

***Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Racial Reconciliation:
The Role of Culture, Politics, and Public Policy***

By David K. Ryden
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Abstract: Race relations have long been a blind spot among white evangelical Christians. Yet in the past 15 years, there has been an explicit acknowledgement among white evangelicals of the need for racial reconciliation with minorities who share their evangelical faith. That acknowledgement has been accompanied by tangible efforts to work toward that end, albeit with modest success. This essay examines evangelical attitudes on race among white and minority evangelicals. It explores the unique potential that exists within evangelical churches for genuine racial reconciliation, as well as the significant obstacles rooted both in the nature of the evangelical faith tradition and in the broader contemporary political culture. Finally, the paper outlines a theologically derived public policy agenda around which racial reconciliation might be advanced, within evangelical churches and in society at large.

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Introduction

The 1990s were when American evangelical Christianity caught the reconciliation fever. In a period of a few short years, countless books were written exhorting churches on to multi-racial ministry. Evangelical denominations and organizations publicly owned up to the historical sin of racism, issuing formal apologies and committing themselves to better race relations. And individual evangelical Christians likewise sought to build relationships across racial lines.

It did not take long, however, for the fever to cool. Looking back, the fruits of the reconciliation movement of a decade ago appear modest at best. Evangelical churches remain overwhelmingly segregated. White and black Christians still live mostly apart from each other. While there undoubtedly are exciting models of multi-racial ministry, they are few and far between. In sum, genuine far reaching racial reconciliation remains a frustratingly elusive goal.

This essay explores why the well intentioned reconciliation efforts of evangelical Christians yielded so little by way of tangible success. The answer is intriguing and troubling for the future of black/white race relations. It suggests that the cultural and historical identities of blacks and whites, respectively, lead to much different, and even contradictory, views of race relations and how best to address racial problems. This cultural conditioning is interwoven into a complex set of political considerations; as a consequence, black and white evangelical Christians are poles apart in their partisan

attachments, ideological orientations, and policy prescriptions on matters of race and inequality. In retrospect, these culturally ingrained political differences are so stark as to make the earlier efforts at reconciliation appear almost comically naïve.

It remains to be seen if there is any hope for stronger, more permanent bonds between black and white evangelicals. It almost certainly would require a softening of each group's hard partisan loyalties that generate no small amount of distrust. It also compels an acknowledgement by white evangelical Christians of the societal and structural causes of persistent racial inequality. Finally it may mean that white evangelical Christians support a more activist policy agenda that would demonstrate real commitment to bettering the condition of so much of black America. The open question is whether there is such a policy path that does so while also aligning with the conservative political instincts of white evangelicalism.

The Scriptural and Theological Basis for Reconciliation

“Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” 2nd Corinthians 5: 18.

“For He himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the wall of separation. . . and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.” Ephesians 2: 14, 16.

A central tenet of evangelical Christianity is its reliance upon scripture as authoritative guide to ethical and moral behavior. As a result, significant work has been done by those leading the reconciliation movement to flesh out a biblical mandate for the cause. That mandate is rooted both in literal provisions of the Bible and in broader, general biblical values.

At the heart of the biblical case for reconciliation is the vision of Christ as the ultimate agent of reconciliation, between God and man, and by extension between all men.

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” 2nd Corinthians 5: 17-20.

The theological concept of reconciliation around Christ reaches in two directions. He reconciles all humankind to their Creator. But He also brings the ministry of reconciliation to those who accept Him. All believers are compelled to extend Christ’s reconciling power to their fellow man. Once one is reconciled to God, they become living instruments of that reconciliation. In short, scripture calls men to be reconciled to God *and* to each other.

The corollary to the explicit message of reconciliation is the broader goal of Christian unity, the desire for harmony and brotherhood among believers. Biblical reconciliation is a concept that combines relationship with God with the transformation of one’s human relationships, toward the end of restoring harmony among believers. Reconciliation is reserved in scripture “as the most powerful way of expressing the meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” (DeYoung, 45)

The New Testament is replete with references to the central importance of unity among those who are members of Christ’s body. In Colossians 3:11 Paul proclaims that all are “one in Christ,” whether Jew or Greek, male or female, circumcised or uncircumcised. Ephesians 2:11-22 and Galatians 3:28 describe Jew and Gentile as

becoming one body in Christ. He “has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility . . . to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.” This is Christ’s explicit prayer, that “all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.” (John 17:21)

This call to Christian unity certainly encompasses race and ethnicity. Racial and ethnic unity is inferred in Jesus’ great commission in Matthew 28:19 to “make disciples of all nations” (Perkins and Tarrants, 164). God desires an “all-nations church,” and the Gospel is for people of all ethnic, racial, and national groups. Just as unity was possible for Jew and Gentile, so too is it possible for black and white believers. As Paul says, “[we] are no longer strangers and sojourners, but [we] are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” (Pannell, 36) John Perkins, the elder statesman of racial reconciliation efforts, sees reconciliation as being at the very heart of the Gospel.

