime power. Though she tested him with hard questions, in the end she told him all that was in her heart. It appears that in this black woman Solomon found a kindred spirit with whom he could discourse freely.

Whether or not that relationship was sexual, there is evidence that other alliances did indeed produce children. Zephaniah, a descendant of Hezekiah, is called the son of Cush and brings special prophecies about Cush (Zeph 1:1; 3:10). Jehudi, the courtier sent to bear Jeremiah’s message

from Baruch to King Zedekiah, appears to have had a Cushite ancestor (Jer 36:14). Faithfully, Baruch stands before the king, reading the words of God, while the king slashes the scroll and casts it in the fire (Jer 36: 21, 23).

Ebed-Melek, a confidential advisor of the king, is identified as a Cushite four times (Jer 38:7, 10, 12; 39:16). Believing that Jeremiah was bringing God's authentic voice to Judah, Ebed-Melek risked his life to rescue the prophet from the cistern and secure for him a hearing with the king. Jeremiah commends the courtier's faith (39:15-18) and proclaims to him a special covenant of God's protection.

When Cushite pharaohs ruled over Egypt, they contracted military alliances with both Israel and Judah, especially during the time of the Twenty-fifth or Cushite Dynasty. Sabacho (716-701 BC, called So in 2 Kings 17:4) contracted an alliance against Assyria with Hoshea, king of Israel, while Tirhakah (690-664) came to the aid of Hezekiah when Jerusalem was besieged (2 Kg 19:9; Is 37:9). Mortuary figurines of Tirhakah clearly reveal his African features, and his enormous statue still towers above the great temple complex at Karnak.

## AFRICA IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The kingdom of Cush continues to play a role in the New Testament, where we read of the conversion of Candace's Ethiopian treasurer (Acts 8:26-39). Candace was the royal title of the Queen Mother of Nubia, a powerful African nation located principally in what is now Sudan. Greek was spoken in the court, so the chamberlain would have had no problem reading a Septuagint version of the prophet Isaiah; and Philip, a Greek-speaking Jew, would easily have communicated the Gospel to him.

It was Candace who wielded the real political and military power from her capitol city in Meroe while her son served as a religious figurehead. The royal mother made gifts to deities on behalf of the kingdom and may have sent her chamberlain with a gift to Jerusalem. The arts of civilization flourished at a high level throughout her realm, and twice her forces engaged the Roman army in battle.

Further to the north lay Cyrene, capital city of the Roman province Cyrenaica. The city was famous for three schools of philosophy and for native sons who excelled in medicine, mathematics, rhetoric and literature. Perhaps the most illustrious of these was the astronomer Eratosthenes, who in approximately 200 BC computed the circumference of the earth with remarkable accuracy. No less brilliant was the Hellenistic poet Callimachus, who became the director of the library at Alexandria and acquired an astonishing reputation for the versatility of his aptitudes. Athletes from Cyrene excelled in Olympic competition, especially in horse chariot racing.

Ships carried corn, oil and wool from the fertile fields of Cyrene, as well as a contraceptive known as sylphium, much

sought after in Rome. Cyrene maintained a monopoly on the herb until it became extinct through overharvesting approximately AD 200.

The citizens of Cyrene roamed far and wide throughout the Mediterranean world as merchants, athletes, philosophers, orators, mercenaries and entertainers. The Jewish community of the city had a deep interest in Judaism and produced an important literature including a five-book history of the Maccabees by Jason the Cyrenian (2 Maccabees 2:43). There were close ties with Jerusalem. Simon of Cyrene may have been impressed to carry the cross of Jesus when he came as a devout Jew to pay a Passover visit to Jerusalem. Apparently he became a believer, and his sons were known to the Christian community (Mk 15:21; cf. Rom 16:13).

