

ONE NEW HUMANITY

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But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it (Ephesians 2:13-16).

Four-score years ago, as perhaps our greatest president might say, Martin Luther King, Jr., was born. When I sat down to collect my thoughts last Thursday, I realized that, had he lived, Dr. King would be celebrating his 80th birthday. He did not live, of course, and in a few minutes I'll remind you of some things he said before he died. But tomorrow the nation officially observes his birthday, and the day after that, the first African American president of the United States will take the oath of office. There could hardly be a better time to reflect about race, and the things that divide God's people, and the promise of America, and most important of all, the vision of God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ.

I think of my own life as pretty short so far, despite the fact that I qualify – prematurely, it seems – for the senior citizen discount at Eat n Park and some movie theaters. But I've been thinking this week how much has changed in my short lifetime. When I was born, there were still some Americans alive who had been born into slavery. When I was a child, segregation was still the law in much of the South and unofficially practiced, though seldom admitted, in much of the North. When I was two years old, Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, and a 26-year-old minister who had been in his pulpit little more than a year suddenly found himself in front of a movement that would transform America.

When I was four years old, President Eisenhower sent federal troops to Little Rock, Arkansas, so that a handful of black students could go to the previously all-white public school, as the Supreme Court said they could under the Constitution of the United States. When I was ten, that preacher from Montgomery stood at the Lincoln Memorial and told the nation,

I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!¹

Around that time, a story has it that Attorney General Robert Kennedy asked his brother whether Martin Luther King, Jr., could be elected president. President Kennedy answered, "I don't know. Do you think the country is ready for a Baptist?"

The year after that, the Nobel Committee in Stockholm awarded the Baptist minister their Peace Prize, and the US Congress passed, and a new president from the South signed, a monumental Civil Rights Act, over much opposition.

As a kid growing up in the Mon Valley, I was often asked by some people who followed pro football whether I was related to Cookie Gilchrist. They always smiled when they asked, so one day I looked up Cookie Gilchrist and discovered that he was a running back for the Buffalo Bills. He was also black, which is why they smiled. I decided I would always answer, "Yes, Cookie is my cousin." That worked somehow. All through high school and even in college, some of my friends called me "Cookie," and it was a gentle joke with a subtle point.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 104.

When I went off to college in Connecticut, there were photos in restaurants of the National Guard with fixed bayonets on the streets of New Haven during the Black Panther trials the year before. One of the great debates on college campuses was whether Martin Luther King's strategy of nonviolent resistance and his Christian ethic of love would be enough to change America, or whether black people should adopt the more belligerent style of Malcolm X and the Black Panthers. Martin and Malcolm were both dead, but they were still larger than life in shaping the debate.

Those of us with Christian commitments argued for King's approach, but it was obvious that talking the talk without walking the walk would discredit not only Dr. King, but the Christian church itself. The reason that Malcolm X and the Black Muslim movement were attractive to many African Americans was that the Christian church was identified with slavery and segregation in the South and complacency and prejudice in the North. "If that's the way Christians live, then we need some other religion," the Black Muslims said. I learned in college that nothing so discredits Christianity as the bad conduct of Christians.

When I graduated from college and divinity school, I came back to Western Pennsylvania as an indentured servant of the United Methodist Church. I had loans from the church repayable in service, and I could work them off by serving as a Methodist minister. The man who did more than anyone else to lure me into Methodist ministry was the bishop of the Pittsburgh area in those days. His name was Roy Nichols, and he was one of a handful of African American bishops in the United Methodist Church. The majority of black Methodists in America belong to the AME and AME Zion churches, the African Methodist Episcopal churches, because early in our history they could not be leaders, and often not even members, in the white churches. Bishop Nichols was bright and funny and altogether charming. He told us that his wife, who was a podiatrist, married him because he had such pretty feet. He was a great leader at the national and international levels, but I first met him when he spent a day hauling a bunch of us high school students around Pittsburgh, showing us all the great things the church could do and asking us to think about becoming ministers ourselves.

I tell you all this on the eve of the Martin Luther King holiday and Barak Obama's inauguration because we are not only witnesses to history but also participants in and shapers of history. In a great democratic country like the United States of America, we the people not only elect our leaders but set the tone of society. Whether society is just and benevolent for all people or unjust and indifferent depends upon us. And the church is at the heart of all this because, in a religious nation like ours, the church is where so many people derive their basic worldview and values. What the church lifts up as moral and spiritual values, and what the church chooses to ignore, not only reflects our commitment to Christ but helps to shape society and bend the course of history.

The truth is, on matters of race the church has a mixed record. Many of the great abolitionists were Christians; so were many defenders of slavery. Many of those who stood up for civil rights and marched with Martin Luther King were Christians, including John Galbreath, the founding pastor of Westminster Church; but many of those who defended segregation and discrimination were also Christians. In his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" in 1963, Dr. King wrote, "I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership." With some notable exceptions, much of the white church's leadership, he said, was either silent or actively in support of segregation. But silence is not necessarily neutral. To be silent in the face of injustice is in effect to support the status quo, because the church says implicitly, "This is not something God cares about. You can be a good Christian and not care whether other human beings suffer poverty or discrimination." Martin Luther King said the church was too often a thermometer reflecting society's temperature instead of a thermostat to set that temperature.

Contrast the church's complacency with the Bible's prophets. Amos asks the worshipers of his day why they want to see the day of the Lord. The coming of the Lord will be bad news for them, because they show up in worship on the Sabbath but they neglect God's justice in everyday life:

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:21-24).

Martin Luther King asked, at the end of his march to Selma, how long it would take before justice would come, before all people in America would be treated equally:

How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever.

How long? Not long, because you reap what you sow.

How long? Not long, because the arm of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.²

Toward the end of his life he was discouraged by the slow pace of change and reform. But on April 3, 1968, he recalled the image of Moses standing on the edge of the promised land with the people of Israel:

I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.³

The next day, he was assassinated. He was 39 years old.

Forty-one years later, the day after a holiday dedicated to Martin Luther King, Jr., the United States is about to inaugurate our first African-American president. Whether you voted for Barack Obama or not, you know that the celebration is not just about Mr. Obama, but about what is now possible in America. This is not just a partisan thing. It wasn't just Jesse Jackson and Oprah Winfrey who had tears in their eyes during the president-elect's acceptance speech: so did Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice.

My son is in college studying to be a history teacher. If that turns out to be his profession, I can see him a couple of decades from now telling his class how the first year he was eligible to vote for the president, a black man was elected to that office for the first time. I hope he has to explain to that roomful of teenagers why it was such a big deal – because by that time it will be so obvious that anyone in America can be elected to any office, promoted to any position, that young people will have to learn in history class about the time when it was not so. When that day comes in my son's classroom, much of Dr. King's dream will have come true.

But God has a greater vision still. As the letter to the Ephesians says, God is at work in Christ breaking every barrier down. The great division in Paul's day was between Jews and Gentiles. The early church had to be persuaded that people like most of us, people who are not Jews, could also become Christians. Paul says Christ is breaking down every dividing wall of hostility, and creating in himself one new humanity. That great work of reconciliation continues today, not only in America but throughout the world. And we are part of that work. Until God's people are united, regardless of race or nationality, we need to press on and make that mission our own – because our eyes too have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

² Ibid., 124.

³ Ibid., 203.