“That call to reach out a loving hand of assistance to the poorer brother or sister crosses cultural, racial and international barriers. If the Gospel we preach is genuine, it is the power to reconcile alienated men and women to a holy God and to one another across all these barriers. It is the only means and hope for international brotherhood and peace, and the only means and hope for brotherhood and peace between different races and ethnic groups here at home.” (Perkins and Tarrants, 177)

Unity under the common lordship of Christ must encompass racial brotherhood and relationships. Christian unity demands that we love each other across racial barriers.

The Two Waves of the Racial Reconciliation Movement

*“. . . the emphasis on racial reconciliation [by white evangelicals] appears to be opening a space for emotional expression, dialogue, and even potentially a kind of cultural healing, and this in a national culture deeply scarred by racism **where very few such forums exist.**” – Wadsworth (1997)*

The scriptural foundation of racial reconciliation notwithstanding, white evangelical Christians' record on race relations for most of the 20th century left much to be desired. It was marked by passivity, if not active opposition to civil rights and the pursuit of social justice for blacks. White evangelical churches and organizations typically acquiesced to, and often embraced outright, the segregationist practices that existed in much of the country at mid-century. At the height of the civil rights battles of the '50s and '60s, the respective behavior of black and white evangelicals could not have differed more. Black civil rights activism had a decidedly Christian cast to it; it was often rhetorically grounded in the Gospel message of justice for all. Meanwhile, most white evangelicals stood on the sidelines. Southern whites generally sided *against* black evangelicals on matters of civil rights and segregation, while northern evangelicals were too distracted to take much notice. To the extent that religiously motivated whites joined in the civil rights crusade, they tended to be Jewish or liberal mainline Protestants.

The indifference of white evangelical Christians on matters of race continued, even as the first wave of the racial reconciliation movement surfaced in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Tom Skinner, John Perkins, William Parnell and other black voices represented the spirit of the times, as they implored white evangelical America to make the cause of economic and social justice for blacks their own. Those pleas largely fell upon deaf ears. (Alumkal, 201)

It would take two more decades before white evangelical Christians would get serious about the business of reconciling with their black believing brethren. The mid-1990s brought about a remarkable level of activity – intellectual, institutional, individual

– the purpose of which was to atone for past sins and build relationships between black and white evangelical Christians.

On an intellectual level, serious theological effort was devoted to the subject of racial reconciliation, and why it warranted the attention of evangelical Christians. Dozens of books were published which explored racial healing within the church; many of these were written by black/white teams of authors. *Christianity Today*, the leading periodical voice for white evangelical America, began to devote serious space and articles to black/white relations and the need for reconciliation, as did other religious journals.

Nor was racial reconciliation confined just to academics and scholars. Rather there were dramatic developments on a collective level, as religious groups and denominations admitted sins of the past and engaged in highly public acts of contrition. In 1994, the overwhelmingly white Pentecostal Fellowship of North America (PFNA) pursued reconciliation with black Pentecostal denominations in what came to be known as the “Memphis Miracle.” The PFNA abruptly dissolved itself, joined with black pentecostal churches to form the Pentecostal Charismatic Churches of North America (PCCNA), electing a bishop from one of the black denominations to head it. They also issued the Racial Reconciliation Manifesto in which they covenanted to work together to combat racism. (Racial Reconciliation Manifesto).

A year later, the Southern Baptist Convention issued a formal apology for its segregationist past and denounced racism. The National Association of Evangelicals and the National Black Evangelical Association held joint meetings to encourage racial cooperation. Numerous organizations and ministries were formed around a mission of racial harmony and reconciliation – Reconcilers Fellowship, the Twin Cities Urban

Reconciliation Network, Chicago's Urban Reconciliation Enterprise, the John M. Perkins Foundation for Reconciliation and Development, to name just a few. (Emerson, 63-65)¹

The most dramatic of these efforts occurred within the men's worship movement known as PromiseKeepers, which in the late 1990s was organizing huge gatherings of evangelical Christian men across the country. Led by former University of Colorado football coach, Bill McCartney, PromiseKeepers made personal commitment to the pursuit of racial reconciliation one of its primary tenets. The organization challenged those men and pastors attending the gatherings to covenant to "confront racism and build crosscultural friendships." (Gilbreath, 181)

As the PromiseKeepers commitment to building cross-cultural relationships suggests, this "second wave" of racial reconciliation did not exist just at the institutional or corporate level. Rather, it aimed to plant in individual Christians the seeds of reconciliation. Racial reconciliation was not just a political tactic or an organizational necessity, but a Christian imperative. Individuals were urged to "overcome their racism through direct contact and association with people of color," to acknowledge the sin of racism and to repent. Evangelicals were called to confront and engage racial issues, rather than minimizing or evading them.