Although an African synagogue, that of the Cyreneans and Alexandrians, first objected to the preaching of Stephen (Acts 6:9), other natives of Cyrene became early adherents of Christianity and carried the good news to Cyprus (Acts 11:19-26). From there Cyrenians and Cyprians travelled on to Antioch and innovated a Gospel approach to non-Jewish Greeks. This revolutionary action drew the attention of the Jerusalem Council, and Barnabas was dispatched to assess this new development. Convinced of the authenticity of the mission, Barnabas strategized with the leaders and went to Tarsus to seek out Paul. Implementation of the Africans' dream would require the involvement of a multinational and multicultural task force. As the church at Antioch prayed, searched the Scriptures and strategized for a full year, a core of leaders developed. Of the five who are named, two are African: Lucius of Cyrene, and Simon called the Black (Acts 13:1-2). Here again, translations fail to inform us that "Niger" is Latin for "Black." This may well be none other than Simon of Cyrene.

The missionary agency was in large part initiated, strategized, promoted and directed by Africans. The story of Acts tells us that Paul and Barnabas were promptly sent to Cyprus, home of some members of the Antiochene community (Acts 13:4-12), but archaeological evidence tells us of the arrival of the Gospel in Cyrene. By the end of the first century AD, there were Christian burials inside the Jewish cemetery at Cyrene.

## AFRICANS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Clement of Alexandria (150-215) was a Christian philosopher with a keen desire to win pagan intellectuals to Christ. He directed a catechetical school at Alexandria and wrote important exhortations to the heathen as well as to Christians, calling them to a more perfect life in Christ. Another African, Origen (185-254), became the director of a catechetical school at age 18. His was the finest mind the church would produce in 300 years. Origen was highly successful in debating Jews, pagans, and Gnostics, and is in fact credited with destroying Gnosticism. This important

biblical scholar, theologian, exegete, and pioneer in biblical criticism produced the Hexapla, comparing six versions of the Bible. He profoundly influenced the theological thought of the succeeding centuries.

Tertullian (160-225) was a pagan lawyer who converted to Christianity. He authored apologetic, theological, and controversial works, and was the first theologian to write in Latin. It was he who formulated the doctrine of the Trinity, and coined nearly a thousand new words to explain Christian truths.

Athanasius (296-373), was Bishop of Alexandria and a major theologian and writer. He was the chief upholder of the doctrine that Christ was both man and God, and was the principle opponent of the Arian doctrine that Jesus was man rather than God. Even as a very young deacon, he was influential at the Council of Nicea. Opponents referred to him as the “black dwarf.” He was repeatedly exiled and persecuted, but his principles ultimately prevailed at the Council of Constantinople in 381.

Cyril, who died in 444, was also Bishop of Alexandria. He brilliantly represented and systematized the teachings of Athanasius and other Alexandrians. He was a vigorous opponent of heresy.

Perpetua and Felicitas were two martyrs who died in the Carthage arena in 202. Their story was widely used in winning others to Christ.

Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, died a martyr in 258. He possessed a profound knowledge of Scriptures, wrote important theological works, fought heresy, and insisted on the unity of the Church.

Lactantius (c. AD 317) is best known for his *Institutes*, described as the “most comprehensive apology which Christianity created before the end of the time of persecution.” The major theme of the *Institutes* is justice. Lactantius insisted that God had given humanity a way of life open to all people regardless of race, education, sex, color or creed.

St. Maurice of Aganum (born about 287) was a Roman general who refused to kill Christians during the slave revolt in Gaul. He declared to the emperor Maximian:

We cannot obey you without denying God, the Creator of all things, our Master as well as yours, whether you acknowledge it or not.

He was slaughtered by imperial decree along with his regiment for his defense of slaves.

G. Marius Victorinus (280-363) was a neoplatonist professor of rhetoric with a brilliant record as philosopher and scholar. Educated in Africa but taught in Rome, he wrote theological and devotional works that were to lead to the conversion of Augustine.

Augustine (354-430), Bishop of Hippo, was one of the Doctors of the Church. A profoundly influential theologian, he dealt with three heresies: Manichaeism, Donatism, and Pelagianism. Augustine had remarkable insights into the

human heart and soul. His most famous work is *Confessions*, written to describe his conversion and win others to Christ by detailing the philosophical basis for Christianity. Monica (331-387) was Augustine’s prayerful and powerful mother.