In short, there was a palpable energy and enthusiasm over the possibility of racial reconciliation. White evangelicals took concrete action that demonstrated an acknowledgment of racial division and a commitment to reconcile with fellow black Christians. To one observer, these efforts were "some of the most significant, and

¹ Evangelist Billy Graham, the highest profile figure in the evangelical tradition, likewise reflected this reconciliation. Once far more passive in the face of racial separation of the 1950s and '60s, Graham gradually desegregated his evangelism crusades and evolved into a fervent spokesman for racial reconciliation.

potentially radical, moves ever made within American evangelicalism.” (Wadsworth, 343) Moreover, there was genuine optimism that reconciliation was in fact achievable. The hope was that repentance and forgiveness might provide the foundation for a lasting racial healing otherwise not possible. The racial reconciliation movement appeared to be carving out a space for “a kind of cultural healing . . . in a national culture deeply scarred by racism *where very few such forums exist.*” (Wadsworth, 365)

Evangelical Contributions of Racial Reconciliation

The optimism of a decade ago regarding the potential for racial healing among black and white evangelical Christians appears to have been misplaced; despite the efforts chronicled above, a deeper racial reconciliation among evangelical Christians has simply failed to materialize. Despite some success stories, reconciliation efforts on a larger scale have stalled out. From a contemporary standpoint looking back, the 1990s reconciliation movement seems more a passing fad than a serious reordering of race relations among evangelical Christians. This essay examines why; it fleshes out the influences of culture and politics as obstacles to a lasting and comprehensive reconciliation among white and black evangelical Christians.

But first, it is important to recognize the positive side of the racial reconciliation story. Arguably evangelical Christians have laid the foundation for future reconciliation by bringing to the table the one thing that is essential to true reconciliation – the belief in the redemptive grace and power of Christ. Lasting racial reconciliation may be possible only when both parties can draw upon a reservoir of trust and grace that is the product of their shared faith. Communities with shared religious beliefs are uniquely constituted to exhibit the traits – humility, repentance, forgiveness, acceptance – needed for genuine

racial reconciliation. That shared faith creates in whites a capacity to repent and to apologize, and in blacks the complementary capacity to forgive and accept. It gives both the commitment to then pursue meaningful ongoing relationships. Evangelical Christians would say that faith in God's grace, and that faith alone, can overcome the deep wounds, resentments, and hate from centuries of racism and discrimination.

The Evangelical approach to racial reconciliation is truly distinguished from secular theories that focus on the legal or political. The spiritual dimension is the unique contribution of Evangelicalism to the hard work of racial reconciliation. Evangelicals accept that only Christ's miraculous healing power can produce meaningful reconciliation between black and white. (Glynn, 837) Only Christ the reconciler working on the hearts of His followers can create true racial justice. The racial wounds must be healed from the inside, through attitudes transformed by Christ. (Glynn, 839) Only Christ can give people the motivation and commitment to prevail over the wounds that are opened in the process of reconciliation. (Glynn, 839)

Evangelicals' strong belief in sin explains racism, to which divinely inspired repentance and forgiveness are the only sufficient response. The admission of sin and reliance on Christ allows them to actively overcome that sin and build positive relationships. Thus the evangelical framework imposes a higher standard of conduct than what customary social and political realms demand. It is not simply about justice, but also about love, forgiveness, and grace. This may well be a more promising and hopeful first stage for reconciliation than conventional secular approaches. (Glynn, 838) As we will see, however, it is not enough in and of itself.

Culture, Politics and the Complexities of Racial Reconciliation

“Race/ethnicity serve[s] as a prism through which common religious and theological tenets are refracted at sharp angles, yielding divergent values and political allegiances.” – McDaniel and Ellison (2008).

A central question that repeatedly surfaces in this book is whether there even exists a consistent or coherent political perspective or policy approach that can be categorized as evangelical. For there to be anything approximating a cohesive or distinctive normative evangelical framework for public policy suggests a commonly accepted theological mindset, which in turn generates a consistent policy stance or position.

At first glance, the common theological commitments of white and black Christians would seemingly offer a strong foundation for racial reconciliation. While the tendency is to equate “evangelical” with white conservative Christians, blacks are even more likely to adhere to evangelical doctrinal beliefs, to belong to evangelical or pentecostal churches, and to report higher levels of personal religiosity. Blacks are predominantly evangelical in their theology and orientation. A 2001 Gallup poll found 61% of blacks describing themselves as born again Christians. In other words, there is significant overlap in adherence to evangelical tenets among black and white Christians that should generate a common framework for thinking about race issues and building firmer black/white relationships.

In fact, the similar theological dispositions of white and black evangelicals have not translated into like political or policy views on race. Indeed, what is most striking is the extent to which they have reached utterly divergent policy positions despite their common faith. Instead, the combination of differing historical and cultural backdrops, partisan allegiances, and contrasting ideological orientations, when filtered through the

prism of race, have led to profoundly dissimilar answers to the problem of how best to address race relations. This complex brew has made the goal of genuine and lasting racial reconciliation between black and white evangelical Christians far more difficult than it otherwise might appear.

In short, huge hurdles to racial reconciliation exist in the deep political divisions that separate black and white Christians – in their party loyalties, ideological orientations, and policy preferences. Nine out of ten blacks support the Democratic party in their voting; close to two-thirds of white evangelicals vote Republican. Blacks accept a far more expansive role for the state in seeking economic and social equality. White evangelicals typically prefer smaller government, less taxes, and less social welfare. Unsurprisingly, these differences in party and ideology lead black and white evangelicals to policy stances that are more often than not at odds. This begs the obvious question: How can two groups, both purporting to treat scriptural authority as literal truth, interpret that scripture so differently in its policy applications to matters of race?

The Cultural Shaping of Racial Reconciliation Theology

One clear piece of the answer is the formative influence of culture in shaping textual meaning, including scripture. Cultural influences shatter the simplistic assumption that one need only locate the apt biblical passage to determine the correct policy on a given issue. Interpretation of scripture is socially constructed and shaped. Determining the message of the text and its meaning for one's life is very much the result of the cultural history, character, and experiences of the community to which one belongs.

(McDaniel, 182)

Black and white evangelical Christians may both be employing a literal interpretation of scripture. But the specific product of that literalism for each is dictated by their respective collective religious identities, and the socio-religious values within each group. The vast complexity of the Bible assures that these cultural influences will play out in how members of different communities elevate some passages while diminishing or dismissing other, favoring some themes at the expense of others. (McDaniel, 182)

The practical result of these social cues is that white and black Christians are operating from much different premises when reading and applying the Bible. (McDaniel, 182) More significantly, these differing cultural influences dramatically effect how each group envisions the problem of race and the path to racial reconciliation within a biblical context.

The cultural framework for white evangelicals is characterized by what Emerson calls “accountable free will individualism” (Emerson, 79). It is a highly individualistic theological orientation – emphasizing personal sin, repentance, salvation, and individual morality. The focus is on personal choice, responsibility, and addressing sin in one’s life. (Emerson, 79) The focus of faith is one’s own spiritual well being, the state of one’s personal relationship with Christ.

Unsurprisingly, the black historical and cultural experience manifests itself in a markedly different orientation. The black religious tradition could not help but be developed as part and parcel of their collective existence, and of their struggle to define themselves within their American experience. (Alumkal, 182) While one’s personal relationship with Christ is important, their scriptural mandate incorporates prophetic

concern for injustice, exploitation, and neglect of the less fortunate. For black Christians, biblical concerns include values of fairness and equality, and stress collective responsibility for treating all people with justice and mercy. (Alumkal, 183)

These contrasting sensibilities ensure that whites and blacks will see matters of race and reconciliation through different lenses. White evangelicals place primary emphasis on personal responsibility. Racial tensions are caused by individual sin, and the failure to love one's neighbor. "The individual is . . . an entity independent of macro social structures and institutions." (Emerson, Smith and Sikkink, 400-401) Racism is at its core a spiritual problem grounded in the sinful nature of man and society. It compels a spiritual solution – namely repentance, forgiveness, and unity through a common identity in Christ. Thus reconciliation is effectively distilled down to a matter of individual effort. Racial division is resolved through the actions of individuals. (Alumkal, 202) Whites need to own up to their sin, repent and apologize to their black brethren, and seek forgiveness in return.

These cultural cues of white evangelicals are very much of a piece with dominant American values. They fuse the evangelical Christian faith with a faith in the American ideals of individualism, independence, and self-determination (Emerson, 129). The white "cultural tool kit" leads to solutions to race problems that are "profoundly individualistic and interpersonal: become a Christian, love your individual neighbors, establish a cross-race friendship, give individuals the right to pursue jobs and individual justice without discrimination by other individuals, and ask forgiveness of individuals one has wronged." (Emerson, 130) The emphasis on relationships and interpersonal connections are the prism for understanding and interpreting race issues. And a close personal relationship

with Christ will inevitably infuse one with the love, respect and dignity needed to build these relationships.

Black evangelicals see the world much differently. They have an awareness of institutional and societal factors that is utterly absent from the white evangelical consciousness. In stark contrast to the anti-structuralism of white evangelicalism, the black religion tradition places considerable importance on social, economic, and political institutions – both as contributing to racial problems and as having a hand in the remedy. Their cultural backdrop includes a strong element of group solidarity in challenging the broader sources of racial inequality. (Alumkal, 183) Their theology easily blends in an emphasis on attacking the social disparities in access to quality housing, education, economic opportunities, and the like.

These contrasting foci were evident in the respective racial reconciliation movements of the 1970s and 1990s. The black leaders of the first wave of racial reconciliation were unequivocal in highlighting societal sin and challenging the systems of injustice and inequality. A distinctive piece of the movement was to demand an end to the inequities traceable to existing economic, social, educational, political, and religious structures. (Emerson, 67) The initiation of personal relationships had to be accompanied by collective justice; reconciliation required attacking the institutional barriers that denied blacks true political, economic, and social equality.