Zeno of Verona served as bishop of Verona from 362 to 375. Over one hundred of his tractates survive as well as a collection of sermons.

Optatus of Melevis served as a Bishop in North Africa. He worked to reconcile Christians during the Donatist Schism, and was influential in the East and West as well as in Africa. He died before 400 AD.

By 480 Victor of Vita served as Bishop in the province of Byzacena. He described the survival of the Church during an invasion of vandals. He perceived that the persecution was not only religious but also political.

Bishop Vigilius of Thapsus participated in a religious synod between the Arians and the Orthodox in 484. He produced important theological and ecclesiastical works.

Fulgentius of Ruspe (467-533) was a Roman civil servant who resigned his post to enter the priesthood. In 507 he was elected bishop of Ruspe. Later driven out of Africa by the Vandals, he was instrumental in popularizing Augustine’s work.

Three early popes were African. Pope Victor I (AD 189-199) popularized Latin as the common language of the church, thereby making Christianity more democratic and accessible to ordinary people. Pope Melchides (311-314, sometimes known as Meltiades) was persecuted prior to his reign as pope. He was considered one of the African Christian martyrs. Pope Gelasius I (A.D. 492-496) worked to settle conflicts in church and believed that “both civil and sacred powers are of divine origin, and independent, each in its own sphere.”

Let us thank God for the important role played by Africans in the Bible and early Church. Let us share the Good News that Christ died to redeem people of all races and nationalities. Let us proclaim that God’s love knows no boundaries. And let us affirm the amazing diversity of God’s creation!

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*Catherine Clark Kroeger is President Emerita of Christians for Biblical Equality and Adjunct Associate Professor of Classical and Ministry Studies at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary. She is author of several books, including I Suffer Not a Woman and Women, Abuse and the Bible.*



## CHRISTIANS FOR BIBLICAL EQUALITY

CBE is an organization of Christians who believe that the Bible, properly interpreted, teaches the fundamental equality of men and women of all racial and ethnic groups, all economic classes, and all age groups, based on the teaching of Galatians 3:28—*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.*

CBE is made up of individual members and local chapters of women and men who work together to promote biblical equality in their own areas and in their own churches and organizations.

Our mission is to make known the biblical basis for freedom in Christ. We seek to advance the cause of Christ and the work of the Gospel by encouraging full development of the gifts and talents of all Christians in the service of God. We seek to educate Christians regarding the Bible's message about the equality of men and women of all races, ages, and economic classes in church, home, and society. We desire to reach out in a healing ministry to those who come from differing backgrounds and behavior patterns.

Membership is open to anyone who supports the Statement of Faith and the mission of the organization. Members receive *Priscilla Papers*, CBE's quarterly journal, and have access to all resources available from the national office which include: the speakers' bureau, audio and video cassettes of significant speeches on the subject of equality, discounts on books and reprints purchased from the Book Service, and assistance in beginning a local or regional chapter of CBE.

## STATEMENT OF FAITH

We believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God, is reliable, and is the final authority for faith and practice.

We believe in the unity and trinity of God, eternally existing as three equal persons.

We believe in the full deity and full humanity of Jesus Christ.

We believe in the sinfulness of all persons. One result of sin is shattered relationships with God, others, and self.

We believe that eternal salvation and restored relationships are possible through faith in Jesus Christ who died for us, rose from the dead, and is coming again. This salvation is offered to all people.

We believe in the work of the Holy Spirit in salvation, and in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of believers.

We believe in the equality and essential dignity of men and women of all races, ages and classes. We recognize that all persons are made in the image of God and are to reflect that image in the community of believers, in the home, and in society.

We believe that men and women are to diligently develop and use their God-given gifts for the good of the home, church, and society.

We believe in the family, celibate singleness, and faithful heterosexual marriage as the patterns God designed for us.

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