When the second wave of racial reconciliation surfaced two decades later – with a significant white evangelical involvement – the system-changing facets of the original formulations were gone. Something had been lost in translating and popularizing the message for a larger white evangelical audience. The popularized version reflected the

crabbed white evangelical vision of reconciliation. It focused mainly on individual-level reconciliation, without seriously addressing the racialized social structures, institutions, and culture. (Emerson, 52)

These divergent orientations toward the problems of race help to explain the loss of energy and momentum in the racial reconciliation movement of the late 1990s. The cultural blinders that constrain white evangelical understanding of race left them ill-equipped to attend to factors at the center of the black evangelical cultural experience. The white social construct based upon the individual and the relational ignores racialized patterns that are systemic, institutional, and deeply embedded in society. Their culturally ingrained individualism leaves little room for concerns of collective sin or societal responsibility. Justice is not “working against structures of inequality, but [only] treating individuals as equals, regardless of the actual economic and political facts.” (Emerson, 58)

This “institutionalized racialization of religion” blinds white evangelicals to the systemic dimensions of justice that still disproportionately impact black communities and neighborhoods. (Gilbreath, 74) The need to work for social justice and equality between races is minimized or ignored altogether. Issues of inequality, systematic injustice, and group conflict simply are not part of white evangelicals’ consciousness. For black evangelicals, the exclusive focus on individual relationships is woefully incomplete and sure to be ineffective. Little wonder blacks eventually weary of the talk of personal reconciliation and relationship building. (See Gilbreath).

But their cultural limitations do more than blind white evangelicals to the social realities faced by fellow black evangelicals. They actually push them in an opposite

direction from what black evangelicals believe is needed to address race issues. White evangelicals perceive racism as a function of individual prejudice; the race problem is one of personal bigotry and poor relationships. (Emerson, 89) Hence structural explanations that push individual determination aside are actually wrong-headed. Stressing the institutional and social causes of racial tension obscures the root source – the accountable individual and personal responsibility. (Emerson, 79) Institutions and group consciousness only undermine individualism and aggravate racial tensions. (Emerson, 80) As an example, government-sponsored welfare not only cannot address what is essentially an individual problem, but it makes the problem worse. (Emerson, 104)

This individualism is so deeply ingrained in conservative Protestant culture that it goes beyond mere indifference to structural aspects of race problems. It actually morphs into a strong opposition to formal governmental efforts to address racial inequality. Thus the dominant white evangelical racial mindset, while supportive of formal legal equality for minorities, opposes governmental action to remedy on a broader institutional level the disparities in black economic, social, and political success. (Alumkal, 201) In the end, the cultural shaping of evangelicalism specific to black and white evangelicals pushes them in different, nonreconciliatory directions. This chasm in the respective understandings by blacks and whites is undoubtedly a central piece of the race problem, and adds to the entrenchment of a racialized society. (Emerson, 91)

Reinforcing Separation: The Parties, Politics, and Policies of Evangelicals

The cultural rift between black and white Christians finds its parallel in the dominant political, partisan, and policy behaviors of each group. The causal connections

between these factors are complicated, and beyond the scope of this essay. But it is safe to say that the cultural divide between black and white evangelicals is very much reflected in and mutually reinforced by the political divide that separates them, thus rendering reconciliation all the more difficult.

Black and white evangelical Christians are as far apart in their *partisan* affiliations as two demographic groups can be. The broad majority of white evangelicals belong to the Republican party, while the vast majority of black evangelicals belong to the Democratic party. Blacks are easily the most monolithic bloc in the Democratic coalition, with over 90% voting for the Democratic candidate in recent presidential elections. Meanwhile, white evangelicals are the most solid bloc of Republican voters, with over 70% voting for the Republican candidate.

These differing partisan affiliations are unsurprising, in light of history and the contrasting policy preferences that flow from black and white understandings of race. As noted, blacks' culturally shaped religious tradition emphasizes social welfare and communal issues. They are far more supportive of liberal, interventionist social and economic policies. (Wadsworth, 346) One would expect them to align with the party that favors redistributive economic and social welfare programs and policies. Hence their loyalty to the Democratic Party.

White evangelicals, in contrast, have a religious tradition that emphasizes individual morality, traditional values, and a law and order criminal justice system. Their individualistic theological tradition generates a natural opposition to the targeting of social and economic policies for the benefit of particular groups. This should foster

support of the party of individualism and conservative social values, namely the Republican Party. (McDaniel, 183)

There is some overlap among white Christians and racial minorities on certain policy issues. Blacks are as conservative, if not moreso, on a number of issues of concern to white evangelicals (abortion, homosexuality, school prayer). Indeed, the Republican party has tried to make inroads with minority voters by emphasizing its family values agenda. (McDaniel, 189) That effort has been singularly ineffective because, as McDaniel eloquently puts it, “race/ethnicity serve[s] as a prism through which common religious and theological tenets are refracted at sharp angles, yielding divergent values and political allegiances.” (McDaniel, 189).

This is in part a matter of issue salience. Economic and social improvement is of primary importance to blacks, and the Democratic program on educational access, economic opportunity, health care, and poverty relief mirrors those concerns. The black church tradition likewise preaches community, equality, and social justice, thus aligning with Democratic programmatic efforts to address poverty and care for the less fortunate. Blacks’ unshakeable loyalty to the Democratic party is clearly borne of policy preference. (McDaniel, 189-190)

And yet, something deeper is going on that makes it difficult to be optimistic about racial reconciliation between black and white evangelical Christians. It is a deeply fixed distrust based upon each side’s perception of the partisan identity which the other has taken on. From this perspective, the overwhelming identification of black and white evangelicals with their respective parties has been devastating to the cause of racial reconciliation among them.

The monolithic support by black evangelicals of a party dominated by the abortion rights orthodoxy is a huge obstacle to many white evangelicals, for whom pro-life concerns trump all others. Meanwhile, broad majorities of white evangelicals support a party whose history on racial issues was spotty at best, and repressive at worst. The Republican party's resistance to civil rights and its use of thinly veiled racial appeals for political benefit – plus its neglect of social justice issues for blacks – caused many to view it as harboring racist elements. (Wadsworth, 342) It has continued to use implicit racial appeals to define itself as conservative on race issues – welfare, affirmative action, rehabilitative criminal justice, and more.

Unsurprisingly, conservative Christians who align with that party are perceived in the same light. (McDaniel, 181) The conservative values and policies of white evangelicals make them appear dismissive of the concerns of the less fortunate, thereby validating the suspicions of blacks toward conservatives and Republicans. Republicans' hard line on crime, antipathy toward social welfare, and general distrust of government reinforce the image of conservative Christians who vote Republican as insensitive to the circumstances of minorities. (McDaniel, 189)²

Churches as Reflections of Black/White Evangelical Differences

The social and political differences between black and white evangelicals are inextricably intertwined with the differences that exist in the respective roles and

² Ed Gilbreath, a black evangelical who worked for *Christianity Today* for many years, captures the polarizing effect of this animosity each group has towards the other's party of choice. That the "evangelical" label has become so bound up with the Republican Party and its conservatism has led many blacks who are clearly evangelical in their faith to nevertheless shun the term. They simply do not wish to be associated with the political implications of the term. At the same time, the outright dread that some white evangelicals harbor for the Democratic party is a looming obstacle to creating space for black evangelicals in the same church or social tent as white evangelicals. Gilbreath sometimes feels "that some white evangelicals won't consider an African American believer a real Christian unless he or she subscribes to their conservative political views." (Gilbreath, 139)

behavior of predominantly black and white evangelical churches. Certainly black and white churches reinforce, if not shape outright, the attitudes of black and white evangelical Christians on social and political questions. This is especially true in light of these churches' more overt political activism, as well as the groups' higher rates of church attendance and greater religiosity than other demographic groups.

Black churches have a strong tradition of social outreach, borne out of the great social needs of the large numbers of blacks who migrated north in the mid-20th century and settled in large urban areas. Contemporary black evangelical churches take the social gospel seriously, and are much more likely than their white counterparts to sponsor social programs on a variety of societal problems – after school and mentoring programs, transitional housing, substance abuse treatment programs, educational alternatives, and many others. (Greenberg, 392)

White evangelical churches are much less likely to address the social and economic problems of the community. They are less inclined to see their mission as one of social action or outreach. Their central focus is on evangelism and the immediate spiritual needs of their congregants. (Greenberg, 389) To the extent they do address people's material and physical needs, it is as a means of reaching them with the message of salvation. Social action is not in conflict with the goal of evangelism, but it certainly is secondary. (Greenberg, 390)

At the same time, the churches buttress the political commitments of the rank and file. Both black and white evangelical clergy bolster the partisan inclinations of their followers. In black churches, overt political involvement is commonplace. Pastors frequently have strong direct ties to Democratic officeholders and the party. It is routine

for Democratic candidates to address the congregation from the pulpit on Sunday mornings. (Greenberg, 383-84)

Indeed, the social activism in black urban churches almost guarantees that they will have strong relationships with government officials (who in large metropolitan areas are typically Democratic). The prophetic tradition of black churches often means an explicit political agenda of economic welfare and social justice concerns of the black community. Hence black urban churches are found working with social service agencies and local officeholders on problems ranging from housing and welfare to police and community relations and more. (Greenberg, 392)

On the flip side, white evangelical churches are likely to support Republican candidates, albeit in less overt ways than their black counterparts. They are places where conservative organizations will circulate their voter guides come election time. They don't necessarily eschew a political agenda, but it is most likely to center on abortion and other socially conservative issues. White churches engaged in social outreach often do so while simultaneously pressing a political agenda that would reduce governmental commitment to social and economic welfare.

By one estimate, at least 90% of blacks who attend church do so at exclusively black churches. The percentage of white evangelicals attending predominantly white churches is surely at least that high. The strict racial segregation of American Sunday mornings, combined with the contrasting messages and missions of these racially segregated places of worship, only amplifies the magnitude of the obstacles to racial reconciliation among evangelical Christians.

Rethinking Racial Reconciliation

“Despite the often very best intentions of most white American evangelicals, the complex web of factors . . . produce a rather dismal portrait of the realities of and prospects for positive race relations among American Christians in the United States. -- Emerson and Smith (2000)

The personal, relational approach has been a positive development in racial reconciliation efforts, with its focus on personal responsibility, repentance and forgiveness, and cross racial interaction. This element has been missing from most policy-oriented, structural solutions. It brings needed attention to the moral and spiritual aspects of race relations, and is a necessary pre-condition to realizing genuine progress in race relations.

But the personal, relational approach standing alone is doomed to fail, given its neglect of the structural barriers to justice and equality for black Americans. White evangelical solutions are too dismissive of societal realities that impact racial groups in highly disparate economic, political, and social terms. “[T]heir prescriptions fail to render race inconsequential for life opportunities.” (Emerson/Smith, 132) The inequities between black and white are too great to ignore – in access to health care and quality education, economic success, their treatment by the criminal justice system, political power, and more.

Hence the need for white evangelical Christians to move beyond the cultural constraints which limit their ability to recognize the impact of race on society. The inability to grasp the structural and societal dimensions of racial problems comes from living in racial isolation. If so, a central piece of the reconciliation puzzle is not public or governmental, but in the renewed commitment of white evangelicals to learn what the lives of blacks are like. This means pursuing *authentic social interaction* – to worship together, socialize, and live in the same neighborhoods. It suggests a depth of relationship

between black and white that goes beyond superficial interaction, and entails a true appreciation for how the other half lives. It requires knowing each other and living in relationship, so that to grasp the reality of our racialized society.

A second piece of a reconstituted approach to racial reconciliation is *intellectual*. The uni-dimensional personal relational approach to reconciliation reflects what Mark Noll characterized as the scandal of the evangelical mind – the tendency toward action at the expense of reflection.³ Their response to racism and reconciliation is akin to their response to other issues – an intense, energetic, action-oriented agenda to solve the problem. Unfortunately, this sense of immediacy and impatience with the problem, while driven by good intentions, leaves little space for deeper intellectual reflection. Their action oriented intuition, combined with their limited cultural understanding of race, yields a one-dimensional attack on a thoroughly multidimensional challenge. (Emerson and Smith, 171). The solution is short term and ultimately ineffectual.

When faced with the complexity of American race relations, evangelicals might refrain from quick-minded activism and engage in some serious thinking about the issue. That reflection is likely to yield an acknowledgment of the reality for black America. That reality is one in which poverty engulfs one in four blacks, the criminal justice system ensnares one in three black men, and marriage rates are lower and divorce rates higher than for other ethnic groups. It is one in which 70% of black babies born are

³ Chris Rice notes the dearth of serious theological work on reconciliation. Despite the countless books on the subject, they lag far behind the secular debates, trends and developments in the public square. “In contrast to a mountain of secular books and research, I found not a single twentieth century survey of race and Christianity written in sociology, history, economics or journalism by Christian or secular publishers. The weight of the work is completely anecdotal.” (Rice and Perkins, 258)

without a father present; it includes school failure rates of such magnitude in urban schools like Detroit and Chicago that it almost defies comprehension.

These realities cannot be chalked up solely to personal sin. Larger institutional and societal factors are undeniably at work. More importantly, whatever the causes, these realities are undeniably public policy questions, demanding public policy responses. Integrity of the family structure, the alleviation of poverty, a fair and effective criminal justice system, some modicum of access to quality education – these are issues that on some level concern government, and compel governmental involvement. Though few white evangelicals may be impacted personally by these issues, scripture obligates them to pursue remedies on behalf of black Christians and all fellow citizens. White evangelical Christians must be willing to actively engage the public policy apparatus and support policy stances designed to address these problems in a serious way.⁴

Racial reconciliation should not, however, be the tail that wags the dog of politics and policy. It is unrealistic to expect conservative Christians, in the name of better race relations, to shift to the Democratic party in droves or to routinely embrace expansive government. Nor should we expect black Christians to suddenly migrate in large numbers to the Republican party just to advance reconciliation. But black and white evangelicals

⁴ Some take a “glass half full” perspective on the state of racial reconciliation efforts. Chris Rice cites a host of successes by church coalitions and other activists in structural issues of education, housing, and employment. These include (1) Promise Keepers’ efforts in putting race relations on the radar screens of white evangelical men, (2) the Call to Renewal’s interfaith and ecumenical efforts to address poverty across ideological lines, and (3) a Christian Community Development Association that has exploded from thirty member organizations in 1989 to over five hundred churches and ministries ten years later. (Rice and Perkins, 252) Yet it is striking that all of the efforts cited are private. None really includes the engagement of politics and public policy.

must be prophetic voices within their respective parties, calling them to account on matters of biblical concern.⁵

For conservative evangelicals, it would mean being the Republican party's conscience to ensure that the plight of the poor and of working class blacks are on the party's agenda. It would include seeking common sense solutions to the hardships that disproportionately plague blacks. It also would demand that they call out those within the party who persist in the language of racial division and insensitivity, who continue to use race as a divisive tactical tool.

For blacks, it means finding their voice on abortion and other issues of life, and working actively to combat the uniform, unflinching pro-abortion rights dogma of the Democratic party. Likewise, it would mean calling out those in the Democratic party who routinely demonize Republicans who prefer small-government, private sector solutions to poverty as necessarily racist or uncaring about the poor and dispossessed. If each group were to take more seriously the prophetic calling within their parties, it might be a first step toward the restoration of trust between black and white Christians, without which reconciliation is a pipedream.

Finally, conservative Christians need to think seriously about a *more activist public policy agenda* that they could support, and which might also lay the groundwork for eventually building stronger relationships with black evangelicals. This need not mean capitulating to the Democratic policy agenda on criminal justice, economical equality, and education. These problems have proven immune to conventional

⁵ See the discussion in the opening chapter regarding the cooptation of evangelicals by party and ideology. It is fair to say that both black and white evangelicals have fallen prey to this, and have frequently put party fealty and ideological leanings before scriptural truth. This cooptation has had dire effects for the goal of racial reconciliation and the call for unity and love between fellow believers.

Democratic solutions. The search for effective remedies compels a serious debate over the role of government, best social services practices, the commitment of resources, personal responsibility, and more. There are legitimate conservative policy proposals on these subjects that need to be aired. Christian conservatives – and their party – need to be in the midst of the debate.

Just as important as the policy specifics that conservative Christians support is action that clearly demonstrates that they recognize the structural components of race in America. The ultimate goal should be a policy approach that naturally aligns with their more conservative overarching views of government and politics but that also represents a distinctive and serious effort to address obstacles to realizing progress in racial and social equality.

If white evangelicals are clear about their motives, their policy views might find a receptive audience among some blacks. It is crucial that black evangelicals not judge the motives of white Christians by whether or not they necessarily buy into standard liberal policy prescriptions for the issues of importance to black Americans. Indeed, blacks might aim to bring fresh eyes to the public policy alternatives on matters of social justice and economic equality. It is not as if their captivity to the Democratic party has produced noticeable successes in the areas of greatest importance to blacks.

There are several issue areas in particular that provide a natural starting point for white evangelicals to begin demonstrating their seriousness about social and economic inequities.

- *Faith based social service delivery.* President Obama has decided to maintain (but rename) President Bush's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. This reform in publicly funded social welfare programs grew to encompass satellite offices in virtually every federal department and programs in practically all areas

of social welfare. It also was originally viewed with great promise across ideological and partisan lines, and has the potential to do so again. It should command the active support and participation by evangelicals, given its potential to address a host of social needs that are especially acute in black communities. The FBI also works in ways that are attractive to conservatives, with public resources being funneled through churches, faith-based groups, and grass roots neighborhood organizations. Without the stigma of the Bush plan (or the perception among blacks that it was a transparent political play to attract black support for Bush), blacks likewise should be amenable to the program, particularly in light of the ability of urban black churches and faith-based organization to tap into it to serve the surrounding neighborhoods.

- *Criminal justice and punishment.* If conservative Christians need a model of how they might approach criminal justice issues in serious ways that are consistent with their conservative policy instincts, they might examine Chuck Colson's Prison Fellowship Ministry. It is a remarkably holistic approach that combines overtly religious programming to address prisoners' spiritual needs with practical training aimed at preparing them to successfully re-enter society. Colson is hardly a bleeding heart on criminal justice. Yet he has been an energetic advocate for sentencing reform and alternative punishment for nonviolent offenders. Often with the help of public funding, Colson's work reflects a deep compassion for those ensnared in the criminal justice system. His ministry defies easy labeling as conservative or liberal. Rather it embraces creative ways to actually rehabilitate convicted criminals.
- *Education policy.* Surveys indicate support among black Americans for school vouchers and other modes of choice that are the preferred policy mechanism of Christian conservatives. But these will only benefit so many inner-city kids stuck in failing schools. Christian conservatives need to extend their concern for education beyond their own kids and neighborhoods to include the struggles of public education, especially the steep challenges faced by urban schools. They can serve on public school boards, volunteer in badly understaffed and under-resourced schools, mentor a public school student, and support their fundraising efforts with their resources. They can enthusiastically support genuine attempts to reform schools. Finally, conservatives need to strike a less adversarial stance, and forego the demonizing of the public schools that many black kids are likely to end up attending.

Each of these areas holds out opportunities to pursue legitimate policy objectives using fresh, less liberally orthodox approaches. The policy options in each area also include a tantalizing mix of public and private actors and solutions. As such, they provide real opportunities for black and white Christians and black and white churches to work

together, side by side, to solve important societal problems. In other words, they acknowledge the public dimension of the problem while making room for the relational aspect favored by religious conservatives and which may be needed to actually make racial reconciliation stick.

Conclusion

The prospect of genuine, lasting reconciliation between black and white evangelical Christians is a distant one, the work of decades rather than months or years. Their deep cultural differences will not recede until they overcome the cultural isolation that blinds them to the realities of the other's existence. There is little in contemporary society to suggest that evangelical Christians are prepared to engage fellow minority believers – through worship, living, and working together – sufficiently to overcome the deeply ingrained cultural framework within which they operate. As a result, black and white evangelicals are likely to continue down the divergent political and policy paths that further complicate the goal of reconciliation.

Ironically, finding common ground in the public policy arena might actually serve to quicken the process of establishing mutual trust between black and white evangelicals. White evangelical Christians must exhibit a broader public policy consciousness, one that recognizes the structural impediments to equality for minorities and supports policy initiatives aimed at those structures. In turn, black evangelicals need to be open to less conventionally liberal policy prescriptions in those areas of concern to them, and accept with a measure of grace the good faith policy strivings of their more conservative white evangelical sisters and brothers. By finding common points of public policy

collaboration, black and white evangelicals might be reminded of the theological mandate of a ministry of reconciliation, both through personal relationships and in the pursuit of biblical justice for all.

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